Finiteness and verb-second in German agrammatism

Michaela Wenzlaff and Harald Clahsen[*]

Department of Linguistics, University of Essex, Colchester C04 3SQ, UK

Abstract

This study presents results from sentence-completion and grammaticality-judgement tasks with seven German-speaking agrammatic aphasics and seven age-matched control subjects examining verb finiteness marking and verb-second (V2) placement. The patients were found to be selectively impaired in tense marking in the face of preserved mood and agreement marking. Moreover, our results revealed that V2 scores varied across our patients, with some showing impaired and others preserved V2 performance. These findings will be discussed in the light of different syntactic accounts of agrammatism. Published by Elsevier Inc.

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1. Introduction

Over the past years a series of studies across a range of languages have produced evidence that tense marking is more impaired than subject–verb agreement in agrammatic production (e.g., Benedet, Christiansen, & Goodglass, 1998; Friedmann & Grodzinsky, 1997, 2000; Kolk, 2000). A prominent syntactic account that has been proposed to explain this dissociation is the Tree Pruning Hypothesis (TPH; e.g., Friedmann & Grodzinsky, 1997, 2000). Assuming that tense and agreement are represented as separate functional categories, with (subject) AgrP (= Agreement Phrase) located below TP (= Tense Phrase), the TPH claims that agrammatic phrase-structure representations are pruned at the TP layer yielding phrase-structure trees without TP or any other functional category above TP. This then explains why subject–verb agreement is preserved (since AgrP is lower than TP) whereas tense marking and CP (= Complementizer Phrase) related phenomena are impaired in agrammatic production; see also Hagiwara (1995) for a related proposal.

The theoretical assumptions made by the TPH are questionable, however. No current syntactic theory treats AgrP and TP as separate functional categories and posits a fixed hierarchy of functional categories for CP-TP-AgrP-VP. While these claims were originally made by Pollock (1989) within Government-Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981), Chomsky (2000) argues that agreement and tense are fundamentally different syntactic concepts, with tense being an interpretable feature of the syntactic category T, and agreement not forming a functional category of its own. Instead, *Agree* is conceived of as an operation that establishes a structural relationship between, for example, the person and number features of a clausal subject and the corresponding uninterpretable features of a finite verb, which are checked by T. Thus, if T is pruned in the agrammatic phrase-structure tree (which according to the TPH accounts for impaired tense marking), *Agree* should not be able to operate because the host for a verb's person and number features (= T) has been deleted. This means that an impairment of tense should co-occur with impairments in agreement thus making it hard for the TPH to explain a selective impairment in tense.

Adopting a feature-checking model along the lines of Chomsky (1995), we have proposed an alternative Tense Underspecification account of agrammatism (Wenzlaff & Clahsen, 2004) which rests on two crucial assumptions: (i) that T/Infl contains uninterpretable agreement features along with interpretable tense and mood

[*] Corresponding author. Fax: +44-1206-872198.
E-mail address: harald@essex.ac.uk (H. Clahsen).

features, and (ii) that among the interpretable features of T/Infl, mood distinctions are primary and tense distinctions secondary, as illustrated in (1).

(1)
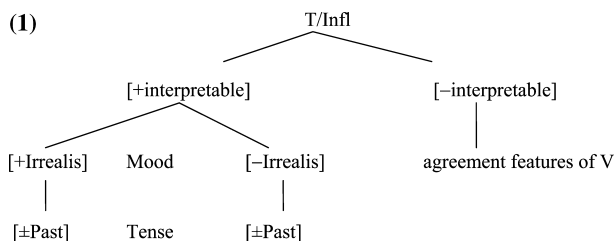
T/Infl is the host of verb finiteness features and as such not only contains agreement and tense, but also mood features, which distinguish between indicative ([−Irrealis]) and subjunctive or conditional ([+Irrealis]) finite verb forms. Mood and tense features are interpretable, i.e., relevant for semantic interpretation, whereas agreement features of verbs are non-interpretable, i.e., irrelevant for the semantic interpretation of verbs (Chomsky, 1995). Evidence from linguistic typology and from child language development suggests that mood distinctions are more basic than tense oppositions. By-bee (1985, p. 33), for example, notes that mood marking is more common across languages than tense marking, and that if a given language marks tense on finite verbs, it also marks mood, but not vice versa. Likewise, for child language development, Hyams (2001) and Radford (2000) observed that mood distinctions are made earlier in acquisition than tense distinctions, suggesting that among the interpretable features of T/Infl, tense is secondary to mood. Given this assumption, we proposed that in agrammatism the syntactic category T/INFL is unspecified for tense, with other features unimpaired. This means that agreement features and mood distinctions are maintained, while the secondary distinction between [+Past] and [−Past] is lost.

