Extraction from embedded V2 clauses in German

Insights from children's productions

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CGSW 38, Potsdam, 17–18 September 2026

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Roadmap

The debate

The hypothesis

The study

- Method, design, participants
- Results

Discussion

The debate

Wh-questions from embedded V2-clauses (EV2Q) in German

Long-distance *wh*-question from V-final clause

(1) Wen$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ dass die Katzen __$_1$ wecken]?
who.ACC believe.2SG you that the cats wake.3PL
'Who do you believe that the cats are waking?'

Subject EV2Q question

(2) Wer$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ wäscht __$_1$ die Kinder]?
who.NOM believe.2SG you wash.3SG the children
'Who do you believe is washing the children?'

Object EV2Q question

(3) Wen$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]?
who.ACC believe.2SG you wake.3PL the cats
'Who do you believe the cats are waking?'

Two analyses of EV2Qs

1. Long-distance movement

(4) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ __$_1$ wecken$_2$ die Katzen __$_1$ __$_2$]]?

- successive-cyclic movement just like *wh*-questions from embedded V-final clauses (1) but with the verb moved to C

  (Thiersch 1978, Tappe 1981, Sternefeld 1989, Staudacher 1990, Haider 1993)

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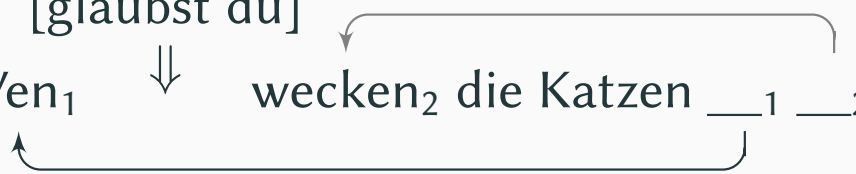
  (Thiersch 1978, Tappe 1981, Sternefeld 1989, Staudacher 1990, Haider 1993)

2. V1-parenthetical insertion

(5) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ [glaubst du] ⇓ wecken$_2$ die Katzen __$_1$ __$_2$]



- clause-internal movement with a verb-first integrated parenthetical

  (Reis 1995, 1996, 2002, Steinbach 2007, Kiziak 2007, 2010, Viesel 2011)

Two analyses of EV2Qs

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- clause-internal movement with a verb-first integrated parenthetical

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⇒ Unresolved debate

The hypothesis

Combining two observations

- Observation: (6) is **biclausal** and (7) is **monoclausal**.

(6) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ __$_1$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]]?

(7) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ [glaubst du] $\Downarrow$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]

- Children perform **better on object biclausal questions** compared to their subject counterparts for a number of languages (e.g. Thornton 1990, Grolla 2022, Jakubowicz and Strik 2008, Liter et al. 2022, Lutken and Legendre 2026).
  → **cross-clausal movement** is "easier" with **objects**
- Children perform **better on subject monoclausal questions** (and subject relative clauses) compared to their object counterparts for a number of languages (e.g. Labelle 1990, Pérez-Leroux 1995, Yoshinaga 1996, Vincenzi et al. 1999, McDaniel and Lech 2003, McDaniel et al. 1998, 2010, Guasti et al. 2012, Sauerland et al. 2016, Yatsushiro et al. 2026).
  → **clause-internal movement** is "easier" with **subjects**

Hypothesis (to be refined)

(8) $[_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ glaubst du $[_{CP}$ __$_1$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]]?

- If EV2Qs involve actual **cross-clausal movement** children should perform **better with object** than with subject questions.

(9) $[_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ [glaubst du] $\Downarrow$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]

- If they involve **clause-internal movement** as is the case under the parenthetical analysis children should perform **better with subject** than with object questions.

What does "perform better" mean?

Monoclausal questions

- more adult-like productions/fewer errors with subject questions

Biclausal questions

- medial *wh*-responses like (10) more frequent and long-lived with subject questions

(10) a. **Who** do you think **who** Grover wants to hug?
(4;09, Thornton 1990: 87)

b. **What** do you think **who** ate this? (3;11, Thornton 1990: 232)

Performing better on German EV2Qs

1. more target productions, i.e. errorless EV2Qs
2. fewer medial *wh*-responses (see appendix)
3. fewer switches of grammatical function from S to O (11) or from O to S (12)

(11) *Object question in the subject condition*

Wen glaubst du wäscht die Mama?
who.ACC believe.2SG you wash.3SG the mum
'Who do you believe the mum is washing?'
Int.: 'Who do you believe is washing the children?'

