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ABSTRACT

        This paper examines the claim that German-language
syntax is undergoing a process of restructuring that will eliminate
verb final position in sentences, resulting in a very English-style
linear sentence structure. One particular structure is examined in
interviews with 30 adults and 10 children: the finite verb in
subordinate clauses that is increasingly being located in second
position, especially in the because-clause, in contexts other than
declarative clauses. Survey findings indicate that 47 percent of
adults used the verb-second pattern for because-clauses, especially
when discussing emotive topics; children used it to an even greater
extent. This feature was not found to be restricted to any social
grouping, age, sex, or degree of education. Overall, it was found
that this new structure is very common in colloquial speech, that
likelihood of occurrence depends on linguistic context or function
rather than on extralinguistic facts, and that speakers' evaluation
of the structure is as variable as their usage of it and broadly
corresponds with the hierarchy of usage. Results suggest that economy
of effort in production and processing also play a part in this
patterned inherent variation, rather than outright linguistic change,
in the German language. (Contains 31 references.) (NAV)

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Introduction

For the language learner, perhaps the most striking feature of German syntax is the apparently categorical location of the finite verb in final position in subordinate clauses introduced by a conjunction:

1   Petra kommt nicht mit ins Kino, weil sie zu beschäftigt ist.
     [Petra isn't coming to the cinema, because she is too busy.]

This is, so to speak, the stereotypical feature of the language, the one most readily identified and most frequently caricatured by speakers of languages which do not have such patterns. One of the main reasons for this is the dislocation of two elements, the subject and the finite verb, which are felt to be so intimately linked that they should be in adjacent positions in the sentence. The argument in all such cases (German is, of course, far from unique in this respect) is that processing such sentences imposes considerable cognitive demands on the listener or even reader, and that this pattern is therefore uneconomical in communicative terms (Eisenberg 1989: 20; Kann 1972: 379).

The main aim of this paper will be to investigate the claim (see, e.g., Kuper 1991; Admoni 1973; Kann 1972) that German syntax is undergoing a process of restructuring which, if it is maintained and taken to its logical conclusion, will result in the loss of this distinctive feature in favour of what Admoni (1970:13) calls 'gradlinige Satzkonstruktionen' (linear sentence structures), which in turn will lead to a reduction in syntactic complexity and thus to increased communicative efficiency (although it is worth noting that the increased use of hypotactic structures in written German often has the opposite effect). The discussion will focus on one particular sentence type and will derive from a small-scale empirical study conducted in Cologne.

The starting point for this discussion is the common observation that in certain contexts the finite verb in subordinate clauses is increasingly being located in second position, which is the 'normal' position for the verb in main clauses: contrast the 'normal' word order in example 1 above with the (apparently) non-standard variant:

2   Petra kommt nicht mit ins Kino, weil sie *ist* zu beschäftigt.

In fact, this pattern is far from new: until well into the 18th century both alternatives were current in both spoken and written German (Wells 1985: 253-4), and the verb-second construction has persisted in many traditional dialects, especially in the south of the German-speaking area (Gaumann 1983: 2, 15, 64-7). In a sense, therefore, the question here should perhaps be whether the current variability is an indication of a reversion to or a reassertion of an older form rather than an innovation. However, for the purposes of this paper it will be considered from a synchronic perspective and set in the context of a potentially general trend towards greater syntactic simplicity.

The relocation of the finite verb into second position in contexts other than simple declarative clauses is increasingly common (for example, in the second of two adjacent subordinate clauses linked by *und* (and), or in yes-no questions). These features are all familiar to linguistic observers but have been subject to relatively little empirical investigation (for theoretical discussion, see Zemb 1973; Brinkmann 1978; Engel 1969; Bierwisch 1978; Redder 1990; Thim-Mabrey 1982). Yet this is much needed, partly because most of these 'alternative' constructions are scarcely tolerated if at all by normative grammarians (see, e.g., on the feature to be discussed here: Engel 1988: 730; it is not even mentioned in Helbig and Buscha 1986, Dreyer and Schmitt 1985 or Götze and Hess-Lüttich 1989), and partly because some at least appear to be subject to clearly identifiable constraints, which suggests that they should not be dismissed as irregular deviations or performance errors. For example, verb-second order seems to occur in some types of subordinate clause but not others, even then only in certain syntactic environments, and only in spontaneous colloquial speech. In other words, for many (perhaps most) subordinate clauses the verb-final rule is categorical, while some have a variable pattern.

