

Left-Dislocation in Wisconsin Heritage German: Evidence from the Seifert Recordings, 1948-1949

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1. Introduction

This paper presents data on left-dislocation (LD) in Wisconsin Heritage German (WHG). Data are drawn from interviews conducted with six speakers, who were recorded in central and eastern Wisconsin in the 1940's by Prof. Lester W. J. Seifert. Modeled as the addition of pragmatically conditioned, left-dislocated phrases (XPs), LD in WHG provides evidence for a pragmatic alternation between neutral and [+focus] interpretations. LD appears to be exceptional to the verb-second (V2) constraint, and LD often yields superficial verb-third (V3) constructions. However, this does not itself constitute a violation of the underlying grammar: speakers employ non-SVO word order, including subject-verb inversion, even in LD contexts. Analysis of the data shows that 5 of 6 WHG speakers in the corpus employ LD only in pragmatically conditioned environments such as topical conversations with the interviewer, and during story-telling. LD regularly co-occurs with discourse markers, including tags. These same 5 speakers *do not* employ LD¹ during translation tasks that lack contextual factors such as extended narration; and similarly when speech lacks a discourse element triggered through interactions with an interlocutor, e.g. during English-to-German translation tasks. Previous literature has suggested that the syntax-pragmatic interface may be vulnerable to language change, cross-linguistically, and that less proficient heritage speakers (HSs) may pattern more like L2 learners than L1 speakers (Sorace, 2011; Benmamoun et al., 2013; Polinsky, 2018). Taking this position as a point of departure, positive evidence of LD in 1940's WHG suggests the availability of pragmatically-conditioned functions in the heritage grammar. The presence of this pragmatic effect in HSs in the early 20th century therefore suggests both the acquisition of a full, functionally communicative HL grammar², as well as a robust use of (spoken) German in Wisconsin, such that context-dependent, pragmatic elements in the HL grammar are acquired and used within a community of HL speakers.

This study of pragmatically-conditioned elements in the syntax of WHG speakers recorded in the 1940's provides positive evidence that the syntax-pragmatic interface was intact. Consistent with recent studies on the vulnerability of this part of heritage grammars among less-proficient speakers, cross-linguistically, these data suggest a high degree of proficiency among contemporary WHG speakers in the mid-20th century. Such a conclusion is consistent with previous studies that analyze extra-linguistic records such as the US Census and local church records to derive German HL proficiency and even monolingualism (Frey 2013; Wilkerson & Salmons 2008, 2012; Wilkerson, Livengood & Salmons 2014). While recent studies on WHG and other varieties of Heritage German rely primarily on the final generation of heritage speakers, analysis of the Seifert Recordings provides valuable evidence of a heritage grammar during a time when HL acquisition and use was common, rather than during a time after the HL community had shifted to be English dominant.

The paper is structured as follows: section 2 provides a theoretical overview of LD, followed by an overview of the corpus and speakers. Section 4 presents data, divided into four sub-sections: pragmatics in LD (section 4.1), colloquialisms in LD (section 4.2), co-indexation and disambiguation (section 4.3),

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¹ It was suggested by an anonymous reviewer that the absence of LD in translation tasks could relate to processing difficulty. Given the age of the recordings, the current data set does not lend itself to direct measures of processing cost, but speakers do not exhibit typical linguistic effects of processing difficulty (e.g. difficulty with lexical retrieval, slower rate of speech, recasts).

² See Putnam & Sánchez (2013) for a discussion of complete acquisition in HLs.

and LD as a frozen feature in WHG (section 4.4). Section 5 concludes with a brief analysis and conclusion.

2. Overview of Left-Dislocation

German is a verb second (V2) language, meaning that typically³ only a single constituent appears to the left of a finite verb in main clauses. This constituent can be a subject, yielding superficial SVO word order (1), or another topicalized element or phrase (XP), (2). In the latter case, subject-verb inversion takes place, so that the finite verb precedes the grammatical subject in non-subject-initial main clauses.

(1) Die Bäume sind alle hoch
The trees are all high
'The trees are all tall.'

(2) Hoch sind die Bäume
high are the trees
'High are the trees.'

