Topic position or prefield? – Disentangling the positional restriction of topic drop in German based on acceptability rating data

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This paper is concerned with the restriction of topic drop in German to the preverbal prefield position. Using acceptability rating data from four experiments, I argue (i) that topic drop is not necessarily the omission of a topic, and (ii) that topic drop is restricted to the prefield, (iii) in particular to the highest prefield position of an independent clause or to a prefield at the left edge of the utterance, but that (iv) topic drop is not bound to an utterance-initial positioning.

1 Overview

Germanic V2 languages like German systematically allow for a phenomenon called topic drop (TD), i.e. the omission of the preverbal constituent from a declarative sentence in spoken language or conceptually spoken text types (Fries 1988), see (1). As the term implies, it is often taken for granted in the literature that TD is the omission of the sentence topic (e.g. Helmer 2016). In the following, I will show that this view is unjustified in German (section 2). Instead, I will argue for a structural restriction of TD to the preverbal position of V2 clauses, the prefield in terms of the topological field model, and that it can potentially be captured as a restriction to the highest syntactic position, but not to the first element of an utterance (section 3).

(1) Δ Kann   heute   leider   nicht   kommen.
      can   today   unfortunately   not   come

2 Topic drop as the omission of the (sentence) topic

Equating TD with dropping the sentence topic, i.e., the entity under which the comment information should be stored in the common ground (Krifka 2007), from the prefield implies a close connection between topicality and TD, e.g., topicality could be (i) a sufficient, i.e., any topical prefield constituent is omittable, and/or (ii) a necessary condition for TD, i.e., any omittable prefield constituent is topical. I will show that there are counterexamples for both predictions.

2.1 Topicality as sufficient or necessary condition for topic drop

(i) Sufficiency is questioned by non-droppable topics such as contrastive topics or topics which cannot be recovered like *Hans* in example (2). A and B both know Hans, but he is not present in the current discourse situation so that *Hans* cannot be omitted because a hearer would not be able to recover the reference of the TD. Topicality, then, is at least not strictly sufficient for TD; the lack of givenness in context can block the omission, as can the combination with focus in contrastive topics.

(2) *A to B:* Übrigens: *(Hans) hat   letzte   Woche   geheiratet.   (Krifka 2007: 43, adapted)
              by.the.way Hans   has   last   week   married

(ii) Necessity can be refuted by corpus examples with dropped expletive subjects similar to (3a) in Ruppenhofer (2018). Expletives are not referential and hence cannot be topical (e.g. Lambrecht 1994). In defense of the necessity of topicality, Trutkowski (2016) suggests that the expletive subjects of weather verbs can be topical and thus droppable, but only when they refer to the current situation that must be present in the utterance context (3a vs. 3b).

(3) a. Δ Regnet   grad.   [uttered while looking out of the window]
            rains   right.now
    b.* Δ Regnet   bestimmt,   wenn   wir   in   Urlaub   fahren.   (Trutkowski 2011: 120,
            rains   definitely   when   we   in   vacation go   her judgments)

2.2 Experiment 1: Topic drop of expletives

I test Trutkowski's (2016) account with an acceptability rating study on TD of the expletive subjects of weather verbs. I varied whether the current situation is present or not by presenting the target utterance in the context of a question that does or does not ask about the weather (4a vs. 4b). This results in a 2 × 2 design (COMPLETENESS (full form vs. TD) × QUESTION TYPE (weather vs. other)). If topicality is a necessary condition, TD of non-topical expletives should

generally be degraded, while Trutkowski predicts an interaction, i.e., that TD is only degraded after a question not asking about the weather, i.e., not mentioning the current situation.

(4) a. Was macht das Wetter bei dir? (weather question)
    what makes the weather at you
  b. Wolltest du nicht joggen gehen? (other question)
    wanted you not jog go
  (Es) regnet leider schon wieder ziemlich heftig
  it rains alas already again pretty heavily

38 native speakers of German[1] recruited from the crowdsourcing platform Clickworker rated 24 items like (4) presented as instant messages with one of six weather verbs on a 7-point Likert scale (7 = completely natural), along with 80 fillers. I analyzed the data in R with CLMMs (Christensen 2019). The final model contained only a significant main effect of QUESTION TYPE (χ^2 = 12.05, p < .001): Utterances after weather questions were rated as more acceptable (Fig. 1). This can be explained by pragmatics: An answer with a weather verb is more coherent after a weather question. With respect to the necessity of topicality, the result questions the general prediction and Trutkowski's (2016) account: TD is as acceptable as the full forms regardless of the question type. In conclusion, TD of non-topical expletives is possible, and topicality is neither a (strictly) sufficient nor a necessary condition for TD.

