TOPIC, THEME AND THE GERMAN INITIAL FIELD*

Wim Scherpenisse

This article deals with some constructions involving the German Initial Field (henceforth IF), i.e. the position(s) preceding the finite verb in main clauses. First, I will demonstrate two different types of construction involving the IF. Then I will present some possible structural analyses of these constructions. In examining the constructions more closely, I will try to decide which analysis has to be favored. Finally, I will briefly deal with the distribution of the expletive element *es*. The framework used will be the Government-Binding theory throughout (cf. Chomsky (1981, 1982)).

1. *The Initial Field.*

To begin with, consider the sentences in (1).

(1)a Ein älterer Herr tritt an den Empfang.
      (an elderly gentleman steps at the reception)
      "An elderly gentleman steps up to the reception desk."

   b An den Empfang tritt ein älterer Herr.
     "Up to the reception desk steps an elderly gentleman."

In (1), the finite verb *tritt* occupies second position. The first position has been filled by a constituent from behind the finite verb. In principle this may be any one constituent. This possibility of fronting any phrase might lead one to adopt the well-known theme-rheme distinction for German main clauses. However, it is not at all clear how to decide what is theme and what is rheme. No single semantic or pragmatic feature suffices to characterize a phrase as, say, the theme. Research surveys like Lutz (1981) show that there is a whole scale of definitions of the notion "theme", or rather opinions about this notion. For this reason it seems to me that theories should not be based on a semantic or contextual definition of "theme". The vagueness of the notion suggests that in this area there are ten-

dencies rather than rules. Instead, we should look for a structural definition or diagnosis.

In view of the fact that any constituent may be fronted to the IF, we could regard the post-finite part of the sentence as a predication of the phrase in the IF, simply identifying the latter with the theme, so that sentences like (1) fit into the schema (2).

(2) *Theme - finite verb* (V_f) *- rest of the sentence (Rheme)*

By defining Theme in this way, we have a purely structural definition, which nevertheless strongly resembles one of the more current traditional definitions: theme = *Satzgegenstand* (roughly, "that about which the sentence tells something").

In (1) and (2), we have one position in front of the finite verb. This position is identified with the Theme. However, we will have to refine our analysis because of the existence of a sentence type with two IF positions. Consider (3).

(3)a Den Kerl, den habe ich schon zu oft gesehen.
     (that guy, that-one have I already too often seen)
     "That guy I've seen too often now."

   b Dieser Minister, warum ist der noch nicht da?
     (this minister, why is that-one yet not there)
     "This minister, why hasn't he shown up yet?"

In (3)a the finite verb *habe* is preceded by an NP and a demonstrative pronoun, in (3)b the IF is filled by an NP and a question word, *warum*. I defer an analysis of sentences like (3) to a later section. Here it is sufficient to notice that some German main clauses have structure (4).

(4) $X - Y - V_f$ *- rest of the sentence*

I will refer to X as the Topic of the sentence, for reasons that will become clear later. Whatever analysis is proposed, it will have to account for both (2) and (4).

2. *Some analyses.*

Before we go on, let us consider some analyses that have been proposed to account for structures like (2) and (4). To do that, we will make two assumptions that are widely accepted.

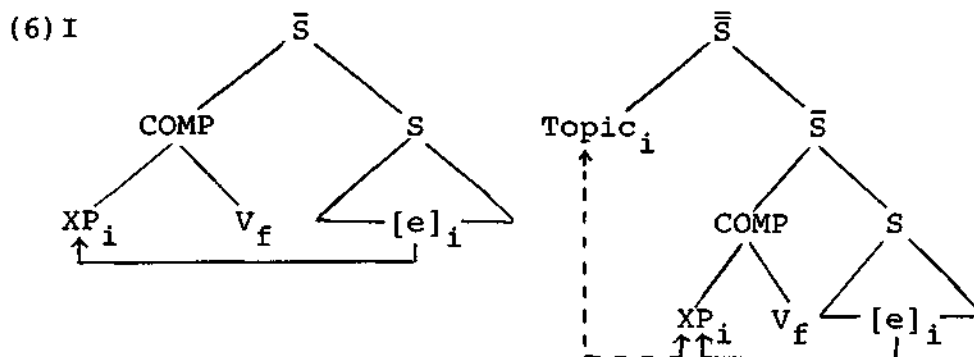The first assumption is that German and Dutch are SOV languages