This looks like a classic example of the early stages of change, but as Günthner (1993) argues it could equally well be a case of patterned inherent variation. The following sections will therefore consider empirical evidence on the use of one type of clause, the *weil-Satz* (because-clause) in relation to the broader question of what this kind of variation actually represents.

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Outline of study

The empirical basis for the discussion here consists of data gathered in a small-scale survey of 30 adults (both male and female, of different age groups and with various degrees of formal education) and 10 children in the course of four experiments, all conducted by an anglophone fieldworker with a good knowledge of German (for other empirical studies on this topic, see Gaumann 1983, Günthner 1993 and Schlobinski 1992).

The first two experiments took the form of individual interviews with first the adults, then the children. The interviews were relatively unstructured and the objective was to generate an informal atmosphere using a variety of familiar techniques to overcome the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972: 209; Milroy 1987: 59-60). The informants were told that the survey was part of a project on local identities in post-unification Germany. The remaining two experiments consisted of a subjective reaction test and a self-evaluation test: the informants were confronted with a set of nine sentences containing because-clauses in various contexts and were asked first to judge the acceptability of these sentences and then to indicate whether they would use such sentences themselves.

Discussion of the experiments

Interviews with adults

The single most striking result of this experiment was the remarkably high overall frequency of the verb-second pattern: it occurred in 47% of all because-clauses, and the relative proportion for each speaker increased during the discussion of emotive topics (such as the Gulf War, immigration, the effects of unification). This fact alone underscores the significance of the feature and demonstrates that it should not be treated as a marginal phenomenon in contemporary spoken German.

Possible associations with extralinguistic factors such as sex, age and degree of education were looked for, but although some interesting tendencies emerged the scale of the survey was too small for any significant conclusions to be drawn. The important general point that did emerge clearly is that this feature is not restricted to any social grouping: it occurred to a greater or lesser extent in the

speech of all the informants, which confirms the intuitive assertions made by other observers such as Gaumann (1983: 83-5) and Sandig (1973: 41-2).

The data was far more revealing with respect to linguistic constraints, which were the real object of the study. It had been suggested (e.g. in Glück and Sauer 1990: 48) that the verb-second pattern would only actually occur in one of the three theoretically possible syntactic configurations: that is to say, when the *weil*-clause follows the main clause, not when it precedes or is embedded in the main clause. It is also said to be associated with a pause after the conjunction. Our findings only partially support this view, as can be seen in Table 1.

The *weil*-clauses occurring in the interviews were classified into five categories (to simplify the presentation, examples are given here in English):

● *weil* is used as a turn-taking device rather than to introduce an explanatory clause
  [A: I think cable TV is a waste of money, I hardly ever ...
  B: ... because you get lots of channels you don't really want.]

● the *weil*-clause is a direct answer to a why? question
  [A: Why do you use this software?
  B: Because it's more user-friendly.]

● the *weil*-clause follows a main clause with a pause after *weil*
  [I'm not going on holiday this year because ... I can't afford it.]

● the *weil*-clause follows a main clause with no pause after *weil*
  [I vote for the Tories because they're such wonderful people.]

● the *weil*-clause is embedded in the main clause
  [The Tories, because they're such wonderful people, always get my vote.]

There were no occurrences of the configuration '*weil*-clause precedes main clause' [Because the Tories are such wonderful people, they always get my vote]. This is in fact not surprising, given the function of such clauses, and I shall return to this in the final section.

