Variations on V2: the information-structural dynamics of the left periphery in German

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Modern German is usually regarded as a typical instance of a Germanic V2 language, with a strict V2 restriction for matrix declaratives that requires exactly one position to be filled in the ‘forefield’ in front of the finite verb. Deviations from V2 described in the literature are either separate constructions such as left dislocation or hanging topics (Frey 2005), specific exceptions such as sentences with irrelevance conditional and counterfactual adverbial clauses in the forefield (Axel 2004, d’Avis 2004), or patterns of only putative multiple frontings that might be subsumed under V2 (Müller 2005 on multiple VP constituents in the forefield). Accordingly, examples such as in (1) are usually constructed to illustrate ungrammatical linear orders, and starred accordingly:

(1) “[Sobald/Wenn/Weil es aufheitert], wir können spazieren gehen.” [Axel 2004:25]

However, findings from spoken language use outside formal standard German provide evidence for just such linearisations, cf. (2), including ones with non-clausal adverbials (3):

(2) WENN du mir nisch GLAUBST wir legen AUF [KiDKo, MuH3WT]
(3) HEUte ich werd meine zigaRETten mitbringen [KiDKo, MuH11MD]

This suggests that there might be systematic extensions of V2 in German, to a more liberal forefield that can also accommodate V3. Evidence for this was first reported from Kiezdeutsch, an urban dialect found in informal speech among multilingual peer groups (Wiese 2009, 2013), and has subsequently also been found in more monolingual contexts of German (Schalowski 2012, 2015), cf. (4) and (5) (utterances by speakers at a lecture series and an annual DGfS conference, respectively):

(4) wenn sie das GANze hören sie wissen genau ... [BSa-Sch 8]
(5) und dann (-) die partikeln verÄNdern sich nicht [BSa-Sch 24]

These findings point to a specific pattern which (a) is syntactically integrated into German as V3, rather than an allochthonous SVO construction (Wiese 2013, te Velde to appear; contra Auer 2013), indicated, e.g., by the preservation of the verbal bracket, and (b) at the level of information structure, allows both framesetters and topics to appear together in the left periphery.
Our paper presents results from a cross-linguistic study that further explored such an information-structural motive for this pattern. We investigated whether speakers of German and English were more likely to place verbs in a V3 position, after framesetter plus topic, if language-specific grammatical restrictions were removed. In order to test this, we presented speakers with a (non-verbal) comic sequence and asked them to describe the final picture, which included a frame-setter (a time indicated on a clock) and an animate or inanimate topic. Participants had to render the scene (a) verbally and (b) in a semi-verbal set-up, using little plastic figures, wooden clocks, and paper slips with written verbs.

Results indicate that verbal descriptions followed the typical standard language patterns, German speakers displaying V2 with either the topic/subject or the framesetter/adverbial in the forefield (i.e., Adv V$_{\text{fin}}$ S or S V$_{\text{fin}}$ Adv), and English speakers displaying SVO with the topic/subject always in front of the verb and sometimes preceded by the framesetter/adverbial (i.e., SV Adv or Adv SV). In contrast to this, in the semi-verbal condition, both German and English speakers also used an additional ordering option pointing to V3, with both topic and framesetter presented before the verb, and in both internal orders (i.e., framesetter > topic, and topic > framesetter). We analyse these findings from the point of view of the interface between syntax and information structure, and discuss their implications for a syntactic account of German V3.