CHAPTER 6

The German Auxiliary and Complementation System

6.1 Preliminary Comparative Observations

The foremost problem in German syntax stems from the fact that German syntax is not uniformly right-branching, as is the syntax of English, French and Dutch. There is no way German syntax can be described other than by allowing a mixture of left and right branching. Even if the basic underlying word order is taken to be SOV, which is not preferable, and in all default cases lowering of elements onto the V-cluster is given a left-branching turn, which is preferable, there is still the fact that question words and focused elements are attracted to sentence-initial position, which requires right-branching. German predicate raising, in any case, is predominantly left-branching, as clearly shown by surface word order. Historically speaking one may say that German is more conservative than Dutch and English.

On balance, the most efficient solution appears to be to keep basic VSO-order, but with predominantly left-branching V-clusters. As is shown below, right-branching is found in V-clusters only with a small class of verbs and only when these verbs are clustered and non-spine, and stand directly under the perfective auxiliary. This is a clear principle and avoids messiness in the rule system: S-syntax is right-branching but V-syntax is, in principle, left-branching. It allows for whatever valid generalizations can be made with regard to underlying and/or surface verb-initial languages, such as predominance of prepositions as against postpositions, fronting of question words and focused elements, preferentially preposed adjectives, etc. It avoids, moreover, the necessity of postcyclic adjustments in verbal end clusters.

Predicate raising is less frequent in German than in Dutch. As in Dutch, subject raising need not be assumed at all in the complementation system, and is taken to occur only with the highest tense operator in the auxiliary system. As opposed to Dutch, verbal end clusters are, in the rule system presented below, entirely tame and need no re-adjustment.

The middle position between the two tenses is filled exclusively by the future modal verb werden, which also acts as the passive auxiliary and as the verb for ‘become’. In the latter two meanings it can occur as an infinitive: Ich
hoffe, nicht entlassen zu werden (‘I hope not to be fired), and Ich hoffe, Lehrer zu werden (‘I hope to become a teacher), but as the future modal it lacks an infinitive: "Ich hoffe, es schaffen zu werden (‘I hope I will manage it’). Note that the Dutch equivalent of the last sentence: Ik hoop het te zullen klaarspelen, is perfectly grammatical, which means that the middle position between the tenses is empty in Dutch.

Some further differences with the other languages discussed will appear in the text below. Other differences have been left undiscussed. No maux-verbs have so far been detected.

6.2 Branching Directionality in V-clusters: The R-condition

The main problem with regard to a proper formulation of the rule system has proved to be the question of when V-clusters deviate from their standard left-branching orientation and become right-branching. In order to bring about order in what seemed to be a messy database the principle has been formulated that German V-clusters are standardly left-branching, but switch over to right-branching when a member of a small class of verbs is clustered and non-spine (i.e. has a left brother labelled ‘V’), and stands directly under the perfective auxiliary (haben or sein). In that position the same verbs block the application of the cyclic rule past participle. (The reader will remember that the rule past participle is inoperative in Dutch under the same condition, but for all verbs and, of course, with right-branching directionality.) Moreover, the postcyclic rule V-final has to be extended with the option (for loftier style registers) of allowing the V-cluster to be moved across an embedded /S. Under these two principles all phenomena appear to fall into place. The phenomena in question have been observed in the literature (see note 1), which, however, fails to offer a principled solution. With the help of the notion of directionality and of the technique of V-clustering, Semantic Syntax can account for the seemingly irregular data in a straightforward and principled way.

Let us have look at the details. In clause (1a) standard left-branching has applied in the V-cluster (as for Dutch, and for the same reason, examples are in the form of subordinate clauses). The shallow structure is as in (1c), derived from the SA (1b), formally specified by the Formation Rules in 6.3.1.

(1)a. ... daß ich tanzen gegangen bin
       ... that I dance gone am
       ‘... that I have gone dancing’