(12) *Subject question in the object condition*

Wer glaubst du weckt die Maus?
who.NOM believe.2SG you wake.3SG the mouse
'Who do you believe is waking the mouse?'
Int.: 'Who do you believe the cats are waking'

Hypothesis

(13) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ glaubst du [$_{CP}$ __$_1$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]]?

- If EV2Qs involve actual cross-clausal movement children should produce more target responses, fewer medial *wh*-responses and fewer changes of grammatical function in the object condition.

(14) [$_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ [glaubst du] ⇓ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]

- If they involve clause-internal movement as is the case under the parenthetical analysis children should produce more target responses, fewer medial *wh*-responses and fewer changes of grammatical function in the subject condition.

The study

The study

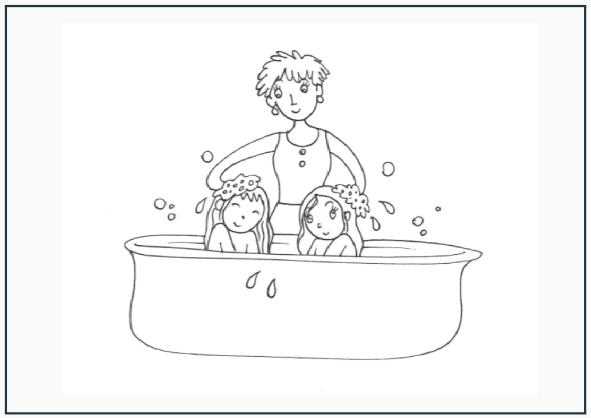
Method, design, participants

Method

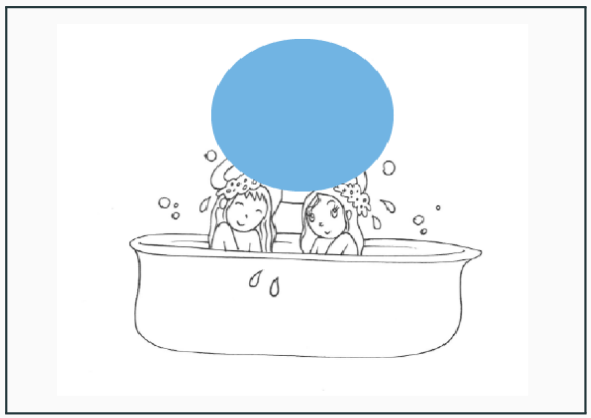
- guessing game between the child (CHI) and a puppet (PUP) + EXP
- PUP could not understand adults

Method

(15) *Subject Wh-question: Who do you think is washing the girls?*

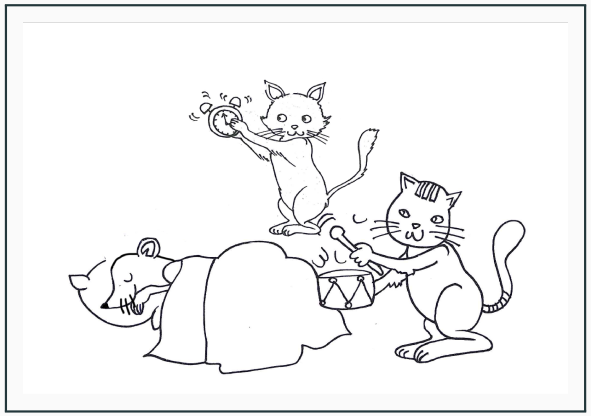


shown to CHI



shown to PUP

(16) *Object Wh-question: Who do you think the cats are waking?*



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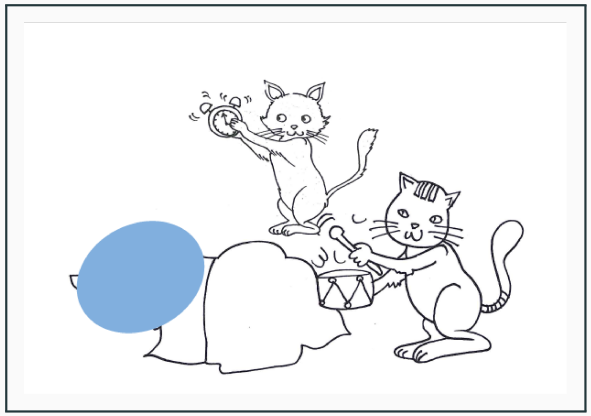

shown to PUP

Design

Items:

- 6 EV2Q training items (4 repetitions + 2 hybrid items)
  - EXP provides full EV2Q *wh*-question (twice)
- 12 experimental items (6 *who* subject questions, 6 *who* object question)
  - EXP never provides full EV2Q; only reminders and if necessary start of question: "Who do you think…"

Item properties:

- Agents mismatched in number with patients on all items as number agreement helps disambiguate between subject and object questions (plus case on wh-item).
- Covered character was always singular.
- All verbs were reversible.