Table 1: Distribution of *weil*-clauses according to utterance type and word order

Context	Verb-final n	Verb-final %	Verb-second n	Verb-second %	TOTAL n
Turn-taking	87	66	45	34	122
Answer to 'why?'	70	57	52	43	122
MC → *weil* + pause	12	13	84	87	96
MC → *weil* – pause	35	66	18	34	53
MC [*weil*] MC	19	100	0	0	19
Total	223	53	199	47	422

In absolute terms, *weil*-clauses (regardless of word order pattern) were used far more frequently as 'free-standing' elements (in answers to why? questions and as turn-taking signals) than in complex sentences. This again is unsurprising, given that the data is drawn from fairly informal spontaneous speech, which is generally characterised by simple sentence patterns such as single clauses and paratactic constructions. The data has not yet been subjected to statistical tests for significance, but the figures are strongly suggestive of two things: first, that adult speakers categorically apply the verb-final rule when the *weil*-clause is embedded in the main clause; and secondly, that the verb-second pattern is common in at least the four other contexts identified here, especially but by no means only when *weil* is followed by a pause. We shall consider the implications of this in the final section, but at this stage it is perhaps useful to establish a tentative hierarchy of contexts favouring the use of the verb-second variant:

(MC → *weil* + pause) >
(answer to 'why?') >
(MC → *weil* – pause) and (turn-taking) >
(MC [*weil*] MC)

Interviews with children

The overall frequency of occurrence of the verb-second pattern amongst this group was higher than for the adults, but the reasons for this are open to speculation. For example, it could be that the children were less sensitive to or less aware of the standard norms, or it could be that they were more relaxed in the presence of the fieldworker and tape-recorder. What is of interest here is first that, unlike the adults, the children actually do use the supposedly 'impossible' pattern of verb-second in *weil*-clause embedded in main clause, albeit very occasionally; secondly, that the verb-second pattern appears to be categorical in the context (MC → *weil* + pause); and thirdly, that the hierarchy of constraints is identical to that established for the adult speakers.

Questionnaires on acceptability and self-reported usage

The informants were asked to judge 9 sentences, first in terms of general acceptability and secondly with respect to their own usage. One sentence conformed to the standard norm (verb-final), all the others contained the verb-second pattern in various permutations. For this part of the study, we were interested only in complex sentences, so that the categories (answer to why? question) and (turn-taking signal) were ignored. The results cannot be spelt out in detail here, but it is worth noting that they suggest the following sequence of acceptability of the verb-second pattern (the standard pattern was predictably considered most acceptable):

(MC → *weil* + pause) >
(MC → *weil* – pause) >
(*weil* → MC) >
(MC [*weil*] MC)

This sequence again matches the hierarchy established earlier for actual usage by both the adults and the children [except that (*weil* + MC) had not occurred in the interviews].

The self-reports showed a similar range of scores to those for acceptability, and will not be dealt with in detail here (see below), although it is perhaps worth noting that middle-aged speakers generally claimed a lower use of the verb-second pattern than either younger or older speakers. However, this self-judgement does not correspond to actual recorded usage, so there is no reason to suppose that age-grading is at work here.

Comparison of actual use, self-reported use and acceptability

It is difficult to draw direct comparisons between the results of the interviews and the questionnaires because of the different methods used for quantifying the results. However, an impressionistic comparison suggests certain tendencies. For example, it appears that virtually all the adult speakers (the children's group was not taken into account) agree on the unacceptability of the verb-second pattern in embedded *weil*-clauses and quite accurately assess their own speech behaviour in this respect.

There also seems to be a correspondence between the results from all three tests for the context (MC → *weil* – pause). However, while the presence of a pause after *weil* in such contexts appears to make the verb-second pattern much more acceptable, speakers apparently substantially underestimate their own use of it. Even though no firm conclusions can be drawn from this, we can speculate that while many speakers are willing to acknowledge the legitimate place of this supposedly non-standard feature in at least certain types of contemporary German, they have not yet to the same extent overcome the strictures and authority of prescriptive grammars.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of this small-scale investigation go some way towards providing an empirical and rather more differentiated corroboration of previous studies. Even if the scope of the survey does not warrant very firm conclusions, we nevertheless have grounds to argue that the verb-second pattern in *weil*-clauses is very frequent in colloquial speech; that it enjoys a high level of awareness amongst native speakers; that likelihood of occurrence appears to depend on linguistic context or function rather than on extralinguistic factors; and that speakers' evaluation of the construction is as variable as their usage of it and broadly corresponds with the hierarchy of usage. It is clearly a significant feature of colloquial speech, which appears to be subject to certain specific constraints and therefore demands more serious attention than it is customarily given in grammars of German (see also Glück and Sauer forthcoming).