underlyingly, i.e. that they are verb-final in their base
structure and in introduced dependent clauses (consider Koster
(1975) and Den Besten & Edmondson (1983)). The second assump-
tion is that the finite verb in main clauses is in a position
identified as [+tense] (Den Besten (1983), Evers (1982)), sche-
matically (5).

(5)

$$\overline{\overline{S}}$$

[+tense]   S

                        V_f
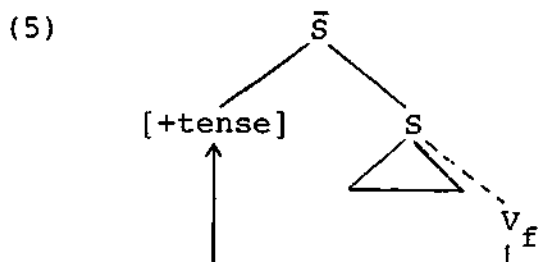
We will take these assumptions as uncontroversial.

Having made these two assumptions, we can consider the
alternatives. With each alternative I will mention some authors.
This, however, does not mean that they have proposed the struc-
ture given in every detail. More specifically, I have taken
COMP to be a daughter of $\overline{\overline{S}}$ and a sister of S in all structures;
moreover I simply skip the question of the position of INFL[1].
Each alternative will be accompanied by a Topic structure, ana-
lyzed in accordance with Chomsky (1977). The Topic is base
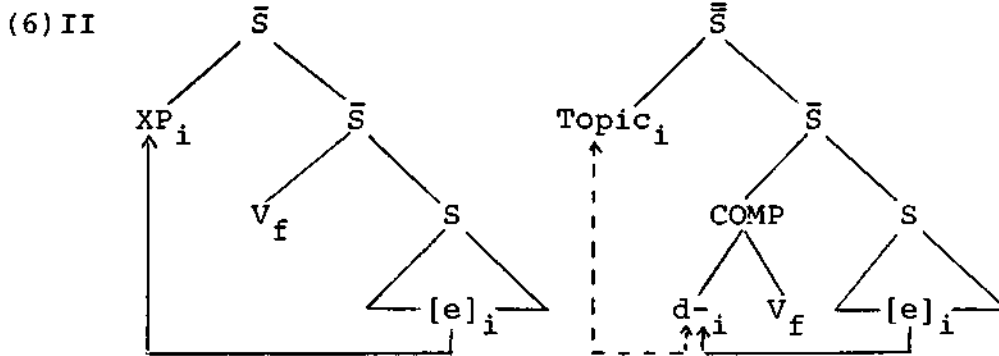generated under $\overline{\overline{S}}$ and a coreferent element (in German a so-
called d-pronoun[2]) is moved to COMP.

The first analysis is given in (6)I; cf. Haider (this volume)
and Scherpenisse (1984).

(6) I

$$\overline{\overline{S}}$$

COMP   S

XP_i V_f $[e]_i$

$$\overline{\overline{\overline{S}}}$$

$Topic_i$ $\overline{\overline{S}}$

                COMP   S

            XP_i V_f $[e]_i$

This is in a way the simplest possible structure to deal with
(2) and (4). It is assumed in (6)I that after placement of V_f
in COMP a phrase from under S is chomsky adjoined to the left of
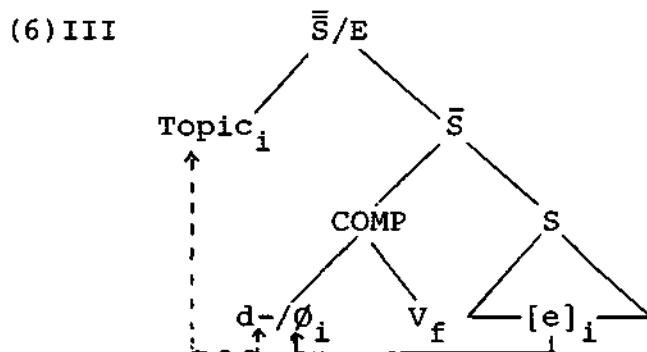COMP. In the Topic structure given on the right, the Topic is

base generated under $\bar{\bar{S}}$, and "something" is moved from S to COMP. The dotted line is meant to indicate coreference, a continuous line stands for movement.

