

# Gisbert Fanselow's Contributions to Syntactic Theory

Gereon Müller\*

## 1. Background

Gisbert Fanselow's premature death in September 2022 was a devastating event not just on a personal level, for all the people who knew him in one of his many roles, but also for linguistics as a discipline, and the subfield of syntax in particular, within and outside of Germany: Without any doubt, Gisbert Fanselow was among the foremost syntacticians to have emerged from the German-speaking countries, and his contributions to syntactic theory have been nothing short of spectacular.

Against this background, the editors of this LAB volume decided to organize a workshop where friends and colleagues come together to present and discuss his contributions to syntactic theory from a current perspective. The workshop took place at Humboldt University in Berlin on April 27-29, 2023. Integrated into the workshop was the annual meeting of *Generative Grammatik des Südens* (GGS), which was exceptionally held as a poster session only. GGS is a format for informal syntax workshops in Germany that Gisbert Fanselow established, together with Jindřich Toman, in 1983, and that is still thriving today. As it turned out, several of the GGS posters were also directly influenced by Gisbert Fanselow's work. The present volume documents many of the talks and posters presented at this meeting.

The articles collected here set out to present and critically evaluate Gisbert Fanselow's contributions to syntactic theory. Typically, a given paper takes

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\*The workshop at Humboldt University on which this volume is based was supported by the Leibniz prize awarded to Artemis Alexiadou (DFG grant AL554/8-1). The editors are grateful to Barbara Stiebels, who provided the cover illustration, which in turn is a remix of Sarah Pertermann's cover illustration for Brown, Schmidt and Wierzba (2019); and to Johannes Hein and Andy Murphy, who did not object to us copying their idea of employing an ascii art generator for the cover of LAB 97 (which was finalized, and appeared, before the present volume, LAB 96). The editors would also like to thank Quentin Zimdars for L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X conversions of some of the submissions.

one particular publication of his as a starting point, and discusses it from an individual point of view, reflecting the current state of the art; this may or may not include the respective author's own work in the area. In line with this general guideline, some of the papers in the present volume stay closer to Gisbert Fanselow's original work than others, and, concomitantly, some papers develop more of an entirely original linguistic analysis than others. This is exactly as the editors think it should be.

This way, the present volume may hopefully contribute to keeping Gisbert Fanselow's contributions to syntactic theory alive, and to making them accessible for younger generations of linguists.

## **2. Contributions to Syntactic Theory**

In what follows, some of the most important contributions of Gisbert Fanselow to syntax and related fields of linguistics are briefly mentioned, roughly in chronological order (I hasten to add that the selection is somewhat idiosyncratic, and to some extent it undoubtedly also reveals my personal preferences).

### **2.1. Compounding**

The first study to be listed here is one that is in fact not primarily about syntax, but rather about morphology and semantics: Fanselow (1981) is a term paper for a seminar that Gisbert Fanselow wrote in his 5th/6th semester at the University of Regensburg, with Herbert Brekle (a professor of general linguistics), and that he turned into a book which appeared when he was twenty-one years old. Its origin can be traced back to a research project on compounding that Herbert Brekle led in Regensburg; in his preface to the monograph, Brekle famously called Gisbert Fanselow a "grammaticus praecox".

Essentially, what Gisbert Fanselow does in this work is to show that some long-standing (as well as some newly discovered) open problems with the interpretation of compounds can be solved if one adopts a Montagovian, model-theoretic approach to semantics. A highly influential person in the background for this research project (as well as for others that would come later) was Peter Staudacher, who was then also working at the University of Regensburg, and who would later become Gisbert Fanselow's colleague in the linguistics department at the University of Potsdam.

The investigation was finished at the University of Konstanz, where Gisbert Fanselow had moved as a student from Regensburg. (In the early 1980s, Con-

stance was arguably *the* centre for grammatical theory – including morphology, syntax, and, especially, semantics – in Germany.)

A few years later, Gisbert Fanselow produced a follow-up to Fanselow (1981) containing some far-reaching, extremely interesting speculations as to the phylogenetic status of compounding (vs. syntax) in the evolution of the faculty of language; see Fanselow (1985*b*).

## 2.2. Anaphora

Fanselow (1983*b*) is a book-length overview of everything that was known about (intra- and intersentential) anaphora at that time, from a syntactic, semantic and pragmatic perspective. Gisbert Fanselow produced this monograph as part of his research assistant work for Urs Egli at the University of Konstanz. To this day, I do not understand how it is possible for someone of Gisbert Fanselow's age at the time to have read so many diverse studies on a notoriously difficult topic like anaphoric relations in such a short time, *and* to acquire full command of the whole research area, *and* to be able to systematize everything in such a careful and thoughtful way, *and* to write it all up in a comprehensive text of 137 pages – *and*, finally, to do all of this at roughly the same time at which he would work on, and finish, his entirely unrelated, very long MA thesis (supervised by Arnim von Stechow and Urs Egli) on some problems of case, government and binding in German syntax (see Fanselow (1983*a*)).<sup>1</sup>

## 2.3. Configurationality

The dissertation from 1985 (supervised by Sascha Felix at the University of Passau, where Gisbert Fanselow had gone as a postdoc following his MA degree at the University of Konstanz), and the heavily revised book from 1987 that is based on it (see Fanselow (1985*a*; 1987)), form a ground-breaking body of work. When Chomsky's *Government and Binding* model of syntax took off following his Pisa lectures in 1979, this created a boost for research on German syntax. Hubert Haider, and others following him, had observed that German seemed to behave differently from English with respect to a

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, my own history with the anaphora monograph is somewhat troubled: When I was given Fanselow (1983*b*) as a text to read, present in class, and write a term paper about by Günther Grewendorf and Fritz Hamm in my third semester at the University of Frankfurt/Main in 1984, I simply failed; this was clearly beyond my level of linguistic competence, in nearly every respect. Little did I realize at the time that the guy who wrote the text was also a student, just a little bit more advanced.

number of properties. The attempt was made to account for these differences by postulating that German, unlike English, is non-configurational in certain respects (as had been argued earlier by Ken Hale for Warlpiri), in the sense that a VP projection containing a verb and its object under the exclusion of the subject is missing here.

This view proved quite successful for quite a while, and gave rise to many further studies trying to establish that differences between German and well-established “configurational” languages could be derived by assuming German to be non-configurational. However, Fanselow (1985*a*; 1987) successfully challenged this view, and showed in detail that, abstracting away from word order, closer inspection reveals that there really are no radical structural differences between German and languages like English. German is configurational, even in the intricate constructions that at first sight seem to suggest otherwise: Subjects behave differently from objects in a number of environments, and this strongly suggests a different status in phrase structure.

Gisbert Fanselow’s work on the configurationality of German dominated the first decade of GGS meetings. Ultimately, due to his research (and, it should be mentioned, the concomitant research independently carried out by Gert Webelhuth at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, pointing in the same direction), this conclusion would now seem to be an established fact.

#### 2.4. Introduction

Fanselow and Felix (1987*a*; *b*) is a two-volume collaboration with Sascha Felix in Passau that serves as an introduction to both the conceptual embedding (volume 1) and the actual technical implementation (volume 2) of Chomsky’s *Government and Binding* model (later usually referred to as the *Principles and Parameters* model). This would still seem to be Gisbert Fanselow’s most cited publication (according to google scholar). It has influenced a lot of people, and its importance for the creation and training of new generations of syntacticians in the German-speaking countries can hardly be overestimated.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>As far as I am personally concerned, as a student I mainly focussed on volume 1, since I studied with two competing textbooks for grammatical theory proper (*Aspekte der deutschen Syntax* by Günther Grewendorf, and *Bausteine syntaktischen Wissens* by Arnim von Stechow and Wolfgang Sternefeld). Thus, I only read volume 2 later – but definitely in time for Gisbert Fanselow’s idea for a joint follow-up project in the 1990. This revised edition (with the new working title of *Ökonomie-basierte Syntax*) would (according to his first proposal) have covered functional categories, strict cyclicity, economy, the minimalist program, optimality theory,

## 2.5. Minimal Syntax

Fanselow (1991) is Gisbert Fanselow's habilitation thesis from the University of Passau. After obtaining this degree, he was a visiting professor at the University of Stuttgart in 1992, before becoming a permanent professor of grammatical theory (with a focus on syntax and morphology) in the linguistics department of the University of Potsdam, where he would stay until the end.

This work is 400 pages long, with a very dense formatting and an extremely small line spacing. It develops a complete, fully articulate model of syntactic theory that conforms to the Strong Minimalist Thesis (long before this was formulated by Chomsky) and is characterized by a vast empirical coverage. It addresses crucial phenomena from a variety of different languages, often in minute detail. It argues for a concept of competition among syntactic candidates that precedes work in optimality theory; and it introduces a feature-based approach to relativized minimality that is independent of (and very different from) Luigi Rizzi's famous concept of the same name, and that emerges as almost identical to the core concept employed in Chomsky's later Minimal Link Condition.

I take it to be very likely that, if there were such a prize, this monograph would win the prize as the best linguistics book that has never been properly published.

## 2.6. Scrambling

Based on the observation that the topic of free word order (and, accordingly, the question of the existence and nature of Haj Ross's scrambling operation) had not been covered satisfactorily in earlier work, Gisbert Fanselow set out to address this issue in earnest in the mid-1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Following various unpublished manuscripts (among them a long treatise called *Scrambling and Barriers*), Fanselow (1990) was the published outcome of his first attempt at dealing with the phenomenon; the basic assumption here is that scrambling in German is an A-movement operation.