Wenzlaff and Clahsen (2004) presented data from seven German-speaking agrammatics who (in both sentence completion and grammaticality judgement tasks) attained high correctness scores for subject–verb agreement, whereas present and past-tense marking was severely impaired.[1] These findings provide further support for the cross-linguistic validity of impaired tense and intact agreement in agrammatic aphasia and show that the tense-agreement dissociation does not only hold for production (contra Grodzinsky, 2000), but also for other modalities (as revealed by the results from the grammaticality judgement tasks). However, these findings by themselves do not allow us to decide between the two syntactic accounts of agrammatism mentioned above as the tense-agreement dissociation can be ex-

plained either way, in terms of TP-pruning[2] and [±Past] underspecification.

To further examine potential impairments in the domain of verb finiteness beyond tense and agreement, the present study investigates the same seven agrammatics and seven control subjects who participated in our earlier study with respect to mood marking and V2 placement using the same kinds of tasks (sentence completion and grammaticality judgement) that were employed to examine tense and agreement. These data allow for direct comparisons of different verb finiteness phenomena within the same subjects and tasks, and enable us to assess the empirical validity of the two competing syntactic accounts of agrammatism mentioned above.

2. Mood marking in German

Grammatical mood, sometimes also referred to as 'reality status' (Foley & van Valin, 1984), refers to the way the speaker presents the truth of the proposition in the discourse and real-world context and essentially expresses the difference between a 'realis' non-qualified assertion interpretation of the proposition and 'irrealis' non-asserted meanings (Bybee, 1985, p. 28). Mood is to be distinguished from (illocutionary) force or speech act mood (e.g., interrogative and declarative) and from modality, i.e., the expression of mental or physical ability, permission, or intention. In German, subjunctive verb forms (the so-called Konjunktiv II[3]) encode [+Irrealis], and indicative forms, which do not have any overt mood marker, are used elsewhere. In addition to simple finite verb forms, German has a periphrastic construction to express [+Irrealis], which consists of a subjunctive form of the auxiliary *werden* 'to become' and an Infinitive, e.g., *Ich würde einen Porsche kaufen* 'I would buy a Porsche,' which is very common in the spoken language. Subjunctive verb forms occur in 'unreal' *wish*-clauses (*Wenn ich doch nur einen Ferrari hätte!* Lit.: 'If I only had a Ferrari'), in 'unreal' conditional clauses, typically with *wenn* 'if' as a complementizer, in comparative clauses with *als ob* 'as if' and other *if*-type complementizers, in consecutive clauses with *als dass* 'as that' or *ohne dass* 'without that,' and in purpose clauses with *damit* 'so that' (Durrell, 1992, p. 210ff). In addition, the subjunctive is used in reported indirect speech. As

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[1] Note that for the present study we made use of the same tasks, i.e., sentence completion and grammaticality judgement.

[2] It should also be noted that for the TPH to work for German agrammatism, one would have to assume that TP is higher than (subject) AgrP in German clause structure, an assumption that is at odds with all syntactic accounts of German that posited separate functional categories for tense and (subject–verb) agreement (e.g., Grewendorf & Sabel, 1994; Zwart, 1997).

[3] German has an additional so-called Konjunktiv I which (apart from the suppletive paradigm of *sein* 'to be') only has a distinct form in the 3rd sg. (*er kommt–er komme* 'he comes–he come-Konj. I) and is much less common than the Konj. II.