

The Use Conditions of Melioratives and O/X-marking

Frank Sode

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Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Introduction

What's the topic?

- (1) Du machst besser mehr Sport.
you do.**ind** better more sports
'You better exercise more.'

- (2) Du würdest besser mehr Sport machen.
you will.**subx** better more sports do.**inf**
'You'd better exercise more.'

- (3) Du hättest besser mehr Sport gemacht.
you have.**subx** better more sports do.**ppt**
≈ 'You should have exercised more.'

What are melioratives?

- (4) Du machst besser mehr Sport.
you do.**ind** better more sports
- (5) Mach besser mal mehr Sport.
Do.**imp** better PRT more sports
- (6) Du solltest besser mehr Sport machen.
You shall.**subx** better more sports do.**inf**

“ Melioratives

Melioratives are forms with an imperative-like function that are formed with a version of the adverb *better*. ”

Meertens & Lauer (2018)

What is their function?

- (7)
- a. Du räumst besser dein Zimmer auf. (Command)
 - b. Du fasst besser die heiße Platte nicht an. (Warning)
 - c. Sie nehmen besser diese Pillen. (Advice)
 - d. Sie nehmen besser den A-Zug. (Disinterested Adv.)

“ German melioratives have a subset of the uses of imperatives. ”

Meertens & Lauer (2018)

Proposal in Meertens & Lauer (2018)

“ Ingredients:

- Melioratives are genuine declaratives or imperatives. i.e., there is no separate sentence type ‘meliorative’.
- *besser* makes a separate contribution. cf. modal particles like *ja*, *wohl*, *denn*, ...
- The behavior of melioratives arises from the interaction of the contribution of the host clause and the contribution of *better* [sic!].

[...] ”

Meertens & Lauer (2018)

Proposal in Meertens & Lauer (2018)

- (8) Sie nehmen besser den A-Zug (als den B-Zug).
you take better the A train (than the B train)

“ PRESENTS the prop. that the addr. takes the A train.

Default Doxastic commitment to that proposition.

Contribution of *besser* According to the addressee's self-motivated effective preferences, taking the A train is better than taking the B train.

Presupposition of *besser* Both taking the A train and not taking the A train are doxastically possible for the speaker. ⇒ Cancels the default-commitment. ”

Meertens & Lauer (2018)

Refinements

Refinements

General problem: *besser* is treated as a distinct modal particle.
Specific semantic and pragmatic properties of declarative melioratives are attributed to its fixed lexical meaning, in particular, the “diversity condition”.

“ We assume that *besser* further imposes a diversity condition on its modal base with respect to its first argument.

- Implemented as a presupposition that there are both p and not- p wolds [sic!] in $f(w)$. ”

Meertens & Lauer (2018)

Refinements

Focusing on *besser*

- *besser* is the comparative form of *gut*;
we also find superlative forms
- there are also non-modal uses of *gut* / *besser* / *am besten*
- there are also predicative uses of *good* with a modal interpretation; on a predicative use, there are more modal flavours available

Facts about gradability

- (9) *Du machst gut mehr Sport.
you do.ind good more sports
- (10) Du machst besser mehr Sport.
you do.ind better more sports
- (11) Du machst am besten mehr Sport.
you do.ind best more sports

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Predicative uses

- (12) Es ist besser, du machst mehr Sport.
it be.**ind** better you do.**ind** more sports.
'You better exercise more.'
- (13) Es ist gut, dass Vesela hier ist.
'It's good that Vesela is here.'
- (14) Es wäre noch besser, wenn Fabio auch hier wäre.
'It would be even better if Fabio were here too.'

Refinements

Desiderata

⇒ Shared semantics for *gut*

⇒ Explain the restrictions on an adverbial use

$$(15) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{good} \rrbracket^c = \lambda w. \lambda d. \lambda p. \text{good}_c(w)(p) = d$$

$$(16) \quad \llbracket [\mathbf{er\ than\ } d_c] \mathbf{good}] \rrbracket^c = \lambda w. \lambda p. \text{good}_c(w)(p) > d_c$$

defined only if there is a salient decision problem Q_c
such that p resolves Q_c .

d_c is the degree of goodness of the salient action
alternative to p resolving Q_c .

