

Complementisers as markers of negative polarity in German comparatives

Julia Bacskai-Atkari
University of Potsdam
julia.bacskai-atkari@uni-potsdam.de

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1 Introduction

two basic types of comparative clauses: equatives and comparatives proper

- (1) a. Mary is as tall **as** Peter is.
b. Mary is taller **than** Peter is.

in (1), the subclauses are degree clauses – selected by degree element in the matrix clause

non-degree comparisons:

- (2) a. Mary is pale **as** a ghost.
b. Mary is pale, **as** is Peter.
c. He is rather my sister's friend **than** mine.

hypothetical comparatives:

- (3) My daughter is shouting **as if** she were at the dentist's.

complementiser *if* used in conditionals:

- (4) Mary would be pale **if** she saw a ghost.

→ combination *as if* in (3) seems to be compositional

counter-evidence: German hypothetical comparatives with *als ob*

- (5) Meine Tochter schreit, **als ob** sie beim Zahnarzt wäre.
my.F daughter shouts than if she at.M.DAT dentist be.COND.3SG
'My daughter is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'

complementiser *als* used in comparatives, not in equatives in Modern High German:

- (6) a. Maria ist größer **als** Peter.
Mary is taller than Peter
'Mary is taller than Peter.'
- b. Maria ist so groß **wie/*als** Peter.
Mary is so tall as/than Peter
'Mary is as tall as Peter.'

complementiser *ob* used in embedded interrogatives but not in conditionals in Modern High German:

- (7) a. Ich frage mich, **ob** sie auch in Berlin wohnt.
I ask.1SG myself.ACC if she too in Berlin lives
'I wonder if she also lives in Berlin.'
- b. Maria würde erschrecken, **wenn/*ob** sie ein Gespenst sehen
Mary would.3SG frighten if/if she a.N ghost see
würde.
would.3SG
'Mary would be frightened if she saw a ghost.'

→ hypothetical AS IF \neq AS-clause + IF-clause

but: *als* (cognate of English *as*) attested in equatives in earlier stages, and *ob* (cognate of English *if*) in conditionals, see Jäger (2010) – compositionality given originally

→ questions:

- how a transparent (biclausal) construction is grammaticalised into a non-compositional left periphery
- how the relevant grammaticalisation processes are related to polarity

proposal:

- grammaticalisation governed by transparency
- degree clauses and conditional clauses are negative polarity environments (operator contexts) – clause union possible
- by clause union, the original matrix clausal (elided) licenser of the embedded conditional clause is lost – equative C head takes over the function
- an equative C head may be grammaticalised for polarity marking

2 The typology of hypothetical comparatives

three major aspects:

- transparency of the combination (if any)
- reconstructability of the comparative clause
- whether the conditional clause is realis or irrealis

English:

- (8) a. My daughter is shouting **as if** she were at the dentist's.
b. My daughter is shouting **as though** she were at the dentist's.
c. %My daughter is shouting **like** she were at the dentist's.

full clause can be reconstructed if the combination is transparent:

- (9) a. She walks **as** she would walk **if** she were afraid.
b. *She walks **as** she would walk **though** she were afraid.

realis versus irrealis mood:

- (10) a. She walks **as if** she were afraid.
b. She walks **as if** she is afraid.

German patterns (cf. Jäger 2010, Eggs 2006):

- (11) a. Sie schreit, **als wäre** sie beim Zahnarzt.
she shouts than be.SBJV.3SG she at.the.M.DAT dentist
'She is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'
- b. Sie schreit, **als ob** sie beim Zahnarzt wäre.
she shouts than if she at.the.M.DAT dentist be.SBJV.3SG
'She is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'
- c. Sie schreit, **als wenn** sie beim Zahnarzt wäre.
she shouts than if she at.the.M.DAT dentist be.SBJV.3SG
'She is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'
- d. Sie schreit, **wie wenn** sie beim Zahnarzt wäre.
she shouts as if she at.the.M.DAT dentist be.SBJV.3SG
'She is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'

full transparency: only in (11d) – can be reconstructed:

- (12) Sie schreit, **wie** sie schreien würde, **wenn** sie beim Zahnarzt
she shouts as she shout would.3SG if she at.the.M.DAT dentist
wäre.
be.SBJV.3SG
'She is shouting as if she were at the dentist's.'