Participants

- 25 German-speaking children
- age range: 4;3–6;2 ($M = 5;4$)
- recruited in kindergartens in Berlin
- no diagnosed hearing/speaking impairment or language disorders

Data and coding

298 utterances were transcribed and coded

- Question type:
  - from embedded V2 clause (EV2Q)
  - *wh*-copying (WH-COPY)
  - scope marking (SM)
  - matrix question (MQ)
  - from embedded V-final clause (VF)
  - error
- Target (adult-like production of expected EV2Q) vs. non-target (everything else)
- Correct (EV2Q, SM, or WH-COPY of the right type, i.e. S or O)
- GF change (S for O question, and O for S question)
- Wh-case mismatch (*Wen* in a subject Q, *Wer* in an object Q)[1]

[1] In cases of conflict between case and agreement, precedence was given to the latter.

The study

Results

Results: Response types

Figure 1: Proportion and count of response types by condition

Results: Target responses

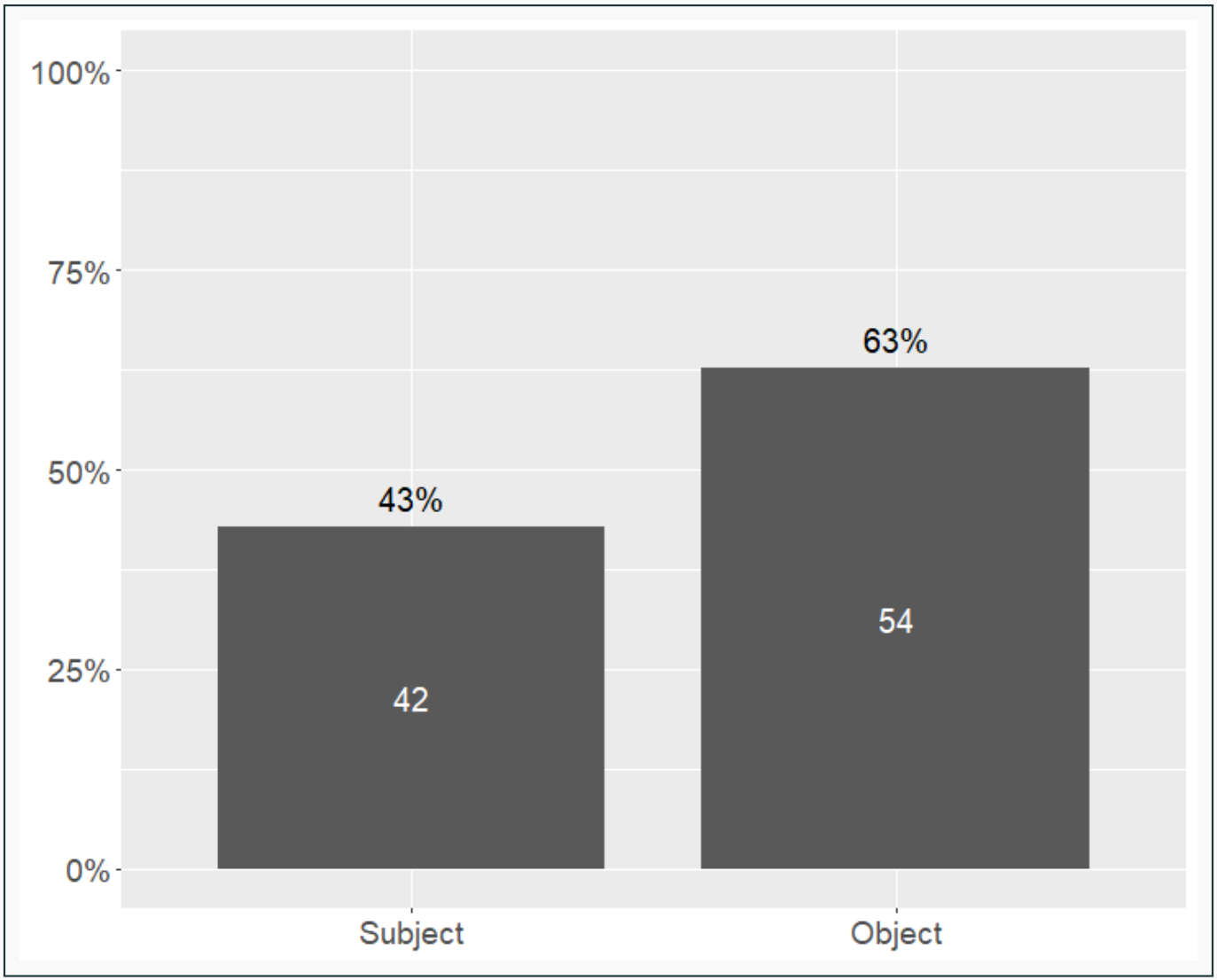

Figure 2: Proportion and counts of only target responses in EV2Qs

Result 1: Model for target in EV2Q

Do participants produce more target responses in one of the conditions?

Table 1: glm (target ~ condition*age, data = subset(data, question_type = "EV2Q"))[2]

	$\hat{\beta}$	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	0.6670	0.2654	2.514	.01195 *
Condition(Subject)	−0.9964	0.3420	−2.914	.00357 **
Age	1.2468	0.3080	4.048	5.17e-05 ***
Condition × Age	**−1.9245**	0.3846	−5.004	**1.69e-06** ***

⇒ Negative effect for condition: fewer target responses in S condition

⇒ Negative interaction: children produce less target responses in S condition the older they are

[2] An initial mixed effects model showed zero estimates for random-effect variances (singular fit). As fixed-effect estimates were numerically identical we report the standard logistic regression (mixed model did not improve model fit, AIC: 227.4 vs. 223.4).

