

# Configurationality – Fanselow 1987

Katharina Hartmann\*

## Abstract

This paper presents Fanselow's dissertation from 1985 that appeared as Fanselow (1987). It introduces the configurationality debate and reviews some of Fanselow's arguments against a non-configurational syntax for German. Finally, the influence of the work on immediately subsequent syntactic work is evaluated.

## 1. Introduction

Written in the heydays of the Principles and Parameter Theory, Fanselow (1987) pursues the question whether German differentiates the grammatical functions of subject and object by structural configurations, hence whether German has a hierarchically structured VP or not. This book is the shortened and published version of Fanselow's Ph.D. thesis from 1985 entitled "Deutsche Verbalprojektionen und die Frage der Universalität konfiguraler Sprachen".

The research question was fostered by work on Malayalam (Mohanar 1982), Japanese (Kuno 1973), and especially Warlpiri (Hale 1983), all languages that were argued to be non-configurational, thus to exhibit a flat and unstructured VP. The issue had received some popularity among German syntacticians, who even disputed the existence of the VP in German altogether. The arguments were mainly based on free constituent order in the German middlefield. Fanselow's Ph.D. thesis is a reaction to these works.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the arguments against a configurational middlefield in German. Section 3 reviews the core arguments of Fanselow (1987). Section 4 briefly analyzes the impact that Fanselow's dissertation had on generative syntax at the time.

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\*Studying this work has had a lasting influence on my academic life. It was the first generative book that I dealt with in depth as a student. It had a decisive influence on my decision to become a linguist. I will always remain grateful to Gisbert for this impact he had on my life.

## 2. Arguments for a Non-Configurational Middlefield in German

In a series of works from the early 1980s, Hubert Haider and Wolfgang Sternefeld argue, based on various observations on linearization properties of German, against a configurationally structured middlefield and question the existence of a VP excluding the subject. The observations pattern with the criteria for non-configurationality developed by Hale (1983).

Hale (1983) defines six criteria for non-configurationality. Non-configurational languages have a rich case system (C1), free constituent order (C2), exhibit discontinuous constituents (C3), do not have NP-movement (C4), do not have expletives (C5), and often have free pro drop (C6).

Hale's criteria (C1) to (C5) all seem to apply to German. German identifies grammatical functions by case (C1) and has free word order (C2), see (1) (Fanselow 1987:27, (26c))<sup>1</sup>, which clearly deviates from the generally established S-IO-DO-V basic word order of German (Lenerz 1977).

- (1) weil einen Apfel gestern dem Hotzenplotz in der  
 because an-ACC apple yesterday the-DAT Hotzenplotz at the  
 Uni der Kaspar schenkte  
 university the-NOM Kaspar gave  
 'because Kaspar gave Hotzenplotz an apple yesterday at the university'

Haider (1983), (1984), (1986) and Sternefeld (1982) conclude from examples such as (1) that nominative case assignment by a VP-external head is not possible given the low position of the subject. The authors argue that the grammatical functions are not identified by structure, but by the verb assigning case directly to the theta-roles. Given this, the assumption of a hierarchically structured VP becomes obsolete leading to a number of empirical observations. Thus, it is expected that only languages which lack morphological case recur to structural hierarchies for argument identification. Comparing German to Dutch, this is supported by various structural dissimilarities between the two languages. Haider (1986) argues that unstressed pronouns are placed above the subject in the so-called Wackernagel position in German, but below the subject in Dutch. This, so Haider, follows from the assumption that unstressed pronouns occur "V<sup>max</sup>-initially". Given that all arguments are dominated by S

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<sup>1</sup>The book is written in German. All glosses and translations are mine.

in German, the pronoun precedes the subject, see Haider (1986), (8a/c), cf. also Haider (1982), (8).

- (2) a. dass es Max nicht gewusst hat  
 that it Max not know has  
 b. dat (\*het) Max het niet wist  
 that it Max has not known  
 ‘that Max didn’t know it’

The assumption of an unstructured middlefield also accounts for the possibility of having discontinuous constituents (C3), see (3) (F87:37, (44a/d)).

- (3) a. Zur SPD war seine Loyalität gewachsen.  
 to.the SPD was his loyalty grown  
 ‘His loyalty to the SPD was grown.’  
 b. Politiker kenne ich nur korrupte.  
 politicians know I only corrupt  
 ‘I only know corrupt politicians.’

It is not evident that German passives involve NP-movement (C4). Example (4) (F87:39, (47b)) shows that object pronouns may precede the passivized subject. Finally, the ban of expletive pronouns in the German subject position of an impersonal passive could again follow from a general ban of expletives in non-configurational languages (C5), see (5) (Haider 1986:45, (13)). Observe that Dutch requires expletives in this position, supporting a configurational structure of its middlefield.