3 Topic drop as the omission from the prefield

Thus, TD should not be considered a topic omission, but an omission from the prefield. While the majority of research takes TD's prefield restriction for granted, Helmer (2016) argues that TD is also possible in the middle field. This is the motivation to test the prefield restriction.

3.1 Experiment 2: Topic drop in prefield vs. middle field position

In a COMPLETENESS × TOPOLOGICALPOSITION (prefield vs. middle field) acceptability rating study 45 German Clickworkers rated 24 items like (5) and 72 fillers on a 7-point Likert scale.

(5) *Context (in German)*: 'A: What do you have planned for tonight? B: We want to watch the new Matrix movie in the theater😊 I totally like the first three movies'
  a. (Ich) bin jetzt richtig gespannt auf den neuen Teil (prefield)
    I am now rightly keen on the new part
  b. Jetzt bin (ich) richtig gespannt auf den neuen Teil (middle field)
    now am I rightly keen on the new part

I analyzed the data with CLMMs. The main result is a significant COMPLETENESS × TOPOLOG-ICAL POSITION interaction (χ^2 = 28.18, p < .001): TD in the middle field is degraded compared to TD in the prefield (Fig. 2). (Future research needs to clarify whether the fact that TD in the middle field is not so bad in absolute terms could be due to some participants unconsciously inserting the missing pronoun in the middle field.) The result of experiment 2 supports the prefield restriction of TD, which I specify below.

Freywald (2020: 167), following Rizzi (1994), argues that TD is not restricted to any prefield position, but "dass Topik-drop nur in der höchsten Position eines selbstständigen Satzes statt-finden kann'' ('that TD can only occur in the highest position of an independent clause'), i.e. in the highest [Spec, CP] of V2 clauses. This reasoning predicts that TD is impossible in em-bedded V2 clauses (Rizzi 1994; contra Trutkowski 2016), which I test in experiment 3.

3.2 Experiment 3: Topic drop in embedded prefields

In a 2 × 3 acceptability rating study (COMPLETENESS × EMBEDDING (initial vs. final vs. none)) 45 German Clickworkers rated 24 items like (6) on a 7-point Likert scale along with 72 fillers. If TD is possible in any prefield position, embedded TD should be acceptable. If TD is re-stricted to the syntactically highest prefield position, embedded TD should be degraded.

(6) *Context (in German)*: 'A: What's new from Tim?'

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[1]Participant numbers in this abstract are numbers after exclusions based on ungrammatical catch trials.

a. (Er) hat seine neue Freundin betrogen, hat er mir am Freitag gebeichtet. (initial)
   he has his new girlfriend cheated has he me on Friday confessed
b. Am Freitag hat er mir gebeichtet, (er) hat seine neue Freundin betrogen. (final)
   on Friday has he me confessed he has his new girlfriend cheated
c. (Er) hat seine neue Freundin betrogen. (none)
   he has his new girlfriend cheated

I analyzed the data with CLMMs using forward coding for the predictor EMBEDDING, which results in two variables (NONE VS. INITIAL/FINAL, NONE/INITIAL VS. FINAL). The main result is a significant COMPLETENESS × NONE/INITIAL VS. FINAL interaction (χ^2 = 9.96, p < .001) indicating that final embedded TD is degraded (see Fig. 3). This suggests that TD is not possible in every prefield position. The interaction COMPLETENESS × NONE VS. INITIAL/FINAL is not significant, indicating that initial embedded TD is acceptable. There are two potential explanations for this pattern: 1) Embedded TD is acceptable, but only when it is positioned at the beginning of the utterance, potentially allowing for a better linking to the discourse (Trutkowski 2016). 2) The initial conditions are not really embeddings but independent V2 clauses with V1 parentheticals (Reis 1997; cf. Pauly 2013), so that in this condition TD would occur in the highest [Spec, CP] in line with Freywald's (2020) account. In sum, exp. 3 shows that a positioning in the prefield is not sufficient for TD and that TD might be restricted to the highest clause position.

