Separating Tense and Assertion: Evidence from Embedded V2 and Child Language

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Friday, 26. 02. 2016, 13:00-13:30, Raum: G 309

We explore the claim that Tense and Assertion are separate projections in the grammar of some Germanic languages (following Klein 1998, 2006 and Duffield 2007). Our principal claim is that auxiliary inversion removes the presupposition of truth. Our approach leads towards an eventual mapping of the related effects of assertion, Verum Focus and point of view onto a syntactically present (and separately available) illocutionary Act Phrase in both the matrix and the subordinate clause (Woods, to appear).

An asserted truth is the illocutionary force of a declarative with the tensed verb in situ. Inversion lifts the presupposition inherent in a declarative when Tense moves to V2. In German, for example, there are three positions for the tensed verb (assuming matrix V2 is between C and T in Fin):

(1) Tensed verb final (embedded clauses) – Presupposed; no assertion
   a. Ich weiss warum er singen kann (German)

(2) V2 (matrix and embedded clauses) – Asserted; no presupposition
   a. Ich kann nicht singen! (German)
   b. Maria sagte, er kann singen. (German)

(3) Auxiliary inversion – no assertion, no presupposition, therefore interrogative
   a. I asked her could he sing (English dialects, Woods to appear)

There is much evidence for this: in standard embedded clauses, the verb is left in situ and the clause is neutral as to illocutionary force. In embedded V2 clauses, the verb raises, the presupposition of its truth is dropped, and the clause is treated as an assertion (Julien 2009, Steinbach & Antomo 2010, Wiklund 2010). Embedded V2 is not available under predicates which independently induce a presupposition of their truth, such as factive complements:

(4) a. *Ich weiss warum kann er singen/*Ich weiss warum er kann singen (German)
   b. *I knew could he come tonight (English dialects, Woods to appear)

Furthermore, a fleeting but remarkable feature of English child language, auxiliary doubling, shows evidence of the two positions available to the tensed verb (e.g. “Is Tom is busy?”). Children use auxiliary doubling in the place of more complex tag questions (e.g. “Tom is busy, isn’t he?”) or cleft constructions (“Is it that Tom is busy?”) in order to maintain a presupposition about which a further question is asked:
(5) Father: Do you want to go outside?  
Child: No! (to friend:) Do you don’t want to go outside?  (Child, 4;0, Roeper 2014)

In this case, the child is not asking if their friend wants or doesn’t want to go outside (i.e. a normal polar question), but whether the friend is in agreement with a view that presupposes not going outside. We argue that experimental studies (e.g. Rowland and Theakston 2009a,b) who elicit a large proportion (around 40%) of auxiliary doubled questions by children between 2;6 and 3;6 and claim them as incorrect polar questions actually induce these structures due to an experimental setup biased towards these kinds of semi-confirmation questions.

This talk provides an avenue of explanation for the presence of two tense positions in German, which has been a neglected problem for decades. We propose different semantic and discourse functions for each position: the lower position is purely a [+Tense] position where the higher position is also [+Assertion]. However, this distinction is masked in languages like English in which both functions are conflated on the same head, T. Our approach makes predictions about Verum Focus: where it typically attaches to Tense in English, it can only attach to the V2 position in German, so we predict that Verum Focus is only available on the complementiser and not the tensed main verb in verb-final clauses, but it is available on the verb in EV2: both predictions are borne out (Höhle 1992). Note that verb movement to the [+Assertion] position is not only way to achieve an asserted interpretation: the presence of discourse particles and speech act adverbs in non-V2 clauses leads to an asserted interpretation in Swedish (Wiklund 2010) and in English, emphatic do-support forces an asserted interpretation when the verb remains low. The difference with German is that the verb final position makes explicit – particularly in embedded clauses – the separation of the two “Tense” positions, long a mystery.