The position of "nicht" - Part 2

by German-is-easy - Tuesday, November 13, 2018

https://yourdailygerman.com/position-nicht-german-2/

Ey yo German learners,

what is gucci? Welcome to the most lit German learning blog ever. And because it is Brovember, I have a very special topic for you, bros. Today, we'll finally get the very very very long awaited part of two of our mini series called

The amazing Positions of "nicht"

or in short T.A.M.P.O.N.
Yup, that's what jokes are made of in Brovember.
Seriously though, my apologies to all of you that it took me so long to finish part two!!! But it's an important topic and I wanted to get it right.
In part one we learned two things; kind of the Yin and Yang of German negation:
a very nice, simple, straight-forward rule.
And an absurd sounding, pink assumption we need for the rule to work.

The rule: ***Nicht*** ALWAYS *precedes what it negates. no exceptions.*
The assumption: *The side sentence structure is the REAL, normal German sentence structure.*

Most of you probably have a hard time believing that these two things are all we need to get a grasp on the position of *nicht*. And that's right. But not rules. What we need is an understanding of the core dynamic of a German sentence and we need to trust our ... here it comes... intuition. Yup, intuition.
You see, the thing with the position of *nicht* is the same as with word order. There are several options for pretty much any given sentence. Some sound neutral, some carry special emphasis and some have so much tension that they sound wrong.
That's what we'll talk about today.

- Where is the natural spot for *nicht (*which would be what most sources call "sentence negation") and what happens if we move it out of there.

I'm not promising you that you'll get every single nicht right after reading this. But I am pretty sure that you'll feel like you've understood what's going on and you understand what's going on when you see a "weird" negation.
If you haven't read part one yet or you don't really remember it, then please check that out first.

The amazing position of "nicht" - Part One

Otherwise, I'd say, let's jump right in.

In the intro I mentioned that the position of **nicht** has a lot to do with German word order. There's a whole three part series on that, but we'll go over the most important points together.

German Sentences Exposed

Under the hood, a German sentence consists of two parts. The first part sets up a scene. We (usually) get a protagonist and time and location and possibly a bunch of references to stuff that's already established in the conversation.

The second part is what is "happening" in that setting. That's the payload so to speak, this is the bit of info that actually made us say the sentence to begin with. This includes the verb and all elements that are "defining" for it in that sentence.

Let's look at an example. Oh and of course will use the *verb at the end*-structure (if you don't know why... READ PART ONE ;).

- ... ,dass ich gestern Abend zuhause einen Film geguckt habe.
- ..., that I watched a movie at home last night.

Imagine this as a shot as a movie scene. The camera shows me, unkempt, in my underwear on the couch. Behind me, we can see the windows and that it is dark outside. Cut. Now the camera is behind me showing the back of my head and the screen with a scene of the movie ~~The Notebook~~ ... erm... I mean *Fast and Furious*. Of course, don't watch the Notebook in Brovember. Or any Vember for that matter. Anyways, between those two "halves" there sometimes are one or a few elements for which it is up to interpretation whether they're part of the main message or just tag-ons to the scenery.

So it's actually a two side structure with a squishy center. Kind of like my body at the moment. My shoulders and my legs are well defined but the belly can lean either way, depending on my positi... anyways.

setting and references - in between stuff- the big news

Here's an example that'll make the whole dynamic really obvious.

1. ... , dass ich gestern im Zoo *Maria getroffen habe*. (..., that I met Maria at the zoo yesterday.)
2. ... , dass ich sie gestern im Zoo *getroffen habe*. (..., that I met her at the zoo yesterday.)
3. ...., dass ich dort gestern *Maria getroffen habe*. (..., that I met Maria there yesterday.)

Do you see how the elements bounce around depending on whether they are new or just references? As soon as something is a reference (sie, dort) it has been part of the conversation already and it moves to the left because it is not part of the "news".

In sentence number one, the person who I am meeting is part of the main news. In the second sentence however, she has already been mentioned, so it's just news that I met her, and possibly where. And in the last one, we learn what I did at the zoo yesterday.

Gee, it must be kind of depressing for a learner to see the crazy hopping in German while in the English translations, everything nicely stays in its slot.

But yeah, that's roughly how word order works in German and as I said, there's a whole series about it (link below).

What matters for us today is this three part structure:

<div align="center">setting up the scene - vague stuff that can belong to either side - main news</div>

Because that is the key to the most important thing since sliced bread... wait, this idiom doesn't fit #idiomfails. Anyway, it's the key to ...

the neutral position of *nicht*

And the neutral position of ***nicht*** is... drum roll please... right before the big news.
And everything that comes before it is automatically scenery. That makes sense if you think about it. You set up the scene because you want to tell us that something DIDN'T happen in that setting. Let's take a few examples.

1. ... , dass ich gestern Abend zum ersten Mal ***nicht*** Youtube geguckt habe.
   ... that I didn't watch Youtube last night for the first time.
2. ... , dass ich gestern in der Bar ***nicht*** fünf Bier getrunken habe.
   ... , that I didn't drink five beers at the bar yesterday.
3. ..., dass Maria heute mit ihrem Hund ***nicht*** in den Park geht.
   ... that Maria doesn't go to the park with her dog today.

In the first one, the story is that I did something for the first time last night, and the pay-off, the main info is that this thing was NOT watching Youtube.
In the second one, the scene is me at a bar, and I DIDN'T drink five beers. And the last one is about something Maria and her dog today and the news is that she DIDN'T go to the park with Bellyfrog Junior. Poor doggy.
Now, I'm sure you're all wondering the same thing. And the answer is yes. The name of the dog really is Bellyfrog Junior. She named it after her grandmother, you know.
But you're probably also wondering how the heck you as learners are supposed to know where the main message starts. Like... sure, it makes sense when I show it with colors but doing it alone.
And I know it seems like a daunting task and so far this must seem like a quite stupid way of explaining something. But please bear with me. What we'll do now is move ***nicht*** left and right in these examples and see what happens. Don't try to pin down rules, just take it in and see if it makes sense and sounds intuitive. I'm sure, you'll be surprised :).

moving "nicht" right

By moving ***nicht*** right from the neutral position, we're moving it into the block that is the news. And so, we're essentially splicing off a part of that, making it part of the scene. Because remember... everything before nicht is scenery.
Let's go over the examples one by one.

1. ..., dass ich gestern Abend zum ersten Mal Youtube ***nicht*** geguckt habe.

Youtube is now part of the setup so we're basically telling the story of what happened between me and Youtube last night for the first time. And that story is, I didn't watch it. The sentence is grammatically fine. It's just not a very natural one. You see, when you tell the story about something you watched, that something is usually pretty strongly connected to the verb. The two together make for the news, not just the watching. Sure, the connection between those two is not as strong as the connection between a verb and its separable prefix, but still separating the two creates quite a bit of tension and therefore focus. And that focus is hard to justify. Like... what else could I have done with Youtube, if I didn't watch it. Maybe I read it. Or maybe I invited it to dinner. You see, having Youtube as part of the scene and then have what I did with it not be to watch is just rare.
Let's take the next one

2. ..., dass ich gestern in der Bar fünf Bier *nicht* getrunken habe.

Again, contrary to what textbooks and most online sources imply if you follow their rules, this is a perfectly fine sentence. It tells a story about me and a certain five beers yesterday at the bar. Maybe the bar has a wide selection of beers and I tried all except those certain five beers. Or maybe I drank up ALL the beers at the bar, except those five. The point is, the sentence doesn't negate those beers.
But usually, when we're telling the story about us drinking something, the drink itself is an essential part of that news broadcast. By splitting it away from the verb, we're introducing tension and that has to be justified by some unusual message.
And while here, it is not so hard to find such a message, it is pretty much impossible for the last example.

3. ..., dass Maria heute mit ihrem Hund in den Park *nicht* geht.

This sentence establishes Maria and her dog. AND that they are directed toward the park in some way, because that is established by the Accusative in the phrase *in den Park*. All that is established scene, and the only thing negated is the "gehen". So this sentence would only makes sense if you wanted to tell us that she didn't "go" but, I don't know, hovered. Or teleported.
Generally, the destination is VERY strongly connected to verbs of motion and splitting it away creates an extreme amount of tension. So most of the time people will call it "wrong" because the tension and focus is not justified.
Cool.
So, what have we seen so far? When we move *nicht* to the right from the neutral position, into the chunk that makes up the *news,* we're creating quite a bit of tension because we're splitting up what naturally (I dare say "intuitively") belongs together. And depending how strong that bond is, this can just suggest a special message (the beer example) or it can sound wrong. Like for a verb and its prefix for instance...

- ... , dass die Tür auf nicht geht.

This is not really wrong, but it is SUPER weird. Or art, if a poet does it.
Anyway, let's direct our attention in the other direction and move *nicht* left.

moving "nicht" left

Remember that we learned that some sentences have these undefined elements in the center? These

elements that can be either scene or main message, no one knows or cares? Well, if we have one of those elements and we move nicht left, past it, then this element becomes part of the main message.
Let's look at our park example, because there, we do have such an element, as we can see in the non negated version

     1. ... , dass Maria heute mit ihrem Hund in den Park geht.

We can understand the sentence as telling us what she does ("going to the park with her dog") or we can understand it as telling us what she does with her dog ("go to the park"). It doesn't really make a difference information-wise. And so it doesn't really make a difference which version we're negating, or in other words, it doesn't matter whether nicht is before or after the dog.

3. ..., dass Maria heute mit ihrem Hund *nicht* in den Park geht.
..., dass Maria heute *nicht* mit ihrem Hund in den Park geht.

BOTH version sound neutral. Now some of you are probably like *"But Emanuel, isn't the second version what is called element negation? Like... we're negating the dog part specifically?"*
But the answer is no. This is NOT element negation because there isn't enough tension, and thus not enough focus on one element. That's a good example why this whole sentence negation vs. element negation stuff isn't really all that great, IMO.
If we wanted to put focus on the dog-part, we'd have to do that using our voice. Or red caps. Like Trump.

3. ... , dass Maria heute *nicht* MIT IHREM HUND in den Park geht (sondern mit ihrer Kuh).

So, if we have one or several unclear elements then the position of *nicht* doesn't really matter in that area. But as soon as we move it into what is clearly the scene, THAT'S when we create focus.

2. ... , dass ich gestern *nicht* in der Bar fünf Bier getrunken habe.

Technically, we could interpret the whole part after *nicht* as the news. But the fact that there's a number (five) suggests that THE AMOUNT is our story, and the location where it takes place is part of the scene. If we take out the number then the bar becomes more newsworthy... like... "drinking beer at the bar"... that's a nice description for an evening activity.
Anyway, by moving *nich*t in front of the bar-part in the original example, we're creating a focus on this element. Because it was part of the scene. And whenever we have nicht in front of an element of the scene, we create so much focus that this element specifically is now the target of the negation, making THIS negation the main point of the sentence. While the rest kind of becomes scene.
Here it is again with color:

2 ... , dass ich gestern *nicht* in der Bar fünf Bier getrunken habe.

I did drink five beers yesterday, I just didn't do it at the bar. And
Now, in this example, *nicht* isn't THAT far from the neutral position yet. So it doesn't create crazy tension. That's why usually native speakers would give the bar a little extra nudge through aural emphasis. But the further you move *nicht* to the left, the stronger the tension and the more clear the focus on that single element.

2 ...., dass ich **nicht** *gestern* in der Bar fünf Bier getrunken habe.

I did drink five beers at the bar. But it wasn't yesterday.
Cool.
Now, for completion, let's also move nicht to the left in the Youtube example...

    1. ... , dass ich heute **nicht** zum ersten Mal Youtube geguckt habe.

This sentence is a tricky one. Technically, we could see the whole chunk after **nicht**, *watching Youtube for the first time*, as the *news.* That's what I didn't do today. Maybe I did it years ago, maybe I haven't done it yet -#youtubevirgin.
But the more natural way, is to consider *for the first time* as part of the scene. So without the negation, the sentence would tell us what I did today for the first time.... watching Youtube. The neutral position for **nicht** would be before Youtube then, and so by putting **nicht** in front of *for the first time*, we've moved it into scene-land. And that creates tension and special focus on *the first time*. That's what's being negated now, but I did watch Youtube before.

Cool, now, let's do a little recap.
Each sentence consists of a setup, usually the protagonist, references to stuff that has been part of the conversation and time and place, followed by the news. That news can be just a verb or a verb and its object or a longer chunk. It's different from sentence to sentence and really the only way to approach this of it is by using ... common sense. The neutral position of nicht is right before the news. And if we move it away from there, we're creating tension that might lead to one specific element becoming the focus of the negation or ... to a sentence that sounds weird or wrong.
And that's basically it.
I know you're now all like *"EMANUEL, are you for real?!?! That's your explanation? We have a gazillion questions!!!"*
But as far as fundamentals go, there isn't really much more to explain. All we can do now is look at examples. And that's what we'll do in the third part of this series - a big, fat exercise, to be published in about three years.
Nah, kidding. I won't make you wait that long this time :).
But for today, we've done enough. Don't stress out if you walk away from this not feeling like "Yeah, I got all the rules.". There are no real rules. That's one take-away. And the other is this dynamic of neutral position and moving nicht away from it. If you feel like you've understood this as a concept, then perfect!
But of course that doesn't mean that you shouldn't have questions. I'm pretty sure you do, so please let me know ALL of them in the comments. That'll help me make the exercise more on point, so to speak. And also, I'm curious to hear your thoughts. Was it what you expected (probably not ;)? Did that make sense to you? Do you think, with a little bit of practice, it can make you feel "safe" in the world of negation? As most importantly... WAS IT LIT??
Let me know all your feedback and criticism in the comments, bros.
I'm out for now... erm... keep dabbin' on 'dem textbooks, have a great week and see you next time.

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