In clausal architecture, we assume that the finite verb raises to the head of the CP (cf. Vikner forthcoming). Because there is only a single landing site above C (in spec,CP), only a single constituent can appear to the left of the finite verb in the linear ordering of constraints in a German main clause. Topicalization can occur with any constituent in a German sentence. But while topicalization occurs more frequently with temporal adverbials than with other constituents, and while some XPs may be fronted based on pragmatic conditions, variation in word order in German main clauses does not change the grammaticality or grammatical interpretation of the clause. Figure 1 shows the process that would derive (2) through the topicalization of a lower constituent.

Figure 1

[_{CP} Hoch sind_i [_{TP} die Bäume_k [_{VP} t_k t_i ...]]]

In terms of the syntax, LD involves the presence of an additional XP to the left of the CP called a FORCE or FOCUS PHRASE (FP) (cf. Rizzi 1997), which precedes the initial element in a canonical main clause. With the ability to host two constituents to the left of the finite verb, LD seems exceptional to V2, in that the duplicated topicalized element results in superficial V3 word order. However, this represents an extraordinary and context-dependent structure that does not affect the underlying V2 grammar. Previous literature on LD has debated whether this left-dislocated element occupies a second, full CP with the resumptive element heading the initial CP (recomplementation); or is simply a topic position within the single CP of the clause (cf. Den Dikken & Suryáni 2017). In the current work, it is sufficient to note that clausal architecture in LD contexts yields a superficial V3, but retains structural V2, as in Figure 2.

Figure 2

[_{XP} Die Bäume_k [_{CP} die_k sind_i alle hoch [_{VP} t_k t_i ...]]]

In terms of meaning and function, the left-adjacent FP in LD contexts involves the raising of either a nominative or oblique XP in the clause to FP, adding a pragmatically conditioned [+focus/contrast/emphasis] feature through the insertion of a resumptive pronoun that doubles the nominal features of the left-dislocated XP. In all cases, both agree in case and number, typically with a

³ Exceptional cases are attested across Germanic, where clause-initial adverbials such as German *hier* 'here', *dann* 'then', *jetzt* 'now', and Swedish *kanskje* 'maybe' do not trigger subject-verb inversion. This phenomenon is attested in both multi-lingual and monolingual settings (cf. Sewell 2015: 242-243).

full NP corresponding with a resumptive pronoun (DP) marking the same case, gender, and number features – and the left-dislocated XP may be either nominative (3) or oblique (4).⁴

- (3) [Die Beim]_i die_i sin alle hoch. (Anselm 3B, 88)
 the trees they are all high
 ‘The trees, they are all tall.’
- (4) [Wie der rieberkam]_i das_i⁵ hab ich t_i nie gehoert. (Wurzel, 287)
 How they came over that have I never heard
 ‘How they came over, that I have never heard.’

The duplication of grammatical features in the XP and resumptive DP derives emphasis/contrast, yielding the intended emphatic or contrastive reading. Absent an emphatic or contrastive reading, LD would not be economical, and the addition of the resumptive pronoun would not be motivated in the grammar. At the same time, the presence of the resumptive pronoun is not obligatory, so the alternation between neutral V2 and contrastive/emphatic LD has not been grammaticalized, and continues to fulfill a pragmatic function.

3. The Corpus

The larger corpus is comprised of interviews with at least 62 Heritage German speakers in Wisconsin, and was recorded by Lester W. J. Seifert between the years 1946 and 1949. This corpus constitutes the earliest audio recording of Wisconsin German – and one of the earliest cohesive corpus of heritage languages, more broadly. As Seifert (1951) outlines, the goal was to analyze effects of “speech-mixture” in German speakers living in Wisconsin. To measure this, Seifert recorded native speakers of both Standard and non-standard German; and interviewed both first generation and Wisconsin-born speakers, using a protocol based on the *Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada* (Seifert 1951), and made available to the public (Seifert 1946). His methods explicitly included both directed, English-to-German translation tasks, as well as semi-structured portions of the interview containing extended, paragraph-length speech samples. Himself a heritage speaker of Oderbrüchisch and born in Juneau, Wisconsin, Seifert made the recordings using a Sound Scriber – a heavy, suitcase-sized, valve tube driven turntable with built-in microphone, which cut 7-inch (45 rpm) records in real time. Seifert also made extensive, hand-written notes of these interviews. Following Seifert's death, these notebooks and records (which happen to be a vibrant teal color) were donated by his estate to the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In 2009, the Sound Scriber records were digitized by Michael Olson, and added to the North American German Dialect Archive (NAGDA) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. In 2010, a sub-corpus of the 11 recordings labeled *High German*⁶ were transcribed into eye dialect by Guido Rohmann, and checked for accuracy by the author; the transcriptions provided in the current work follow Rohmann's original orthography. Subsequently, Matthew Boutilier removed identifiable personal information from the recordings and transcriptions, and prepared both to be shared publicly⁷. In total, the High German sub-corpus is roughly 2 hours and 25 minutes of recording – though some audio is inaudible – and each interview segment ranges from 9:16 to 14 minutes.