Result 1: Target responses in EV2Q by condition over age

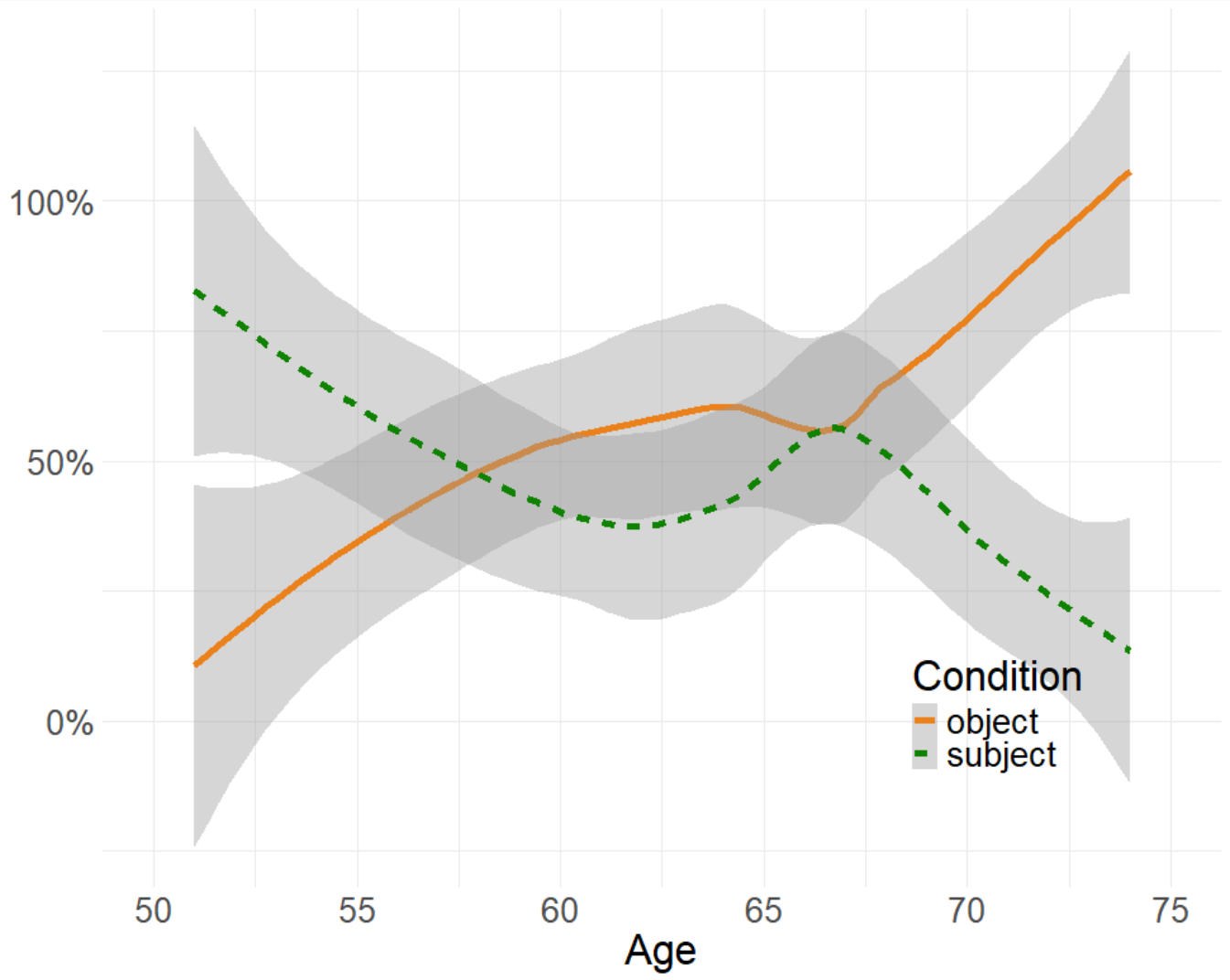

Figure 3: Proportion of target responses by condition over age in EV2Qs

Results 2: Medial *wh*-responses by condition

Do participants produce more medial *wh*-responses in one condition?

Table 2: glmer(medial.wh ~ condition*age + (1|participant), data = data)

	$\hat{\beta}$	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	−8.5728	1.9872	−4.314	1.6e-05 ***
Condition(Subject)	−0.7185	0.7126	−1.008	.313
Age	0.2061	1.2527	0.165	.869
Condition × Age	−0.7929	0.5556	−1.427	.154

⇒ No effects

- 43 of 48 cases of wh-copying come from just 4 kids (58, 63, 66, 71); 3 other kids contribute the remaining 5 cases;
- 12 of 15 cases of scope marking come from 1 kid (69); 2 other kids contribute the remaining 3 cases;

Result 3: Grammatical function change in EV2Q

Do participants produce more GF switches in one of the conditions?

Table 3: glmer(GF_change ~ condition*age + (1|participant) + (1|item), data = subset(data, question_type = "EV2Q"))

	$\hat{\beta}$	SE	z	p
(Intercept)	−1.7512	0.4803	−3.646	.0003 ***
Condition(Subject)	0.0011	0.5897	0.002	.998
Age	−1.4899	0.4231	−3.521	.0004 ***
Condition(Subject) × Age	**2.1252**	0.5343	3.978	**1.39e-04** ***

⇒ Positive interaction: children produce more GF change responses in S condition the older they are[3]

[3] *p*-values of interactions have been corrected for multiple comparisons using the Holm method.

