Coherence with Adjectives in German

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1   Abstract

In the German grammatical tradition, coherence generally refers to a special kind of predicate formation where a verb forms a complex predicate with the head of its infinitival complement. Also adjectives taking infinitival complements have been shown to allow coherence, but the exact conditions for coherence with adjectives appear not to have been addressed in the literature. Based on a corpus-study (supplemented with grammaticality judgements by native speakers), we show that adjectives fall into three semantically and syntactically defined classes correlating with their ability to construct coherently. Non-factive non-gradable adjectives allow coherence, factive gradable adjectives do not allow coherence and non-factive gradable adjectives are tolerated with coherence. On the basis of previous work on coherence in German, we argue that coherence is like an extraction structure in allowing the head and a dependent of this head to be associated with different information structural functions. Following literature on the information structural basis of extraction islands, we show how the lack of coherence with factive adjectives follows from their complements being information structurally backgrounded, while the infinitival complements of non-factive adjectives tend to a higher fusion with the matrix clause. We also show that coherence is observed with attributive adjectives as well, arguing that coherence is not a uniquely verbal property. Finally we provide an analysis of coherence with adjectives within Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG).