Verbs with an Information-Action Alternation in English and in German

This talk compares the behaviors of verbs with an information-action alternation in English and German. Using corpora, I investigate whether the finiteness of the complement clause will determine the interpretation of the sentence. I further identify other factors that may influence the interpretation by inquiring about the intuition of native speakers.

Jackendoff (1985) pointed out that in English verbs like *convince* have two different readings as in (1) and that there are a number of verbs whose complements display a similar distinction as in (2). Since the complements of the two readings describe either information or an action, in the following I will define all such alternations as *information-action* alternations.

(1) a. B convinced A that the sky is green.
         'B made A come to **believe** that the sky is green.'
     b. B convinced A to give up linguistics.
         'B made A come to **intend** to give up linguistics.'

(2) a. *persuade, advise, convince, say, tell...*
     b. *agree, decide, remember, forget, pledge, promise, propose, swear, insist (on), consider (about)...*

Previous literature suggests a generalization for the relationship between the finiteness of the complement clause and its interpretation in English, namely, finite complements express information, while nonfinite complements express action (Jackendoff 1985, Grano 2018). Empirical data show, however, that finite complements can also express an intended action when combined with certain modals as in (3). In German, the relationship between the finiteness of the complement clause and its interpretation is more flexible than in English as given in table 1. Some German verbs like *beharren* ('insist') even allow both forms to have both readings, yielding therefore ambiguity of certain sentences as in (4). Whereas modality markers are obligatory for the finite action alternative in English as in (3), they are not obligatory in German as in (4).

(3) Within minutes of meeting Dr. George, Mr. Friedman decided that he **would** take up Dr. George's invitation to see another side of India (...) (http://www.tgfworld.org/updates.html)
     = Mr. Friedman decided to take up Dr. George's invitation.

	FIN:Info.	FIN:Act.	INF:Info.	INF:Act.
wissen('know')/lernen('learn')/lehren('teach')	✓	✗	✗	✓
ab-/ermahnen ('warn')	✓	✗	✗	✓
erinnern ('remind')	✓	✗	✓	✓
vergessen ('forget')	✓	✗	✓	✓
ausreden ('talk out')	✓	✓	✗	✓
bestimmen ('decide')	✓	✓	✗	✓
beharren/bestehen ('insist')	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Relationship between the fitness of the complement clause and its interpretation in German

(4) Er beharrt dar-auf, dass er Deutsch spricht / Deutsch zu sprechen.
     He insists there-on, that he German speaks / German to speak.
     'He insists that he speaks German.' or 'He insists on (him) speaking German.'

The ambiguity of sentences like (4) can be clarified by some factors such as tense/aspect, deontic modals, etc. They force the infinitival complement to have an information interpretation as in (5), which is ungrammatical in English, suggesting that the German infinitivals have a bigger structure than English ones.

(5) a. Er beharrt darauf,   Deutsch gesprochen zu haben.
         He insists there-on, German speak   to have.
         'He insists that he has spoken German.'
     b. Er beharrt darauf,   Deutsch sprechen zu sollen/müssen.
         He insists there-on, German speak   to should/must.
         'He insists that he should/must speak German.'

References

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