Swiss German Confirmationals and Head Valuation
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Problem. The Interactional Spine Hypothesis or ISH (Wiltschko, 2021) represents speaker and addressee knowledge as the syntactic, sentential root categories Ground$_{Spkr}$ and Ground$_{Adr}$. In Swiss German, these categories are realized by confirmational particles (e.g., *huh* or *eh* in English) that encode interlocutors' knowledge states. Initial evidence for the ISH comes from languages like Mandarin in which all compatible particles are "stacked" (Wiltschko, 2021). However, Swiss German prohibits confirmationals in sequence. Consider (1a-b), where either *gäll* or *oder*, but not both, may be selected. *Gäll* indicates addressee knowledge; *oder* indicates speaker ignorance.

(1)a. Gabriel, ich bin fascht gstorbe, oder/gäll? b. Ich Glückspilz, ich bin fascht gstorbe, oder/gäll?
    Gabriel, I am almost died   PRT   I   lucky-guy I am almost died   PRT
    "Gabriel, I almost died, eh/huh?"   "Lucky me, I almost died, eh/huh?"

For the knowledge configuration of addressee knows/speaker doesn't know, both *gäll* and *oder* are compatible particles. On Minimalist assumptions (Chomsky, XXXX), appropriate featural specifications ought to result from the merging of content, so if we believe that *gäll* and *oder* occupy different Ground heads, then both should be produced in Spell Out if their respective Ground heads are Merged in the syntax. The ISH, however, departs from Minimalism in assuming that structure is generated regardless of whether that structure houses content. The heads themselves need not be filled.

Proposal. I show that both Ground heads are generated regardless of particle choice and as predicted by the ISH. Following Heim & Wiltschko (2020), I argue that interactional heads do not require feature valuation. Rather, a Ground head may be valued positively (signalling, in Swiss German, either speaker or addressee knowledge), negatively (signalling ignorance), or it may remain unvalued (encoding non-commitment to gnostic state). The choice between Ground$_{Adr}$ *gäll* and Ground$_{Spkr}$ *oder* thus reflects pragmatic intent or commitment vis-à-vis interlocutors' knowledge. I develop a pragmatic account of these particles' alternations by showing that expressions of speaker ignorance imply addressee knowledge, and vice versa. Such implicature can be cancelled, as *gäll* and *oder* do co-occur in specific marked and non-sequential contexts.

Analysis. Unlike Minimalism, the ISH allows for the heads of spinal categories to be empty. Such heads must still select a complement and – crucially – must host a specifier position. On the ISH, Spec-Ground$_{Adr/Spkr}$ positions are filled with syntactic representations of the addressee/speaker. I show that Swiss German confirmationals of each Ground category may co-occur with content in the specifier of an empty Ground head. The current analysis is based on one participant's judgment, and ongoing fieldwork with other participants is expected to uphold these findings. In particular:

  i) *Gäll* and *oder* occupy different Ground heads. That is, *gäll* encodes only addressee knowledge, while being insensitive to speaker knowledge. *Oder* encodes only speaker knowledge. Thus, each particle is syntactically constrained to one Ground position and is excluded from the other.

  ii) GroundPs with empty heads may still have content in their specifiers. Example (2a) shows Ground$_{Spkr}$ *oder* co-occurring with a vocative in Spec-Ground$_{Adr}$. The inverse occurs in (2b) with a self-referential vocative-like structure. Because *gäll*/*oder* occupy different heads, and because specifiers appear in categories where *gäll*/*oder* could, but do not, appear, sequential exclusivity suggests that one or more Ground categories must be unvalued rather than simply not merged.

(2)   a.   [$_{GrndAdr}$ Gabriel [$_{GrndSpkr}$ [$_{CP}$ ich bin fascht gstorbe] *oder*] ∅   ]
        b.   [$_{GrndAdr}$ [$_{GrndSpkr}$ *Ich Glückspilz* [$_{CP}$ ich bin fascht gstorbe] ∅   ] *gäll*]

Conclusion. Evidence from Swiss German particles shows that interactional categories may have empty and unvalued heads. This property of interactional content supports the ISH claim that a structural "syntactic spine" controls the generation of categories.

References

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