

TeKaMoLo: The When, How, Where and Why of German Sentence Structure

fluentu.com/blog/german/german-sentence-structure/

jackboyle

August 26, 2015

Without a doubt, learning rules concerning German word order can ruin your day.

They're complex at best and illogical looking at worst.

As an intermediate speaker, anything other than the simplest of sentences requires some serious forethought just to get the thing out.

The exceptions often outnumber the rules themselves.

Now you're thinking: "Perhaps this isn't the sturdy and encouraging opening gambit I wanted for an article taking on German word order as subject of the day."

But bear with me. Because whilst articles like this great one on conjunctions, verbs and clauses deal with the more nerve-shredding technical aspects of German word order, we're going to focus today on the **content** of what we want to say, and how to say it.

TeKaMoLo — The Theory

TeKaMoLo. It looks weird. Get used to it. It's an important rule concerning word order if you want your German to look and sound correct. Fortunately, it's also pretty simple.

TeKaMoLo governs in which order the adverbial phrases fall in your sentences. By which I mean it governs in which order we answer the following questions:

- *Wann ist es passiert?* (When did it happen?) TEMPORAL
- *Warum ist es passiert?* (Why did it happen?) KAUSAL
- *Wie ist es passiert?* (How did it happen?) MODAL
- *Wo ist es passiert?* (Where did it happen?) LOKAL

These are the Te, Ka, Mo and Lo. Or, as I have just noticed, the "AI Brothers," which brings a nice musical family vibe to things.

The importance of getting this word structure right can't be understated. For one thing it ensures you're going to be understood.

For another it allows you to develop your sentences in length and complexity, instead of relying on being super basic all the time.

And knowing what you're doing with word structure means knowing what you're emphasizing, bringing a bit of rhythm to the way you speak. (Hey, this AI Brothers thing has another level.) This will really help develop your confidence.

For any sentence you want to use to explain how something was done then this order is standard. And whilst there are a few exceptions—which we'll go through with rich scrutiny in a few lines—be reassured that these are largely dependent on your own intentions. (Whilst we're explaining and describing things, it might be good to brush up on your adjective endings.)

First, some examples.

TeKaMoLo — In Action

"Josh spoke loudly at the kitchen table yesterday out of consideration for his grandmother."

This is a packed sentence. It contains each of the component parts of TeKaMoLo, but in the wrong order. Or, rather, in the right order for English, but the wrong order for German.

So, let's readjust things:

1. Temporal (when) — yesterday
2. Kausal (why) — out of consideration for his grandmother
3. Modal (how) — very loudly
4. Lokal (where) — at the kitchen table

And now we've got it in order let's translate it.

Josh hat gestern aus Rücksicht auf seine Oma sehr laut am Küchentisch gesprochen.

When, why, how, where.

1, 2, 3, 4.

Te-Ka-Mo-Lo.

Importantly, you need to pay close attention to where the two elements of the verb are. This is a primary clause—I'll have a bit more to say on this in a moment, so don't worry—so the first part of the verb has to stand in position 2 with the past participle at the end. Have another look at the sentence. Right now, read it again. See?

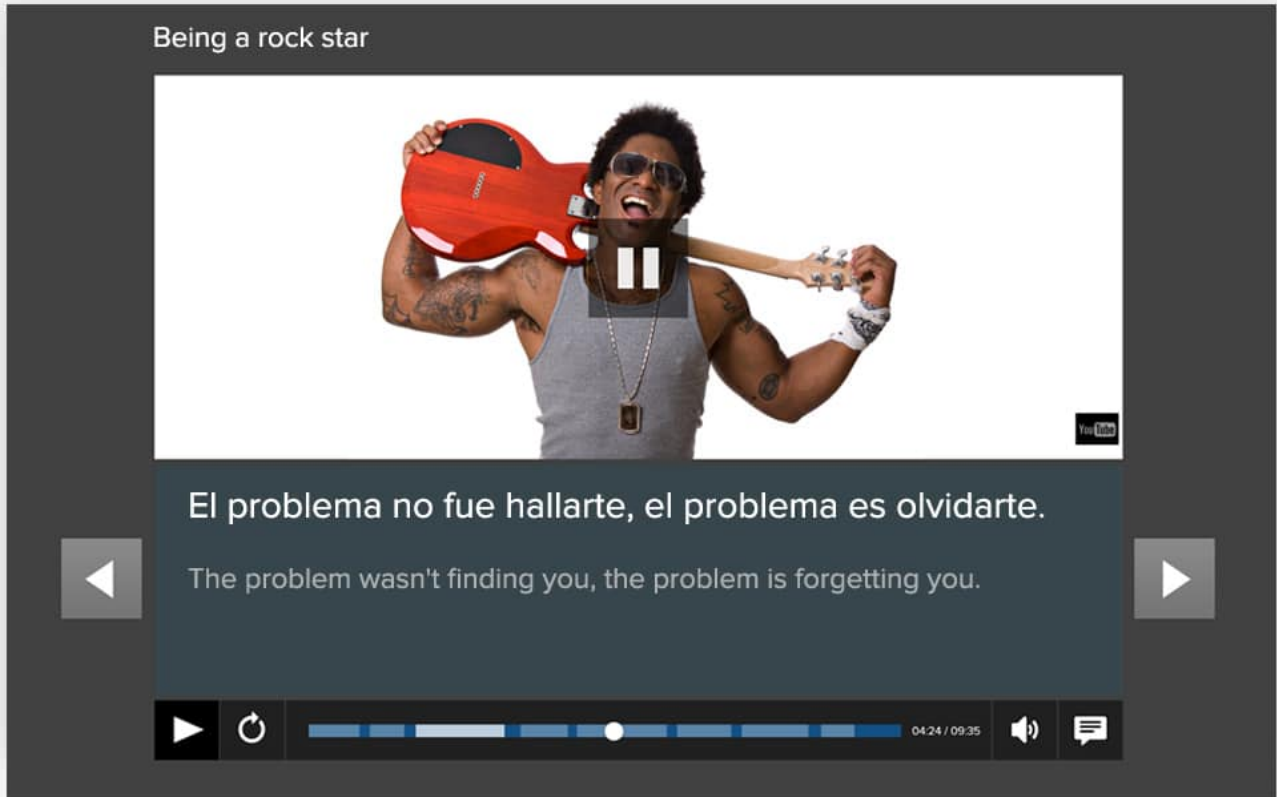
But is all this easier said than done?