Consider now the second analysis (cf. Cremers & Sassen (1983), Platzack (1982)):

(6) II

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              S̄                              S̿
            /   \                          /   \
         XP/i     S̄                   Topic_i    S̄
         ↑        /  \                  ↑        /  \
         |      V_f    S                |     COMP    S
         |           / \                |     /  \   / \
         |      ⌐[e]_i⌐                 |   d-_i V_f ⌐[e]_i⌐
         |_____|                  |  ↑↑                 |
                                        |__|_____|
```

Here, the XP is taken not to adjoin to COMP, but to $\bar{S}$. In the Topic structure, however, the Topic is again supposed to be under $\bar{\bar{S}}$, but the coreferent element is in a position under COMP specified as *d-* in (6)II.

In the third alternative, the distinction between Theme and Topic structures has been minimalized (cf. Koster (1978), Lenerz (1982)):

(6) III

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                 S̿/E
               /    \
          Topic_i     S̄
            ↑        /   \
            |      COMP     S
            |     /   \    / \
            |  d-/∅_i  V_f ⌐[e]_i⌐
            |__↑__↑_____|
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The Theme in Theme sentences and the Topic in Topic sentences are analyzed as one and the same structural position, called Topic in (6)III. Again, a d-pronoun is fronted to a position under COMP. If it remains there, we have a Topic sentence; if it is deleted (by free deletion in COMP) we have a normal Theme sentence.

To begin the comparison, let us look at XP movement, d-movement and wh-movement in (6)I,II,III.[3] In (6)I, these movements cannot be distinguished a priori, because they are all movements

to COMP. In II and III, on the other hand, wh-movement and d-movement are different from XP movement: the first two are movements to COMP, whereas XP movement is to an adjunction position of $\bar{S}$ (II) or nonexistent (III). Hence, only II and III correctly predict that there will be no XP preposing in dependent clauses but that wh- and d-movement is possible in these clauses. Thus, the correct predictions can only be made without further stipulation when wh- and d-movement on the one hand and XP movement on the other are distinguished structurally. So this first comparison already favors II and III over I, like the more detailed analysis of Topic structures given in the next section.

3. *Topic structures and deletion in COMP.*

Consider the following sentences:

(7) Den Kerl, den habe ich schon zu oft gesehen.
     (that guy, that-one have I already too often seen)
     "That guy I've seen too often now."

(8) Dieser Minister, warum ist der noch nicht da?
     (this minister, why is that-one yet not there)
     "This minister, why hasn't he shown up yet?"

(9)a Diesen Jungen, niemand darf den beleidigen.
     (this boy, no-one may that-one insult)
     "This boy, no-one may insult him."

   b *Diesen Jungen, niemand den darf beleidigen.
     (this boy, no-one that-one may insult)

(10)a ?Diese Frau, dieser Mann schlägt die zusammen.
      (this woman, this man beats that-one together)
      "This woman, this man is beating her up."

   b *Diese Frau, dieser Mann die schlägt zusammen.
     (this woman, this man that-one beats together)

   c ?Diese Frau, dieser Mann, der schlägt die zusammen.
     (this woman, this man, that-one (masc.) beats that-one (fem.)
                                                       together)

The type of topic structure that occurs most frequently is given in (7,8). In this type the second IF position is filled by a wh-phrase, or by a d-pronoun coreferent with the topic. When such a d-pronoun is fronted, it is impossible to have more than one XP