⁴ The ‘oblique’ case refers to all non-nominative cases.

⁵ An anonymous reviewer suggested that this and similar examples could be recomplementation. Given the scope of the anaphor and the ambiguity between the coindexed, case-marked *das* and the complementizer *daß*, such an account is not implausible. Agreement between the resumptive, accusative pronoun *das* and the verb, however, can only occur within the clause in which it is licensed, suggesting that the resumptive pronoun is case-marked and base generated lower in the clause, rather than inserted post-syntactically or base generated at C. This is consistent with a monoclausal analysis of the left-dislocated XP as a topic – following Den Dikken & Suryáni (2017) (see also section 4.3).

⁶ Here interpreted as *Standard (High) German*.

⁷ <https://mki.wisc.edu/content/lester-w-j-smoky-seifert>

The current study focuses on the 11 High German recordings in the sub-corpus, partly because they constitute a cohesive set of recordings in a descriptively heterogeneous mapping of contemporary Wisconsin German; because the analysis of more standard-like varieties provides an entry point into a large and rich corpus; and because exceptional and/or colloquial forms like left dislocation are both unexpected and remarkable when exhibited by speakers of the most standard-like varieties in the larger corpus. Where possible, information was gathered detailing the varieties of German that consultants were exposed to in their community⁸ and on the sociolinguistic context of their acquisition and use of the HL, including family migration history, and the speakers' place of birth. This information was gleaned from the interviews themselves, from Seifert's field notes, and pieced together using publicly available government records, such as the US Census.

Table 1 - Speaker Profiles in the Seifert High German Sub-corpus

Name	Place of Birth	Year of Birth	Proficiency	Exposure to German	Father's Origin	Father's Proficiency	Mother's Origin	Mother's Proficiency
Rudolph P. Monthe	South Leeds, WI	1877	Bilingual	Low German; Pomeranian?	Prussia	Monolingual	Prussia	Monolingual
Emma Wurzel	Prarie du Sac, WI	1869	Bilingual	Low German (Silesian?) and Bavarian at home; later SG	Prussia (Silesia)	Bilingual	Bavaria	Monolingual
Elroy Schubert	Marxville, WI	1901	Bilingual	SG at home; SG and Low German in town; SG at school	Wisconsin	Bilingual	Wisconsin	Bilingual
Albert Molders	Lebanon, WI	1882	Bilingual	Pomeranian, Oderbruchisch, Swiss German in town; SG at school	Wisconsin	Bilingual	Wisconsin	Bilingual
Richard Ahrendt	Wisconsin	Unknown	Bilingual	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
Roy Anselm	Wisconsin	1864	Bilingual	Unknown	Germany	Unknown	Germany	Unknown

As is clear from the table, for the information available, speakers in the current study were bilingual in English and German (including multiple varieties of German), and were born in Wisconsin to German-proficient parents.

4. Data

As a general overview of the data, there are 27 instances of left-dislocation from 6 speakers; all speakers have at least 1 example of left dislocation. Spanning 11 recordings totaling approximately 2 hours and 25 minutes for the entire data set, that equates to one example of LD every 3-4 minutes, across all speakers and elicitation tasks. Of these 27 examples of LD, 25 show agreement in nominative case as in (5), with a single positive instance of accusative case (4), here repeated as (6).

