

# Topicality and inverse negative scope in German

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In the German middle field, the negation *nicht* ‘not’ can take inverse scope over a topical singular indefinite, challenging two assumptions: that negation in German exhibits purely linear scope (Jacobs 1982), and that topics take wide scope (Endriss 2009). This is shown by the fact that *ein Boot nicht* ‘a boat not’ in (1-a) can be replaced by *kein Boot* ‘no boat’ (1-b) without changing the meaning. Unlike *kein Boot* in (1-b), the narrow-scope indefinite in (1-a) is a topic, as it can directly precede a sentence adverbial, which has been claimed to be the designated topic position in the German middle field (Frey 2004).

- (1) a. weil ein Boot (leider) nicht zur Verfügung stand.  
because a boat unfortunately not to availability stood  
b. weil kein Boot (??leider) zur Verfügung stand.  
because no boat unfortunately to availability stood  
‘because a boat was unfortunately not available.’

We therefore hypothesize that the acceptability of *ein N nicht*-sentences depends on topicality. When the indefinite precedes the sentential adverb, sentences should be rated as more acceptable than when it follows the adverb. For *kein N*-sentences, we expect the opposite pattern. To test this, we conducted an acceptability judgment experiment with a 2×2 factorial within-subjects design: form of negation (*ein-N-nicht* vs. *kein-N*) and word order (NP-ADV vs. ADV-NP). This yielded four experimental conditions (2). Forty-nine native speakers of German rated 24 experimental and 48 filler sentences on a 7-point Likert scale.

- (2) *Context sentences* (translated)  
The State Secretary was late for the NATO summit. The press suspected that this was due to the fleet of aircraft.  
It has now been reported that...
- a. *ein-N-nicht\_NP-ADV*  
ein funktionsfähiger Flieger **leider** nicht zur Verfügung stand.  
a functioning plane unfortunately not to availability stood  
‘... a functioning aircraft was unfortunately not available.’
- b. *ein-N-nicht\_ADV-NP*  
**leider** ein funktionsfähiger Flieger nicht zur Verfügung stand.  
unfortunately a functioning plane not to availability stood
- c. *kein-N\_NP-ADV*  
kein funktionsfähiger Flieger **leider** zur Verfügung stand.  
no functioning plane unfortunately to availability stood
- d. *kein-N\_ADV-NP*  
**leider** kein funktionsfähiger Flieger zur Verfügung stand.  
unfortunately no functioning plane to availability stood

A cumulative link mixed model reveals a significant effect of word order on the ratings ( $\beta = -0.5272$ ,  $SE = 0.1181$ ,  $z = -4.463$ ,  $p = 8.09e - 06$ ), qualified by a strong interaction with form of negation ( $\beta = -2.3519$ ,  $SE = 0.2186$ ,  $z = -10.759$ ,  $p < 2e - 16$ ). Whereas *ein N nicht*-sentences received higher ratings when the NP precedes the adverb, *kein N*-sentences showed a substantial drop in acceptability when *kein N* precedes the adverb. Furthermore, the acceptability of *ein N nicht*-sentences with *ein N* preceding the adverb was not significantly different from *kein N*-sentences with *kein N* following the adverb. This suggests that inverse negative scope is more acceptable when the indefinite is a topic and that inverse scope is preferred over linear scope in such cases.

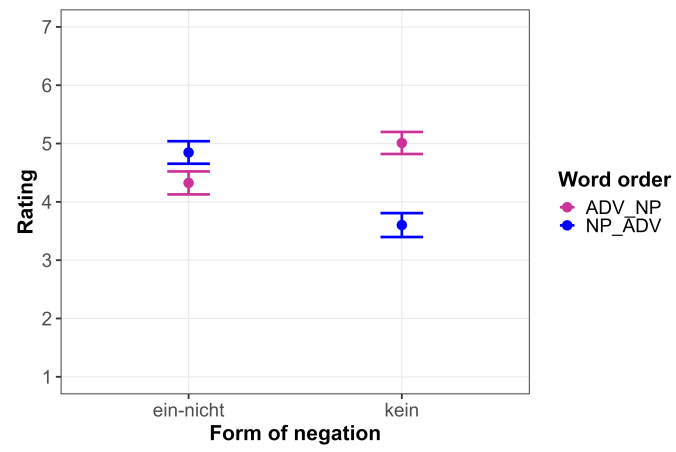


Figure 1: Acceptability judgment results