

The limits of left peripheral variation in German

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Over the last decades, grammatical variation in the left periphery has been a well-researched topic in linguistics. Besides commonly accepted deviations from V2 structures, such as, for example, left dislocation or hanging topic, recent research shows a growing interest in V3 phenomena. In this paper, I provide an analysis of data from a reading-time experiment implying that there are limits to the extent of deviation from V2 in the form of V3 in German. First and foremost, there seems to be a characteristic V3 structure with a specific word order, namely adverbial-subject-finite verb. All in all, the paper addresses three topics in syntactic variation research: (1) the processing of syntactic variation, (2) the grammatical analysis of V3 structures from various perspectives, and (3) the limits of V3 and the reasons for these limits. The paper aims to make an empirically-grounded contribution to investigating V3 as a test case for syntactic variation in monolingual German.

Drach (1937) provides a model that allows for a systematic description of verbal placement in German distinguishing between V1, V2, and verb-last sentences. However, only in the recent past, sentences such as (1) have gained further attention:

- (1) Danach die Frau ist so ausgerastet. (KiDKo, MuH17MA)
Afterwards the woman is so clicked.out
'Afterwards the woman completely lost it.'

These structures display a specific word order, namely adverbial-subject-finite verb, placing the verb in the third position in a declarative. Corpus studies reveal that sentences of this type are attested in a number of modern Germanic varieties in multilingual contexts (cf. Wiese 2009, Quist 2008, Kostinas 1998, Freywald et al. 2015). For German, there is also evidence that the sentences occur in monolingual environments (cf. Schalowski 2015, 2017). While theoretical linguistics and corpus linguistics have made a great contribution to the analysis of the syntactic structure of V3, predominantly in a generative fashion (cf. Freywald 2018, Haegemann & Greco 2018, Alexiadou & Lohndal 2017, but cf. Rehbein et al. to appear 2018), very little is known about V3 from an experimental perspective. Especially in terms of sentence processing, there is no data allowing an insight into how language users process V3 structures. This paper aims to shed light on this question and thus compliments findings from corpus linguistics and theoretical linguistics.

In a self-paced reading experiment, I tested different types of V3 structures as well as subject-initial (SV_{fin}) and non-subject-initial V2 structures ($AdvV_{fin}$ and OV_{fin}), as illustrated in table 1. The analysis of the overall reading times reveal that participants process $AdvOV_{fin}$ structures significantly slower than $AdvSV_{fin}$. In fact, the processing of $AdvSV_{fin}$ is similar to non-subject-initial V2 structures, whereas subject-initial V2 is processed significantly faster than the other structures. The data indicate that the object in V3 clauses slows down reading times, whereas the subject facilitates processing which is overall not different from V2. Drawing on these findings, I discuss different grammatical approaches to V3 including generative and functional accounts.

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Appendix

Table 1: Stimuli for the self-paced reading experiment.

		1	2	3	4	5	6
A	[!] V3	Nachher	den Hund	füttert	ihr	und	grinst.
	V3	afterwards	the dog	feed	you	and	smile
		‘Afterwards you feed the dog and smile.’					
B	V3	Nachher	ihr	füttert	den Hund	} und grinst.	
C	A-V2	Nachher	füttert	ihr	den Hund		
D	V2	S-V2	Ihr	füttert	den Hund		nachher
E		O-V2	Den Hund	füttert	ihr		nachher