Results 2: Grammatical function change

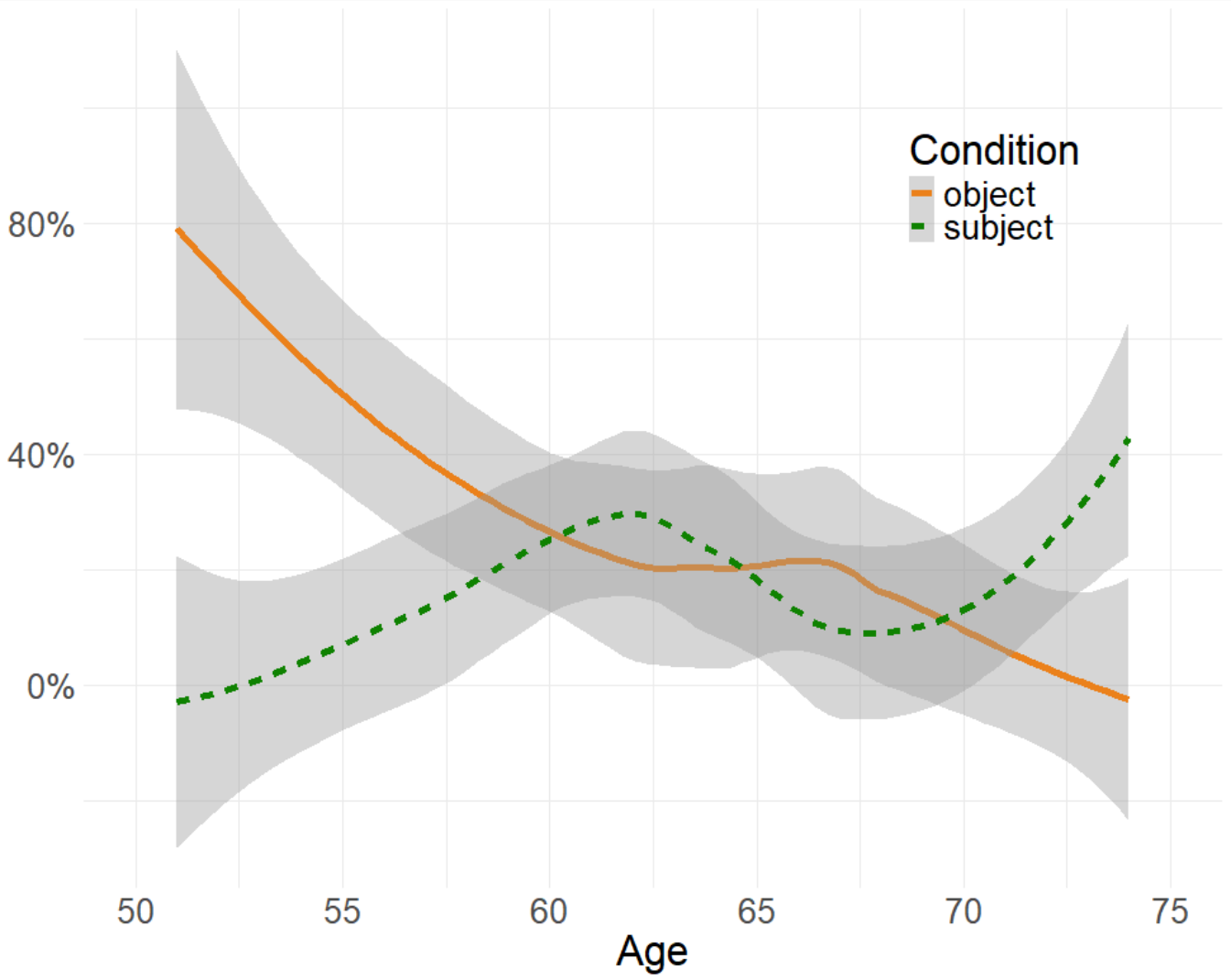

Figure 4: Proportion of GF change responses over age in EV2Qs

Results: Summary

- Children produced between 55 and 65% EV2Qs.
- **Within these, accuracy for subject questions decreases with age while that for objects increases.**
- **Also, young kids more often produced a subject instead of an object question; old kids more often an object question in place of a subject question.**
- No effect on the production of medial *wh*-questions was observed.

Discussion

Hypothesis

(17) $[_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ glaubst du $[_{CP}$ __$_1$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]]?

- If EV2Qs involve actual cross-clausal movement children should produce more target responses, fewer medial *wh*-responses and fewer changes of grammatical function in the object condition.

(18) $[_{CP}$ Wen$_1$ [glaubst du] $\Downarrow$ wecken die Katzen __$_1$]

- If they involve clause-internal movement as is the case under the parenthetical analysis children should produce more target responses, fewer medial *wh*-responses and fewer changes of grammatical function in the subject condition.

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$\Rightarrow$ **Both seem to be confirmed, only at different ages!**

Two options

There are two ways to make sense of these findings:

1. Children initially treat EV2Qs as parenthetical insertion and only gradually acquire cross-clausal movement.
2. Children always treat EV2Qs as involving movement from the start and another factor (e.g. Relativized Minimality, Rizzi 1990) is responsible for the varying asymmetries.

(3. Children always treat EV2Qs as parenthetical insertion and another factor is responsible for the varying asymmetries.)