((9)b, (10)b). If, however, the d-pronoun remains in place, two
XPs are acceptable ((9)a, (10)a), even if the second one is ac-
companied by its own d-pronoun ((10)c). These facts can be inter-
preted as follows:

First, consider the configuration in which the d-pronoun has
been moved to COMP, in which case we may take it to act as a
predication operator. When an XP is moved up to a position ad-
joined to $\bar{S}$, this adjunction creates a second operator. If we
assume that there can only be one operator per sentence, the
ungrammaticality of structures like (11) is immediately ac-
counted for.

(11)
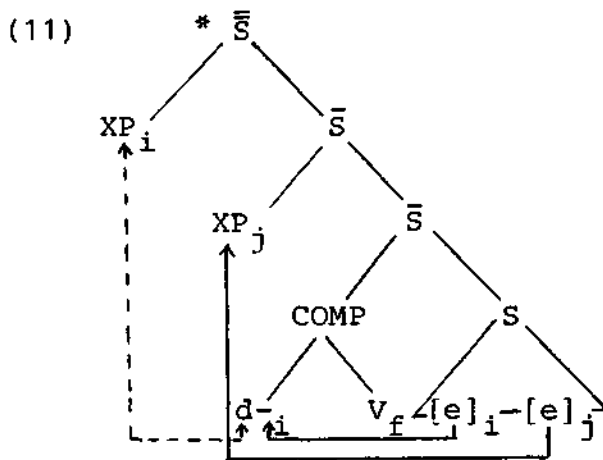
On the other hand, when the d-pronoun remains in situ, it
does not function as an operator. Therefore another XP may be
fronted without violating a principle of grammar: there is
only one movement to an adjunction position. (Remember that
we consider Topics base generated under $\bar{\bar{S}}$.) Sentences with d-
pronouns in situ are always somewhat marked. This probably
follows from the fact that d-pronouns are operators in the un-
marked case and therefore tend to be locally bound.

Only analyses (6)II and III are consistent with the restric-
tion that the second IF position is filled by a wh- or d-element
in the unmarked case, whereas I needs stipulation. So, II and
III are favored over I also by the analysis given. I would now
like to present some evidence that II, in its turn, has to be
favored over III. The evidence concerns deletion in COMP.

In German and Dutch the COMP position must be lexicalized
in finite sentences. I will not go into the question why this

is so but simply state the fact. This means that we can only
investigate deletion in COMP when COMP contains more than one
element. This is probably the case in some subordinate struc-
tures with wh- and d-elements. It turns out, now, that wh- and
d-elements which bind an empty category in S may never be
deleted, cf. (12,13):

(12)a Ich weiß, [$_{COMP}$ wer daß] [e] gekommen ist. (D-structure)
(I know, who that come has)
"I know who came."

b Ich weiß, [$_{COMP}$ wer] [e] gekommen ist.

c *Ich weiß, [$_{COMP}$ daß] [e] gekommen ist.

(13)a Der Mann, [$_{COMP}$ dem daß] ich [e] mein Geld geliehen habe,
..... (D-str.)
(the man, who that I my money lent have)

b Der Mann, [$_{COMP}$ dem] ich [e] mein Geld geliehen habe, ...

c *Der Mann, [$_{COMP}$ daß] ich [e] mein Geld geliehen habe, ...

Deleting *daß* from the D-structures (12)a and (13)a yields a gram-
matical output, but deleting *wer* from (12)a or *dem* from (13)a
leads to an ungrammatical sentence with an unbound EC (the c-
cases). So, summarizing we may say that in tensed clauses only
base generated COMP items may be deleted, provided this does
not yield an empty COMP. But if we accept this, then we must
also conclude that d-pronouns may NOT be deleted freely as in
alternative (6)III: this would leave an EC to be related to a
position outside S̄. Clearly, this analysis of deletion in COMP
favors II over III.

As I said above, if a d-pronoun does not move, it does not
act a predication operator and no local binding is required.
Also there is no EC. In that case, the coreference relation
between the d-pronoun and the Topic can cross several clause
boundaries, witness (14):

(14) Diesen Mann, es ist wohl klar, warum ich den nicht mag.
(this man, it is PRT clear, why I that-one not like)
"It should be clear why I don't like thàt man."

The grammaticality of (14) confirms what has been said so far.[4]

4. *Theme structures.*

I now turn to sentences involving one IF position, the theme structures. I will formulate some restrictions on the fronting of an XP to the S̄ adjunction position.