Focusing on mood

- Use conditions $\approx$ use conditions of conditionals
- There is a contradiction between the use conditions lexicalized by *besser* and the use conditions associated with a past subjunctive conditional frame.
- no context is required for the licensing of X-marking;
similar to *sollte* $\Rightarrow$ endo-X marking

Use conditions

- (17) a. Du machst besser mehr Sport.
 b. ...besser, wenn du mehr Sport machst.

indicative frame / conditionals $\Rightarrow$ openness / diversity condition

- (18) a. Du würdest besser mehr Sport machen.
 b. ...besser, wenn du mehr Sport machen würdest.

subjunctive frame / conditionals $\Rightarrow$ future less vivid

- (19) a. Du hättest besser mehr Sport gemacht.
 b. ...besser ..., wenn du mehr Sport gemacht hättest.

past subjunctive frame / conditionals $\Rightarrow$ counterfactual

Refinements

Focusing on mood

- Use conditions $\approx$ use conditions of conditionals
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Context dependence of X-subjunctive forms

(20) #Du würdest mehr Sport machen.
You will.**subx** more sports do.**inf**

(21) Du würdest besser mehr Sport machen.
You will.**subx** better more sports do.**inf**

(22) Du solltest mehr Sport machen.
You shall.**subx** more sports do.**inf**

Conditional mood marking

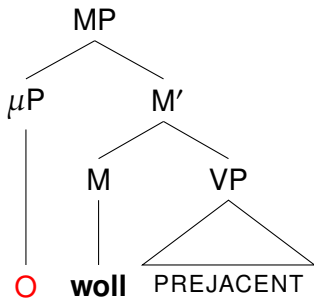
Indicative and subjunctive conditionals

(23) If Laura comes, Fabio will come too.

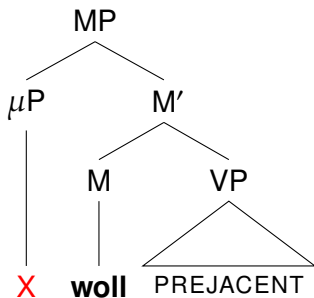
(24) If Laura came, Fabio would come too.

I assume a Kratzer-semantics for conditionals; cf. [Kratzer \(1981, 1991\)](#). As for the details of the syntax-semantics interface, I follow [Grønn & von Stechow \(2009, 2011\)](#); [Grønn \(2021\)](#). The proposed decomposition is based on [Sode \(2025\)](#).

Decomposing Kratzer: Structure



woll + **O** = *will*



woll + **X** = *would*

Decomposing Kratzer II: Semantics

$$(25) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{woll} \rrbracket = \lambda w. \lambda q. \lambda p. (\forall w')[p(w') \rightarrow q(w')]$$

$$(26) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{O} \rrbracket^{f,g}(w)(w') = \text{BEST}_{f,g}(w)(w')$$

defined only if

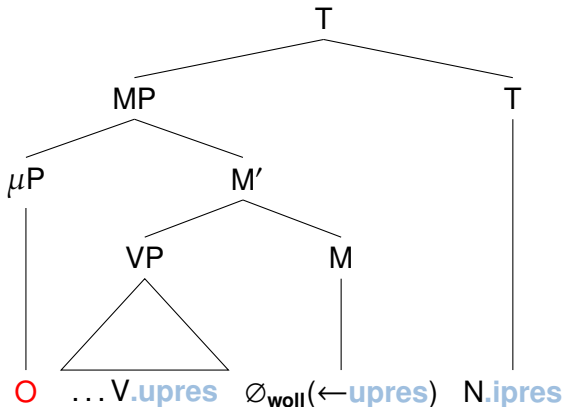
- i. f is what is common knowledge
- ii. g is what is common knowledge

$$(27) \quad \llbracket \mathbf{X} \rrbracket^{f,g}(w)(w') = \text{BEST}_{f,g}(w)(w')$$