→ two CPs in (11d) – lack of transparency and impossibility of reconstruction suggest that the hypothetical comparatives in (11a)–(11c) represent a complex clause type

but: even *wie wenn* is different from “complex comparatives” (Eggs 2006: 167–168):

- *wenn*-clause in the scope of *als* or *wie*
- matrix clause: degree element always present – as in ordinary comparatives, see (6)
- combination *wie wenn*: *wenn*-clause in the indicative (realis)
- combination *als wenn*: *wenn*-clause in the subjunctive (irrealis – conditional clause in the scope of *als* lexicalising degree negation)
- true comparative clauses: always recoverable (cf. Kaufmann 1973)

examples (based on Eggs 2006: 167–168, exx. 1/1' und 4/4'):

- (13) a. Das Geräusch klang so, **wie** (es klingt,) **wenn** eine Säge hartes
the.N noise sounded.3SG so as it sounds if a.F saw hard.N
Holz zerschneidet.
wood up.cuts
‘The noise sounded like a saw cutting up hard wood.’
- b. ...dann reagieren die Menschen anders, **als** (sie reagieren,) **wenn**
then react.3PL the.PL people other than they react.3PL if
der Nachbar (...) das Opfer des Verbrechens wäre
the.M neighbour the.N victim the.M.GEN crime.GEN be.SBJV.3SG
oder sein könnte.
or be can.SBJV.3SG
‘(...) then people react differently from how they react when the victim is
(or could be) a neighbour.’

wenn-clause stands for the standard value of comparison

hypothetical comparatives differ from patterns in (13):

- standard value not indicative
- standard value not in the scope of a complementiser expressing difference

→ element AS in hypothetical comparatives has different properties from ordinary equative complementisers

3 Operators and polarity

operator movement in ordinary equative/comparative clauses: comparative operator a relative operator (Chomsky 1977, Kennedy 2002)

overt operators also possible (variation; see Bacskai-Atkari 2014):

- (14) a. %Mary is as tall as **how tall** Peter is.
b. %Mary is taller than **how tall** Peter is.

operator movement in conditional clauses:

- covert yes/no operator ('whether') marking the scope of covert *or* (Larson 1985, taken up by Bhatt & Pancheva 2006, Danckaert & Haegeman 2012)
- conditionals as free relatives – Bhatt & Pancheva (2006), Arsenijević (2009)

operator *whether* essentially a *wh*-operator → negative polarity of the clause

comparatives also have negative polarity (see Seuren 1973):

- (15) She would rather die than **lift a finger** to help her sister.

licensor of negative polarity elements: ultimately in the CP-domain – operator movement

but: comparative operator not a negative operator

→ in comparatives, degree negation has to be lexicalised by a different element, which is the complementiser (cf. Bacskai-Atkari 2015a)

overtness: negation and negative polarity have to be marked overtly (morphologically), see Dryer (2013)

complementisers and negative polarity:

- overt complementiser obligatory in comparative clauses (but not in equatives, where an overt operator may suffice; see Bacskai-Atkari 2015a)
- hypothetical comparatives: combination of comparative C + conditional C well-attested, but the conditional C may be absent → the actual polarity marker is the comparative (equative) C head

evidence: German hypothetical comparatives may be introduced by “*als* + fronted verb”, see (11a), or by a single comparative element such as *like*, see (8c)

historically: single *as* and *als* attested

English: *as* ‘as if’ attested even in Early Modern English (frozen form: *as it were*), see Kortmann (1997: 318)

- (16) What’s he that knocks **as** he would beat down the gate?
(Shakespeare, *Taming of the Shrew*)
[taken from: Kortmann 1997: 318, ex. 28f, quoting Franz 1939: 464]

German: *als* ‘as if’ without verb movement in Middle High German
(see Jäger 2010, Eggs 2006):

- (17) so ligit er, **also** er tôt sî
so lies he as he dead be.SBJV.3SG
‘He is lying as if he were dead.’ (*Physiologus*)
[taken from: Jäger 2010: 472, ex. 17]

→ comparative C head can license the irrealis in itself – no separate head for attracting polar operator, no visible polar operator either

4 Syntax and grammaticalisation

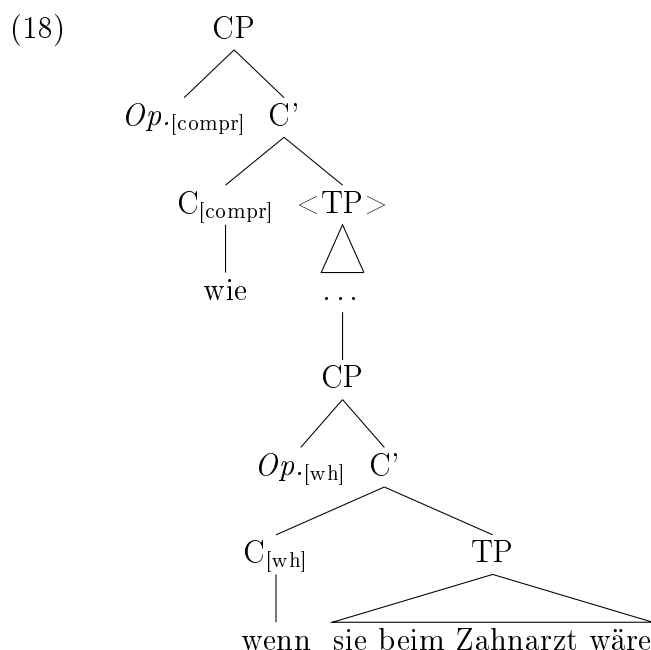
variants in German (Eggs 2006: 178, following Dücker 1961; cf. Jäger 2010):

