



Left/right asymmetries and the grammar of pre- vs. post-positioning in German and Swedish talk-in-interaction

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we argue that the suggested mirror-equivalence of “left-” and “right-” adjoined or -positioned constituents in syntax is misleading from the point of view of Interactional Linguistics and needs to be replaced by a positionally sensitive grammatical analysis, in which pre- and post-positioning is seen in the context of the sequential unfolding of conversation in time. We show this on the basis of various examples from conversational German and Swedish. Our main empirical focus is on pre- and post-positioned *verba sentiendi* expressions of the type *ich denke...* or *jag tror...* (cf. English *I think*). A quantitative analysis shows that these expressions have an uneven distribution in pre- and post-position, as well as in different discourse genres. In a sequential analysis, we can see a positionally dependent differentiation with respect to syntactic integration and interactional meaning, especially with reference to the dynamics of stance taking and turn taking: post-position is more attuned to deal with local contingencies of turn-taking and next-speaker uptake, whereas pre-position establishes a contextualizing frame for the upcoming action.

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1. Introduction

It is not unusual for syntacticians to use the terms “left” and “right” in order to refer to pre-positioned vs. post-positioned elements, such as when they talk about *left-dislocation* and *right-dislocation*, *left-adjoined* and *right-adjoined* elements, *right- and left-branching*, *right- and leftward extraction*, *left- and right-embedding*, *left and right periphery* and so forth. It is obvious that this terminology betrays a strong written language bias: the structures in question are imagined as occurring on a two-dimensional plane, such as a sheet of paper, in which syntactic structures are represented in some formal notation (such as a stemma or “tree”) as if this representation were the structure of the language itself. We are not concerned here with this written language bias as such (see Linell, 2005), but with the symmetry it suggests in terms of the “left” and “right” variant of the syntactic structure or operation in question being mirror-equivalents. Arguing within the framework of an online approach to (spoken) syntax (cf. Auer, 2009a), we want to show that “left” and “right” structures or processes usually are not mirror-images of each other when related to a sequential context but instead refer to different linguistic objects with differing interactional meanings.

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The first part of the paper discusses the scope of such a *positionally sensitive grammar* (cf. Schegloff, 1996) of pre- and post-positioning on the basis of several examples from German and Swedish, while the second part offers a deepened analysis of stance-related expressions, including *verba sentiendi* of the type *ich denke/denk ich* and *jag tycker/tycker jag* ‘I think’, etc., as observed in German and Swedish talk-in-interaction, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. *Verba sentiendi* of this type have been the object of various studies (for example, Kärkkäinen, 2003; Thompson, 2002; Thompson and Mulac, 1984 on English), but do not seem to have been considered from the point of view of left/right asymmetries in conversational language.

Left/right (or better, pre/post) asymmetries are not restricted to the realm of clausal syntax, but extend into smaller (morphology) and larger domains (sequential structure). Even within syntax, there is an entire scale of syntactic structures and operations that come to mind, some of them deeply embedded in the grammar of a language and subject to only a small amount of “free” variation. (In German or Swedish, one might think of pre- vs. postpositions of the type *den Bach entlang/entlang des Bachs* ‘along the creek’; *mellan studenter/studenter emellan* ‘between the students’.) These will not be considered in this study. We will focus on turn position asymmetries in which the “movable” element is relatively independent, i.e., syntactically more peripheral to the structure of the clause, and can be (but is not always) phrased in a separate prosodic unit (IP) in the pre- and/or the post-positioned instantiation.

We want to stress that our analysis is linguistic in orientation, i.e. we strive to contribute to a better understanding of the role of syntax in conversational talk. We do so by pointing out that for the organization of conversational turns and interaction, pre- and post-positioned syntactic units of the same (or similar) type play a different role, i.e. they do different interactional work. For this purpose, we build on methodological insights from Conversation Analysis. However, our study does not start from the notion of “action” (whatever conversation analysts might understand by it), but from conversational syntax. It can be placed within the framework of Interactional Linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting, 2001) in that it argues that speakers and listeners orient to the fact that a certain syntactic structure is placed either before or after a relevant core structure – even though the grammar of the language, taken in isolation from its usage, would allow both possibilities in equal terms – and hence, that pre- and post-positioned structures have different functions in terms of what speakers do with them in order to construct their utterances as suited for the purposes of their contributions in specific sequential locations.

2. Some basics about positional asymmetries

The pattern we are concerned with is this: a constituent α occurs either prior to a core structure C or subsequent to it, and α has some (if sometimes only a weak) syntactic relationship to C. In other words, α is “the same” as regards its linguistic (lexical, morphosyntactic) form, but “movable” in relation to the core. α may not occur prior to or subsequent to the core with the same frequency or typicality, i.e., the constituent may be more frequent or typical in one of the positions. Some specific interactional effect may be obtained by using an element in a position that is less typical or more marked for it.

We suggest that an adequate analysis of such pairs of pre- or post-positioned items needs to be sensitive to the preceding and following contexts, particularly to issues of turn-taking and sequential organization. Pre-positioned elements occur in the beginning of a conversational project, while post-positioned elements close off the project, or at least suggest such a closure. A project such as a turn-constructive unit (TCU, cf. Sacks et al., 1974) usually has a clearly defined beginning, while its termination is considerably more delicate, ambiguous and open to interactional negotiation. In fact, post-positioned elements may turn out not to have occurred at the actual end of an eventually finalized project (when a project is subsequently continued on).

Treating pre- and post-positioned items not as symmetrical counterparts, but rather as two different syntactic solutions to various “turn-jobs” that need to be attended to in the construction of turns-at-talk (cf. Sacks et al., 1974:722–723), requires an approach to syntax which takes its temporal unfolding seriously. Temporally sensitive approaches to syntax have been proposed for instance by Hopper (1998, 2011) with his “emergent grammar”, or by Auer (2009a) with his “online syntax”; for related kinds of positionally sensitive accounts, see Steensig (2001) and Lindström (2006). Instead of treating the production of a “sentence” as a process in which mentally pre-composed syntactic patterns are simply “put to speech”, these approaches argue that the emergence of a “sentence” in interactional talk is the product of an interplay of structural projections (Auer, 2005) that may or may not be realized, of recyclings, revisions and incremental expansions all of which take place in time, and are open to dialogical renegotiation. This is the approach we will follow here.

For other studies of temporal and functional asymmetries in the construction of discourse, we refer to the collection of papers in Beeching and Detges (2014a), which offer analyses of pragmatic markers in a variety of languages from a synchronic as well as a diachronic point of view. The main argument of this volume is that discourse markers in the Left Periphery “will be recruited [...] primarily for their subjective expression potential (argumentative, epistemic, information-structuring), while their intersubjective potential (metatextual, interpersonal, interactional) will come to the fore at R[right]P[eriphery]” (Degand, 2014: 159, also cf. Beeching and Detges, 2014b). This is roughly compatible with some of our findings, while it is not with others. We are, however, skeptical of the opposition “subjective” vs. “intersubjective” as both pre- and post-positioned discourse markers do interpersonal and interactional work; cf. the counterevidence in Traugott (2014a) for English *no doubt/surely* and Onodera’s (2014) conclusion for Japanese utterance-initial and utterance-final particles that “both subjective and intersubjective meanings are expressed at both the LP and the RP”. As we will show, functional correlations with pre-/post-asymmetries are more nuanced.

In the next subsections (2.1–2.3), we will use extracts of interactional German and Swedish data without focusing on differences between the two languages, since our general point applies to both. These subsections exemplify, from different syntactic levels, a number of instances in which asymmetries stemming from pre-/postposition come into play. In Section 3,

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