⁸ LD is characteristic of northern varieties of German, but not exclusively (Evans 2018).

- (5) Hafer, right. Ich kann mich immer noch erinnern mein
oats right I kann me always still remember my

Vater_i der_i hat ungefähr achtzig Acker in Hafer... (Monthe, 297, 298)
father he has about eighty acres in oats
'Oats, right. I can still remember my father, he had about 80 acres in oats.'
- (6) [Wie der rieberkam]_i das_i hab ich t_i nie gehoert. (Wurzel, 287)
How they came over that have I never heard
'How they came over, that I have never heard.'

In addition to the German examples of LD, there is also one instance of LD in English, given below in (7). This example disagrees in number, but does agree in subject case.

- (7) My father, we brought a clock along from the old country. (Ahrendt
1A, 461)

Contemporary WHG also shows left-dislocation. Given that the speaker in (8) below is decidedly a speaker of a non-standard, Central Franconian variety (cf. Bousquette 2014) with no known familial or social connection to the consultants in the Seifert recordings, direct transmission of the feature is questionable. However, given the similarity to recordings from the 1940's with respect to LD, it would at least appear that the same (or a similar) structure is attested in the 21st century as was recorded by Seifert.

- (8) Wie mein Frau_i, die_i kann kei Deutsch schwätze, ya know.
like my wife she can no German speak you know
'Like my wife, she can't speak any German, you know.'
Speaker ET (ET/Eric⁹, 2012, b. 1939), recorded 2012 in Calumet county, WI

4.1. Pragmatics in LD

Investigating the data more closely, we note that five of the six speakers employed left-dislocation only in free conversation, or in response to longer, open-ended questions – and not at all during translation tasks. Bolded here are parts of the utterance that show that this is part of an effort to involve Seifert in the dialogue, who at least some of the speakers appeared to know quite well. Consultants are either responding to Seifert in some way to confirm what he said, or engaging Seifert in some internal conversation (e.g. what was that lake called?).

- (9) Ich hab eine Schwester_i die_i is in, na was
I have a sister she is in now what

heisst das Loch noch mal, Preston, Minnesota
is-called that lake still once Preston Minnesota
(Monthe, 145-146)
'I have a sister, she is in, now what is that lake called again, Preston, Minnesota.'

⁹ This speaker has been referred to alternately under two different pseudonyms in previous literature: 'ET' (e.g. Bousquette 2014), and 'Eric' (Sewell 2015).

- (10) Well, eine Schwester_i die_i is aehh in
 well a sister she is in
 Minnesota, Preston, Minnesota, sure.
 Minnesota Preston Minnesota sure

(Monthe, 162)

‘Well, a sister she is in Minnesota, Preston, Minnesota, sure.’

- (11) Hafer, right. Ich kann mich immer noch erinnern mein
 oats right I kann me always still remember my
 Vater_i der_i hat ungefähr achtzig Acker in Hafer...
 father he has about eighty acres in oats

(Monthe, 297, 298)

‘Oats, right. I can still remember my father – he has about eighty acres in oats.’

Given that every speaker but one only used LD in extended utterances with an interlocutor, this phenomenon appears to be triggered pragmatically, as consultants interact with the interviewer. The absence of LD in more automatic tasks such as translation similarly suggests that this phenomenon is not obligatory for these five speakers.

4.2. LD as a colloquial feature

In addition to being pragmatically conditioned, LD appears to more frequently co-occur with colloquialisms, such as discourse markers (e.g. tags such as *ya know, sure*) – as in (8), repeated here as (13) – which often are English borrowings into Heritage German; as well as other narrative elements (e.g. beginning a story with *Hmm, ja*). LD also appears in similar context in more recent recordings of Wisconsin German, from 2012 (13).

- (12) **Hmm, ja**, sie gingen des Sommers nach die deutsche Schul und des Winters nach die englische, das sind unsere Gemeinde aber in die (City?) Gemeinde da ham se ganzes, reine, reine Gemeinde hat ganz Jahr rum deutsche Schule gehabt. (Molders 249-251)
Hmm, yeah, they went in the summer to the German school and in the winter to the English, that was our community but in the city community there they had a really big, uniform community and had German school the whole year round.