Option 1: Gradual acquisition of cross-clausal movement

- Clause internal movement (to produce a matrix question) must be different from and acquired earlier than cross-clausal movement.
- We should observe (almost) no *wh*-copying at young age because that involves LD-movement.
  - Earliest correct *wh*-copying in our data at 63 months
  - Earliest attempted *wh*-copying at 52 months (but with embedded V2, cf. (19))

(19) Wer glaubst du denn [$_{CP}$ wer hat die Oma getrocknet]?
who.NOM believe.2SG you PRT who.NOM has the gran dried
Lit.: 'Who do you believe who has dried the gran.' (4;4)

Option 2: Gradual acquisition of Relativized Minimality

- Children employ cross-clausal movement for EV2Qs.
- Development of S/O-asymmetry is due to development of featural Relativized Minimality (fRM, Rizzi 1990, 2004)
  - Young children have "coarse" fRM: Any intervening DP, no matter its featural similarity to the movee, impedes the movement.
  - Old children have "fine" fRM: Only sufficiently similar DPs (e.g. with same case) impede the movement.

		young	old
(20)	Wer$_{\text{NOM}}$ glaubst $\boxed{\text{du}_{\text{NOM}}}$ [$_{\text{CP}}$ weckt __ die Katzen]?	1 DP	1 DP$_{\text{NOM}}$
(21)	Wen$_{\text{ACC}}$ glaubst $\boxed{\text{du}_{\text{NOM}}}$ [$_{\text{CP}}$ wecken $\boxed{\text{die Katzen}_{\text{NOM}}}$ __]?	2 DPs	0 DP$_{\text{ACC}}$

Option 2: Movement plus Relativized Minimality

- *Wh*-copying should show a similar development of the S/O-asymmetry.
  - In our data, it doesn't. BUT: only 48 data points (43 from 4 children).
- Other languages should show a similar development of the S/O-asymmetry (modulo structural differences).
  - English: overall O-advantage; no explicitly reported interaction of condition and age (e.g. Thornton 1990, Liter et al. 2022, Lutken and Legendre 2026); BUT: *that*-trace effect.
  - Italian: no asymmetry in the same experimental setup (Dal Farra et al. 2026); BUT: Subject extraction from postverbal position.
  - Brazilian Portuguese: O-advantage reported anecdotally, no mention of age (Grolla 2022).
  - French: O-advantage reported anecdotally, no mention of age (Jakubowicz and Strik 2008).
  - Spanish: O-advantage reported anecdotally, no correct/target/adult-like S-question produced in longitudinal study (Gutiérrez Mangado 2006).

Conclusion

- We found a developmental trajectory from a subject advantage to an object advantage in the production of EV2Qs in German 4–6 year-old children.
- Thus, both a parenthetical analysis (at young ages) and one in terms of successive-cyclic movement (at older ages) receive some support.
- An alternative explanation as cross-clausal movement with developing featural Relativized Minimality is equally possible.
- At the moment, we have no clear answer for the debate on EV2Q in German.

Thanks

Thank you for your attention.

Thanks to Fabienne Salfner, Maite Seidel, Emilia Strom, Jesse Trumpheller, Jakob Wünsch, Janel Zoske for data collection and handling.

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (LeibnizDream, grant agreement No 856421).

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Agreement over case

Why do we give preference to agreement in cases of conflict with case?

- Subject-verb agreement is mastered relatively early in the acquisition of German (Clahsen 1986, Clahsen and Penke 1992).
- Case marking is only acquired later (Clahsen 1984, Tracy 1984, 1986, Mills 1985, Ulrich et al. 2016)

Medial *wh*-responses as a measure

Wh-copying (22) is grammatical in the Berlin-Brandenburg area (Fanselow and Mahajan 2000: 219, Pankau 2013: 30, Fanselow et al. 2024: 50) as is *Wh*-scope marking (23):

(22) Wen denkst du wen sie mag?
who.ACC think.2SG you who.ACC she likes
'Who do you think she likes?' (Fanselow et al. 2024: 42)

(23) Was glaubst du wen Irina liebt?
what believe.2SG you who.ACC Irina loves
'Who do you believe that Irina loves?' (Fanselow 2006: 442)

Medial *wh*-questions seem to ease the production of difficult long-distance questions in other languages, even if ungrammatical (Thornton 1990, Grolla 2022, Liter et al. 2022, Lutken and Legendre 2026).

⇒ They can be expected to constitute an even easier alternative to difficult EV2Qs in German as they are grammatical.

They involve cross-clausal movement (Bayer 1991, Fanselow and Mahajan 2000, Höhle 2000, Fanselow and Ćavar 2001, Felser 2004, Rett 2006, Schippers 2012, Pankau 2009, 2013).

