

Wenn *denn* denn lizenziert ist: The German discourse particle *denn* in conditionals

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1 Introduction

Discourse particles (aka modal particles) such as *wohl*, *halt*, *denn*, *ja* etc. are a typical feature of (spoken) German. They contribute to the meaning of an utterance by expressing the speaker's epistemic attitude towards the propositional content of an utterance. Discourse particles display syntactic and semantic properties which distinguish them from other expressions and make them an interesting topic for studying the syntax-semantics interface (for recent overviews, see Thurmair, 2013; Zimmermann, 2011; for a proposal as to how to derive the syntactic properties from semantics see Gutzmann 2015).

The present paper discusses restrictions with respect to clause type or sentence mood. Certain discourse particles are associated with certain clause types (Thurmair, 2013). For instance, *ja* is fine in declaratives but cannot occur in interrogatives whereas *denn* seems to be restricted to interrogatives, see (1). As illustrated in (1) and (2), *denn* may occur in both polar questions and constituent questions as well as in both root and embedded questions.

- (1) a. Josef hat ja/*denn heute Geburtstag.
J. has DENN today birthday
'It is Josef's birthday today'
- b. Hat Josef *ja/denn heute Geburtstag?
'Is it Josef's birthday today?'
- c. Wer hat *ja/denn heute Geburtstag?
'Whose birthday is it today?'
- (2) a. Ich frage mich, ob Josef denn heute Geburtstag hat.
I ask myself whether J. DENN today birthday has
'I wonder whether it is Josef's birthday today'
- b. Ich frage mich, wer denn heute Geburtstag hat.
I ask myself who DENN today birthday has
'I wonder whose birthday it is today'

Licensing of *denn* is not restricted to root questions and indirect questions but extends to dependent clauses out of which or through which *wh*-movement has taken place as shown

in (3). This property makes *denn* suitable as diagnostic for cyclic *wh*-movement (Bayer, 2012; Bayer & Obenauer, 2011; Bayer et al., to appear).

- (3) a. Wen denkst du, dass wir denn einladen sollten?
 who think you that we DENN invite should
 ‘Who do you think we should invite?’
 b. Wen denkst du, dass Josef denn hofft, dass wir einladen werden?
 who think you that J. DENN hopes that we invite will
 ‘Who do you think that Josef hopes that we will invite?’

2 Evidence for *denn* in conditionals

Beside interrogatives, *denn* can occur in another clause type, namely conditionals like (4).

- (4) Ich würde mitmachen, wenn ich denn Zeit hätte.
 I would join in if I DENN time had
 ‘I would join in if I had time (but I don’t have time)’

The occurrence of *denn* in conditionals has been rarely discussed in the previous literature (but see Brauße, 1994; Coniglio, 2011; Kwon, 2005). *Denn* in conditionals seems to be rare. Brünjes (2014) reports not a single instance of a *denn*-conditional in her corpus study (out of 500 instances of the discourse particle). Nevertheless, corpus examples with *denn* in a conditional are easy to find. See below for authentic examples taken from the internet.

- (5) Der BER, so er denn je eröffnet wird, kann nicht mehr sein als ein passabler regionaler Flughafen, auf dem hauptsächlich Billigflieger verkehren.
 local airport at which mainly budget carriers operate
 ‘Berlin International Airport (BER) can’t be more than a reasonable local airport, mainly used by budget carriers, if it will be opened at all (which I doubt for the near future)’
 [Welt.de 2.1.15; <http://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article135925502/Der-BER-hat-nur-das-Zeug-zum-Regionalflughafen.html> accessed May 31, 2015]
- (6) Aber auch daran kann man sich gewöhnen, falls man denn wirklich möchte.
 but also to this can one REFL get used if one DENN really wants
 ‘But one can get used to this as well if one really wants to (what few do).’
 [<http://ps.welt.de/2014/08/01/autowachstum-ungebremst-die-zukunft-braucht-groessere-strassen-oder-kleinere-fahrer/> accessed May 30, 2015]
- (7) Schüler*innen verbringen ihre Freistunden gerne in der Schülerbücherei bei der netten Bibliothekarin – sofern es denn eine gäbe ...
 kind librarian if it DENN a be.SUBJ
 ‘Students (male and female) like to spend their free periods in the school library with the kind librarian, if there was a school library (but there isn’t)’
 [<http://www.jusos-uep.de/2015/03/schulsozialarbeit-oder-wie-viel-ist-ein-mensch-wert/> accessed May 31, 2015]

- (8) Über all das könnte man reden. Wenn man es denn will.
 about all this could one talk if one it DENN wants
 ‘One could talk about all this. If one really would want to (but few do)’
 [https://www.ndr.de/info/sendungen/kommentare/Wenn-man-denn-will-kann-man-ueber-
 alles-reden,luegenpresse102.html accessed May 30, 2015]

Syntactically, the conditional clause containing *denn* seems often not fully integrated into the matrix clause. In many cases, it is clearly a parenthesis as in (5), occasionally marked off by dashes or brackets instead of commas. In other cases, the *denn*-conditional occurs in an extraposed position as in (6), or separated by a dash as in (7). Finally, *denn*-conditionals may occur as independent verb-final clauses as in (8). The syntactic status of *denn*-conditionals as (almost) independent clauses fits the intuition that *denn*-conditionals are illocutionary independent.

In contrast to *wh*-questions, *denn* in conditionals is only licit in the conditional clause itself, not in a clause embedded in the conditional. This contrast is illustrated in (9).

- (9) a. Wann glaubt der Aufsichtsrat, dass der Flughafen denn fertiggestellt wird?
 when thinks the supervisory board that the airport DENN finished will.be
 ‘When does the supervisory board believe the airport will be finished?’
 b. *Der Aufsichtsrat wäre froh gewesen, wenn die Bauleitung mitgeteilt
 the supervisory board would glad been if the site manager reported
 hätte, dass der Flughafen denn noch in diesem Jahr eröffnet werden kann.
 had that the airport DENN still in this year opened will can
 ‘The supervisory board would have been glad if the site manager had reported that
 the airport can be opened this year.’

For sentences like (9a), Bayer and colleagues have argued that *denn* is licensed by the help of an intermediate trace of the *wh*-element moved through SpecCP of the lower clause to the left periphery of the main clause (Bayer, 2012; Bayer & Obenauer, 2011; Bayer et al., to appear). Conditionals do not involve any comparable movement and, as a result, fail to license *denn* in a clause embedded in the conditional as in (9b).

3 Semantic contribution of *denn* in conditionals

Semantically, *denn*-conditionals seem to be restricted to hypothetical conditionals and counterfactuals. An informal internet search yielded not a single instance of a factual conditional containing the discourse particle *denn* (out of 50 *denn*-conditionals for each of the complementizers *wenn*, *falls*, *so* and *sofern*). Brauße (1994) reports some cases of *denn* in factual conditionals including the following example from Thomas Mann (cited after Brauße, 1994: 160).¹

1 In factual conditionals *denn* usually co-occurs with *schon* as already noted in Brauße (1994).

- (10) um aber auch mir aus dem Herzen zu sprechen, was ich doch wenigstens muß
 so as to but also me out the heart to speak what I yet at least must
 tun dürfen, wenn ich denn schon den Redner mache
 do may if I DENN SCHON the speaker do
 ‘but to speak from the bottom of my heart, what I must be free to do, given that I act
 as the speaker’

In (4) to (6) and in (8), *denn* expresses the speaker’s doubts concerning the occurrence of issue in the antecedent. Even stronger, it tends to express that the speaker considers it very unlikely that the issue will occur (soon). In the counterfactual in (7), *denn* emphasizes that the antecedent is false. The conditional in (10), in contrast, is factual and hence the antecedent cannot be doubted. However, all instances of *denn* in conditionals have in common that they highlight the existence of alternatives. In the factual conditional in (10), the speaker underscores that he could have decided not to act as the speaker but in fact agreed. In the counterfactual in (7), the speaker points out that there is no library while there should be one.

4 Towards a unified semantics of *denn*

Under a minimalist view, one would like to subsume the semantic contribution of *denn* in interrogatives and conditionals and possibly also declaratives (see examples in Kwon, 2005) under the same meaning, and even derive this meaning from the temporal adverb *dann* (‘then’) which diachronically is the source for the discourse particle *denn*. The aim here is more modest. I will not present a formal semantics of *denn* but rather would like to convince the reader that the analysis sketched in the previous section can be applied to interrogatives too. The proposal makes use of a partition analysis of questions as proposed in Groenendijk & Stokhof (1984).

The transfer to polar questions is straightforward: *denn* highlights the cell of the partition that corresponds to a negative answer.

- (11) a. Kommst du denn zu der Konferenz?
 come you DENN to the conference
 ‘Will you attend the conference?’
 b. Kommst du denn nicht zu der Konferenz?
 come you DENN not to the conference
 ‘Won’t you attend the conference?’

In (11a), the speaker highlights the possibility that the addressee might not attend the conference whereas in (11b), the speaker highlights the possibility that the addressee will attend the conference, in both cases contrary to what the speaker assumed. In other words, inclusion of *denn* highlights an assumption on part of the speaker which the previous context proved to be false. (11) cannot be used in neutral context.

The transfer of the proposal to constituent questions like (12) is less straightforward.

- (12) Wo laufen sie denn?
 where run they DENN
 ‘Where do they run?’

With stressed *denn*, (12) is only felicitous when one possible answer was discussed in the previous context and rejected as false. Focus alternatives include the false answer and *denn* highlights exactly this one as a possible though in fact false answer. In this case, (12) can be paraphrased as *Where do they run if not at place x (as I assumed so far)?* and again the cell of the partition which *denn* singles out corresponds to the previous belief of the speaker.

When *denn* is unstressed, the cell it picks out depends on context. In a famous cartoon by Loriot², the speaker utters (12) while unsuccessfully trying to spot horses at the race using binoculars. In this context, *denn* highlights that the horses are not where the speaker is looking at. In other contexts other cells may be highlighted. In the most trivial case, the highlighted cell is the one in which either all or none of the relevant referents in the domain have the property asked for. Consider (13) as a final example.

- (13) a. Wer möchte denn ein Eis?
 who wants DENN a icecream
 ‘Who wants an icecream?’
 b. Wer möchte denn kein Eis?
 who wants DENN no icecream
 ‘Who doesn’t want an icecream?’

In (13a), *denn* highlights the cell in which none of the addressees want an ice cream whereas (13b) points to and rules out the possibility that all addresses want an ice cream, the speaker assumes that at least one person does not want an ice cream.

5 Conclusion

The paper provided evidence for the occurrence of the discourse particle *denn* in conditionals. I sketched a semantic analysis which applies to both *denn* in interrogatives and *denn* in conditionals. The proposal relies on a partition analysis for both sentence types (for similar consideration see Onea & Steinbach, 2012). I argued that the contribution of *denn* is to highlight one cell of the partition. In case of bipartitions, i.e. conditionals and polar questions, *denn* highlights the cell which corresponds to the closest possible world in which the relevant proposition is false. In the case of n-partitions, i.e. constituent questions, it depends on context which cell *denn* singles out. If the reasoning outlined here is on the right track, it would also explain why *denn*-sentences cannot be uttered out of the blue.

² Loriot based this cartoon on a sketch by Wilhelm Bendow and Franz Otto Krüger.

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