Verb-second word order in weil ‘because’ clauses of spoken German:
Psycholinguistics theory from corpus-linguistic data

In current spoken German, subordinate clauses introduced by the conjunction weil ‘because’ occur with two orders of Subject, finite Verb and Object(s): Verb-Final/SOV (henceforth “VF”) or Verb-Second/SVO (“V2”). “Weil-V2” is restricted to colloquial language registers, virtually absent from formal (written, edited) German. Detailed accounts of weil-V2 were recently published by Antomo & Steinbach (2010) and Reis (2013).

Current theories of weil-V2 take the perspective of the listener, seeking to account for the wider range of interpretations licensed by weil-V2 than by weil-VF clauses. In particular, weil-V2 clauses—like their counterparts containing the coordinating causal conjunction denn ‘for’—afford “epistemic” explanations of the explanandum expressed in the main clause in addition to “propositional” explanations, the latter being the only ones licensed by weil-VF. In our paper, we take the perspective of the speaker, i.e. we investigate the sentence planning process, including self-repairs. This production-based approach will also appear to elucidate why weil-V2 licenses epistemic explanations.

We examined a treebank of spoken German (TüBa-D/S; Stegmann et al., 2000), which contains circa 38,000 sentences produced in face-to-face conversations. We found 372 usable sentences with weil, and 66 with denn. A majority of the weil clauses has V2 word order (54.8%). No weil clause precedes the main clause it modifies.

The data accrued from this collection strongly suggest that extemporaneous production of weil-V2 clauses requires more conceptual and syntactic planning effort than weil-VF and denn clauses. Two indications (from a larger set): Weil-V2 clauses are significantly longer than both other clause types; and they manifest overt self-repairs, whereas self-repairs are altogether absent from the other clauses. Another striking difference: Around 17% of the weil-V2 and denn clauses were produced in isolation, without main clause—presumably commenting on what the conversation partner said, or answering a question—whereas only two weil-VF clauses occurred without main clause.

*Theory* Sentences with a trailing weil/denn clause express a backward inference (from the conclusion expressed in the leading main clause to the evidence expressed in the weil/denn clause). The conceptual content for such sentences can either be retrieved from long- or short-term memory, if the speaker made that inference before (“offline”), or s/he has to make it ad hoc (“online”). In the former, relatively easy case, the weil clause speaker will often succeed in planning the evidence clause in parallel with the conclusion clause. In the latter, more error-prone case, s/he often prefers sequential planning. The larger processing load for weil-V2 suggests that speakers often plan and initiate leading explanandum clauses without sufficient look-ahead for the ensuing weil clause, and resort to a (co)vert self-repair: to abandon the current sentence plan and express the evidence conceptual content in a new sentence—of course with standard V2.

Building on these assumptions, we have worked out a psycholinguistic framework that generates sentences with syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic properties such as those that Reis and Antomo & Steinbach hold responsible for the interpretation of weil/denn clauses, without introducing another weil-V2 lexical entry.

References