A number of explanations have been proposed (see, for example, Gaumann 1983; Eisenberg 1989; Sandig 1973; Hentschel and Weydt 1990; Gunthner 1993; Schlobinski 1992) specifically for the variable application of the verb-second pattern after *weil*. One possibility is that the two patterns represent two distinct

functions. The location of the finite verb in clause-final position may be seen as the structural counterpart to the conjunction introducing the clause: they complement or reinforce each other and together signify 'subordination'. According to this view, the conjunction has a dual function, signalling (a) a logical connection between two sentences (in this case that one provides an explanation of or for the other) and (b) the dependency of one sentence on the other. Moving the verb to second position, the 'normal' or unmarked position for the verb in main clauses, would then have the effect of retaining the logical connection between the two sentences while removing the implication of subordination or dependency (van de Velde 1974: 78; Gaumann 1983: 104).[1] This would mean that *weil* used in this way becomes both formally and semantically equivalent to the co-ordinating conjunction *denn* (see Durrell 1991: 394). In fact, both *weil* and *denn* derive from a single earlier form *wande*, which was used variably with both verb-second and verb-final constructions (Gaumann 1983: 42; Sandig 1973: 42). However, while *weil* is common in both written and spoken German, *denn* rarely occurs in speech. It could therefore be argued that *weil* with verb-second pattern is the spoken counterpart of written *denn*. This might also explain why in complex sentences it is largely confined to the context (*weil*-clause follows main clause), as this is the only context in which *denn* can be used; the relationship between *weil* and *denn* would then be very similar to that between 'because' and 'for' in English, both syntactically and semantically.

The same argument could be extended to the relationship between *weil* and *da* (which is equivalent to the English 'since, as'). It is generally considered (see, for example, Gaumann 1983: 43; Eisenberg 1989: 20) that there is a semantic difference between these two forms: *weil* normally implies that what follows is new information or a specific explanation of the content of the main clause, which is probably why *weil*-clauses normally follow the main clause; *da* normally implies a given, previously known or generally valid proposition, implying that the content of the main clause is inevitable or necessarily true. However, *da* (like *denn*) is rare in speech and is apparently never used with the verb-second pattern. It could be, therefore, that in spoken contexts *weil* with verb-second preceding the main clause is semantically equivalent to *da* in written contexts. Schlobinski (1992: 315) indeed argues that *weil* is the causal connective in spoken German (for a detailed discussion of the relationship between *weil*, *denn* and *da*, see Redder 1990 and Thim-Mabrey 1982).

The increased frequency of the verb-second pattern after a pause and its frequent occurrence in the other contexts established here (answer to why? question and turn-taking signal) lend further weight to the claim that *weil* may have different functions. In each of these environments, the *weil*-clause seems to 'break free' from an associated main clause, in other words to lose its sense of dependency and become a free-standing entity. Indeed, Günthner (1993: 43-6) argues that in terms of discourse pragmatics the verb-second pattern has the function of indicating precisely that there is no necessary dependency relation between the (propositions in the) main clause and the *weil*-clause: they are said to have 'separate assertability'. At the same time, it is important to realise that our study shows that the verb-second pattern is by no means confined to such 'independent' contexts, as is often argued.

