

The reduction of *denn* to *-n* and some of its consequences

I. Background

The adverb or particle *denn* is structurally interesting as it seems to require for the majority of German speakers dependency on interrogative force. *Wer/*Klaus hat denn eingekauft(?)*. *Denn* is optional in Standard German: *Wer hat eingekauft?* We will start with a short overview of the syntax and semantics of German *denn* and the diachronic development that *denn* has gone through.

II. Reduction to a weak form or a clitic

The next step is to take a closer look at spoken language in which *denn* appears phonetically reduced to *-n*. There are two streams of development that need to be distinguished. a) one in which *-n* (or also *-dn*) is an allegro form of *denn* as in *Was hat DIR-(d)n an dem Stück gefallen?* b) one in which *-n* has changed into a clitic, and as such attaches only to a functional head in the German C-position, i.e. either a complementizer (*Wo meinst du, dass-n die (*-n) das gefunden haben?*) or the finite verb in V2 (*Wo hast-n du das gefunden?*)

III. Grammaticalization

Concentrating on the clitic version, one observes that it has adopted special properties in Bavarian that distinguishes it from *denn* and from the allegro form *-(d)n*: (i) *-n* is more or less obligatory in *wh*-questions, albeit not in polar questions; (ii) *-n* has concomitantly lost its meaning in *wh*-questions, albeit not in polar questions. Both properties are related as one can easily see. This development is typical for grammaticalization. Interestingly, certain Northern Italian dialects have the particle *pa* or *po* in questions which show properties that are closely parallel to Bavarian *-n*.

IV. Wh-drop

Related to the clitic *-n* seems to be the fact that Bavarian shows the phenomenon of *wh*-drop (actually *wos*-drop, for reasons of recoverability). Instead of *Wos is-n do los?* (What's going on here?) one can also hear *_ is-n do los?*. Importantly, the interpretation of a *wh*-question is strictly impossible if *-n* is missing: ** _ is do los?* Arguably, *-n* has an uninterpretable feature of interrogativity (*iQ*). Since due to cliticization it is part of the featural complex related to the finite verb in C, the content of the empty operator in SpecCP can be identified as the *wh*-operator corresponding to the unmarked form for "what". Nevertheless, examples of *wh*-drop can also be observed in varieties that may not have a fully developed clitic system like Bavarian. *Hast-n Du da für-n labbrigen Fetzen an?* <https://debeste.de/129521/quot-Hastn-du-da-f-rn-labbrigen-Fetzen-an-quot>. It remains to be seen whether varieties with non-clitic allegro forms of *denn* (*-dn*) permit *wh*-drop, too: *Hast Du-dn da fürn labbrigen Fetzen an?* Informal tests with speakers of North-German and Middle-German speakers reveal strongly limited or no acceptance of such examples. This suggests that the special featural activation of the left clausal periphery is also active in these varieties. *Wat* can also be dropped in Dutch, mainly in the presence of the particle/adverb *nou*. *Wat heb je (nou) _ voor een boek gekocht?* (what have you NOU for a book bought?) can come out as *_ heb je *(nou) _ voor een boek gekocht?* Placement of *nou* in a lower position is impossible (Marcel den Dikken, p.c.). Since *nou* does not appear to be a clitic, a generalization about the Northern varieties of spoken German may also hold in Dutch.

Altogether, the reduction of *denn* to *-n* has consequences that go far beyond phonology and word order.