In this paper we propose a description of German word order including phenomena considered as complex, such as scrambling or (partial) VP fronting. We achieve this by relating directly a syntactic dependency structure to a topological hierarchy as in the usual topological model of Germanic languages (e.g. Bech 1955, Evers 1975) without any resort to movement or similar mechanisms. Our approach only outlines the basic restrictions on which finer grained description will have to be added. Nevertheless, the possibility to describe the basis of these different and very controversial phenomena of German with very few and simple rules makes this approach appealing. Contrarily to HPSG (e.g. Reape 1994, Kathol 1995), based on an underlying phrase structure grammar on which a topological structure is transplanted, our approach consists of a description of a direct correspondence between the dependency structure (the – unordered – verbal subcategorization frames, Tesnière 1959) and the topology that orders the surface, and the only phrase structure we consider is the topological hierarchy.

Following the usual description of a declarative sentence, the syntactic head, the finite verb, opens the main domain consisting of the following fields: Vorfeld, left bracket, Mittelfeld, right bracket, and Nachfeld. The finite verb occupies the left bracket.1

A verbal argument of the main verb has two basic choices of positioning: The right bracket and any place inside of a major field (Vor-, Mittel-, and Nachfeld).2 According to this choice between right bracket and major field, the verb opens a different type of constituent: In the latter case the verb opens an embedded domain consisting again of different fields (Mittelfeld, right bracket, and Nachfeld) and it occupies the right bracket of this embedded domain ((6), (7)). The former case is very different: The verb joins the domain of its head, and takes the right bracket position (1). Inside this bracket, it offers places for only one of its dependents, generally to its left, but also to its right if it is the auxiliary *wir haben oder haben* (Oberfeldumstellung or auxiliary flip).3

A verbal argument of a verb in the right bracket (of the original or an embedded domain) has the same choices between joining the right bracket (3) and opening a new domain. In the latter case the new domain behaves just like non-verbal complements of the verb and can take any place4 in a major field of its governor’s domain (4) or of any higher domain (5).5 This similarity of verbal and non-verbal placement suggests a high degree of generality of our approach. Moreover, the description of Dutch is a straightforward change of some parameters.6

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1 The movement hypothesis from final to V2 position has been convincingly refuted by Kathol 1995, pp. 107-127.
2 This only applies to complete infinitives (with zu); bare infinitives and participles can only create this new domain in the Vorfeld (and some more restrictions on its governor apply).
3 Going to the left of its governor is the ordinary position of the verb and it only offers a new place to its left (V2V2 is possible in the right bracket). However, if it takes the (eventual) right position, the verb offers again two places, one to its left and one to its right, in order to account for simple (V2V2, V2V3V4V5….) and double Oberfeldumstellung (V2V3V4V5V6….).
4 The order of elements inside a domain does hardly depend on their domain structure (but on case, pronoun vs. full noun, discourse structure, visibility of case, etc.). We propose thus to have general domain internal nance structure (but on case, pronoun vs. full noun, discourse structure,

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We would like to conclude by stressing our awareness of the fact that we do not describe all, often lexical, restrictions on word order. We are convinced, however, that the topological structure of the Germanic sentence is not only a classical and intuitive approach, but that, correctly formalized, it should serve as a basis for more detailed descriptions. It seems futile to try to deduce the standard order of a unique domain with verb clustering from the non-standard ‘extraposition’, i.e. a more complex structure of embedded domains, as it is done in phrase structure based approaches.

Example: Suppose the following syntactic dependency structure that gives for example this sentence without embedded domains:

(1) Niemand hat diesem Mann das Buch zu lesen versprochen.

The initial domain is (VF) (MF (MF) (MF) (MF)). (VF = Vorfeld, [ = left bracket, MF = Mittelfeld, ] = right bracket, NF = Nachfeld)

We start from the top and place the finite verb: (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Niemand can be placed in any major field (the Nachfeld position isn’t excluded, but we use a system of penalties, not developed here, to distinguish more or less marked sentences). Say we chose the Mittelfeld: (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Versprochen can join the initial domain – (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) – or it can open a new domain, for example in the Vorfeld: (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Note that niemand cannot join the new domain, as it is not a descendent of versprochen:

(2) *Niemand diesem Mann versprochen hat das Buch zu lesen.

Diesem Mann can either enter its governor’s domain, say the Mittelfeld: (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Or it can join a major field in a higher domain: (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Zu lesen has even more choices: It can join its governor’s right bracket:

(3) (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

It can create its own domain in this same domain, say in the Nachfeld:

(4) (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

Or it can use a major field of a higher domain:

(5) (VF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF) (MF)

In this latter case, das Buch can again join its governor’s domain:


Or use a higher domain’s major field:


It cannot join the domain of versprochen, as its governor is not inside it. We predict correctly:

(8) * Das Buch versprochen hat diesem Mann niemand zu lesen.
Some References:
Kathol, Andreas, Linearization-Based German Syntax, PhD thesis, Ohio State University, 1995