

German as RPN

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It should be noted that “Reverse Polish Notation” is named in honor of the Polish logician Jan Lukasiewicz, who developed prefix notation, wherein the operator comes before the operands. Postfix notation proved more useful for stack-based arithmetic computations, and so the opposite of prefix notation came to be known as “Reverse Polish Notation”. It was kind of a strange feeling when I encountered Polish notation in logic class. Finally I got to see the forwards version of what I had been doing in reverse for so many years! Anyway, here’s a classic example of German as RPN, hidden in a web page on the subject of *Dutch* word order. Consider the clause “... that Frank saw Julia help Fred swim.” In German, that would be expressed as

... daß Frank Julia Fred schwimmen helfen sah.

... that Frank Julia Fred swim help saw.

You can create this sort of constructing in English too, but nobody does this unless they are trying to cause trouble: “The rat the cat the dog chased caught died.” English also gets somewhat unpredictable if you decide to start the sentence with something other than the subject:

What you need I cannot give you. Object first, no inversion.

Nothing but blue skies do I see. Object first with inversion.

Sometimes it snows. Adverb first, no inversion.

Rarely does it snow. Adverb first with inversion.

It’s like English is struggling to decide whether it wants to hang out with its Germanic buddies and use X-V-S or strike out on its own and be an S-V language. I found German an easy language to learn because it is much more logical, much less capricious. “The verb goes in second position, the adjective goes in front of the noun.” “But what if the adjective is really

long?” “Tough. Goes in front. Because that’s where adjectives go.” Swedish (at least to my unaccustomed ears) leans more towards the capricious end of the scale. What’s the difference between “från” and “ifrån” and “i från”? It’s probably one of those subtleties that I will never learn.

Okay, enough about language. Geek talk resumes on Monday.

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