

Some observations on the syntax and pragmatics of *wh*-drop in German

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wh-drop refers to the optional dropping of a *wh*-phrase in languages like Standard Dutch and Bavarian German, cf. (1).

- (1) a. *Wat/wat doe jij nou?* [Standard Dutch]
what do you PRT
'What then are you doing?'
- b. *Wos/wos is-n des?* [Bavarian German]
what is-PRT that
'What's that?'

The elision of syntactic material typically implies that the relevant material is given or topical. Since *wh*-phrases make bad topics, some different mechanism must be invoked for the elision of the *wh*-phrases in (1). Bayer (2010) claims that this mechanism is recoverability. The *wh*-word *wos* in (1b) can be dropped because its presence can be recovered via the clitic *-n*, which Bayer analyzes as the result of an agreement operation between C° and *wos* in SpecCP. Since *-n* signals the presence of a *wh*-phrase in SpecCP at some stage of the derivation, the *wh*-phrase can be dropped. The example from Standard Dutch in (1a) equally favors the presence of the clitic *nou* in *wh*-drop, which according to Bayer has a function similar to *-n* in Bavarian German.

In this talk, I will first challenge Bayer's analysis of *wh*-drop based on data from German. I show that *-n* is not an agreement marker for a *wh*-phrase in SpecCP, but a pragmatic marker that is used independently of the presence of a *wh*-phrase. Given this, it can be of no help to recover an elided *wh*-phrase. After a brief outline of an alternative analysis for *wh*-drop, I will then turn to the main part of the talk, where I investigate two issues that have received little attention so far. The first issue is what *wh*-phrases can be dropped in German. The standard claim is that only *wh*-phrases corresponding to *what* can be dropped. But this claim is both too narrow and too broad: not every *what* can be dropped, and not every dropped *wh*-phrase corresponds to a *what*. The second issue is in which way *wh*-drop interacts with the pragmatics of *wh*-questions, and in particular how *wh*-drop interacts with special questions.