defined only if

- i. f is empty
- ii. g is what is common knowledge

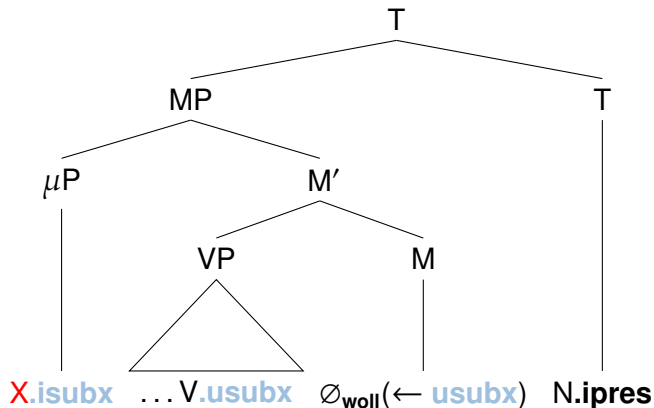
German O-marked modals



(28) ... V.upres $\rightsquigarrow$ present indicative

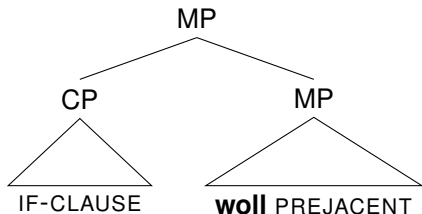
Grønn & von Stechow (2011): There is no need to assume the existence of an indicative feature in German.

German X-marked modals



(29) **... V.usubx** $\leadsto$ past subjunctive / Konjunktiv II

If-clauses



(30) Modal Modification (MM)

Grønn (2021)

$\llbracket \llbracket \text{IF-CLAUSE} \llbracket \text{woll PREJACENT} \rrbracket \rrbracket \rrbracket^{f,g} =$

$\llbracket \llbracket \text{woll PREJACENT} \rrbracket \rrbracket^{f*,g}$

where $f* = \lambda w. f(w) \cup \{\llbracket \text{IF-CLAUSE} \rrbracket\}$

Compatibility Presupposition

von Fintel (1998)

For any $w \in W$, $\llbracket \text{IF-CLAUSE} \rrbracket$ is compatible with $f(w)$

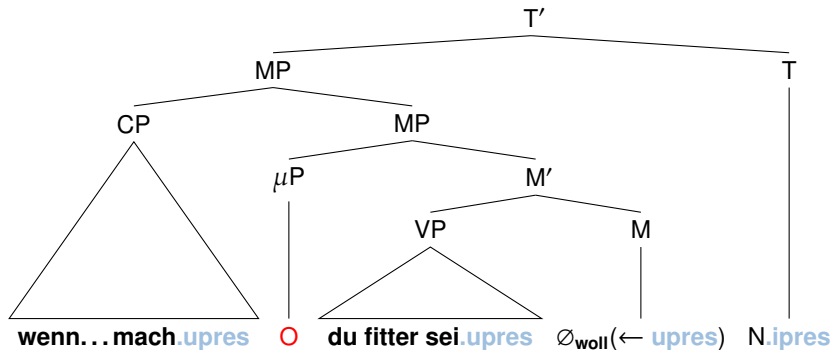
Antecedent requirement

Without a semantics antecedent ('if'-clause or other restrictor) the meaning of X-marked **woll** trivializes.

⇒ blocking; cf. [Grønn \(2021\)](#)

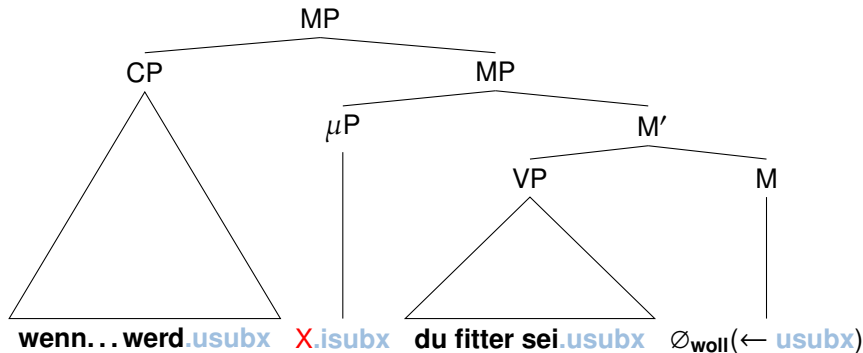
- (31) #Du würdest mehr Sport machen.
You will.[subx](#) more sports do.[inf](#)