Subsequently, via various further unpublished manuscripts (with titles like *Displaced Arguments*) this approach was replaced with an analysis according to which scrambling does not in fact exist as a genuine operation. Rather,

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Richard Kayne's Linear Correspondence Axiom, Eric Reuland's approach to binding, the copy theory, and many other interesting topics. Unfortunately this project never materialized.

<sup>3</sup>Scrambling was the main topic of his talk from October 1986 at the GGS meeting at the University of Regensburg, which incidentally was the first time I ever met him.

free word order is the result of variable base-generation (hence the title of the long paper that first made this point in some detail: *The Return of the Base Generators*; Fanselow (1993)). Eventually, after a lot of yet further unpublished versions of the material (among them *The Final Return of the Base Generators*), this later line of research culminated in a very successful, widely cited article that appeared in *Linguistic Inquiry*: Fanselow (2001a).

More generally, it seems fair to conclude that Gisbert Fanselow's work on free word order in German still defines the state of the art; it is hard to see how any work on scrambling could not take it as a point of departure.

### 2.7. Distributed Deletion

Fanselow (1988) is a seminal early study on NP-split constructions in German. These constructions pose a challenge because evidence for extraction from a nominal category is not systematically forthcoming, and effects of non-matching can sometimes be observed. Fanselow and Ćavar (2001; 2002) exploit the options for deriving constructions of this general type that are offered by the copy theory of movement. On this view, in cases where it looks as though one category  $\alpha$  has first undergone movement from another category  $\beta$ , and  $\beta$  may also subsequently move, this can be reanalyzed as movement of only  $\beta$  throughout, accompanied by distributed phonological deletion (or phonological non-realization) of complementary parts of the different occurrences of  $\beta$ . This then gives the impression that  $\alpha$  has moved where in fact it has only ever been  $\beta$ .

This approach has then been applied by Gisbert Fanselow to NP-split constructions in various, typologically different languages, in joint work with a number of co-authors (Caroline Féry, Stavros Skopeteas, Elisabeth Verhoeven, and Alla Paslowska, among others). This stream of research has proven extremely influential over the years.

### 2.8. Lexical Case

With the advent of optimality theory in phonology, Gisbert Fanselow actively started pursuing the options that this new model of grammar might offer for syntax. The investigation of lexical case in Fanselow (2001b) is a result of this research.

The basic insight, which an optimality-theoretic approach based on violable and ranked constraints makes possible, is that contrary to standard assumptions, lexical case assignment is not in fact irregular; on the contrary, it is governed

by deep principles of grammar, and severely restricted. More specifically, Gisbert Fanselow contends that two assumptions that are quite radical in nature should be maintained: First, there can be at most one lexical case per predicate. And second, lexical case always goes onto the lowest-ranked nominal argument of a predicate. These observations are convincingly argued for; what is more, it is shown how they can be derived from very simple and natural constraints in an optimality-theoretic approach.

So, there are at least two lessons that can be learned from this paper: To begin with, seemingly unsystematic domains of syntax can, upon closer scrutiny, be shown to be highly regular after all. Furthermore, optimality theory is worth pursuing as a framework for grammatical theory.

### 2.9. Wh-Scope Marking

Fanselow and Mahajan (2000) and Fanselow (2017) are important studies in the area of wh-scope marking in the world's languages.

Before Gisbert Fanselow's work on these constructions, the field was basically split between two approaches, which to many seemed to exhaust the logical space of possibilities. On the one hand, there were arguments (going back to Henk van Riemsdijk and others) for a direct wh-dependency approach, according to which wh-scope marking constructions are essentially fully equivalent to regular long-distance wh-movement constructions, except that an expletive wh-scope marker fills the target position for the real wh-phrase, which is either partially moved (as in German), or not moved at all. On the other hand, arguments had been produced (by Veneeta Dayal and others) to the effect that the wh-scope marker is actually a regular wh-argument quantifying over propositions, with the clause containing the "real" phrase serving as its restriction. So, intriguingly, there was evidence for both positions. In view of this, Gisbert Fanselow and Anoop Mahajan propose cutting the Gordian Knot by advocating a mixed, intermediate approach that is halfway between a direct and an indirect wh-dependency approach. This model can be shown to have a wide empirical coverage, and it might ultimately prove to be the only account that is in principle able to account for all the available evidence from wh-scope marking in the world's languages.

