Floating Conjunctions and the Syntax-Prosody Interface
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Claim: I investigate the rarely discussed phenomenon of conjunction float (with a focus on German) and make the following claims: ① The case of the German conjunction *aber* (‘but’) is indeed a proper case of conjunction float, a phenomenon whereby a clausal conjunction appears embedded inside the second conjunct, and not an adverb or a particle. ② The placement of floating conjunctions is not due to syntactic movement (contra Zhang 2006) as such an analysis would violate many well-established island constraints. ③ Rather, I argue that the surface position is due to prosodic displacement (cf. Bennett, Elfner & McCloskey 2016) and that it allows new insights on the syntax-prosody mapping and the nature of cyclic spellout. In particular, I argue that, in order to model the placement properties of the floating conjunction *aber* in German, we need to make reference to both prosodic phrasing and syntactic spellout domains.

Background: It has been known since Ross (1967) that in some languages clausal conjunctions appear inside in various positions inside the second conjunct. In the German example in (1), the conjunction *aber* can occur (i) in between the conjuncts, (ii) after the prefield preceding the finite verb or (iii) at the vP-edge following the finite verb, pronominal elements, and scrambled elements.

(1) Peter will nach hause gehen, (aber₁) Maria (aber₂) will ihm (aber₃) jemanden vorstellen  
     ‘Peter wants to home go but Maria but wants him but someone introduce’

Zhang (2006,2010) claims that *aber* is a conjunction when it appears in between the two conjuncts but an adverb when clause-internal. Apart from the fact that such an explanation is heuristically rather unsatisfactory, I will present three pieces of evidence that *aber* is a proper conjunction regardless of its surface position and neither an adverb nor a modal particle: ① The distribution of adverbs and modal particles is fundamentally different from the distribution of *aber*: (i) *aber* can occur in the prefield but does not occupy it (see position (ii) in ex. (1)). Modal particles cannot appear in the prefield, adverbs can but occupy it. (ii) Further, we find that *aber* can ignore syntactic constituency as in (2), where it appears in between a DP and a relative clause that modifies the DP. This position is unavailable for modal particles or adverbs.

(2) Ich mag Maria, der Peter *aber*, der sich immer beschwert, mag sie offensichtlich nicht.  
    ‘I like Maria, the Peter *aber*, der RELF always complains, likes her obviously not’

② The semantic scope of *aber* matches the scope of the conjunction and not the scope of adverbs/modal particles. In (3), there is a whole complement clause in the prefield (SpecCP) of the second conjunct and the conjunction occurs inside the preposed clause. In other words, even though the logical structure is: [A but [B C]] (with A,B,C being clauses), *aber* still occurs inside B. Something like that is completely impossible with adverbs or modal particles whose scope is at least clause-bound. An adverb or a particle that occurs in the position of *aber* is not able to scope out of the dass-clause.

(3) Ich wusste dass er ein Trottel ist, dass er *aber* so ein Trottel ist, wusste ich nicht.  
    ‘I knew that he a fool is that he but such a fool is, knew I not’

③ Finally, it can be shown that the presence of *aber* is required to license conjunction specific processes such as ATB-movement (see (4)), Right Node Raising, Gapping or SLF-coordination (Höhle 1990). Further, we see that whenever something other than full CPs are conjoined, the presence of *aber* is also obligatory.

(4) Was hat sich Peter zum Geburtstag gewünscht Susi ihm *(aber)* nicht gekauft?  
    ‘What has SELF Peter to the birthday wished Susi him but not bought’

(5) ...dass Peter [vP Tennis spielt] [vP Tischtennis *(aber)* nicht mag]  
    ‘that Peter plays tennis but not like table tennis’

Clause-internal *aber* does not have the distribution nor the scope of adverbs and it licenses coordination specific processes. I thus conclude that *aber* is in fact a conjunction regardless of its surface position.