Target and correct

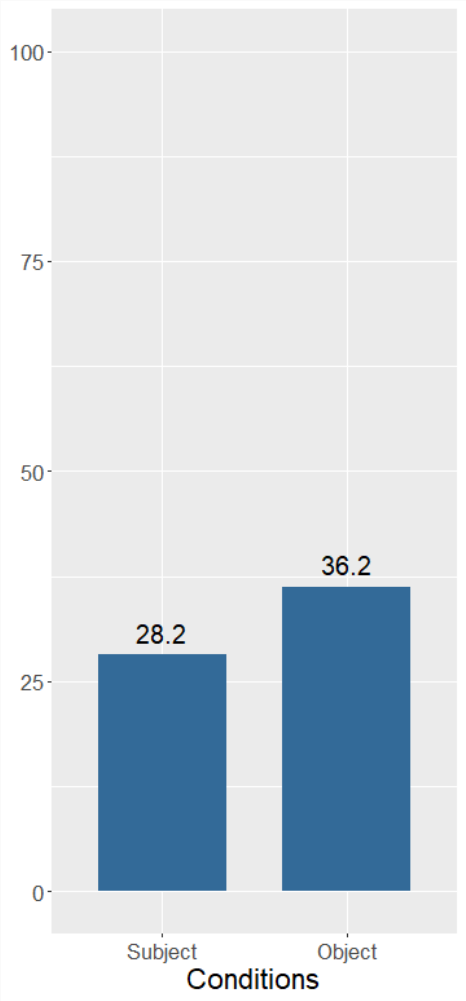

Figure 5: Targets in total

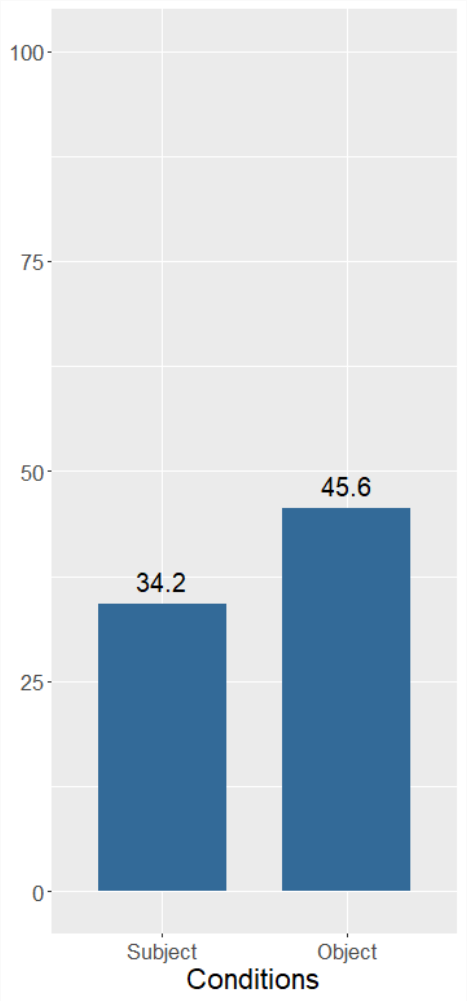

Figure 6: Corrects in total

Non-target EV2Qs

	$EV2Q_{target}$	$EV2Q_{non\text{-}target}$		
		GF change	case mismatch	other
S	42	18	36	2
O	54	20	8	4

(24) **Wen** glaubst du schub**st** die Prinzen?
who.ACC believe.2SG you push.3SG the prince.PL
'Whom do you believe is pushing the princes?' (**S**, 5;4)

(25) **Wer** glaubst du fessel**n** die Bienen?
who.NOM believe.2SG you tie.up.3PL the bee.PL
'Who do you believe the bees are tying up?' (**O**, 5;2)

Non-target EV2Qs

	$EV2Q_{target}$	$EV2Q_{non\text{-}target}$		
		GF change	case mismatch	other
S	42	18	36	2
O	54	20	8	4

- non-target EV2Qs in S tend to be made by older kids ($M = 65.5$)
  $\rightarrow$ more case mismatch because although they start wrong, due to higher language abilities they can correct themselves more often.
- non-target EV2Qs in O tend to be made by younger kids ($M = 59.7$)
  $\rightarrow$ more outright GF changes because they are less able to realize their mistake and correct themselves half through.