The first restriction seems to be that only one non-verbal phrase may be fronted. See (15-17).

(15) *Umziehen sie können nun endlich.
(move they can now finally)
"Now, finally they can move to a new house."

(16) *Der Mann aus der Hand schlug seiner Frau die Teigrolle.
(the man out-of the hand beat his wife the rollpin)
"The man beat the rollpin out of his wife's hands."

(17) *Gestern mit dem Ball hat er mir am Strand ins Gesicht geworfen.
(yesterday with the ball has he me at-the beach into-the face thrown)
"Yesterday on the beach, he threw the ball in my face."

But there are also sentences in which the IF seems to be doubly filled:

(18) Mit dem Ball ins Gesicht hat er mir geworfen.
(with the ball into-the face has he me thrown)
"Throw the ball in my face he did."

(19) Gestern am Strand hat er mit ein Geheimnis gesagt. (18,19 from Haider (1982)
(yesterday at-the beach has he me a secret said)
"Yesterday on the beach he told me a secret."

(20) Nach Dänemark zum Essen sollte man nicht fahren. (Joseph Bayer, p.c.)
(to Denmark to eat should one not drive)
"You shouldn't come to Denmark to eat."

I will come to these below.

Second, a non-finite verb may be fronted with or without objects; a single modal may never be fronted:

(21) Backen hätte ich den Kuchen schon gerne wollen.
(bake had I the cake PRT PRT want)
"I would have liked to bake the cake."[5]

(22) Den Kuchen gebacken hätte ich gerne.
(the cake baked had I PRT)
"Bake the cake, I would have liked to."

(23) *Wollen würde ich den Kuchen gerne backen.[6]
(want should I the cake PRT bake)

Another NP may never be fronted together with the verb:

(24) *Mein Vater backen möchte gerne einen Kuchen.
     (my father bake would-like PRT a cake)
     "My father would like to bake a cake."

We would like to explain these fronting (im)possibilities in
a non-arbitrary way.

   The first restriction that comes to mind vis-à-vis sentences
like (15-17, 24) is that the string to be fronted must be con-
tinuous. In fact this restriction is straightforward: a dis-
continuous string would bind more than one trace, which is a
violation of the Bijection Principle (Koopman & Sportiche (1982)).
But clearly, this restriction does not suffice. The following
sentences have continuous strings fronted, but are nevertheless
ungrammatical:

(25) *Dem Kunden einen Ladenhüter hat er verkauft.
     (to-the customer a shopkeeper has he sold)
     "He sold the customer a shopkeeper."

(26) *Johann gelacht hatte. (Den Besten, p.c.)[7]
     (Johann laughed had)
     "Johann had laughed."

So there has to be a second restriction. The most common formu-
lation of this restriction is that the phrase fronted must be
a constituent, i.e. it must resort under one node. It need not
be a maximal projection, cf. (18-21, 27).

(27) [$_N$ Milch] ist [$_{NP}$ keine [$_N$ e]] mehr da.
     (^{N} milk   is ^{NP} none ^{N} more there)
     "There isn't any milk left."

(18-20) involve PPs and/or adverb combinations, (21) a single
V and (27) a noun that is fronted whereas its determiner, *keine*,
remains in place.

   Turning now to cases like (18-20), I suppose there must be
some kind of restructuring here, such that the phrases end up
under one single ADV node or perhaps an ADV projection. In the
case of (19) this may look like (28), for example:

(28)   ADV'
         ADV   PP
          |
       gestern   am Strand

I should add that it is not at all clear to me presently if there is something like an "ADV projection". Perhaps it is simply a property of adverbs that they may cluster together to form new ADV constituents, cf. the well-known English examples (29, 30) from Jackendoff (Craig Thiersch, p.c.):