It may also be that *weil* carries other potential discourse functions. For example, as well as signalling the intention to take over a turn in conversation, it can be used by the speaker already holding the floor to acknowledge that a turn-change could take place but at the same time to indicate a desire to retain the floor (Gaumann 1983: 117). It can also be used to comment on or explain the illocutionary force of a preceding clause, as opposed to explaining its content (Gunthner 1993: 40ff):

3   Sind das Ölfarben? Weil die haben manchmal so 'ne unheimliche
    Transparenz.
    [Are those oil colours? Because they're sometimes so incredibly
    translucent]
    (from Gaumann 1983 111)

4   Und was gibts außer Cinema Paradiso? Weil – den hab ich schon gesehen.
    [And what else is on apart from Cinema Paradiso? Because – I've seen
    that already]
    (from Gunthner 1993 41)

In fact, it may be that the verb-second pattern is virtually obligatory in such contexts. Furthermore, where the *weil*-clause has the function of providing the basis for reaching a conclusion expressed in the main clause (as in: You've been eating sweets again. Because - you've got chocolate all over your face), the verb-second pattern may not be obligatory but it entails a semantic difference from the 'same' sentence with the verb-final pattern in the *weil*-se. Consider, for example, these sentences from Günthner (1993: 43):

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5a   Der hat sicher wieder gsoffen. Weil – sie <u>läuft</u> total deprimiert durch
      die Gegend.
      [He's obviously been drinking again. Because – she's moping around
      totally depressed.]

5b   Der hat sicher wieder gsoffen, weil sie total deprimiert durch die Gegend
      <u>läuft</u>.
      [He's obviously been drinking again because she's moping around
      totally depressed.]

In 5a, the *weil*-clause contains an observation by the speaker on the basis of
which she has reached the conclusion expressed in the first clause; in 5b, the
weil-clause offers an explanation for the state of affairs articulated in the first
clause.

Explanations such as these suggest that in addition to being a logical operator
and a syntactic marker of subordination or coordination, *weil* can be used with
verb-second word order as a kind of metalinguistic signal, a more or less
conscious strategic device, and therefore (as Gaumann 1983: 115, 130 argues) a
part of communicative competence (see also Sandig 1973: 38). These pragmatic
explanations could be specific to *weil* and a small number of other conjunctions,
in which case they would be interesting but not necessarily of any consequence
in terms of the structure of the language as a whole. However, as we pointed
out in the Introduction, this is not an isolated phenomenon and the tendency
towards 'linearity' suggests that functional explanations are only part of the
picture: economy of effort in both production and processing must also have
a part to play in this development.

Therefore, while the balance of the evidence curently seems to favour the
'variation rather than change' hypothesis as far as *weil*-clauses are concerned,
this study has given rise to a number of questions that should be the subject of
further investigation. For example:

● Is this variable pattern going anywhere? In other words, will the variability
   persist or will the non-standard pattern eventually supplant the currently
   standard pattern?

● More specifically, will the pragmatic versatility enabled by formal
   distinctions mean that the variability will be retained, or will the pressure
   to simplify communication outweigh such stylistic considerations?

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- If change is indeed in progress, how will it proceed? Will it, for instance, spread from one text-type to another (e.g. from informal, spontaneous speech to informal writing to formal speech and then to formal writing)? It is already widely observed in certain written contexts which commonly follow the norms of colloquial speech in other respects, such as advertising slogans and some journalistic contexts.

- If *weil*-clauses are changing their structure, will other clause types simultaneously follow the same route? Some are already doing so (especially *obwohl*-clauses [although] and *während*-clauses [while]) but apparently to a lesser extent.

The investigation of questions such as these not only represents a significant undertaking in the analysis and description of contemporary German but also has broader implications, especially for the teaching German as a foreign language. For even the limited studies that have been conducted to date show, for example, that the conventional distinction between co-ordinating and subordinating conjunctions is of doubtful value and that focusing exclusively on syntactic aspects of sentence patterns and ignoring semantic and pragmatic factors gives learners an incomplete and possibly erroneous picture of how the German language operates.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Günther (1993: 53-4) takes this a step further by arguing for a view of the relationship between subordination and co-ordination as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. This relativistic position then enables her to adduce reasons for locating the verb-second pattern in *weil*-clauses 'nearer the co-ordinating end of the continuum'.

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