German indicative conditionals



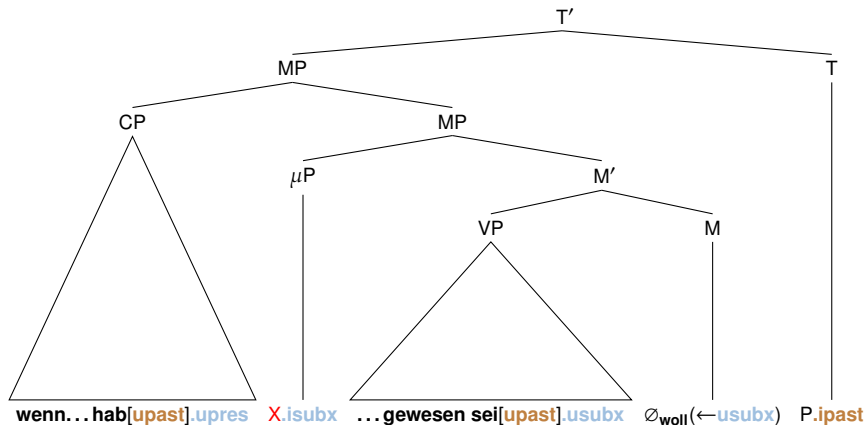
- (32) Wenn du mehr Sport machst, bist du fitter.
'If you exercise more, you will be fitter.'

German subjunctive conditionals



- (33) Wenn du mehr Sport machen würdest, wärst du fitter.
'If you exercised more, you would be fitter.'

German past subjunctive conditionals



- (34) Wenn du... gemacht hättest, wärest du fitter gewesen.
 'If you had exercised more, you would have been fitter.'

Interpretation

- (35) Wenn du mehr Sport machst, bist du fitter.
- (36) $\lambda w: \bigcap (f(w) \cup [\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w']) \neq \emptyset.$
 $(\forall w')[\text{BEST}_{f^*,g}(w)(w') \rightarrow \text{you be more fit in } w']$
where $f^* = \lambda w. f(w) \cup \{\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w'\}$ and f and g are what is common knowledge
- (37) Wenn du mehr Sport machen würdest, wärst du fitter.
- (38) $\lambda w. (\forall w')[\text{BEST}_{f^*,g}(w)(w') \rightarrow \text{you be more fit in } w']$
where $f^* = \lambda w. \{\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w'\}$
and g is what is common knowledge

Mood and use conditions

This gives us:

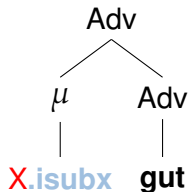
- O-marking: diversity condition
- X-marking: domain widening
- X-marking: no epistemic compatibility requirement

X-marking $\Rightarrow$ future less vivid / counterfactual use

Back to *besser*

The proposal: Incorporation

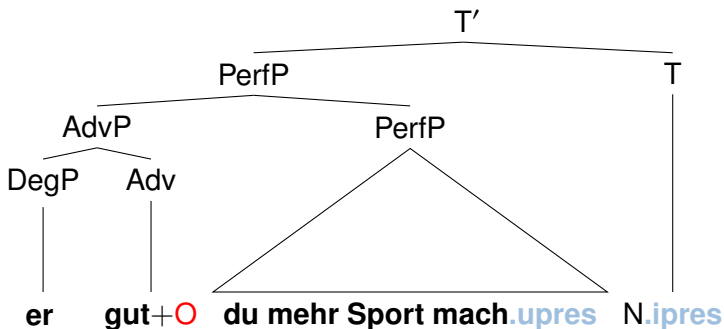
(39)



(40)