Against a movement-based theory: The conclusion above raises the question how the surface position of *aber* arises. For parallel cases in Mandarin Chinese, Zhang (2006) proposes a movement analysis according to which the elements of the second conjunct which precede the conjunction are in this position because they have undergone movement to a topic position above the coordination head.
(6) \[[\text{Peter wants to go home} | \text{Maria, but tₙ wants to stay}]\]

Such a theory can straightforwardly be shown to be untenable for German as the conjunction can also follow non-phrasal material such as the verb (pos. iii in (1)) and it can follow elements known for their inability to move (such as modal particles or complementizers in (3)). Further, as we have seen, the placement of \text{aber} ignores constituency and syntactic islands. In order to derive (2) by means of movement, we would need to move the determiner and the head noun of a subject DP leaving behind the relative clause modifying to the DP. This would at least violate the Condition on Extraction Domains (extraction from a subject) (Huang 1982). Similar examples can be constructed which would require violations of the Coordinate Structure Constraint or a complex-NP-island.

(7) [[ I like Maria | Peter, but [DP tₙ who always complains] does not ]]

A prosodic alternative: Examples like [2] in which \text{aber} clearly ignores well-established syntactic island constraints suggest that a syntactic analysis has a hard time deriving these facts altogether. I would thus like to suggest an approach along the lines of Bennett, Elfner & McCloskey 2016 (BEM), according to which the dislocation of \text{aber} is sensitive to prosodic constituents (rather than to syntactic ones). The underlying idea is that \text{aber} is syntactically merged in the position of it belongs (i.e. the head & but then optionally shifts to the right attaching to any phonological phrase. Consider (8), which is a representation of the second conjunct of (1) where the indefinite \text{jemanden} is replaced by a scramblable definite DP (den Df).

(8) ... \text{aber} [Φ Maria | Φ will ihm | [Φ den D] vorstellen.]

I follow BEM (2016) in assuming that this movement is prosodically driven by a constraint such as Selkirk’s (2011) \text{STRONG START}, that dislocates weak elements at the left edge of prosodic domains to a position to the right. This is further motivated by the fact that \text{aber} can be stressed only in between the conjuncts (pos. (ii) in (1)) but never clause-internally. Further, I would like to submit that if conjunction float is only possible when triggered by \text{STRONG START}, this explains why the conjunctions never float into the first conjunct. I depart from BEM (2016) by assuming that cyclic spellout as envisaged by Distributed Morphology (see e.g. Embick 2010) and direct reference theories (see e.g. Newell 2008) of the syntax-prosody mapping also plays a role in the prosodic dislocation process. The reason for this assumption is that the dislocation of \text{aber} can in principle right-attach to an infinite number of phonological phrases in the middle field but crucially, it can never attach to anything to VP-internal elements. Cf (9) with (1):

(9) *Peter will nach hause Maria will ihm jemanden (aber) vorstellen (aber)

‘Peter wants to go home Maria wants him someone but introduce but\n\hspace{1cm} ‘Peter wants to go home but Maria wants to introduce someone to him.’

The ungrammaticality of (9) follows if we assume that VP-internal material is not accessible to the dislocation of \text{aber}. This is most straightforwardly derived by a cyclic spellout model where the prosodification of the vP-domain has happened on an earlier cycle. To be more concrete, I assume that only the linearly adjacent spellout cycle is accessible for dislocation of \text{aber}. This also derives why the CP-domain of the preposited complement clause is still accessible in (3): Due to the syntactic movement of the complement clause to SpecCP, its higher CP-cycle is still accessible and thus \text{aber} can dislocate into it.

Outlook: Much more needs to be said of course for configurations including marked prosodic structures (e.g. those including contrastive topics). In these cases, I follow Féry (2017), Truckenbrodt (2017) in assuming a differently mapped prosodic structure which then can be shown to limit the placement possibilities of \text{aber}. The same holds for non-CP-coordination whose prosodic properties are often less well-established.

Crosslinguistic Perspective: I would like to highlight other cases of conjunction float (see e.g. Bánréti 1994 for Hungarian, Zhang 2006 for Mandarin or Kandybowicz 2005 for Nupe) share some but not all properties with German and even though this requires further investigation, we may want to derive the differences as arising from independent factors about the specific syntactic structures of the relevant languages.