The production of causative and explanatory clauses in spoken Dutch:
A corpus-linguistic study into verb-second word order after *omdat* ‘because’

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BACKGROUND. From a corpus of extemporaneously spoken present-day German, we extracted clauses introduced by one of the causative/explanatory conjunctions *weil* ‘because’ (with the finite head verb of the clause in canonical verb-final position; VF), *denn* ‘for, because’ (verb-second; V2) and *da* ‘since’ (VF). Only “trailing” clauses were considered (i.e., clauses preceded by the main clause of the sentence). We found that while in *denn* and *da* clauses the finite verb occupied its canonical position virtually without exception, in nearly every second *weil* clause (47%), the head verb occupied the anomalous V2 position. Furthermore, *weil* was by far the most frequent conjunction—introducing 3/4 of all causative/explanatory clauses. For details, see Kempen & Harbusch (2016).

Based on sundry (psycho)linguistic evidence, we analyzed causative/explanatory *weil*-V2 and *denn*-V2 clauses not as part of the current sentence but as (the main clause of) newly launched, independent sentences, and argued that *weil*-V2 is due to the canonical word order rule for German main clauses, not to a special *weil*-V2 lexical item. Presumably, speakers of a *weil*-V2 clause have experienced a planning problem w.r.t. content and/or form of that clause, and prefer to express the causal/explanatory proposition as an independent sentence, simultaneously selecting the most easily accessible conjunction *weil* to specify the discourse relation with the upcoming sentence.

IN THE PRESENT PAPER, we report a similar study into spoken Dutch, using the Corpus Gesproken Nederlands (CGN2.0). Dutch is similar to German with respect to verb placement in main and subordinate clauses. We calculated the frequencies of four conjunctions—*omdat* (similar to *weil*), *want* (Ger. *denn*), *daar* (Ger. *da*) and *door* (Ger. *weil*/*inden*, denoting physical causation only)—and registered verb placement in the clauses they introduced. The frequency pattern we obtained deviated considerably from German: The conjunction *want* accounted for 4/5 of the causative/explanatory clauses, implying that V2 is the strongly preferred order in ditto clauses of spoken Dutch.
Based on our 2016 theory, we predict that if speakers of Dutch get into similar planning problems w.r.t. a causal/explanatory clause and decide to express its propositional content in the form of an independent sentence, they are more likely to select want than omdat as marker of the discourse relation between current and upcoming sentence. Therefore, the incidence of omdat-V2 clauses is expected to be lower than in German. Indeed, the ratio of omdat-V2 to omdat-VF clauses is about 1:10 (compared to 1:2 in the analogous German structures), which corroborates our theory. (We spotted no anomalous verb placements in clauses introduced with another conjunction.)

The treatment of causative/explanatory V2 clauses as autonomous sentences renders superfluous the assumption of omdat-V2 as a separate construction next to omdat-VF (Persoon, Sanders, Quené & Verhagen 2010; Reis 2013 for weil-V2). It also has important implications for the process of COMPREHENDING want clauses as opposed to omdat clauses. We will discuss a recent sentence comprehension experiment by Canestrelli, Mak & Sanders (2013) from this perspective.

References