Reformulating the order of a sentence before translating it takes time, especially when it feels as though the order would be clunky or illogical in English.

“Josh spoke yesterday out of consideration for his grandmother very loudly at the kitchen table” is ugly in English.

But as an intermediate German speaker, developing your conversational skills requires a change in thinking. Instead of creating the sentence in your head in English first, take a crack at it in German directly. This way you don't have to worry about two different orders, just the one.

It takes time, but it pays off. And once you know the rules, once you've obeyed them, you can pull a big old Picasso and break them.



The image shows a YouTube video player interface. The video title is "Being a rock star". The video content features a man with sunglasses and a grey tank top, holding a red guitar over his shoulder. The video is paused. Below the video frame, there are two lines of subtitles: "El problema no fue hallarte, el problema es olvidarte." and "The problem wasn't finding you, the problem is forgetting you." The video player controls at the bottom include a play button, a refresh button, a progress bar showing 04:24 / 09:35, a volume icon, and a comment icon.

Looking for a fun way to learn a language?
How about online language immersion with FluentU?

[Try FluentU for FREE](#)

TeKaMoLo — The Exceptions

The point to be made about TeKaMoLo is that its use is predominantly for sentences where no special emphasis is made.

If we go back to our example above, with Josh and his nearly deaf grandmother, it's difficult to detect a specific point being emphasized. Which is fine until we want to point out that it was out of consideration for his grandmother that Josh was speaking loudly at the kitchen table yesterday.

As Nana says, he is a good boy.

And so in order to emphasize this point we cut and paste it to the beginning of the sentence. This obviously disrupts our TeKaMoLo order—one of the AI Brothers is going solo.

But changing the position of one of these adverbial phrases doesn't leave the others in chaos. They stick to their order.

So now we have: Ka – TeMoLo. The Temporal still comes before the Modal and the Modal still comes before the Lokal, just as in its original form.

And don't forget the verb in a primary clause will always be in position 2.

Let's take a look.

Aus Rücksicht auf seine Oma hat Josh gestern sehr laut am Küchentisch gesprochen.

Alright? Alright.

It ought to go without saying, but just in case (because there are no stupid questions) TeKaMoLo doesn't only apply when all of the criteria are in use.

So we'll take a look at a few examples now to get the blood pumping.

1. "We can drive the car to Berlin tomorrow."

Wir können morgen mit dem Auto nach Berlin fahren.

Morgen können wir mit dem Auto nach Berlin fahren.

Mit dem Auto können wir morgen nach Berlin fahren.

Temporal, Modal and Lokal in action there, all the same words but each version expressing a slightly different emphasis than the one before. The importance of it depends on the context. For example if you're being asked when you're going to get somewhere, it would make sense to address that question immediately.

2. "You can pick us up on Thursday on the way to the beer garden."

Ihr könnt uns Donnerstag auf dem Weg zum Biergarten abholen.

Auf dem Weg zum Biergarten könnt ihr uns Donnerstag abholen.

Be careful—there's only two of the four here, Temporal and Modal. *Zum Biergarten* isn't Lokal, it's part of the Modal phrase *auf dem Weg*.

The way you can tell the difference is that the two won't split up. *Auf dem weg könnt ihr zum Biergarten* doesn't make any sense just as "you can pick us up on the way on Thursday to the beer garden" doesn't either. It's one piece of information and it's describing how the action is being performed.

3. "A rude waiter brought us the bill in the pizzeria yesterday, before we had finished our meal."

Ein dreister Kellner hat uns gestern in der Pizzeria die Rechnung gebracht, bevor wir mit dem Essen fertig waren.

Here it looks as though there are two temporal adverbs: *Gestern* and *bevor wir mit dem Essen fertig waren*.

So why is the second one positioned last in the sentence?

Because it's a **subordinate clause** indicated by the comma and the conjunction *bevor*. The same goes for certain prepositions.

The word **because** is pretty inextricably linked with the *Kausal*, but as it's also the beginning of a subordinate clause, it has no place in the TeKaMoLo configuration.

4. "Josh spoke very loudly at the kitchen table yesterday **because** his grandma is nearly deaf."

Josh hat gestern sehr laut am Küchentisch gesprochen, weil seine Oma fast taub ist.

IT ISN'T, I REPEAT, IT IS **NOT**

Josh hat gestern, weil seine Oma fast taub ist, sehr laut am Küchentisch gesprochen.

This is a mistake I made a lot when I was learning German. I was very confident that with its reputation for efficiency, the German language would do its utmost to confine as much as possible into single clauses. I was wrong, but friendly people pointed it out to me...

...und jetzt habe ich dank dieses Tipps keine Probleme mehr in Deutschland zu sprechen.

So there we are, TeKaMoLo, the least painful technique to getting German word order to work for you. Soon enough you'll be dazzling everyone with your complex poly-adverbial master sentences, using the AI Brothers to bring music to everyone's ears.

If you *liked* this post, something tells me that you'll *love* FluentU, the best way to learn German with real-world videos.

[Experience German immersion online!](#)