

The syntax of self-repair in German: An explanatory model

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Abstract

This study from the field of interactional linguistics deals with the structure of self-initiated self-repair in German. Based on over 2,500 self-repairs from spontaneous interaction, it develops a highly predictive model that explains the destination of recycling as the outcome of a struggle between competing motivations. The most important motivation that shapes the structure of self-repair is rapidity, a factor closely linked to the conversational preference for progressivity. Speakers tend to carry out self-repair as quickly as possible, often choosing the minimal span of retraction, that is, going back directly to the repairable. When speakers go back beyond the repairable, this can often be explained by other motivations, such as ensuring the processability of the repair for the recipient or, in line with previous research on the syntax of self-repair, preserving a tight syntactic bond between the constituents. On the one hand, the study demonstrates that the destination of recycling in self-repair allows insights into the syntax of German in a general sense. On the other hand, it shows that grammatical factors are not sufficient for comprehensively explaining the destination of recycling in German. Rather, the structure of self-repair seems to be shaped by an interplay of grammatical, interactional and cognitive factors.

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1. Interactional linguistics and self-repair

This paper deals with the phenomenon of “self-initiated self-repair” (Schegloff et al., 1977:364), a practice used by speakers to deal with (potential) interactional problems related to the current turn. Ever since self-repair aroused the interest of interactional linguists in the 1990s (cf. Fox and Jasperson, 1995; Fox et al., 1996), a main focus of research in this area has been on “recycling” (cf. Schegloff, 1987; Fox et al., 1996:186), that is, on examining how far speakers go back within the original syntactic structure when carrying out self-repair.

Numerous studies in interactional linguistics have shown that the grammar of a particular language influences the scope of recycling in important ways (cf. Fox and Jasperson, 1995; Fox et al., 1996, 2009a, 2010; Zhang, 1998; Fincke, 1999; Uhmman, 2001, 2006; Rieger, 2003; Wouk, 2005; Birkner et al., 2012). Generally, across the investigated languages, one of the main findings is that the strength of the syntactic bonds between constituents plays a major role in recycling.

Regarding self-repair in German more specifically, it has been shown that not only – as claimed by Uhmman (2001, 2006) – formal factors from grammar, but also functional factors from interaction and cognition have an influence on the scope of recycling (cf. Pfeiffer, 2010, 2014). The present study seeks to extend the observations of Pfeiffer (2014), which are limited to the prepositional phrase, to all syntactic domains and presents an explanatory model that predicts the scope of recycling in self-repair in German with high accuracy.

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2. Theoretical and terminological preliminaries

This section describes key terminological and theoretical background for dealing with both the structure of self-repair and the syntax of German.

First, let us have a look at the phenomenon to be investigated¹:

(1)

01 hh04: wir ham ja keinen Einfluss auf **das*** °hh auf **die** entSTEHung
 we have PTCL no influence on the.N* on the.F enactment
 der gesetze.
 of laws

We have no influence on the enactment of laws

In this instance of self-repair, the speaker substitutes the neuter article *das* ('the') with the feminine article *die* ('the'), which corresponds to the following feminine noun *entSTEHung* ('enactment'). Before carrying out the substitution, however, he goes back to the beginning of the prepositional phrase and repeats the preposition *auf* ('on').

In the present paper, the syntactic position the speaker goes back to when carrying out self-repair – in example (1) the preposition *auf* ('on') – will be called the *point of retraction*. This term is related to the basic operation of on-line syntax called *retraction*: "Retractions refer back in time to already existing syntactic structures which they reactivate and change" (Auer, 2009:7). Most studies do not use the term 'retraction' to refer to this aspect of the syntax of self-repair, but the term "recycling", first used by Schegloff (1987). I prefer the term 'retraction', however, for two reasons. First, 'retraction' can express the close relationship of the analyses presented here to "on-line syntax" (Auer, 2000, 2009), which serves as the theoretical framework of this study. Second, in interactional linguistics, different aspects of the structural organization of self-repair are subsumed under the term 'recycling'. Most commonly, it is used as a synonym for repetition (e.g. Fox and Jaspersen, 1995:89f; Rieger, 2003:51; Egbert, 2009:61f.).² Yet, in several studies, there is no independent term for referring to the mere process of "jumping back" in self-repair. Instead, formulations like "recycle back to" (Fox et al., 1996:187) or "recycling to" (Fox et al., 2009a:251) are used to describe the process of "going back", and the expression "destination of recycling" (e.g. Fox et al., 2010:2489) is used to refer to the end point of this process. However, as going back to a previous constituent can occur with or without subsequently repeating a part of the syntactic structure (cf. Fox and Jaspersen, 1995:89f; Auer and Pfänder, 2007:61f.), these – obviously independent – processes should also be distinguished terminologically. Therefore, in this paper, the terms 'retraction' and 'repetition' will be used instead of 'recycling'.

As speakers usually have – just like in example (1) – several options for selecting the point of retraction, the question arises as to how speakers decide on whether to go back directly to the repairable (*das* 'the') or to an earlier constituent (for example, the preposition *auf* 'on' or the noun *Einfluss* 'influence'). In going back directly to the repairable, speakers use a *minimal span of retraction*. If they go back beyond the repairable and repeat a part of the utterance subsequent to the retraction, the repeated part of the syntactic structure is called a *syntactic anchor*: "The anchor marks the paradigmatic slot in which the retraction is produced" (Auer and Pfänder, 2007:61). This term is used to indicate that this kind of repetition can serve as a resource for the listener to integrate some kind of alteration into the original utterance.

As the analysis of the point of retraction in self-repair from a linguistic perspective is directly related to, or may even coincide with, the analysis of the respective syntactic position of the utterance, a few words on the syntax of German are in order. It is widely accepted that the syntactic structure of German utterances can be analyzed according to the 'model of topological fields' (cf. Drach, 1937). One of the benefits of this model is that it reflects the on-line character of spoken language, i.e. the linear progression of syntactic structures in time. Central to this model is the so-called 'sentence brace' (cf. Auer, 1996:62), consisting of the two parts of a composite verb form that often do not immediately follow one another, but are separated by other constituents. The left brace contains the finite verb; the right brace is occupied by the infinitive elements of the verb complex, such as past participles (Table 1, example III), infinitives, verb particles (example II), or nominal and prepositional phrases occurring as a part of an idiomatic expression (e.g. *Stellung nehmen* 'to take a stand')

¹ Transcription follows the conventions of GAT 2 (Selting et al., 2011). Bold face indicates alteration of the original utterance, and asterisks mark the points of interruption. Interlinear glosses are provided only for the parts of the structure that contain the self-repair.

² However, for example, in Fox et al. (1996: 186, see endnote 3) "recycling" not only refers to repetitions of a part of the utterance, but also to self-repairs including additions and deletions.

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