(29) Out of the building into the street ran Mary.

(30) Down the aisle with Marlene Dietrich walked John.

In analyses of the German examples restruturing cannot be avoided, because the ADVs and PPs may also be fronted by themselves, cf. (31).

(31)   Zum Essen sollte man nicht nach Dänemark fahren.
       (to eat should one not to Denmark drive)
       same meaning as (20)

I would like to conclude this section with some remarks on V1 sentences, i.e. sentences in which no XP is fronted so that V_f is in first surface position. We may take COMP to bear the feature [+wh] in such sentences. [+wh] is an operator defining scope, which means that fronting of an XP would create a structure with two operators; this is ungrammatical, as I argued in section 3. In independent questions the finite verb lexicalizes COMP, in dependent questions one finds a special complementizer, *ob* (= English *if*, *whether*). Some languages also lexicalize [+wh] in independent questions, cf. the French formula *est-ce que*.

5. *Expletive* es.

I will now try to account for the distribution of the expletive element *es* in German, which corresponds to both English *it* and *there*. I will begin by listing four different types of *es*; the reasons for thus dividing the different types of *es* will become clear below.
       Type a1: weather-*es*, see example (32);
       type a1: the impersonal construction, ex. (33);
   type b1: the impersonal passive construction, ex. (34), and
       type b2: the existential construction, ex. (35).

(32) Es regnet.
      (it rains)

(33) Es überläuft mich kalt.
      (it wailks-over me cold)
      "I shiver."

(34) Es darf gelacht werden.
      (it may laughed be)
      "Laughing is allowed."

(35) Es ritten drei Reiter zum Tor hinaus.
      (it rode three horsemen to-the gate out)
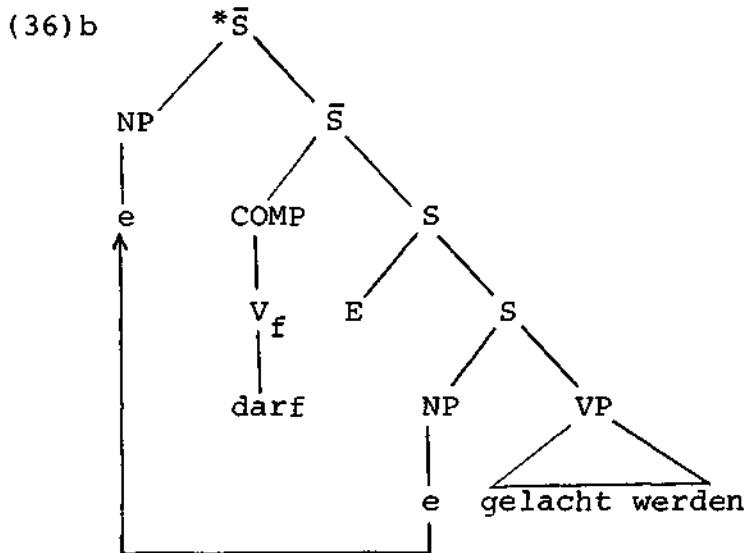   "Three horsemen rode out of the gate."

I start with types a1/2. In these two constructions we have
a lexical item that does not assign a θ-role to its subject as
an inherent property - in other words, it is an idiosyncracy of
those elements that they do not assign a subject θ-role, but
there is no structural reason why there could not be a subject.
Therefore the subject position is filled by a non-referential
pronoun, *es*, with which the finite verb agrees.

For the b-cases the story is different. Let us first look at
b1. Impersonal passives are passives of intransitive verbs, that
is to say verbs that normally assign one θ-role, namely to their
subjects. However, as usual passivization absorbs the subject
θ-role. That is, the verb ends up assigning no θ-role at all.
The subject position is empty and there is no other NP that
could be fronted to it as in normal passives of transitive verbs.
So we see that there are clear structural reasons why the subject
position must be empty. But this leads to the question: where
does the *es* in (34) come from?

I will assume that in sentences like (34) there is an existential
operator, call it E, which binds the empty subject. I take E to
be in a clitic or adjunction position, adjoined to S. Now look at
structure (36)a:

(36)a
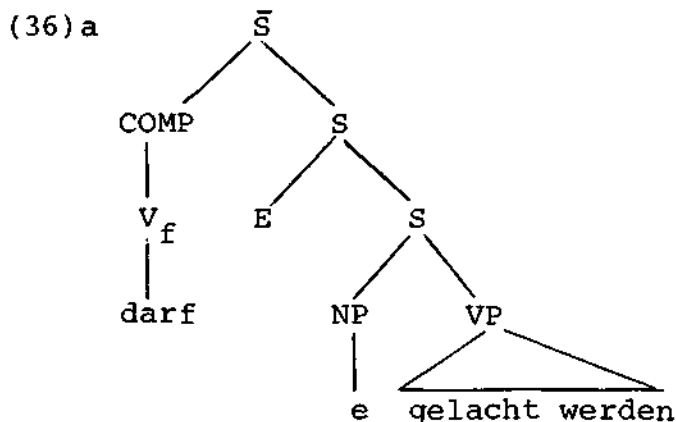
This structure, where V_f has been fronted to COMP, is grammatical. But if we try to front the EC in subject position to the IF, an ungrammatical structure ensues:

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(36)b        *S̄
           /    \
        NP'       S̄
         |      /    \
         e   COMP      S
         ↑     |     /   \
             V_f   E       S
              |         /    \
            darf     NP      VP
              |       |     /    \
              |       e   gelacht werden
              |_____|
```