- (4) weil mir ein Fahrrad geklaut wurde  
 because me a bicycle stolen was  
 ‘because a bicycle was stolen from me’  
 (5) a. dat \*(er) gedanst wordt  
 that it danced was  
 b. dass (\*es) getanzt wurde  
 that it danced was  
 ‘that there was dance.’

The data discussed suggest that configurationality could be a parameter, as suggested, e.g., by Laughren (1989). Fanselow very explicitly refutes such

an assumption. His book is an impressive proof against the existence of such a parameter. The detailed arguments all show that German requires a configurational syntax. At the same time, so Fanselow, there is no positive evidence for the language learner to acquire it, thus, configurationality must belong to the genetic program of the language faculty. In the subsequent sections, I discuss some of Fanselow's arguments in favour of a configurational syntax of German.

### 3. Arguments for Configurationality: Fanselow 1987

Fanselow (1987) presents arguments that challenge not only the alleged non-configurational nature of the German middlefield, but question the existence of a configurational parameter altogether. Fanselow discusses *wh*-movement and the German VP (chapter 2), complex verb movement (chapter 3), binding theory (chapter 4), NP-movement (chapter 5), extraposition and pied piping (chapter 6). Final chapters of the book discuss theoretical and conceptual consequences of the preceding discussions.

In the following, I will present four of Fanselow's arguments in some detail.

#### 3.1. *Wh*-Movement and the German VP

The assumption of an unstructured VP implies a symmetrical extraction behavior between the arguments. Fanselow (1987) offers a number of arguments in proof of extraction asymmetries in German. The first argument concerns ECP-effects with subject extraction. Extraction asymmetries do not exist as long as cyclic movement is possible, thus with extraction from V2-complements and from infinitives. In Southern German varieties, extraction asymmetries from *that*-clauses do not exist either, see (6) (F87:52, (16), (20)).

- (6) a. *Wen<sub>i</sub> sagte Karl, dass Maria e<sub>i</sub> getroffen habe?*  
 who says Karl that Maria meet has  
 'Who did Karl say that Maria met?'  
 b. *Wer<sub>i</sub> sagt Karl, dass e<sub>i</sub> gestern angekommen ist?*  
 who says Karl that yesterday arrived is  
 'Who says Karl has arrived yesterday?'

Fanselow discusses two explanations for the lack of extraction asymmetries out of *that*-clauses as in (6). The data could indicate that German is non-configurational, in which case the verb would govern both, the subject and the object positions. Alternatively, the subject trace is not lexically

governed but antecedent governed by the trace in the specifier of the CP. A suitable test case is movement across an overtly filled CP specifier. If German were non-configurational, extracted subject and objects should show the same grammaticality values. The following examples show subject-/object-asymmetries with long distance movement out of embedded questions (F87:57f, (39b), (41b)) and long relativization (F87:58, (46), (48)).

- (7) a. Radios<sub>i</sub> weiß ich nicht, wer e<sub>i</sub> repariert.  
 radios know I not who repairs  
 ‘As for radios Radios, I don’t know who repairs (them).’  
 b. \*Linguisten<sub>i</sub> weiß ich nicht, was e<sub>i</sub> reparieren.  
 linguists know I not what repair
- (8) a. Die Fallon<sub>i</sub> ist eine Frau, die, wer e<sub>i</sub> kennt, glücklich ist.  
 the Fallon is a woman that who knows happy is  
 ‘Ms Fallon is a woman everybody is happy to know.’  
 b. \*Der Blake<sub>i</sub> ist ein Mann der wen e<sub>i</sub> anruft wir beleidigen.  
 ‘the Blake is a man who who calls we offend’

Both extractions exhibit clear asymmetries between grammatical object, (7-a) and (8-a), and ungrammatical subject movement, (7-b) and (8-b). According to Fanselow, and much in the spirit of the time then, this shows that subjects need to be governed by a trace in "COMP1", the specifier of the CP, in order to satisfy the ECP. This is possible as long as the position is not blocked by another operator.

A further argument for the existence of a VP in German comes from PP-extraction from subjects, which is possible if the subject is strictly governed by the verb in its base-position, thus, with passive or ergative verbs. The latter case is illustrated in (9), which shows that PP-extraction is grammatical with ergative, (9-a), but not with unergative verbs (9-b) (F87:76, (109a/b)).

