

Sensitivity to the Discourse Licensing of Non-Canonical Word Order in L2 German across Proficiency and L1 Typology

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Research on L2 acquisition at the syntax-discourse interface has often been discussed in relation to the Interface Hypothesis, which predicts particular vulnerability for syntax-discourse/pragmatics mappings in adult L2 acquisition [1-2]. In L2 German, previous work on scrambling and related discourse-conditioned word orders has mainly focused on advanced and near-native learners [3-5], leaving lower proficiency levels comparatively underexplored; findings on L1 transfer remain mixed.

This judgment-task study asks how L1 background and proficiency shape naturalness judgments of non-canonical word order in L2 German. Unlike work focusing on ultimate attainment, it targets lower proficiency levels and includes a broad range of L1 backgrounds. Here, non-canonical word order refers to discourse-conditioned fronting of a non-subject constituent (e.g., an object or PP). In total, 119 learners of German from 33 L1s, distributed across A1, A2, B1, and B2/C1 course levels, participated alongside 35 L1 German speakers. The experiment contained 18 critical item sets and 20 fillers. Critical items followed a 2×2 design manipulating word order and discourse context, with lists distributed by Latin square; participants rated target sentences in short chat dialogues on a six-point scale.

Ratings were analyzed in linear mixed-effects models with participants and items as random effects. The L1 German control group showed the expected significant Context $\times$ Word Order interaction: relative to canonical word order, non-canonical variants were rated as more natural when the fronted constituent was discourse-given. In the learner data, the Context $\times$ Word Order $\times$ Proficiency interaction was significant: the context-dependent preference for non-canonical word order was absent at A1/A2 but emerged at B1 and B2/C1, suggesting that sensitivity to discourse licensing develops from intermediate proficiency onward.

In licensing contexts, learner ratings of non-canonical word order were descriptively non-monotonic across proficiency, with comparatively high ratings at A1, lower ratings at A2, and intermediate ratings at B1 and B2/C1. This suggests that learners' treatment of fronted non-canonical word order may not develop linearly; the A1 pattern likely reflects limited grammatical and lexical knowledge rather than genuine non-linearity. L1 typology showed only a marginal main effect, without reliably modulating sensitivity to discourse licensing across proficiency levels. Overall, the findings suggest that discourse-conditioned non-canonical word order in L2 German is learnable before ultimate attainment, with sensitivity emerging from intermediate proficiency onward.

References

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Table 1: Example item set

	canonical word order	non-canonical word order
Licensing context (constituent discourse-given) <i>Macht ihr bald wieder in Spanien Urlaub?</i> make.2PL you soon again in Spain holiday	<i>Ja! Wir fliegen dieses Jahr im August nach Spanien.</i> yes we fly.1PL this year in August to Spain	<i>Ja! Nach Spanien fliegen wir dieses Jahr im August.</i> yes to Spain fly.1PL we this year in August
Non-licensing context (constituent discourse-new) <i>Was macht ihr dieses Jahr im August?</i> what make.2PL you this year in August	<i>Wir fliegen dieses Jahr im August nach Spanien.</i> we fly.1PL this year in August to Spain	<i>Nach Spanien fliegen wir dieses Jahr im August.</i> to Spain fly.1PL we this year in August

Note: 1PL = first person plural; 2PL = second person plural. The non-canonical variant is expected to be more natural in the licensing context, where the displaced constituent is discourse-given.

Figure 1: Estimated marginal mean naturalness ratings by word order and proficiency level in licensing contexts only. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals; higher values indicate greater perceived naturalness. For comparison, L1 German speakers rated non-canonical word order higher in licensing than in non-licensing contexts (4.03 vs. 2.45).