This is so because there is no binder for the upper EC. Hence this EC is illicit, hence it must be lexicalized. In this structure, too, the lexicalization is *es*. Alternatively, we may consider *es* a scope marker for the operator E, generated in place. This becomes more plausible when we take into account that *es* never shows up in post-COMP position in sentences like (34), cf. (37).

(37) *Darf es gelacht werden?
     (may it laughed be)

Deletion of *es* from (37) yields the correct question form of (34).

The base generation hypothesis is still more plausible with type b2. In sentences like (35), *es* may be coïndexed with the subject or, alternatively, be a scope marker for the unrealized operator E. Thus it would be comparable to French *ne* which acts as a scope marker for negations (cf. Kayne (1983)).

Sidestepping to Dutch for a moment, we find support for the analysis given above. In Dutch, the expletive element in the a-type sentences is *het*, a pronoun historically related to the German *es*, whereas it is *er* in the b-type. *Er*, which has no expletive German counterpart, also shows up in post-COMP position, see (38):

(38)a Er mag gelachen worden.
        (there may laughed be)
        "Laughing is allowed."

   b Mag er gelachen worden?
        (may there laughed be)
        "Is laughing allowed?"

Of course, the subject position must be empty for the same reasons
as in German; that means we may consider *er* a lexicalization of
the operator E itself. So there is only a minimal difference
between the two languages: Both have the operator E, but where-
as it lexicalizes directly in Dutch, German makes use of a scope
marker iff the IF is unfilled.

The analysis presented here is deviant from both Williams
(1984) and Reuland (1983). Williams takes *there*-constructions to
be of the type *there be NP* (without VP, *be* is an Aux), which
certainly does not carry over to German, although it may be
correct for English. Reuland (1983) holds the position that *es*
is in subject position in existential sentences, while the subject
NP is in the VP. This cannot be maintained for every type of
existential construction in German; especially the occurrence
of *es* in transitive sentences constitutes a problem for this
theory. The present analysis owes much to Lenerz (1982), especially
563ff. Lenerz connects Dutch *er* to the German adverbial *da* (=
"there"), which has the same distribution as *er* but is not used
as an expletive. I am convinced that this analysis of Dutch *er*
(it being in the post-COMP clitic position, the so-called Wacker-
nagel position) is on the right track. I have extended and modi-
fied it slightly. An analysis in which *er* binds an empty subject
position can also be found in Drewes et al. (1984). Van Bart &
Kager (1984) extend the analysis of *er* as an operator defining
a scopal domain in that they assume that it can be adjoined to
S as well as to VP (op.cit.: 9).