- (9) a. [Über Chomsky]<sub>i</sub> ist ein Buch e<sub>i</sub> erschienen.  
 about Chomsky is a book published  
 ‘A book was published on Chomsky.’  
 b. \*[Über Chomsky]<sub>i</sub> hat ein Buch e<sub>i</sub> gelogen.  
 about Chomsky has a book lied

The possibility of extraction from subject clauses at first glance seems to strengthen the view of a non-configurational syntax (F87:78, (111a)):

- (10) Wann ist es wahrscheinlich, dass Urs kommt?  
 when is it probable that Urs comes  
 ‘When will Urs probably arrive?’

However, as Fanselow argues, this is due to a superficial impression. While the subject clause in (10) is governed by the predicative adjective, the island character reappears if strict government is inhibited due to the presence of an accusative object, see (11) (F87:78 (112a/c)). An accusative object should not matter in a structure lacking a VP.

- (11) a. \*Wer<sub>i</sub> beweist es deine Vorhersagen, dass e<sub>i</sub> angekommen ist?  
 who proves it your predictions that arrived is  
 b. \*Wen hat es den Mann beleidigt, dass du e<sub>i</sub> liebst?  
 who has it the man insulted that you love

### 3.2. Complex Verb Movement in German

In chapter 3, Fanselow investigates whether the VP itself can be subject to syntactic processes, in proof of its existence. Whereas VP-ellipsis is not readily possible in German, potentially strengthening the non-configurational hypothesis, at least parts of the VP can be fronted (Thirsch 1982), see (12) for short, (13) for long VP-movement (F87:91, (13a), (14a)).

- (12) [Die Menschenkette organisiert] hat nur die Friedensbewegung.  
 the human.chain organized has only the peace.movement  
 ‘Only the piece movement organized the human chain.’
- (13) [Geschlafen] glaube ich nicht, dass er hat.  
 slept think I not that he has  
 ‘I don’t think that he slept.’

A central issue of this discussion is the categorial status of the fronted constituents in (12) and (13). Taking the finite verb as being part of the VP, as Fanselow (1987) still assumes, topicalization does not involve the VP in either of the examples. These data are therefore considered only partially relevant for the configurationality debate. The point is fostered by the possibility to strand arguments in the middlefield (F87:93, (17a/d)).

- (14) [<sub>v?</sub> Organisiert] hat die Menschenkette nur die Friedensbewegung.  
 organized has the human.chain only the peace.movement  
 ‘Only the piece movement organized the human chain.’

- (15) [v<sub>?</sub> Wählen] würde ich die SPD nie.  
 vote would I the SPD never  
 ‘I would never vote for the SPD.’

Still, the assumption of a configurational structure allows some predictions. First, constituents that are closer to the verbal complex should not be able to strand if more remote constituents are fronted. As shown in (16), this is indeed the case. In (16-a) (F87:94, (22a)), fronting the adjunct together with the participle is ungrammatical if the direct object remains in the middlefield. Movement of object and participle as well as movement of the whole verbal complex is, however, possible (F87:94, (22b/c)).

- (16) a. \*[Im Juni gewählt] hat er die SPD.  
           in June voted has he the SPD  
           ‘He voted the SPD in June.’  
 b. [Die SPD gewählt] hat er im Juni.  
 c. [Im Juni die SPD gewählt] hat er.

Second, subjects of unergative verbs cannot move together with the participle, (17) (F87:96, (28a)). Ergative (and passive) verbs, on the other hand, may move along with the infinite verb, see (18) (F87:97, (32d)). Such data are difficult to explain without assuming a VP.

- (17) \*[Der Bürgermeister geküsst] hat die Oppositionsführerin.  
           the mayor kissed has the opposition.leader  
 (18) [Ein Unglück passieren] soll dir nie!  
           an misfortune happen should you never  
           ‘An misfortune should never happen to you!’

VP-topicalization also has some bearing on the analysis of discontinuous constituents. Recall that their availability represents criterion C3 for non-configurationality. Discontinuous constituents are possible in German, see (19) (F87:100, (41a)).

- (19) [Sozialdemokraten] sind in diesem Buch nur [ehrliche] beschrieben.  
           social democrats are in this book only honest described  
           ‘This book only describes honest social democrats.’

In continuation of the earlier discussion, discontinuous constituents can be

topicalized together with the verb after a structural reanalysis, as illustrated in (20) (F87:102, (47a)). A base-generation analysis, as advocated for by proponents of a non-configurational syntax of German, cannot straightforwardly account for such a derivation. And again, fronting of a discontinuous subject and the verb is only possible with ergative and passive verbs, suggesting strict verbal government of the trace, see (21) (F87:106, (56a/b/c)).