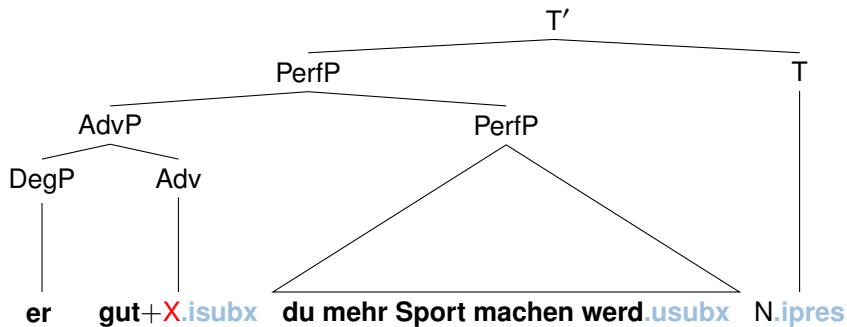
$$\begin{aligned} \llbracket [\text{X gut}] \rrbracket^{f,g} = \\ \lambda w. \lambda d. \lambda p. \llbracket \text{gut} \rrbracket(w)(d)(\llbracket \text{X} \rrbracket^{f*,g}(w)) \\ \text{where } f* = \lambda w. \{p\} \\ \text{and } g \text{ is what is common knowledge} \end{aligned}$$

Melioratives with an indicative frame



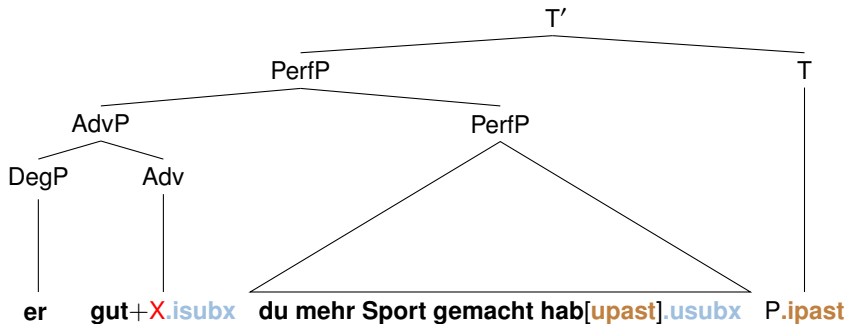
- (41) Du machst besser mehr Sport.
you do.ind better more sports
'You better exercise more.'

Melioratives with a subjunctive frame



- (42) Du würdest besser mehr Sport machen.
you will.subx better more sports do.inf
'You'd better exercise more.'

Melioratives with a past subjunctive frame



- (43) Du hättest besser mehr Sport gemacht.
you have.subx better more sports do.ppt
≈ 'You should have exercised more.'

Interpretation

- (44) Du machst besser mehr Sport.
- (45) $\lambda w: \bigcap(f(w) \cup [\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w']) \neq \emptyset.$
 $\text{good}_c(w)(\text{BEST}_{f^*,g}(w)) > d_c$
where $f^* = \lambda w. f(w) \cup \{\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w'\}$ and f and g are what is common knowledge
- (46) Du würdest besser mehr Sport machen.
- (47) $\lambda w. \text{good}_c(w)(\text{BEST}_{f^*,g}(w)) > d_c$
where $f^* = \lambda w. \{\lambda w'. \text{you do more sports in } w'\}$
and g is what is common knowledge

How does it help?

- Diversity condition is not part of the lexical meaning.
- Use conditions = use conditions of conditionals
- no context is required for the licensing of X-marking; X-marking is not trivialized since the “prejacent” is interpreted as if it was an antecedent.
- Endo-X marking is explained as incorporation of X-marking.

Beyond declarative melioratives

Other types of melioratives

besser is used in imperatives, (48), with modals, (49), and in optatives, (50). These may well be cases of modal concord.

(48) Mach besser mal mehr Sport.
Do.**imp** better PRT more sports

(49) Du solltest besser mehr Sport machen.
You shall.**subx** better more sports do.**inf**

(50) Hättest du doch besser mehr Sport gemacht.
have.**subx** you PRT better more sports do.**ppt**

Conclusion

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- I discussed declarative melioratives in German.
- I started with the theory of Meertens & Lauer.
- I argued that the use conditions of declarative melioratives dependent on the choice of tense and mood.
- I presented a semantic account of *gut* on which *gut* incorporates the O/X-marking of conditionals.
- This predicts the correct use conditions.

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Sode, Frank. 2025. X-marking in German desire reports with *wollen* ('want'). *Pages 73–111 of: Sharma, Ghanshyam, & Ippolito, Michela (eds), Tense and aspect in Counterfactuals.* Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.