I should also mention that I have consciously omitted an
analysis of *es* as a placeholder for extraposed sentences; cf.
Scherpenisse (1984) for such an analysis.

6. *Summary*.

In this article I have shown that an analysis of (what I have called) Theme and Topic structures favors analysis (6)II over I and III. Besides that, we have given an account of the distribution of expletive *es* and its Dutch equivalents, and found that the theory can account for the subtle differences of their distribution.

An important conclusion to be drawn from this analysis of the IF is that Theme and Topic structures can be dealt with and distinguished purely structurally. In this respect, German is parallel to Hungarian, which language distinguishes two preverbal "fields", Topic and Focus (see Kiss (1981)). But unlike the names would suggest, these two fields can also be described in purely structural terms, without making use of semantic and/or pragmatic notions. Thus it is Kiss's and my conviction that "structure is primary to function in language, and it is only structure that can be universally invariant" (op.cit.: 186).

Also implicit in what precedes is another important point. I have in mind the distinction between movement and coreference. The analysis of the German IF, especially of Topic structures, shows that there are important differences between movement and non-movement relations, the former being more restricted than the latter. It is my claim that in order to make meaningful predictions, we should uphold this distinction and not try to unify the two relations into some sort of abstract locality constraint (see for example Koster (1982/1983) and (1984)).

A last point I would like to stress is the connection between operators and adjunction positions. By adjoining a phrase to VP, S or S̄ we can create an operator, which can cause a conflict if there is another operator already present. The COMP position, being base generated, only takes a very restricted set of elements, among which are wh- and d-elements in German. This, I feel, is a desirable result, because of the differences in distribution between such elements and other preposed phrases. Moving anything which is fronted to COMP, like in analysis (6)I, would fail to predict those differences and thereby miss a generalization.

FOOTNOTES.

* I would like to thank Hans den Besten, Eric Reuland, and Sjaak de Mey, as well as the participants of the Sixth Groningen Grammar Talks for discussions about earlier versions of this paper.

[1] INFL is considered to be sentence-final by some authors, e.g. Reuland (1983), and to be identical to COMP by others, e.g. Cremers & Sassen (1983), Haider (this volume).

[2] Here I only consider Topic structures with d-pronouns, and not the so-called hanging topic structure exemplified by (i) (cf. Van Haaften et al. (1983)):

(i)   Die man, ik ken hem niet.   (Dutch)
      (that man, I know him not)
      "That man, I don't know him."

[3] In German and Dutch there is a special class of demonstrative elements that have almost exactly the same behavior as wh-elements; these I will refer to as d-elements throughout. Therefore,what is typical of wh-movement also goes for d-movement in German and Dutch.
The class of d-elements contains d-pronouns (exemplified in exx. (7-10, 14)) and probably also some full NPs that can refer to a Topic, as in (i):

(i)   Johann, diesen Halunken kann ich nicht ertragen.
      (Johann, this rascal can I not bear)
      "I can't stand that rascal Johann." (Hubert Haider p.c.)

[4] The acceptability of (9)a, (10)a,c also favors II over III, because such structures are not derivable in III, where there is no XP preposing.

[5] (20-22) especially occur in southern varieties of German.

[6] In northern German, (i) is possible with contrastive stress on *gewollt*:

(i)   Gewollt hätte ich den Kuchen backen.
      (wanted had I the cake bake)
      "What I would have liked was to bake the cake."

[7] Clements et al. (1983) have shown that string-vacuous rule application should not be excluded from grammar, so this cannot be used to rule out (26). This is desirable because of the grammaticality of sentences like (i):

(i) $[_{\bar{S}}$ er$_j$ $[_{\bar{S}}$ $[_{COMP}$ kommt$_i]$ $[_S$ e$_j$ e$_i]]]$ (he comes)

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