

## Why ‘*n* is not *denn* – Evidence from Special Questions

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**1 Introduction** German possesses a modal particle *denn* lit. ‘then’ that usually occurs in interrogative clauses (Bayer 2012; Thurmaier 1989; Helbig 1988; König 1977), as shown in (1).

(1) Was machst du denn da? ‘What are you doing there?’

The sentence in (1) also has a corresponding version where ‘*n* appears instead of *denn*.

(2) Was machst’n du da? ‘What are you doing there?’

‘*n* is generally analyzed as a phonologically reduced version *denn* (e.g. Wegener 2002: 379).

The only difference between ‘*n* and *denn* is that ‘*n* occurs in second position. The aim of this talk is to show that ‘*n* is not a reduced version of *denn* but a separate modal particle. The data I present come from the Berlin-Brandenburg dialect of German, which has both *denn* and ‘*n*. The arguments I develop center on the behavior of *denn* and ‘*n* in special questions, that is, interrogative clauses that are not requests for information (Obenauer 2004; 2006).

### 2 *denn* in Special Questions

It has already been observed in the literature that *denn* is fine in special questions. Meibauer (1994: 223) notes that *denn* can occur in rhetorical questions with negative declarative force.

(3) Wer hat denn Arbeit in Detroit? ‘Nobody living in Detroit has a job.’

Bayer & Obenauer (2011: 467) observe that *denn* is also fine in can’t-find-the-value-of-x questions (CfvQ), that is, questions where the speaker actually knows the answer but can’t recall it. Consider a scenario where one person can’t remember the name of the person he talked with yesterday. He starts describing himself the person (size, hair color, haircut, etc.) but he can’t recall the name. In such a scenario, this person then can ask himself the following question.

(4) Wie hieß der denn? ‘What was his name?’

Apart from these two, there are four more special questions that accept *denn*. First, there are rhetorical questions with what Obenauer (2004: 364) calls the “obvious-x” reading. Imagine you have a political discussion and someone says Obama was a president who fought for human rights and against climate change. You can then correct him by asking the question in (5).

(5) Wer hat denn das Drohnenprogramm ausgebaut und Fracking unterstützt?

‘Who extended the use of drone strikes and supported fracking?’

The question in (5) is special because the answer is known to both the speaker and the hearer. Second, *denn* is fine in exclamatives, that is, in interrogative clauses where the speaker accepts the truth of the proposition but highlights the value of the variable bound by the wh-operator.

(6) Wie geil ist das denn! ‘How cool is that!’

Third, *denn* is fine in exam questions, that is, questions where the speaker knows the answer and also expects the addressee to know the answer.

(7) Wann hat Cäsar denn den Rubikon überquert? ‘When did Caesar cross the Rubikon?’

Fourth, *denn* is also found in whimperatives (Sadock 1970), that is, interrogative clauses that express a request of the speaker towards the addressee.

(8) Warum sind Sie denn nicht still? ‘Why don’t you be quiet.’

### 3 Three arguments against equating ‘*n* with *denn*

THE FIRST ARGUMENT against equating ‘*n* with *denn* comes from the observation that all the special question illustrated in section 2 accept *denn* but not ‘*n*.

- (9)
- |    |  |         |
|----|--|---------|
| a. | *Wer hat’n Arbeit in Detroit?                                      | [cf. 3] |
| b. | *Wie hieß’n der?   | [cf. 4] |
| c. | *Wer hat’n das Drohnenprogramm ausgebaut und Fracking unterstützt? | [cf. 5] |
| d. | *Wie geil is’n das?  | [cf. 6] |
| e. | *Wann hat’n Cäsar den Rubikon überschritten?                       | [cf. 7] |
| f. | *Warum sind’n Sie nicht still?                                     | [cf. 8] |

Importantly, the questions in (9) are only ungrammatical under the intended special-question interpretation; they are all fully grammatical as regular information-seeking questions.

THE SECOND ARGUMENT comes from one special question that licenses 'n but not *denn*. Imagine that Peter asks Susan how big her apartment is. Susan then says:

(10) Wie groß wird meine Wohnung sein, vielleicht so 55-60 qm.

'The size of my apartment? I don't really know, maybe around 55-60 square meters.'

I will call such question *repetitive questions*. The addressee repeats the question and expresses his doubt towards the correctness of his answer. In repetitive questions, 'n but not *denn* is fine.

(11) Wie groß wird( $\sqrt{n}$ ) meine Wohnung (\**denn*) sein, vielleicht so 55-60 qm.

The THIRD ARGUMENT against taking 'n to be a phonologically reduced version of *denn* comes from the observation that both can co-occur in surprise questions (Obenauer 2004). Surprise questions are questions where the speaker doesn't expect a certain situation and asks why the situation is the way it is. Imagine that Paul's girlfriend combs her hair as every morning, but this morning, she starts screaming and running around. After she calmed down, Paul asks:

(12) Was is'n denn los!? 'What is going on!?'  
*denn* cannot be doubled, so (12) cannot be derived from a source with two *denns*. In sum, if 'n was only a phonologically reduced version of *denn*, the syntactic contrasts cannot be captured.

#### 4 Analysis

The analysis I give for *denn* and 'n rests on Truckenbrodt's (2004) analysis of interrogatives. Truckenbrodt adds to the imperative-epistemic approach (Åqvist 1965; Hintikka 1975) the concept of Common Ground. This means that a question is nothing more than the speaker's wish to share with the addressee some proposition, as shown in (13) (S = speaker, A = addressee).

(13) WANT (S, KNOW (S  $\wedge$  A, p))

Importantly, the meaning of questions does not include any part that specifies whether the speaker or the addressee already know whether the proposition holds. This allows Truckenbrodt to unify special and non-special questions: in the latter, the speaker in contrast to the addressee doesn't know whether the proposition holds. Given this perspective, the particles *denn* and 'n are indicators for meaning components that are compatible with, but not entailed by, the general meaning of questions. As for *denn*, I follow Meibauer (1994: 223) that *denn* expresses something weaker than knowledge of the speaker that the hearer knows the answer. Rather, I suggest that *denn* only expresses an expectation of the speaker towards the hearer. Regarding 'n, I analyze it as a marker that the speaker doesn't know whether the proposition holds

(14) a. question + *denn* = WANT (S, KNOW (S  $\wedge$  A, p))  $\wedge$  EXPECT (S, KNOW (A, p))

b. question + 'n = WANT (S, KNOW (S  $\wedge$  A, p))  $\wedge$   $\neg$ KNOW (S, p)

That *denn* is compatible with the special questions in section 2 follows because these questions convey that the speaker expects the addressee to know whether the proposition holds. As these questions also convey that the speaker also knows whether the proposition holds, 'n is barred in these special questions. Turning to repetitive questions, *denn* is barred because the addressee is the one who originally asked the question, so he cannot be expected to know whether the proposition holds. Since the speaker isn't sure whether the proposition holds, 'n is licensed. Lastly, surprise questions are fine with both 'n and *denn* because the addressee can be expected to know the answer for his behavior whereas the speaker doesn't know it.

The analysis additionally captures that 'n but not *denn* is near-obligatory in information-seeking questions in the Berlin-Brandenburg dialect: in such questions, the speaker necessarily doesn't know the answer, but the speaker cannot necessarily expect the addressee to know the answer.

**Selected references** Bayer, Josef. 2012. From Modal Particle to Interrogative Marker: A Study of German *denn*. In: Bruge, Laura et al. (eds.), *Functional Heads – The Cartography of Syntactic Structures*, vol. 7. 13-28. Bayer, Josef & Hans-Georg Obenauer. 2011. Discourse particles, clause structure, and question types. *The Linguistic Review* 28(4): 449-491. Meibauer, Jörg. 1994. *Modaler Kontrast und konzeptuelle Verschiebung*. Tübingen: Niemeyer. Obenauer, Hans-Georg. 2004. Non-standard wh-questions and alternative checkers in Pagotto. In: Horst Lohnstein & Susanne Trissler (eds.), *The Syntax and Semantics of the Left Periphery*. Mouton de Gruyter, 343-383. Sadock, Jerry. 1970. Whimperatives. In: Jerry Sadock & Anthony Vanek, *Studies presented to Robert B. Lees by his students*, 223-238. Truckenbrodt, Hubert. 2004. Zur Strukturbedeutung von Interrogativsätzen. *Linguistische Berichte* 199, 313-350. Wegener, Heide. 2002. The evolution of the German modal particle *denn*. In: Ilse Wischer & Gabriele Diewald, *New Reflections on Grammaticalization*, 379-394.