### 2.10. Reprojection

Head movement, conceived of as adjunction of one  $X^0$  category to another  $X^0$  category, has long been known to pose substantial, non-trivial problems for

grammatical theory since it violates the c-command requirement for movement and is at variance with the Strict Cycle Condition. Among the alternative options that have been suggested to evade this problem, one particularly fruitful approach has been that a moved head does not in fact adjoin to some other head, but rather moves directly into the void, subsequently taking the root XP that includes it before the movement as its complement. This conception of head movement as reprojection can be traced back to work by David Pesetsky, Anders Holmberg, Arnim von Stechow & Wolfgang Sternefeld, and others, but Fanselow (2003) is arguably the first fully elaborate, working theory of head movement by reprojection. It is based on so-called Münchhausen features, which got their name from the literary figure of Baron Münchhausen, who escapes from a swamp (where he is trapped on the back of his horse) by pulling himself up by his own hair.

Gisbert Fanselow's reprojection approach to head movement has influenced my own (and many other people's) work a lot; and I still think it is absolutely right, and a beautiful solution to a long-standing theoretical problem.

### 2.11. Information Structure

The Collaborative Research Centre (Sonderforschungsbereich; SFB) *Information Structure* in Potsdam and Berlin ran from 2003 until 2015, and Gisbert Fanselow was a driving force behind this huge cooperative research project.

Among the many information structure-related papers that he was responsible for (alone or with co-authors), perhaps the most impressive, and also most successful, one is Fanselow and Lenertová (2011). In general, the main thrust of his work in this domain is to argue that syntactic movement is not triggered by information-structural requirements, in contrast to what had standardly been assumed in approaches investigating the interaction of movement and information-structural concepts like topic and focus (see, inter alia, Fanselow (2006a;b; 2008)).

To this end, certain neglected constructions from Czech and German are brought to the fore in Fanselow and Lenertová (2011). In the relevant constructions, some phrase is fronted to what might initially be considered a focus-related position that corresponds to a proper *part* of the actual phrase that is focussed. So, if a VP consisting of a verb and an object acts as the focus of a sentence, but only the object is in fact fronted, with the verb staying behind, this gives rise to what, from an information-structural perspective, looks like *pars-pro-toto movement*, thereby calling into question any direct



impact of information structure on syntactic operations: Had the motivation of the movement been to front the focus, the verb would have been required to participate in the movement.

### 2.12. Measures of Acceptability

The last contribution to be explicitly mentioned here is Weskott and Fanselow (2011). Like the first publication discussed above, this is not strictly speaking a contribution to *syntactic theory*; but it is certainly an important contribution to the field of *syntax*.

This work sets out to distinguish differences between two experimental approaches to empirical evidence in syntax, viz., Magnitude Estimation vs. Likert Scales. In a nutshell, the result is that by and large, there aren't any (and to the extent that differences can be observed, they would appear to favour the Likert Scales method). This article won the *Language* best paper award, and Gisbert Fanselow was extraordinarily proud of it.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.13. Conclusion

The preceding twelve subsections highlight only a few of Gisbert Fanselow's substantive contributions to syntactic theory. There are many more, from his work on remnant topicalization constructions (see Fanselow (1983*b*; 2002)), via his investigation of the sentential nature of prenominal adjectives (see Fanselow (1986)), his work on binding theory (see, e.g., the truly innovative, competition-based approach in Fanselow (1991)), and his work on unaccusative verbs in German (see Fanselow (1992)), to his more recent work on idioms and how syntactic transformations may affect them (see, e.g., Fanselow (2018), Wierzba, Brown and Fanselow (2023)); and so on.

In addition, a lot of his important and influential work falls outside the realm of syntactic theory proper since its focus is on morphology, on semantics, on experimental approaches to grammatical theory, or on psycholinguistic questions related to issues like parsing of movement dependencies. For the latter two areas, see, e.g., Clifton, Fanselow and Frazier (2006) and Häussler, Grant, Fanselow and Frazier (2015) on superiority effects, Fanselow, Schlesewsky, Vogel and Weskott (2011) on the role of animacy, Fanselow,

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<sup>4</sup>In this context, it is also worth mentioning that to this day, a remark can be found on his website that not only is this a paper that he “particularly like[s]”; he also took this to be an instantiation of the general tendency that “the publications I am most proud of are co-authored”, “with the possible exception of [...] *Minimale Syntax*”. See <https://www.unipotsdam.de/de/ling/staff-list/gisbert-fanselow/publications>.

Zimmermann and Philipp (2022) on inverse scope in German, and, last but certainly not least, Fanselow, Schlewsky, Ćavar and Kliegl (1999) on a bold proposal according to which parsing is governed by optimality-theoretic constraints.

Needless to say, the preceding remarks cannot even begin to do justice to Gisbert Fanselow's contributions to syntactic theory. However, the pages below contain a wealth of information on Gisbert Fanselow's contributions to syntactic theory that I have briefly touched on here; on his contributions to syntactic theory that did not figure prominently in this introduction; and also on his contributions to linguistics that transcend syntactic theory proper. Taken together, the papers collected here document the presence of a truly great linguist.<sup>5</sup>

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