Related to explanation 1) and to characterizations of TD's position as sentence-initial (Huang 1984, Trutkowski 2016) I tested whether TD must be the very first element of an utterance (which I call utterance-initial), or whether conjunctions can precede it.
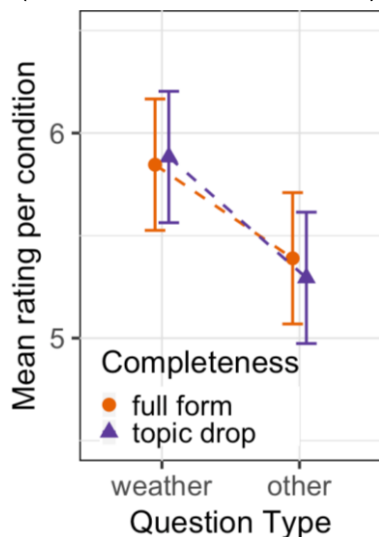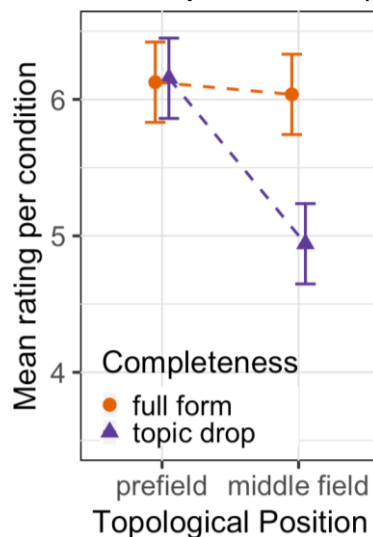

Fig. 1: Mean rating and 95% CIs for Exp. 1.

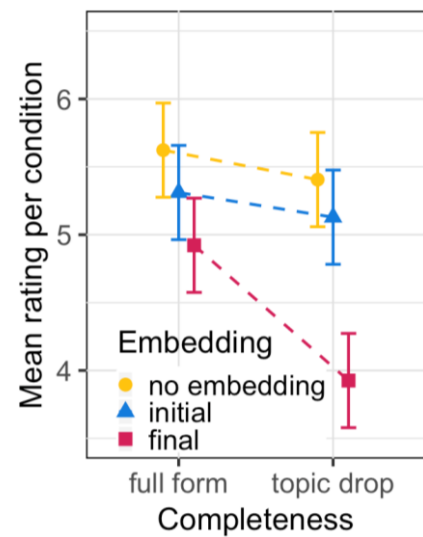Fig. 2: Mean rating and 95% CIs for Exp. 2.

Fig. 3: Mean rating and 95% CIs for Exp. 3.

3.3 Experiment 4: Topic drop in non-initial position after conjunctions

In a COMPLETENESS × PRESENCE OF CONJUNCTION (PC) (present vs. absent) × SUBJECT GAP (licensed vs. blocked) acceptability rating study 58 German Clickworkers rated 24 items like (7-8) and 72 fillers on a 7-point Likert scale. The conjunction type was varied between items (8 × each *und* ('and'), *aber* ('but'), *denn* (parordinating 'because')). The control predictor SUBJECT GAP should ensure that TD after conjunctions is not in fact a cross-clausal subject gap construction where the subject *ich* ('I') is shared between clauses (Wilder 1997). Since such a reading of the target utterance (8) is only licensed when the speaker is the subject of both utterances, I manipulated exactly this: The speaker appears as subject in (7a), licensing a subject gap interpretation, and as object pronoun in (7b), blocking it. If TD after conjunctions is indeed a subject gap, only those TD conditions should be acceptable where such a reading is licensed.

(7) *Context (in German)*: 'A: What do you have planned for tonight? B: We want to watch the new Matrix movie in the theater 😊

a. Die ersten drei Filme mag ich total. (subject gap licensed)
the first three movies like I totally

b. Die ersten drei Filme gefallen mir total gut. (subject gap blocked)
the first three movies please me totally well

(8) a. Und (ich) bin jetzt richtig gespannt auf den neuen Teil. (conjunction present)
and I am now rightly keen on the new part

b. (Ich) bin jetzt richtig gespannt auf den neuen Teil. (conjunction absent)