- (20) [<sub>VP</sub> Bücher geschrieben] hat er noch keine.  
 books written has he yet none  
 ‘He hasn’t yet written any books.’
- (21) a. Geld weiß ich nicht, ob er welches hat.  
 money know I not whether he some has  
 ‘I don’t know whether he has some money.’  
 b. ?Geld ist mir unklar, ob welches wichtig ist.  
 money is me unclear whether some important is  
 ‘I am not sure whether to have some money is important.’  
 c. ?\*Geld weiß ich nicht, ob welches die Welt beherrscht.  
 money know I not whether some the world governs

### 3.3. Binding Theory and the Matter of Configurationality

Although not included in the catalogue of criteria for non-configurationality, binding theory makes strong predictions on the syntactic configuration of a language. Concerning German, numerous arguments for a structured VP can be made based on binding. The examples in (22) (F87:112f, (9a), (16a)) both testify asymmetric binding within the VP. Binding from a direct object into a higher adverbial is excluded, see (23) (F87:115, (20b)), as predicted from the assumption of a hierarchically structured VP.

- (22) a. Ich schenke ihm<sub>i</sub> ein Buch über sich<sub>i</sub>.  
 I give him a book on REFL  
 ‘I give him a book on himself.’  
 b. Ich ordne die Zahlen<sub>i</sub> einander<sub>i</sub> zu.  
 I order the numbers RECP PTCL  
 ‘I relate the numbers to each other.’
- (23) \*Willi Brandt kritisiert die CDU<sub>i</sub> auf einer Versammlung von sich<sub>i</sub>.  
 Willi Brandt criticizes the CDU at a meeting of REFL

Thus, binding theory provides good evidence for configurationality. A potential



challenge is given in (24) (F87:111, (8b)), where the objects appear to mutually bind each other. The ungrammaticality directly follows from a non-configurational syntax, see Sternefeld (1985). Fanselow provides an alternative explanation arguing that binding applies after reconstruction (Grewendorf 1985), with the direct object reconstructing below the indirect object.

- (24) \*Wir vertrauen die Mädchen<sub>i</sub> sich<sub>i</sub> an.  
 we trust the girls REFL PTCL

Reconstruction also accounts for the following data, again providing a strong argument for a structural hierarchy within the VP. Allowing the anaphors in (25) (F87:125, (54a/b)) to be bound by the subject at S-structure would blur the existing binding asymmetries in the middle-field. A solution is again reconstruction, which predicts the correct distribution.

- (25) a. Neben sich<sub>i</sub> möchte niemand<sub>i</sub> eine Schlange sehen.  
 besides REFL wants nobody a snake see  
 'Nobody wants to see a snake besides himself.'  
 b. Sich selbst<sub>i</sub> hält jeder<sub>i</sub> für den größten.  
 REFL self considers everybody as the greatest  
 'Everybody considers himself greatest.'

A further argument in favor of the existence of a configurational VP comes from AcI-constructions with the verb *lassen* ('to let'). Reflexives contained in the complement of *lassen* may be bound by the matrix subject, see (26) (F87:134, 78a)).

- (26) Hans<sub>i</sub> lässt [<sub>?</sub> das Buch sich<sub>i</sub> von seinen Dienern vorlesen].  
 Hans lets the book REFL from his servants read  
 'Hans lets his servants read his book to him.'

The embedded complement is a subjectless clause, which therefore does not represent a governing category. Hence, the reflexive is bound by the matrix subject. Fanselow takes this to indicate that the verb *lassen* selects a VP.

### 3.4. Passive and NP Movement

Criterion C4 addresses the lack of NP-movement in non-configurational languages, hence the lack of a derivationally derived passive structure. German seems to be representative in that it shows evidence against movement of

subjects in passives, see (4). In chapter 5, Fanselow presents a wealth of arguments against a lexical analysis of passive and in support of a derivational passive theory.

First, he argues that subjects do not have to move since case is not necessarily assigned under adjacency in German. The subject may receive case from INFL, which may assign nominative also VP-internally. Second, the non-existence of passivization out of PPs is not surprising given the lack of preposition stranding in German. English, which allows preposition stranding, also exhibits a prepositional passive, see (27) (F87: 151f, (1b), (3b)).

- (27) a. \*Dieses Bett wurde in geschlafen.  
           this bed was in slept  
       b. This bed was slept in.

Third, recipient passives show absorption of the dative case, and this is again unexpected under a lexical passive theory. The following, ambiguous example (28-a) (F87:158, (23)) has one passive interpretation, displayed in the translation, which cannot receive a predicative analysis. Fanselow argues that the absorbed case is indeed the recipient. This is shown in the ungrammatical (28-b) (F87:158, (24a)), where the intention to realize a recipient independently fails. Under a predicative passive analysis, the recipient should not be affected.

