

Verb-Third in German: Syntax, register and social perception

German is generally classified as a Verb-Second (V2) language, with the finite verb appearing in second position in main clauses, preceded by a single constituent in the prefield (Vikner & Schwartz 1996; Holmberg & Platzack 2005) (1):

(1) a. *Maria hat gestern in der Stadt ein Buch gekauft.*
Maria has yesterday in the city a book bought
b. *Gestern hat Maria in der Stadt ein Buch gekauft.*
yesterday has Maria in the city a book bought
c. *In der Stadt hat Maria gestern ein Buch gekauft.*
in the city has Maria yesterday a book bought
'Maria bought a book in the city yesterday.'

This structural generalization has shaped both descriptive and theoretical accounts of German word order, reinforcing the idea that deviations from V2 reflect ungrammaticality or exceptional usage. Among these deviations, Verb-Third (V3) word orders – where two constituents, typically an adverbial and an argument, precede the finite verb in C – have often been treated as marginal or socially marked, and are frequently associated with contact varieties such as Kiezdeutsch (Wiese 2013) (2):

(2) *Gestern isch war Ku'damm ...*
yesterday I was Ku'damm
'I was on Kurfürstendamm (= famous boulevard in Berlin) yesterday ...'
(Wiese et al. : 114, from: KiDKo, Transkript MuH9WT)

However, recent studies have shown that V3 occurs more broadly across spoken registers of German and is neither specific to Kiezdeutsch nor limited to speakers with a migration background (Bunk 2020; Catasso 2021, 2025; Breitbarth 2022, 2023; Sluckin & Bunk 2023) (cf. (3), from a radio interview):

(3) a. [auch in afrika] [die meisten menschen] sprechen englisch
also in Africa the most people speak English
'In Africa, too, most people speak English.'
(Deutschlandfunk, from: Breitbarth 2022: 2)
b. [ohne den job] [das] wäre nich ich
without the job that would-be not I
'Without this job, I wouldn't be myself.'
(WuG, RA_F_0358)
c. [heute] [viele] fliegen turbinenflugzeuge
today many fly jet-aircraft
'Today, many people fly jet aircraft.'
(WuG, HL_M_0444)

This study investigates V3 as a case of structured syntactic variation, based on data from the Wuppertal-Ghent Corpus of Contemporary Spoken German (Breitbarth et al., forthcoming) and a compact corpus of new data from Kiezdeutsch (Neubauer & Catasso 2025). This paper focuses on two aspects:

(i) a formal-syntactic account of the pattern "Adverbial > Argument > Vfin";
(ii) the discourse-pragmatic and social-evaluative dimension of this construction.

With respect to (i), it is argued that what appears to be a single pattern in fact comprises at least three distinct underlying structures, each corresponding to different left-peripheral configurations. The analysis shows that V3 emerges under systematic discourse conditions – particularly in contexts involving discourse anchors or contrastive frame-setters – and is best understood as a marginal-grammatical (Fries 1987 & Haegeman 2006), register-sensitive extension of the canonical V2 pattern rather than a grammatical anomaly.

As for (ii), while V3 has frequently been linked to Kiezdeutsch, the data suggest that its distribution is shaped by discourse-pragmatic and situational factors characteristic of informal speech more

generally. Crucially, in the dataset analyzed here, the statistical frequency of this pattern in spoken German and in Kiezdeutsch does not differ significantly.

The persistent association of V3 with multiethnic youth language appears to reflect socially mediated expectations about speaker identity and language use, shaped by standard-language ideologies and indexical associations. From this perspective, the link between V3 and Kiezdeutsch is not grounded in a distinct grammatical system but in the broader interaction between syntax, register, and perception.

To complement the syntactic analysis, a pilot perceptual study was conducted to examine how V3 constructions are evaluated by native speakers. Results indicate that V3 is often associated with reduced linguistic authority, lower speaker credibility, and a sense of distance from institutional norms. These evaluations point not only to perceived informality, but also to broader forms of social positioning and speaker typification. Such perceptions may contribute to the continued marginalization of V3 in prescriptive accounts of German, despite its grammatical legitimacy in discourse-sensitive contexts.

Taken together, these findings highlight the relevance of a socio-syntactic approach to word order variation. V3 in German offers a clear case of how syntactic structure and social meaning interact—illustrating how formal licensing conditions, discourse organization, and social evaluation co-determine the distribution and interpretation of non-canonical word orders in contemporary spoken German.

Corpora:

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