I analyzed the data first jointly and then post-hoc for each conjunction type separately with CLMMs. For *denn* I found a significant COMPLETENESS × PC interaction (χ^2 = 4.31, p < .05) and significant main effects of PC (χ^2 = 17.4, p < .001) and COMPLETENESS (χ^2 = 8.6, p < .01): Utterances with TD and utterances with overt *denn* were degraded, TD with *denn* was particularly bad. The interaction was also present in the complete data (χ^2 = 6.02, p < .05), but must have been caused there exclusively by *denn*, since for *und* and *aber* TD was rated as acceptable as the full forms after these conjunctions (interaction$_{und}$: χ^2 = 2.01, p > 0.1; interaction$_{aber}$: χ^2 = 0.87, p > 0.3, see Fig. 4). SUBJECTGAP did not have an impact on the acceptability of TD. In sum, exp. 4 suggests that TD does not require utterance-initial positioning, but that conjunctions like *und* and *aber* can precede it clause-internally or -externally regardless of a potential subject gap reading. *Denn* might deviate because it is syntactically parordinating, but semantically subordinating (Reich & Reis 2013), exhibiting properties similar to the final embeddings above.

4 Conclusion

I presented four experiments in which I systematically investigated theoretical claims concerning TD's positional restriction: I showed that TD in German is not restricted to topics – topicality is neither (strictly) sufficient nor necessary (exp. 1). TD occurs at least preferably if not obligatorily in the prefield (exp. 2). It is restricted to the highest prefield of independent clauses or at least to a prefield at the left edge (exp. 3). The latter does not entail utterance-initial positioning (exp. 4). In future research I will explore two potential explanations for these properties: (i) TD's left edge position might allow for an easy linking to the discourse. (ii) Syntactically, TD might involve an empty element that is restricted to positions where it must not be c-commanded sentence-internally (Rizzi 1994; see Stowell 1991 for a similar idea for null articles).

Fig. 4: Mean rating and 95% CIs for exp. 4 for denn (A) and und + aber (B)

Selected references

Christensen, R. H. B. (2019). *Ordinal. Version 2019.12-10*. ● Freywald, U. (2020). Nach dem Öffnen rasch verbrauchen! Objektauslassung in direktiven Infinitiven – ein Fall von Topikdrop. In R. Külpmann, L. Neuhaus, & V. Symanczyk Joppe (Eds.), *Variation in der Argumentstruktur des Deutschen* (pp. 147–177). Buske. ● Helmer, H. (2016). *Analepsen in der Interaktion: Semantische und sequenzielle Eigenschaften von Topik-Drop im gesprochenen Deutsch*. Universitätsverlag Winter. ● Krifka, M. (2007). Basic Notions of Information Structure. In C. Féry, G. Fanselow, & M. Krifka (Eds.), *The Notions of Information Structure* (pp. 13–55). Universitätsverlag Potsdam. ● Rizzi, L. (1994). Early Null Subjects and Root Null Subjects. In T. Hoekstra & B. D. Schwartz (Eds.), *Language Acquisition Studies in Generative Grammar* (pp. 151–176). Benjamins. ● Trutkowski, E. (2016). *Topic Drop and Nu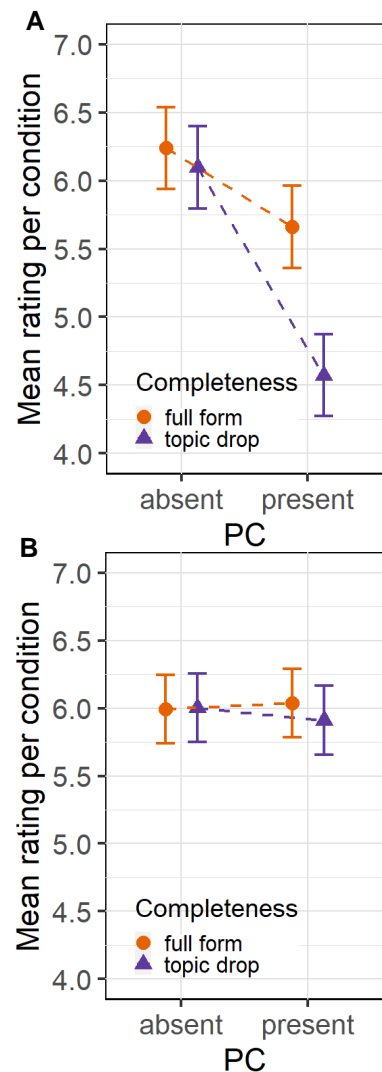ll Subjects in German*. De Gruyter.