Weak definites are in the direct care of the verb

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1 Introduction

Weak definites are not only special in their semantics, they are also unusual in their syntactic behaviour. They are maximal phrases which saturate an argument position of the verb, but syntactically behave partly rather differently from regular arguments, partly the same as them. These findings are on the one hand reminiscent of phenomena of complex predicate formation, and on the other hand they point to the status of weak definites as XPs. The following notes point to a way of reconciling these two supposedly contradictory observations by means of a new understanding of the category VP and of the handling of regular arguments.

2 Main section

As is well known, one of Klaus' interests is in the semantics and anaphoric potential of so-called weak definites (WDs) in various languages. In the following, I would like to make a proposal for the syntax of WDs in German, hoping that Klaus will find it tolerably reasonable.

   German WDs show some syntactic peculiarities compared to standard definite arguments, cf. the sentence pairs in (1)–(4).

(1) a. *Hans fühlt sich unwohl, aber er will zum Arzt
        Hans feels REFL unwell but he wants to-the doctor
        nicht gehen.
        not to-go
   b. Hans fühlt sich unwohl, aber er will beim Hausarzt
      Hans feels REFL unwell but he wants at-the GP
      nicht anrufen.
      not call
      'Hans feels unwell, but he does not want to call the GP.'

(2) a. *Bald wird er gehen zum Arzt.
        soon will he go to-the doctor
   b. Bald wird er anrufen beim Hausarzt.
      soon will he call at-the GP
      'Soon he will call the GP.'

(3) a *Gehen sollte er bald zum Arzt.
       go should he soon to-the doctor
   b. Anrufen sollte er bald beim Hausarzt.
      'He should call his GP soon.'

(4) a. Er war gerade am Zum-Arzt-Gehen, als …
      he was just at-the-to-the-doctor-going when
      'He was about to go to the doctor when ...'
   b. *Er war gerade am Beim-Hausarzt-Anrufen, als …

In contrast to a regular verbal argument, a WD cannot precede sentence negation, (1a) vs. (1b); it cannot be extraposed, (2a) vs. (2b); it cannot be left behind when its licensing verb is moved to the prefield, (3a) vs. (3b); on the other hand, however, it can be part of certain word formation processes, (4a) vs. (4b).

Importantly, these characteristics cannot just be reduced to the inability of WDs to scramble. This is immediately obvious for the possibility to be part of word formation. But also the impossibility of being extraposed is hardly connected to the impossibility of being scrambled. There is evidence that in German extraposed elements are base-generated in their surface position (cf. e.g. Haider 2010). However, even authors who propose a movement analysis for extraposition do not relate it to scrambling, since extraposition also occurs in non-scrambling languages. But the properties illustrated in (1) and (3) also show that it is not the scrambling resistance which makes WDs special. So-called non-specific w-indefinites do not like to scramble, cf. (5a). Nevertheless, in German they may appear in front of sentence negation, (5b), and they may be left behind when the licensing verb is moved to the prefield, (5c).

(5) a.   *Er   hat   wen$_1$ heute t$_1$ beleidigt
        he   has   someone   today   insulted
        (, aber   ich   weiß   nicht, wer   es   war).
        but   I   know   not   who   it   was

     b.   Er hat heute wen nicht begrüßt (, aber ich weiß nicht, wer es war).
         'He didn't greet someone today (but I don't know who it was).'

     c.   Beleidigt hat er heute wen (, aber ich weiß nicht, wer es war).
         'He insulted someone today (but I don't know who it was).'

We can also observe that a WD has to follow a restitutively interpreted *wieder* ('again'). In (6a), the elliptical sentence can have a sloppy reading, an important indication that the definite noun phrase is weak. The elliptical sentence in (6b) does not have the sloppy interpretation. The definite cannot be interpreted as a WD anymore. Note that restitutive *wieder* has a very low base position, lower than the base position of regular objects (cf. e.g. Pittner 2003).

(6) a.   Otto   hat   wieder   das   Krankenhaus   verlassen,
        Otto   has   again   the   hospital   left
        und   Maria   auch.
        and   Maria   too

     b.   Otto hat das Krankenhaus wieder verlassen, und Maria auch.
         'Otto has left the hospital again, and so has Maria.'

Thus we see that in contrast to regular arguments, WDs are generated and stay very close to the verbs whose arguments they are. How is this special closeness structurally implemented? Complex predicate formation by adjunction of a head to another head would provide a very close connection. However, WDs are not heads. In addition to the noun they exhibit at least the weak determiner. Furthermore, they are good candidates for filling the prefield of a German verb-second clause, (7), a position which is thought to be reserved for maximal projections.

(7)   Zum   Arzt   ist   er   heute   gegangen.
       to-the   doctor   is   he   today   gone

Thus, WDs are not adjoined to the verb. However, I think there is a promising possibility for the syntactic handling of WDs. In recent years, a trend has emerged in syntactic research on argument structure that mirrors the semantic Neo-Davidsonian approach in syntax. In a highly influential work, Castañeda (1967) argued that the thematic arguments should be separated from the verb. A sentence like (8a) should be represented in logical form as in (8b), where thematic relations are independent two-place predicates.

(8) a. Jones buttered the toast
    b. ∃e [buttering (e) & Agent (e, Jones) & Theme (e, the toast)]

Different authors, e.g., Schein (1993), Borer (2005: Ch. 2), Ramchand (2008), Bowers (2010) and Lohndal (2014) argue that we find something similar in syntax. They propose the claim in (9) (albeit with significant differences in their approaches).

(9) External arguments as well as internal arguments are severed from the verbal core and are complements of functional projections above V^0.

Schein (1993) bases this claim mainly on possible interpretations of clauses containing a set denoting argument and a distributive quantifier and of clauses containing reciprocals. Borer (2005) claims that lexical flexibility is so pervasive that argument structure should not be lexically specified. Ramchand's (2008) starting point is the claim that the syntactic projection of arguments is based on event structure and that the syntactic structure has a specific semantic interpretation. Bowers (2010) argues that satisfactory analyses of English passives and of the alternation between prepositional dative and the double object construction speak in favour (9). As an empirical argument Lohndal (2014) adds the behaviour of adjectival passives. Note also that Krifka (1992) argues for thematic roles as primitive relations between events and objects in his model-theoretic account of cumulativity and quantization for object and event predicates.
    From our perspective it is now tempting to slightly revise (9).

(10) Regular arguments do not appear as complements of V^0, but as complements of functional projections above V^0.

In addition, we add the claim in (11).

(11) WDs belong to the class of non-regular arguments. Non-regular arguments are arguments which are not referentially closed. They and only they are generated as complements of V^0.

It could be shown that, e.g., resultative XPs including directional PPs, inner arguments of light verb constructions, separable verbal prefixes which are movable to the prefield, bare singulars which are movable to the prefield and objects of verbs of creation belong to the class of non-regular arguments. They show the properties which are illustrated in (1)–(4) and (7) for WDs. Furthermore they are referentially non-closed.
    The distinguished syntactic configuration VP, in which the non-closed argument XP in (12) appears, can be considered a kind of complex predicate. It is the VP which contains all and only the arguments which do not have reference independent from the verb.

(12) (…) [FP ZP F^0 (…) [VP XP V^0]…]

We can assume that a complex predicate may be assigned a non-compositional meaning. This is why, for example, the combination of the WD and the verb gets a conventionalized interpretation. There is mutual semantic impact between the verb and the WD. The WD restricts the possible meaning of the verb, the verb determines the special interpretation of the WD.
    It seems possible to relate the different syntactic properties of WDs and standard definites observed in (1)–(4) and (7) in a rather natural way to their different base positions depicted in

(12). For example, scrambling and extraposition would destroy the special structural relationship in the right headed VP necessary for complex predicate formation. In contrast, movement to the prefield is reconstructed for most syntactic and interpretative needs. Furthermore, the verb cannot move to the prefield without an accompanying XP since it does not constitute a maximal projection, but it can be moved without an accompanying ZP. Furthermore sentence negation and restitutive *wieder* can be naturally assumed to be base-generated adjoined to the VP in (12).

A semantics for WDs that fits with the structural proposal made here is the dependent definite approach developed in Krifka & Modarresi (2016), according to which a WD denotes a function which applies to the Davidsonian event argument introduced by the verb and yields the unique element of this event which satisfies the description of the WD ('uniqueness in respect of an event'). Existential closure applies over the verbal predicate. According to this approach a weak definite introduces a discourse referent, but this discourse referent is less accessible for pronoun resolution than discourse referents that are not embedded under an event. (Krifka & Modarresi 2016, Brocher, Weeber, Hoek & von Heusinger 2020). Brocher, Weeber, Hoek & von Heusinger (2020) take the results of their visual world eye tracking experiment to be very compatible with the dependent definite analysis: indefinite noun phrases are significantly better accessible than WDs, but WDs do introduce referents that are accessible in principle. Brocher, Weeber, Hoek & von Heusinger (2020) conclude that a WD introduces a discourse referent that is embedded in an event created by the verb expressing a stereotypical meaning.

In the literature on the syntax of noun phrases it is a quite common assumption that above NP there are different functional projections with DP being the highest (e.g. Ihsane & Puskas 2001, Schwarz 2013). Ihsane & Puskas (2001) were among the first ones that argued that one should keep uniqueness apart from specificity by different functional projections. Regarding the internal syntax of German WDs, we can assume that the article of a WD only realizes the functional projection encoding the status of definiteness. In contrast, the article of a standard definite moves further to realise also specificity located in D^0.

3 Summary

This contribution first presents some syntactic peculiarities of WDs in German. It then outlines a proposal for their handling in clausal syntax. This outline builds on approaches that reflect the Neo-Davidsonian semantic treatment of regular arguments in their syntactic treatment. According to these, regular arguments are all complements of functional projections above VP. The contribution extends such approaches by proposing that within the VP all non-regular arguments of the verb are generated. Non-regular arguments are arguments that are not referentially closed. WDs are among these. It is indicated how this structural proposal can capture the syntactic peculiarities of WDs.

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