- (28) a. Der Chefarzt bekommt vom Assistenten das Auge  
           the chief.physician gets by.DET assistant the eye  
           herausoperiert.  
           removed  
           'The head physician has the eye removed by the assistant.'  
       b. \*Der Chefarzt bekommt dem Patienten vom  
           the chief.physician gets the patient by.DET  
           Assistenten das Auge herausoperiert.  
           assistant the eye removed

Forth, impersonal passives in subject position do not allow an expletive in subject position, differing, e.g., from French, see (29-a) (F87:165, (47a)). This has been taken as evidence against NP-movement in German passives, see (29) (F87:165, (47b)).

- (29) a. Il a été beaucoup dansé.  
 EXPL has been much danced  
 ‘They was a lot of dancing.’
- b. weil (\*es) viel getanzt wurde.  
 because it much danced was  
 ‘because there was a lot of dancing’

Fanselow derives the lack of the subject expletive in German from a coindexation rule. He argues that expletives need to be coindexed with a postverbal subject for interpretational purposes. Given the absence of DP-subjects in impersonal passives, no expletive may appear. (It remains unclear, though, why expletives in C violate this rule.)

The existence of the German impersonal passive construction is connected to the property of passive auxiliaries to select accusative case. English differs in this respect since accusative always needs to be assigned by the verb. Intransitive verbs do not fulfill this condition, hence impersonal passives are not allowed. Thus, language specific differences in passive constructions stem from differences in their case systems and are not reducible to the configurationality debate.

#### **4. Appraisal of the Work**

The book addresses each of the allegedly non-configurational properties of German in great detail. It provides a wealth of data and very fine observations on core topics of German syntax, which go far beyond the actual debate. The power of the arguments is very impressive. In my opinion, the arguments differ with respect to their accessibility, some requiring a detailed knowledge of a partly only vaguely addressed theoretical background. The judgements of the data are often quite subtle and do not always represent my own evaluation.

With respect to the issue of configurationality, the debate was relatively lively in the two last decades of the 20th century, but ebbed away afterwards. Concerning Warlpiri, Nash (1980) presents a grammar of the language anticipating Hale (1983)’s influential non-configurational analysis. Simpson (1991) is written in the LFG framework, which has been particularly successful in dealing with non-configurational languages. Laughren (1989) is the first to assume hierarchically different positions for the subject and objects in the Warlpiri VP. Legate (2002) provides many convincing arguments for a hierarchically structured VP in Warlpiri with ‘microparameters’ accounting for

the typological peculiarities. I didn't find any substantial work on this matter after Legate's dissertation.

Concerning the configurationality debate in German, Fanselow (1987) certainly had an impact on the debate, but the different theoretical approaches persist after 1987. My impression is that Fanselow (1987) has not been discussed in much detail after the book appeared. Haider (1983) represents the view that subject and object(s) are not separated by a maximal projection, based on free word order under neutral stress and persistent word order in passive constructions.

- (30) a. dass man der Frau<sub>DAT</sub> das Kind<sub>ACC</sub> übergab  
 that one the woman the child gave  
 'that one gave the child to the woman'  
 b. dass der Frau<sub>DAT</sub> das Kind<sub>NOM</sub> übergeben wurde  
 that the woman the child given was  
 'that the woman was given the child'

Haider (1989) parameterizes case-systems and relates German to a morphological case-type defending its non-configurational nature. Fanselow's thesis is not mentioned. Haider (1989) cites Fanselow's data on extraction out of wh-complements in chapter 6.3 ("Arguments for an exclusive VP-internal clause structure"). He writes: "It is not compelling to view this as a representative example for a systematic property of German" (p. 147) and provides examples with judgements meant to refute Fanselow's argument, see (31).

- (31)?\*Rosen weiß ich nicht, wann hier blühen.  
 roses know I not when here bloom

Haider (2010) assumes a VP below a functional projection representing the German prefield, but importantly assumes the subject to be located within the VP. Haider (2010) does not cite Fanselow (1987), neither in chapter 3 "The functional architecture of the German clause - targeting left: clause-internal word order" nor in chapter 4 "Word order variation", which directly address topics of Fanselow's book. Sternefeld (2006) does not cite Fanselow (1987) in either of the two volumes.

The concept of configurationality has been very successfully extended to the left periphery leading to very influential work, e.g. Rizzi (1997), E. Kiss

(1998). Again, the impact of this more recent development on German is limited, due to its property as a V2-language.

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