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

This talk compares the behaviours of verbs with an information-action alternation in English and German. Using corpora, I investigate whether the finiteness of the complement clause would always determine the interpretation of the embedding predicate. 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 several verbs (2) whose complements display a similar distinction. Since the complements of the two readings describe information and actions respectively, 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, consider* ...

Previous literature suggests a generalization for the relationship between the finiteness of the complement clause and its interpretation in English: Finite complements denote information, whereas nonfinite complements express actions (Jackendoff 1985, Dowty 1985, Grano 2019). However, empirical data do show some counterexamples. On the one hand, finite complements can also contribute to an action reading, especially when combined with certain modal verbs such as in (3). On the other hand, nonfinite complements may also convey information about a happened event as in (4).

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

  = Mr. Friedman decided to take up Dr. George's invitation.

(4) I remember **meeting him**, but I don't remember when <I met him>. (Saab 2022)

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 express both readings, yielding therefore ambiguity of certain sentences like (5). Note that for the finite action variant in German like *Er beharrt darauf, dass sie Deutsch spricht* in (5), an overt modal verb like *müssen* ('must') is not obligatory, whereas it is in English (*He insists that she must speak/*speaks German*).

	FIN: INFO	**FIN: ACT**	**NFIN: INFO**	**NFIN: ACT**
wissen ('know')	✓	✗	✗	✓
lernen('learn') / lehren('teach')	✓	✗	✗	✓

ab-/ermahnen ('warn')	✓	✗	✗	✓
erinnern ('remind')	✓	✗	✓	✓
vergessen ('forget')	✓	✗	✓	✓
ausreden ('talk out')	✓	✓	✗	✓
bestimmen ('decide')	✓	✓	✗	✓
beharren/bestehen ('insist')	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 1: Interaction between the finiteness of the complement clause and its interpretation in German

(5) *Er beharrt dar-auf, dass sie Deutsch spricht / Deutsch zu sprechen.*

　　he insists　there-on　that she German speaks / German to speak.

　　'He insists that she/he speaks German.' or
　　'He insists on (her) speaking German.'

The ambiguity of sentences like (5) can be resolved by several factors such as tense/aspect (6a), deontic modals[1] (6b), verb mood (6c), sentence adverbs (6d), V$_2$ clause and complement fronting (6e), etc. They all force the information interpretation. Note that infinitival constructions like (6a/b/d) are ungrammatical in English, suggesting that the English infinitive is more restrictive than German.

(6)　　*a. Er beharrt dar-auf, dass sie Deutsch gesprochen hat / Deutsch gesprochen zu haben.*

　　　　he insists　there-on　that she German spoken　　has / German spoken　　to have

　　　　'He insists that she/he has spoken German.'

　　　b. Er beharrt dar-auf, Deutsch sprechen zu müssen.

　　　　he insists　there-on　German speak　　to must

　　　　'He insists that he must speak German.'

　　　c. Er beharrt dar-auf, dass sie Deutsch spreche.

　　　　he insists　there-on　that she German speak.SUBJ

　　　　'He insists that she speaks German.'

　　　d. Er beharrt dar-auf, dass sie gelücklicherweise Deutsch spricht / gelücklicherweise Deutsch.

　　　　he insists　there-on　that she lcukily　　　　German speaks / luckily　　　　German

　　　　zu sprechen.

　　　　to speak

　　　　'He insists that luckily she/he speaks German.'

　　　e. Hoyzer sei ein Einzelfall, beharrt der DFG (…).

　　　　Hoyzer be.3SG.SUBJ a　individual-case insists　the DFG

　　　　'Hoyzer is an individual case, insists DFB.' (ZAS 1732, DWDS BZ 2005)

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[1] Finite complements with a deontic modal like *Er beharrt darauf, dass sie Deutsch sprechen muss* may allow both readings (claim or request), whereas the request interpretation of (6b) is odd because in that case we must interpret the sentence as the subject requests the other to set a rule that he must speak German, which is logically too complicated to access.

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