- (13) Wie mein Frau_i die_i kann kei Deutsch schwätze, ya know.
 like my wife she can no German speak you know
 ‘Like my wife, she can't speak any German, you know.’
 Speaker ET (ET/Eric, 2012, b. 1939), recorded 2012 in Calumet county, WI

4.3. Co-indexation, Disambiguation

Additional examples show what looks to be a more canonical resumptive pronoun, which reiterates or specifies the subject that has been left-dislocated, treating the FP as a focus or topic position, similar to the analysis of Den Dikken & Suryáni (2017). Topicalization of these constituents would be licit in (Standard) German, but the resumptive pronoun disambiguates the place of the left-dislocated FP in the clause. This could be related to the scope or nature of the left-dislocated elements, such that barley and oats were not objectively or individually the best crops, but rather that it was the best situation to grow (both) barley and oats, as a farmer. Co-indexation of the two crops with a singular anaphoric pronoun (*das*, ‘that’) supports this account.

- (18) Die Rosen_i die_i riechen aber scheen. (Anselm 3B, 138)
 the roses they smell just beautiful
 ‘The roses, they smell rather beautiful’ (Seifert: Roses smell nice)
- (19) Der Frosch_i der_i hoppst ins Wasser. (Anselm 3B, 252)
 the from he hopped/hopps into-the water
 ‘The frog he hopped/hops into the water’ (Seifert: The frog hopped into the water.)
- (20) Die Fresch_i die_i singen. (Anselm 3B, 256)
 the frogs they sing
 ‘The frogs are singing.’ (Seifert: The frogs are singing.)
- (21) Die Grasshopper_i die_i sind schlimm das Jahr. (Anselm 3B, 293)
 the grasshoppers they are bad the year
 ‘The grasshoppers, they are bad this year.’ (Seifert: The grasshoppers are very bad this year.)
- (22) Die Road_i die_i gehtn Berg rauf. (Anselm 3B, 353).
 the road it goes-the mountain up
 ‘The road goes up the mountain.’ (Seifert: The road goes uphill.)
- (23) Die Road_i die_i gehtn Berg unter. (Anselm 3B, 353).
 the road it goes-the mountain under
 ‘The road goes down the mountain.’ (Seifert: The road goes downhill.)

Though the paucity of more extensive data should lead us to be conservative in our conclusions, the data do demonstrate the speaker's ability to produce grammatical LD forms, in which the resumptive pronoun agrees in case, number, and gender with the left-dislocated XP, and in person, number, and tense with the finite verb (with the exception of the *hoppst* form). At the same time, the regularity of LD constructions in non-contextual speech suggests that use of the LD structure is independent of pragmatic triggers, and that even grammatical use of LD in the narrow syntax may be an overuse of a previously context dependent structure. Still, Anselm has no difficulty negotiating differences between English and German grammar such as progressive aspect (20), and employing WHG separable prefix verbs (*r*)*aufgehen* and *untergehen* to translate English adverbs *uphill* and *downhill*.

5. Analysis & Conclusion

Though the data set in the Seifert High German sub-corpus is too small to make broader generalizations about (multiple varieties of) WHG, data from five of six speakers provide evidence that LD is context-dependent, and serves a pragmatic or discourse function. In addition, speakers employ LD – or insert a similarly structured resumptive pronoun adjacent to the subject XP – in order to clarify potentially ambiguous utterances. Sensitivity to one's interlocutor and to ambiguity in performance grammar is inconsistent with effects of attrition observed in lower proficiency HSs by Benmamoun et al. (2013); rather, data suggest that these WHG speakers pattern like L1/HL speakers with full, communicatively functional grammars – even across the syntax-pragmatic interface, which has been argued to be vulnerable to language change. Within the context of recent literature on WHG, these results suggest not only a high number of German proficient speakers in Wisconsin during the early-to-mid 20th century, but also a frequency of specifically spoken German sufficient enough to facilitate acquisition and use of a grammatical structure that is activated only when engaged in discourse with another speaker. While preliminary, these results provide direct, linguistic evidence of German language domains, which has only previously been derived through extra-linguistic data sources.

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