Double competition for SOV vs. SVO in causative clauses of Dutch and German
Gerard Kempen1 & Karin Harbusch2

1MPI for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
2Computer Science Department, University of Koblenz-Landau, Koblenz, Germany

In Dutch and German, the order of Subject, Object(s) and finite Verb in main clauses differs from that in subordinate clauses: SVO (verb-second, V2) and SOV (verb-final, VF), respectively. This occasions grammar lapses by speakers selecting the incorrect (noncanonical) order. A familiar example is the choice of SVO in causative and explanatory clauses introduced by a subordinating conjunction (after Du. omdat and Ger. weil 'because'). This phenomenon, called omdat/weil-V2, may be due in part by the parallel existence of ditto clauses with a coordinating conjunction (Du. want and Ger. denn 'for, since'). These lapses occur only in clauses (henceforth “explanantia”) that follow the main clause (“explanandum”) in extemporaneous spoken language, and there is no mirror image want/denn-VF phenomenon. The syntactic distinction between coordinating vs. subordinating explanans clauses coexists with a pragmatic one: They act as Restrictive or NonRestrictive explanans clauses (Quirk et al. 1985:1075-77). Explananda followed by a restrictive explanans express one assertion; those with a nonrestrictive explanans express two assertions. This also holds for English, e.g. I got a ticket, for I was speeding (NonRes; two assertions) vs. I didn’t get a ticket because I was speeding (Res; one assertion). Crucially, want/denn are exclusively NonRes; omdat/weil are either Res or NonRes. Hence, the SVO vs. SOV and NonRes vs. Res distinctions do not coincide. However, we will see that, in the minds of Dutch and German speakers, NonRes and SVO attract one another.

We observed this attraction in a new corpus study when comparing the incidences of omdat—weil-V2 lapses in a German and a Dutch spoken language corpus (the treebanks VERBMOBIL and CGN; for methodological details, and references, see Anonymus1 & Anonymus2 2016, 2017). The data confirm (as expected) that noncanonical omdat-V2 occurs regularly (in about 6% of the omdat clauses). However—unexpectedly—it is much rarer than weil-V2. The figure shows (1) that the incidence of omdat-V2 is much lower than that of weil-V2 (1.2 vs. 34.1% of all extracted causative clauses); and (2) that Du. want occurs more than four times more frequently than Ger. denn.

Theory. We propose an account based on two assumptions: (1) speakers of German and Dutch produce NonRes and Res explanantia with similar proportions (ratio around 4:1), and (2) NonRestrictivity attracts SVO. In Dutch, virtually all NonRes cases select want, although omdat can very well be NonRes. In German, due to the relatively unpopular denn, most NonRes clauses use the highly popular weil (34.1% with V2; 30.6% with VF, the latter percentage based on a comparison with Dutch). This suggests that NonRestrictivity triggers two competitions, whose effects are additive: (1) between omdat/weil vs. want/denn, and (2) between SVO vs. SOV. We will present a simple feedforward neural network model capable of generating the observed data pattern in response to NonRes vs. Res conceptual input. It consists of two layers of competing nodes, one for Lexicalization (selection of one from a set of mutually inhibiting nodes representing the conjunctions), and one for Linearization (selection of final constituent order). The observed cross-linguistic differences are handled in terms of varying default activations of the lexical nodes.