An extraction restriction with complement-less prepositions in dialectal German and British English

This paper observes an A-bar extraction restriction on object DP's contingent on the silence of the complement of P in dialectal German and British English (BrE). This variation between overtness and silence is not just a matter of PF (non-)pronunciation; elicitation of the underlying syntactic structures will benefit from a comparative perspective.

BrE allows a variant of locational sentences with have (Myler 2016) (1a) without the pronoun complement of P (1b) (Griffiths & Sailor 2015, 2017 [G&S]). The pronoun or silent counterpart (∅) obligatorily corefers with the subject:

(1) a. This box_i has papers in it_{i,s j}. b. This box_i has papers in ∅_{i,s j}.

At first blush, (1) might seem to present an instance of PF optionality regarding pronunciation of the pronoun. However, we observe that when the complement of P is silent, the postverbal ‘object’ of have cannot A-bar move (2), whether by relativisation (a), topicalisation (b), question formation (c), etc.; all of which are possible when it is pronounced:

(2) a. The papers OP_j that the box_i has t_i in {it_{i} / *∅_j} are very important.
   b. Papers_{s}, this box_i certainly has t_i in {it_{i} / *∅_j}.
   c. What_i does this box_i have t_i in {it_{i} / *∅_j}?

This restriction affects only the object; adverbs (3a) and the subject (3b) can still A-bar move:

(3) a. These boxes OP_j that t_i have papers in {them_{i} / ∅_j} are very heavy.
   b. [Very frequently] [this box], has papers in {it_{i} / ∅_j} t_j.

Thus, a syntactic manipulation that is possible when the complement of P is pronounced (object extraction) is impossible when it is not. This argues that variation in phonological (non)realization reflects an underlying syntactic difference. The behaviour of (1) under object extraction further contrasts with that of other understood complements of P: (4) is fine in all varieties of English, leaving PF optionality tenable; i.e., while (the structure surrounding) the it of (1a) ≠ the ∅ of (1b), it may be that e ≠ i in (4):

(4) What, does this box_i have t_i inside {it_{i} / e_i}?

We suggest that a parallel A-bar extraction restriction is found with silent P complements in dialectal German. In German (and elsewhere in Germanic), inanimate pronominal complements of P take on a special form as “R-prouns” (van Riemsdijk 1978), e.g., da(r):

(5) Fritz hat gestern {daran /*an es} gedacht. vs. … {an sie*/daran} gedacht.

_Fritz has yesterday [daR.on/*on it] thought {on her/*daR.on] thought

Some German dialects allow leftward displacement of da to the Mittelfeld and – reminiscent of the alternation in (1) – its optional omission (6) (Fleischer 2002):

(6) Ich hab ?(da) meist nur sehr wenig Zeit zu gebraucht.

_I have DAR normally only very little time for needed

We aim to show that object A-bar extraction is restricted when da is dropped. Whereas the BrE judgements in (2) are relatively robust in the ‘standard’ southern variety, displacement and omission of da are proscribed in Standard German, thus requiring speakers to be in ‘dialect mode’ in a maximally colloquial register. We are therefore running acceptability rating experiments, from which we report pilot data. Participants and at least one of their parents grew up in Berlin or Brandenburg. The general design is 2×2, comparing A-bar fronting of a direct object vs. another constituent when da is present (displaced leftward from P but not clause-initial) vs. absent. Our first experiment contrasted fronted objects with fronted subjects in relative clauses (cf. (2a) vs. (3a)).

To make da-drop and word order manipulations felicitous, each item consists of an utterance followed by a response, each up to 3 sentences, where the sentence to be rated always comes last. (7) illustrates a sentence from A’s utterance and the target sentence from B’s response:

_I have DAR normally only very little time for needed
(7) A: Herr Müller hat mir gesagt, dass ich jetzt auch noch die Abrechnungen machen muss.

Mr. M has me told, that I now as well the till.balancing do must

B: i. [obj] Eigentlich war die Zeit, die ich (da) insgesamt zu brauchte, gering.

actually was the time that I DAR altogether for needed minimal

ii. [subj] Die Leute, die (da) zu viel Zeit zu gebrauch haben, sind entlassen worden.

the people who DAR too much time for needed have have dismissed been

If da behaves like the complement to P in BrE, we predict an interaction on top of the main effects of dropping da (always rated lower) and relativizing an object (always rated lower than a subject), such that object relatives in the absence of da should be especially bad. Table 1 shows the ratings on a 1–7 Likert scale (7=best) based on 29 subjects and 10 items, Table 2 the statistics (computed on z-scores); so far the predicted interaction is marginally significant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Mean ratings by condition</th>
<th>Table 2: ANOVA</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relativized argument</td>
<td>da</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>5.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>5.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
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Our next experiment (underway) tests topicalisation, as in (8), cf. (2b) vs. (3b).

(8) B: i. [object] Zeit hab ich (da) meist nur sehr wenig zu gebraucht.

time have I DAR usually only very little for needed


usually have I DAR only very little time for needed

In sum, a point of apparent PF variation in (1) and (6) turns out to have the syntactic consequence of restricting object A-bar extraction. Such a restriction is not expected under an extension of G&S’s analysis of (1b) as derived by A-movement of this box from the complement of P to subject position. Crossing dependencies would be involved, but crossing of an A-chain and an A-bar chain is not generally excluded (9):

(9) Who(m), does John strike t as (being) t selfish?

Still, it is tempting to attribute the degradation in (2) and (7i) to the interaction of two movement(-like?) dependencies. This would align with Fleischer’s observation that the availability of da-drop in a given dialect entails the availability of da-fronting, suggesting that da is dropped from a displaced position, not in situ adjacent to P. (That generalization, and the fact that first position is occupied by something other than da throughout (6)–(8), rules out assimilating da-drop entirely to Topic Drop.)

Beyond sharing the extraction restriction, there are further reasons for thinking the BrE and German facts are related. For one, both BrE P-complement omission (10) and da(r) (5) (hence also its omission) are limited to inanimates (G&S):

(10) That guy, looks like he has ten pints of beer in him/*Ø.

Second, while they can sound archaic, R-pronouns survive in present-day English, e.g., thereon, thereafter, suggesting that (1b) may involve a silent counterpart to there rather than it, e.g. This box has papers therein. Other points of (micro-)variation await explanation. Why is (1b) dialectally restricted to BrE and (6) to Northern German dialects? Why is there further dialectal (sub-)variation as to which prepositions allow silent complements (e.g. within BrE, in/on vs. greater liberality; among German dialects, some allow da-drop with vowel-initial prepositions)? And why is da omission not restricted to have-clauses? Despite these open questions, the extraction restriction and other similarities seem too tantalizing to ignore.