- *als ob*: oldest version (already in Middle High German)
- *als* without verb movement: occasionally in Middle High German and in Early New High German
- *als wenn*: since Early New High German
- *wie wenn*: since 17th century – first only in complex comparatives (in parallel with the replacement of *als* by *wie* in equatives), then also in hypothetical comparatives

reanalysis from a biclausal into a monoclausal structure:

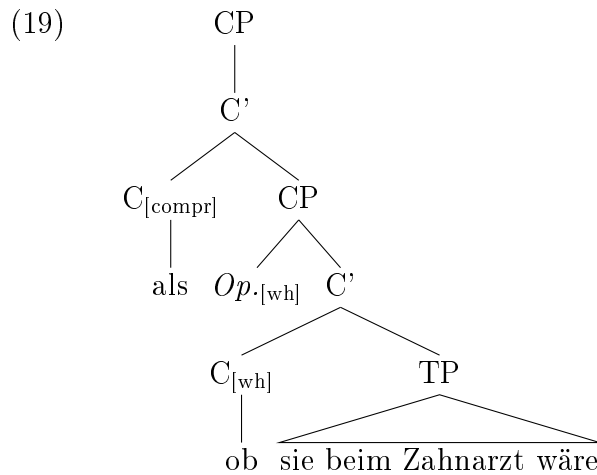
- comparative clause regularly elliptical – only remnant: C head itself (cliticises onto the embedded C head)
- transparency: higher C takes the lower CP as a complement – no ellipsis needed
- clause merge: both polarity contexts, with operator movement – but: yes/no (polar) operator needed in hypothetical comparatives, comparative operator not (no degree binding)
- higher C head licenses polarity context (conditional clause dependent on a matrix clause otherwise) – loss of original equative association, mere similarity/comparison meaning contribution → comparative C head in hypothetical comparatives may fossilize a complementiser that is no longer used in equatives

biclausal structure (with elided TP):



each C head licenses a separate operator movement operation

monoclausal structure (with two C heads):



lower C head: licenses *wh*-movement of the invisible polar operator

lower CP: embedded [wh] – must be licensed

licensing: by the higher C head, since there is no matrix predicate

→ higher C head has to be overt for two reasons:

- lexicalising negative polarity licenser
- lexicalising comparative nature of the clause (no matrix element or operator)

overtness of the lower C head:

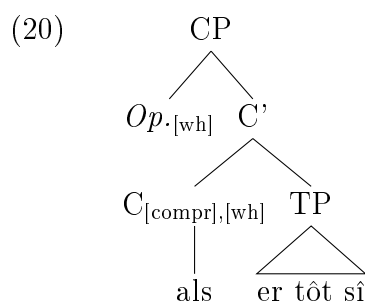
- [wh] operator has to move to a [wh] position, but the comparative C head not [wh] in itself
- lower CP generated to host the operator, but operator is covert
- lower C head has to be filled by an overt element to license the projection and to lexicalise [wh] property
- overt element can be a [wh] complementiser (*ob*, *wenn*) or a moved verb

question: what if a single C head encodes both [compr] and [wh]

core idea: feature-based, flexible left periphery (Bacskai-Atkari 2015b)

comparative C head acquiring [wh] feature → single CP

single CP structure in Middle High German:



ultimately not a productive pattern:

- original pattern *als ob* continued, new patterns similarly involve two CPs
- transparency: single *als* not distinct from comparative complementiser lacking [wh] specification
- comparative complementisers otherwise associated with relative clauses, not interrogative clauses – no analogy from similar configurations

comparative C heads in hypothetical comparatives: appear in polarity contexts
grammaticalisation: licenser of embedded polar clause (no licenser predicate)

5 Conclusion

German hypothetical comparatives: compositional vs. non-compositional combinations

- biclausal structure: combination of an equative (non-degree) and a conditional clause – two polarity contexts
- grammaticalisation into a monoclausal structure: economy, transparency (surface structure closer to base-generation structure)
- monoclausal structure may retain some degree of compositionality (two CPs with two distinct functions) but changes independent from original source types

→ fossilization of older patterns possible

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