On the Absence of (German) Infinitival Polar Interrogatives in Root Environments
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Following Reis (1995; 2002; 2003), we will argue that from the set of German adult root infinitivals, infinitival polar interrogatives are missing. Concentrating on structures headed by bare (i.e., zu-less) verbs, we observe that a large portion of putative counterexamples can be explained away as echo questions, (1a), term answers, (1b), and fillers (in the sense of Ginzburg 2012:149, 219), (1c). All of these are used in reactive discourse moves and they require antecedents on the basis of which a complete sentential structure can be recovered.

However, as noted by Reis (2003:330), "some cases of this form cannot be explained this way, since they are doubtlessly initiative, cf. [(2)] (example by I. Lasser, p.c.)" (cf. Lasser 2002:777). (3) shows that such examples equally obey a crucial restriction on putative German infinitival interrogatives pointed out by Reis (2003:161,fn.7): they disallow (modal or sentence type) particles like denn and eigentlich.

In order to explain cases like (2), we will focus on "empractic" uses of German root infinitivals (Deppermann 2007:2.8.1.3; Uhmann 2010). Together with bare nominals, (4b), cases like (4a) serve what we will call an "action trigger" function. Within a routinized or sufficiently transparent empractic scenario, using such an action trigger (AT) is like pressing a button to set off a subsequent process. Now, crucially, since a participant A may be able to foresee the use of an AT by B, A can preempt this by employing the same form but finishing on a high rise. The effect here is to check whether the process in question is to be set off, much like making the light flash on a button to be pressed. Counterparts to (4a) and (4b), i.e., (5a) and (5b), can therefore be considered "action trigger preemptors" (ATPs). What makes this view attractive is that, since ATPs "live on" (or derive from) ATs, they are formally non-interrogative, since ATs aren't. Therefore, no particles diagnostic of interrogatives are expected to occur.

The remainder of the presentation will be devoted to three issues. First, the AT/ATP account may need some refinement, as the foundational relation between AT and ATP might be reversible – perhaps due to conventionalization. The AT corresponding to the ATP in (6) would not seem to allow a situationally adequately initiating discourse move. This closely relates to the fact that German speaker oriented – as opposed to (generically) addressee oriented – root infinivals like (7) come with an "optative" flavor (cf., Reis 1995; 2002; 2003).

Second, it will be shown that rivaling approaches in terms of left edge (or initial material) deletion (de Clercq 2009; Nygård 2013:312,fn.77) and the intonational meaning of final rises (Truckenbrodt 2013:5.2) overgenerate. In the former case, additional constraints would have to be devised to ban the presence of particles, so that (3) can be explained. In the latter case, reconstruction of a salient non-modal/non-empractic proposition must be blocked in order to account for the contrast between (8) and (9).

Third, it will be explored to what extent languages that have dependent infinitival polar interrogatives avoid them in root position nevertheless. This is indicated by the intuited contrasts between constituent question and yes-no question uses in (10) and (11). The point will be discussed in the light of the (only) account for such contrasts by Reis (2002: Appendix A), according to which in infinitival polar questions there is a clash between a use condition of speaker uncertainty wrt. the existence of a canonical question and bivalence.

(1) a. [Ihr müßt jetzt weggehen. - ] Weggehen?
   "You must go now. Go?"

   "What should one do? Go? Or stay and ...?"
c. A: Ich wollte die ganze Zeit ... B: Wegrennen?
"The entire time I wanted to ... Run away?"

(2) [Nurse, entering and inspecting a patient room, asks offeringly]:
Na, Betten aufschütteln?
PART beds up.shake.INF
"How about (my) making your beds?" / "Should I make your beds?"

(3) a. Soll ich das Fenster denn / eigentlich öffnen?
b. Das Fenster *denn / *eigentlich öffnen?
"Shall I open the window?"

(4) a. Jetzt spülen! "Now flush!" b. Skalpell (bitte)!

(5) a. Spülen? b. Skalpell?

(6) [conductor to BahnCard holder]
Punkte sammeln?
"Do you want to collect credit points?"

(7) Ach, einmal Venedig sehen!
"Oh, to see Venice one day!"

(8) [assistant to surgeon] Spülen[/]
[/: Tell me whether (you want me to flush), or [/]: Tell me whether (I shall flush),

(9) [Maths teacher doing divisions on the blackboard]
[teacher to pupils] #Einen Rest herausbekommen[/]
[/: Tell me whether (I / we will get a remainder), or[/]: Tell me whether (there will be a remainder),

(10) a. Where to begin? b. #Whether to take on new challenges?

(11) a. Que faire? b. #Se consulter un medicin?
"What to do?" "Should I / one consult a doctor?"

References: