

On the assertion of adverbial clauses

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1. Introduction

Central question: Under what conditions can adverbial clauses in German be used as assertions, e. g. as statements, claims etc.?

Main claim: The potential of German adverbial clauses to be used as assertions, their assertoric potential, does not depend on grammatical factors like the degree of their syntactic integration or their semantic role. Rather, it is largely governed by certain norms of rational communication and by aspects of information structure.

2. Basic theoretical assumptions

Assertions are a type of *illocutionary act*, cf. Austin (1962), Searle (1969), Fogal et al. (2018), Pagin & Marsili (2025). In the multidimensional analysis of meaning adopted here, cf. Potts (2005), Gutzman (2015), illocutionary acts correspond to *illocutionary intentions*, i. e. communicative intentions constitutive of a type of illocutionary act,¹ in the expressive content of utterances:

(A1) An utterance *u* is an illocutionary act *ill-act* iff the expressive content of *u* includes an illocutionary intention corresponding to *ill-act*.

For assertions, (A1) implies (A2):

(A2) An utterance *u* is an assertion iff the expressive content of *u* includes an assertoric intention.

Two basic assertoric intentions (B-S and B-A: the set of propositions believed to be true in the world under consideration by speaker and addressee, respectively):²

ASSERT-INT-1(*p*): speaker wants the utterance to have the effect that *p* is an element of B-A.
ASSERT-INT-2(*p*): sp wants the utterance to have the effect that addressee is informed that *p* is an element of B-S.

For example, the meaning of a common type of utterances of sentence (1) is represented by (M1) in this approach (prop, expr: propositional and expressive content, respectively):

(1) Paul versteht nichts von Kunst.
'Paul doesn't know anything about art'

(M1) prop: PAUL-DOESNT-KNOW-ANYTHING-ABOUT-ART
expr: ASSERT-INT-1(PAUL-DOESNT-KNOW-ANYTHING-ABOUT-ART)

By (A1) – (A2), an intention-based account of illocutionary acts is favored over the commitment-based theory advocated by Geurts (2019) and others. But commitments also play a role in the intention-based account. They are linked to illocutionary intentions by principles of cooperative communication. One of these links is (C1):

¹ These intentions correspond to Searle's (1969) "essential condition" of the type of illocutionary act.

² That *x* believes *p* to be true is understood in a wide sense that also covers cases in which *x* just assumes *p* to be true for the purposes of the communication.

(C1) If speakers express ASSERT-INT-1(p) or ASSERT-INT-2(p) by an utterance u, they commit to believing p to be true in the world under consideration when they make u.

(C1) corresponds to the traditional sincerity condition of assertions.

3. Testing assertion

3.1 The Commentary Test

When an utterance is an illocutionary act, it should be possible to give a commentary on the utterance that refers to this act:

- (2) A: Paul versteht nichts von Kunst.
'Paul knows nothing about art'
B (commenting on A): Ich bin überrascht, dass du sagst, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'I am surprised that you say that Paul knows nothing about art'

By using the phrase *dass du sagst, dass* 'that you say that' the speaker of the commentary B refers to an assertion made by the speaker of A. 'Say that p' is the most general predicate describing an assertion of p, as opposed to 'claim that p', 'confess that p', 'agree that p', 'admit that p' etc., which denote more specific kinds of assertion.

(2) is a pragmatically well-formed dialogue. In particular, the speaker of A normally cannot reject B by denying that s/he made the assertion ascribed to him/her. By contrast, a commentary of this kind is pragmatically ill-formed when applied to the utterance of a clause which intuitively doesn't have assertoric potential:

- (3) A: Es ist wenig wahrscheinlich, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'It is unlikely that Paul knows nothing about art'
B (commenting on the underlined part of A): # Ich bin überrascht, dass du sagst, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'I am surprised that you say that Paul knows nothing about art'

The speaker of A could always deny that s/he asserted the argument clause of A. A natural reaction to B would be 'Wait a minute! I didn't say that Paul knows nothing about art'.

The difference is not caused by the fact that (3B) is a commentary on the utterance of a dependent clause, while (2B) comments on the utterance of an independent sentence. The Commentary Test is blind for this distinction, see (3) vs. (4):

- (4) A: Bei unserem Museumsbesuch wurde mir klar, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'During our visit to the museum I realized that Paul knows nothing about art.'
B (commenting on the underlined part of A): Ich bin überrascht, dass du sagst, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'I am surprised that you say that Paul knows nothing about art'

3.1 Lexical indicators of assertion

In addition, certain lexical indicators can be used to test whether clauses have assertoric potential, e. g. the adverbial *ehrlich gesagt* 'frankly'. If this adverbial is possible in the utterance u of a clause, u is normally an assertion.³

³ For limitations see below.

- (5) Bei unserem Museumsbesuch wurde mir klar, dass Paul (ehrlich gesagt) nichts von Kunst versteht.
'During our visit to the museum I realized that Paul (frankly) knows nothing about art.'
- (6) Es ist wenig wahrscheinlich, dass Paul (*ehrlich gesagt) nichts von Kunst versteht.
It is unlikely that Paul knows nothing about art.

Furthermore, some modal particles of German are indicators of assertions, e. g. the unstressed variant of *ja*:⁴

- (7) Bei unserem Museumsbesuch fiel mir wieder ein, dass Paul (ja) nichts von Kunst versteht.
'During our visit to the museum it came back to me that Paul (JA) knows nothing about art.
- (8) Es ist wenig wahrscheinlich, dass Paul (*ja) nichts von Kunst versteht.
'It is unlikely that Paul knows nothing about about art '

Some limitations: Lexical indicators in argument clauses of speech act reports often indicate an assertion of the speaker of the reported act, not of the speaker of the report. Moreover, lexical indicators sometimes are inappropriate not because the utterance is not an assertion but because of specific restrictions on their use. For example, *ehrlich gesagt* is inappropriate in assertions which do not require a certain degree of frankness. In the following applications of the tests these and other limitations are taken into account.

4. Non-correlations between assertoric potential and syntactic or semantic properties of adverbial clauses

4.1 Assertoric potential does not correlate with \pm integration of adverbial clauses

The following examples (9) – (32) are ordered in four groups illustrating the combinations of (un)integration with (non-)assertoric uses of adverbial clauses I found in the data. This will facilitate an assessment of the popular assumption that the assertoric potential of adverbial clauses increases with a decrease in integration, made explicit (and generalized to all dependent clauses and all types of illocution) in the introduction to Meibauer et al. (2013): "Dependent clauses can be evaluated in terms of 'integration vs. unintegration', whereby increasing unintegration goes hand in hand with increasing illocutionary independence".⁵ The idea of a negative linear correlation between \pm integration and illocutionary potential is also inherent in cartographic studies of adverbial clauses in German, e. g. Coniglio (2011), Frey (2012), Frey (2021), Freywald (2018).

A negative linear correlation would predict that only two combinations of [\pm integration] and [\pm assertion] are attested: [+integration, -assertion] and [-integration, +assertion]. But in fact, we find all four possible combinations (adverbial clauses underlined):

[+integration, +assertion]: Integrated adverbial clauses used as assertions

- (9) [...] und solange du ehrlich gesagt kein vernünftiges Kontra geben kannst bestätigst du nur diesen Umstand viel mehr als ihn auszuhebeln.
'And as long as you, frankly, are unable to give a reasonable counterargument, you're only confirming this fact rather than refuting it.'
(/mein-mmo.de/blade-and-soul-start-der-closed-beta-099/)

⁴ I do not translate *ja* because it doesn't have an exact equivalent in English. Roughly it indicates that the speaker assumes that the proposition of the utterance is information that is already accessible to the addressee of the assertion.

⁵ "[...] dass abhängige Sätze in einer Dimension der ‚Integration versus Desintegration‘ zu bewerten sind, wobei zunehmende Desintegration mit zunehmender illokutionärer Selbstständigkeit einhergeht" (Meibauer et al 2013: 9).

- (10) Seit man ja auf jedem Telefon sieht, wer angerufen hat, ist es ja noch einfacher geworden, selber zu entscheiden, mit wem man spricht.
'Since_{temp} you can JA see who called on every phone, it has JA become even easier to decide for yourself who you want to talk to.'
(hilferuf.de/thema/privatnummer-einfach-hingegeben.207740/page-3)
- (11) vielleicht hat sie ja dann doch ein schlechtes Gewissen bekommen, weil sie schon sehr intensiv geflirtet hat, während sie ja noch vergeben war, [...]
'Maybe she felt guilty because she had been flirting very intensely while_{temp} she JA was still in a relationship.'
(www.gutefrage.net/frage/zu-sehr-bedraengt-nun-groupt-sie-ab-was-soll-ich-tun.)
- (12) Er hat sich bei diesem Tanzwettbewerb so verausgabt, dass er dann ja auch drei Tage nicht zur Arbeit gehen konnte.
'He exerted himself so much at this dance competition that he JA couldn't go to work for three days.'
(Thurmair 1989: 79)
- (13) Dabei hat sie allerdings so eine riesige Klappe, dass das ehrlich gesagt ziemlich verkehrt und unpassend rüber kommt.
'However, she has such a big mouth that, frankly, it comes across as rather wrong and inappropriate.'
(/wasliestdu.de/rezension/ploetzlich-banshee-2)
- (14) Einige wollten sich einfach aus der Verantwortung stehlen, indem sie, ehrlich gesagt, sogar zur Verstaatlichung bereit waren [...]
'Some wanted simply to shirk responsibility by, frankly, even being prepared to nationalize.'
(/brill.com/display/book/9783846754733/BP000005.xml)
- (15) Wenn jetzt ja alles wieder funktioniert, ist ja alles wieder gut [...]
'When everything is JA working again now, everything is JA fine.'
(/communities.apple.com/de/thread/200020677?sortBy=rank)
- (16) Ihr Lieben, auch wenn es jetzt ja nun länger ein wenig stiller war hier heißt das nicht, dass nichts passiert ist.
'Dear all, even though it has JA been a little quiet here for a while now, that does not mean that nothing has been happening.'
(www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=4081439021977645&id=909770279144551&set=a.909920582462854&locale=de_DE)
- (17) Dieser Anstieg überrascht deshalb, weil ja eigentlich die Zahl der Mütter im gebärfähigen Alter [...] seit langem zurückgeht.
'This increase is surprising because the number of mothers of childbearing age has JA actually been declining for a long time.'
(www.badische-zeitung.de/.../kleiner-babyboom-in-deutschland-39472767.html)
- (18) Und da es, ehrlich gesagt, für uns unkomplizierter und auch so wunderbar war, trugen wir sie im Tuch und schliefen mit ihnen in einem Bett.
'And since_{caus}, frankly, it was easier for us and also so wonderful, we carried them in a sling and slept with them in one bed.'
(www.stadtlandmama.de/.../wie-meine-tochter-mir-beigebracht-hat-meinem-herzen-zu-folgen)
- (19) [...] finde ich seinen Beitrag fast ein bisschen verwegen! Verwegen nicht deshalb weil er ja richtig schreibt und wie Du sagst den Nagel auf den Kopf trifft, [...]
'I find his contribution almost a little reckless! Reckless not because he is JA right and, as you say, hits the nail on the head.'
(forum.agrowissen.de/forum/index.php?thread/29-fragen-und-anregungen/&postID=62067)

[+integration, -assertion]: Integrated adverbial clauses not used as assertions

- (20) Aufhören? Von wegen! Anita Kupsch ist 76 und spielt so lange weiter, bis sie [*ja] im Lotto gewinnt.
'Quit? No way! Anita Kupsch is 76 and will keep playing until she wins the lottery.'
(www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.harold-und-maude-in-stuttgart-proben-fuer-den-selbstmord-page1.18f909a3-c4bc-43c9-bf76-97026491ab7e.html)

- (21) Fast jeder_i hat schon einmal mit jemand geflirtet, während er_i (*ja/*ehrlich gesagt) schon verlobt war.
'Almost everyone_i has flirted with someone while they_i were already engaged.'
- (22) Gott hält uns nie zum Besten und wird den Zweck der Natur nicht gefährden, indem er [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] irgendwelche Inkonsistenzen in ihrem Gang erlaubt.
'God never makes fun of us and will not jeopardize the purpose of nature by allowing any inconsistencies in its course.'
(/islamische-zeitung.de/nach-innen-gerichtet-uebersetzung-von-suhrawardis-philosophie-der-erleuchtung-erschiene/)
- (23) Wenn das [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] passiert, werden die Chancen auf Fortschritte bei der nachhaltigen Entwicklung möglicherweise vergeben.
'If that happens, the opportunity to make progress with sustainable development could be missed.'
(www.linguee.de/deutsch-englisch/uebersetzung/wenn+das+passiert.html)
- (24) Bekannt war er nicht, weil er [*ja] jemals irgendein Amt oder eine Funktion innegehabt hätte.
'He was not well known because he had ever held any office or position.'
(www.mannheimer-morgen.de/orte/schriesheim_artikel,-schriesheim-in-der-fremde-heimisch-geworden-arid,362811.html.)

[-integration, +assertion]: Unintegrated adverbial clauses used as assertions

- (25) Und wenn man jetzt ja viel mehr Zeit zum Schreiben der Drehbücher hat, warum dann plötzlich nur noch vier Episoden?
'And if you JA now have much more time to write the scripts, why suddenly only four episodes?'
(www.robots-and-dragons.de/news/121895-star-wars-obi-wan-serie-ewan-mcgregor-unbestimmte-zeit-verschoben)
- (26) Die Sängerin war die einzige mit einem Mikro, E-Gitarre ohne Kabel ohne sichtbaren Verstärker (obwohl das ja möglich ist) & das Schlagzeug.
'The singer was the only one with a microphone, an electric guitar without cables and no visible amplifier (although that is JA possible), and the drums.'
(www.drummerforum.de/forum/thread/64020-welche-masche-bei-bestimmten-live-auftritten)
- (27) Es ist kein Tool, das dir „die perfekte Marke“ ausspuckt – weil das ehrlich gesagt Schwachsinn wäre.
'It's not a tool that spits out “the perfect brand” – because, frankly, that would be total nonsense.'
(de.linkedin.com/posts/friesenecker_ehrlich-gesagt-deine-marke-braucht-mehr-activity-7287500029395636225-M_7b)
- (28) Der Kampf geht weiter, zumal das ja nur eine kleinere Nebenbaustelle in meiner dicken Krankenakte ist.
'The battle continues, the more so as this is JA only a minor side issue in my thick medical file.'
(www.facebook.com/ebbythust/photos/schlechte-nachricht-heute-kam-das-ergebnis-des-bei-mir-vor-14-tagen-herausoperie/9670748229626014/)

[-integration, -assertion]: Unintegrated adverbial clauses not used as assertions

- (29) Bevor ich es [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] vergesse: Kannst du mir deine Mail-Adresse geben?
'Before I forget: Can you give me your email address?'
- (30) Falls Sie [*ja] Zeit haben oder Ablenkung brauchen: Dieses webbasierte Spiel für Prokrastinationsfreunde macht derzeit die Runde im Netz.
'In case you have time or need a distraction: this web-based game for procrastinators is currently making the rounds on the internet.'
(blogs.faz.net/quelleinternet/2015/05/12/1524-1525/)
- (31) wenn die zeit [*ja] noch reicht: email beantworten
'if there still is time: reply to email'

- (www.messieforum.de/t1279f136-Sonntag-Abends-Task-Force-gt-gt-gt-Wer-hat-Lust-zum-mitmachen.html)
- (32) Und als ob das [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] nicht genug wäre: die Tische im Freien sind am Nachmittag und frühen Abend sonnenüberflutet, [...]
'And as if that weren't enough: the outdoor tables are flooded with sunshine in the afternoon and early evening, [...]'
(/www.linguee.de/deutschenglisch/uebersetzung/als+ob+das+nicht+genug+wäre.html)

Except (21), all examples are authentic. To determine [\pm assertion] the tests introduced in 3. were applied: All [+assertion] examples contain at least one acceptable occurrence of *ehrlich gesagt* or *ja*. In the authentic [-assertion] examples these indicators are originally absent and a subsequent insertion of them (in square brackets) led to a significant decrease of acceptability in the reading intended in the context of the example, in most cases in every conceivable context.⁶ The Commentary test confirms these results, as illustrated in (33) and (34) for (10) and (30), respectively:

- (33) A: Seit man ja auf jedem Telefon sieht, wer angerufen hat, ist es ja noch einfacher geworden, selber zu entscheiden, mit wem man spricht.
'Since you JA can see who called on every phone, it has JA become even easier to decide for yourself who you want to talk to.'
- B (commenting on the underlined part of A): Ich bin überrascht, dass du sagst, dass man auf jedem Telefon sieht, wer angerufen hat.
'I am surprised that you say that you can see who called on every phone.'
- (34) A: Falls Sie Zeit haben oder Ablenkung brauchen: Dieses webbasierte Spiel für Prokrastinationsfreunde macht derzeit die Runde im Netz.
'In case you have time or need a distraction: this web-based game for procrastinators is currently making the rounds on the internet.'
- B (commenting on the underlined part of A): # Wie kommen Sie dazu, zu sagen, dass ich Zeit habe oder Ablenkung brauche?
'How can you say that I have time or need a distraction?'

For [\pm integration] the usual criteria were applied: Adverbial clauses which fill the prefield of a V2-sentence⁷ or have a correlate in the host clause were classified as integrated, see (9), (10), (12), (13), (15) – (20), (23). In addition, I checked whether the proposition of the adverbial clause is in the scope of the illocution of the host clause and of c-commanding operators, since this is what we expect for integrated clauses. This expectation is borne out in all examples in the [+integration] groups. By contrast, the examples in the [-integration] groups show none of these symptoms of integration, and some of them exhibit additional signs of non-integration.⁸

Thus, the list (9) – (32) clearly shows that the assertoric potential of adverbial clauses does not depend on the degree of their syntactic integration.

4.2 Assertoric potential does not correlate with the position of the finite verb in adverbial clauses

In all examples in (9) – (32) the finite verb is in last position. This proves that VL order neither inhibits nor requires an assertoric use of adverbial clauses. Contra to claims in the literature, cf.

⁶ In some cases, *ehrlich gesagt* was not tested because its low acceptability could have been an effect of the specific restriction mentioned in 3.2.

⁷ V2, V1, VL: Finite verb in second, first and last position, respectively.

⁸ My classification of (18) diverges from cartographic classifications of *da*-clauses as 'peripheral', i. e. not fully integrated, cf. e. g. Frey (2012), Freywald (2018). In Jacobs (2025) I argued that the evidence for this is unconvincing. Cf. also Pauly (2013).

Truckenbrodt (2006), Antomo & Steinbach (2010), this also holds for adverbial V2- and V1-clauses. To be sure, utterances of V2- or V1-clauses after adverbial subordinators are always assertions or other illocutions, e. g. the much-discussed "*weil*-V2-Sätze":

- (35) Auch das müsst ihr jetzt einfach akzeptieren, weil das ist_{fin} ja hier so eine kleine Einbahnstraße.
'You just have to accept that now, because it JA is such a small one-way street here.'
(www.instagram.com/reel/D0s-nq9jLDt/)

But several other types of adverbial V2- or V1-clauses are normally not used as assertions, e. g. hypothetical comparatives with the verb in second position after *als* and hypothetical V1-conditionals:

- (36) Als sei_{fin} [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] nichts gewesen, ging er erleichtert und befreit über den menschenleeren Strand dem Wasser entgegen.
'As if nothing had happened, he walked across the deserted beach toward the water, feeling relieved and liberated.'
(www.nickstories.de/stories/ratte-rizzo/pdf/quartett-09.pdf)
- (37) Hätte_{fin} ich [*ja/*ehrlich gesagt] mehr Zeit gehabt, dann hätte ich einen kürzeren Brief geschrieben.
'Had I had more time, I would have written a shorter letter.'
(Reis & Wöhlstein 2010: 115)

4.3 Assertoric potential does not correlate with possible root transformations in adverbial clauses

In English, the possibility of internal root transformations, e. g. left dislocation, correlates with the assertoric potential of adverbial clauses, cf. Hooper & Thompson (1973), Larson & Sawada (2012), Haegeman (2006). But in German, subordinated clauses, whether or not they can be used as assertions, *never* allow root transformations. This can be seen in all adverbial clauses in (1) – (32). For example, (38b) shows that left dislocation is not possible in the unintegrated causal clause in (28) (= (38a)), even though the clause is asserted:

- (38) a. Der Kampf geht weiter, zumal dieses Problem ja nur eine kleinere Nebenbaustelle in meiner dicken Krankenakte ist.
'The battle continues, especially since this problem is JA only a minor side issue in my thick medical file.'
b. Der Kampf geht weiter, *zumal dieses Problem_i das_j ja nur eine kleinere Nebenbaustelle in meiner dicken Krankenakte ist.

Thus, if a German adverbial clause tolerates an internal left dislocation, it is not subordinated. This is illustrated by (39a vs. b), borrowed from Freywald (2016: 191):

- (39) a. Gregor ist echt der kreativste Kopf in der Gruppe, obwohl der Maik_i, der_j hat_{fin} auch immer sehr gute Ideen.
'Gregor is definitely the most creative person in the group, although Maik_i he_j always has very good ideas too.'
b. Gregor ist echt der kreativste Kopf in der Gruppe, *obwohl der Maik_i, der_j auch immer sehr gute Ideen hat_{fin}.

Freywald (2016), (2018) showed that concessive V2-clauses as in (39a) are not subordinated. That is why they allow an internal left dislocation, in contrast to their subordinated VL-counterparts, see (39b), despite the fact that both variants have assertoric potential.

4.4 Assertoric potential does not correlate with semantic functions of adverbial clauses

Assertoric potential ignores the semantic functions of adverbial clauses. This is obvious for traditional adverbial functions: Utterances of temporal clauses can be, but need not be assertions, see (9) – (11) vs. (20) – (21). The same holds for instrumental clauses, (14) vs. (22), conditional clauses, (15) – (16) vs. (23), (30) – (31), and causal clauses, (17) – (19), (27) – (28) vs. (24). More general semantic distinctions do not correlate with assertoric potential, either. In particular, it does not matter whether an adverbial clause supports the speech act of the host clause or modifies the event of the host clause, cf. Sweetser (1990). Event modifying as well as speech act supporting adverbial clauses can be used as assertions, see (9) – (15) and (25), respectively, and for both kinds of clauses we find non-assertoric uses, see (20) – (23) for event modifying and (29) – (30) for speech act supporting adverbial clauses.

5. A pragmatic explanation

5.1 The basic idea

(A3) is the central assumption of my proposal for a pragmatic explanation:

(A3) Speakers are always⁹ expected to act in accordance with certain norms of rational communication when they add an assertoric intention to the expressive content of an utterance.

Consequently, if an utterance *u* is such that adding an assertoric intention to the expressive content of *u* would lead to a deviation from the relevant norms, *u* will normally not be interpreted as an assertion and grammatical markings of assertion, e. g. speech act adverbials, will seem inappropriate.

5.2 Three norms of rational assertion

The relevant norms hold for all illocutionary intentions, but I present them in the form they take for assertoric intentions and call them norms of rational assertion.

5.2.1 Consistency

CONSISTENCY

Speakers are expected not to add an assertoric intention to the expressive content of an utterance *u* when there are evident indications that they don't have the intention when they make *u*.

An indication is evident if it is mutually recognized by the interlocutors, i. e. they all recognize it, know that they all recognize it, know that they know this, and so on.

An effect of CONSISTENCY is that *non-veridical* utterances are not expected to be asserted. An utterance *u* with proposition *p* is non-veridical iff there are evident indications that the speaker doesn't commit to believing *p* when s/he makes *u*. If these indications moreover suggest a commitment to the belief of $\neg p$, the utterance is strongly non-veridical, otherwise it is weakly non-veridical.

Consider (3A), repeated in (41):

⁹ Except in abnormal cases (intoxication, dementia etc.), which I will disregard.

- (41) Es ist wenig wahrscheinlich, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht.
'It is unlikely that Paul knows nothing about art'

The choice of the matrix clause *es ist wenig wahrscheinlich* ('It is unlikely') is an evident indication that the speaker of (41), when uttering the argument clause, does not thereby commit to believing that Paul knows nothing about art. Thus, the utterance of the argument clause is non-veridical, in this case weakly.

Since expressing an assertoric intention implies a commitment to believing *p*, cf. (C1), evident indications that a speaker doesn't commit to believing *p* are also evident indications that s/he doesn't have an assertoric intention. Thus, adding an assertoric intention to the expressive content of a non-veridical utterance is incompatible with CONSISTENCY and therefore not expected in rational communication. That is why utterances of the argument clause of (41) are not interpreted as assertions. Consequently, they neither pass the Commentary Test nor tolerate lexical indicators of assertions, see (3), (6) and (8).

This effect of CONSISTENCY can also be seen in most of the adverbial clauses in the [-assertion] groups in (9) – (32). Their utterances are non-veridical in the sense just explained. By contrast, none of the examples in the [+assertion] groups are non-veridical.

Adverbial clauses differ from argument clauses, however, in the ways non-veridicality is signaled. It's not a matrix predicate like *Es ist wenig wahrscheinlich* that shows that the speaker doesn't commit to believing the proposition of an adverbial clause. Rather, the evidence for this comes, for example, from negative polarity items, e. g. *irgendwelche* ('any') or *jemals* ('ever'), see (22) and (24), often in combination with negation or subjunctive mood, or from inherently non-veridical subordinators like *falls* ('in case') and *als ob* ('as if'), see (30) and (32), respectively.

In still other cases, the judgement that the utterance of a clause is non-veridical is not based on conventional linguistic indications but on contextual evidence or world knowledge, e. g. in (20). Temporal clauses headed by *bis* ('until') are not inherently non-veridical. But reading (20) in the context of its source, a newspaper report about the actress Anita Kupsch, and applying some world knowledge, one can be sure that the writer didn't want to commit to believing that Anita Kupsch wins the lottery, let alone assert that she does.

The decisive role of the context becomes evident when we compare (20) with (42):

- (42) Trotzdem ist sie zufrieden, denn sie liebt ihren Mann, ihren Laden, ihre Kinder und arrangiert sich mit Enttäuschungen – bis sie [?ja] im Lotto gewinnt, und das nicht zu knapp.
'Nevertheless, she is content because she loves her husband, her shop, her children, and she comes to terms with disappointments—until she wins the lottery, and not just a little.'
(www.welt.de/print/die_welt/literatur/article108913902/Heidenreichs-Buecherschau-Nur-Schoenes-Nur-Buecher.html)

Here, the same *bis*-clause is used to narrate an event that changed the life of the protagonist of a novel. So, the author of (42) used the *bis*-clause as a narrative assertion.¹⁰

The contextual variation between assertoric and non-veridical uses is also typical for other temporal clauses, e. g. *bevor*- or *sobald*-clauses ('before', 'as soon as'). It received more attention, however, in research on *conditional* clauses, where it was discussed under the heading factual vs. hypothetical conditionals.¹¹ Contextually licensed assertoric uses of conditionals are exemplified by the *wenn*-clauses in (15) and (25), while the context indicates a non-veridical interpretation for the *wenn*-clauses in (23) and (31).

¹⁰ That *ja* is not very natural here reflects its specific role as an indicator of accessible information. The particle would be fully acceptable under the (counterfactual) assumption that the reader of the narration was previously informed that the protagonist won the lottery.

¹¹ E. g. in Zifonun et al. (1997: 2286).

The common denominator of these variations between assertoric and non-assertoric uses of certain adverbial clauses is that the proposition of the entire clause neither entails the proposition of the adverbial clause nor its negation. This is well known for conditionals: 'p if q' neither entails q nor \neg q. But also 'p until/before/as soon as q' neither entail q nor \neg q. This opens a leeway for speakers to use these adverbial clauses either as an assertion of q or in situations in which they evidently don't assume q to be true and therefore don't assert q. Which of the two options is chosen will often be signaled by linguistic means, e. g. polarity items, but it can also be completely left to the context, as in (20) vs. (42).

A further instance of this phenomenon is the contrast between the causal clauses in (19) and (24). Both are in the scope of an external negation, but only the one in (24) is non-veridical, signaled by *jemals* ('ever'). The other one is asserted. This variation, too, is made possible by semantic indeterminacy: ' \neg (p because q)' neither entails q nor \neg q. This gives speakers the choice between an assertoric and a non-assertoric use of q. Again, which of the options is chosen is indicated by linguistic and/or contextual clues.

5.2.2 Referential Completeness

An assertoric use of the temporal clause in (21), repeated in (43),

- (43) Fast jeder_i hat schon einmal mit jemand geflirtet, während er_i (*ja/*ehrlich gesagt) schon verlobt war.
'Almost everyone_i has flirted with someone while they_i were already engaged.'

would not necessarily contradict linguistic or contextual indications that the speaker doesn't commit to believing the proposition. (Compare example (11), where an almost identical clause is asserted.) Rather, what seems to stand in the way of an assertion of the temporal clause is that it is not clear what proposition could be asserted anyway. Who is it that could be said to have already been engaged when s/he flirted with someone? This points to a further norm of rational assertion:

REFERENTIAL COMPLETENESS

Speakers are expected not to add an assertoric intention to the expressive content of an utterance u when the proposition p of u contains a variable that is free in p and whose reference is evidently not fixed when they make u.

A similar principle has been proposed by Larson & Sawada (2012). It explains why the temporal clause in (43) is not asserted: The variable x corresponding to the pronoun *er* is free in the proposition of the clause, i. e. not bound by an operator in this proposition. But its reference is evidently not fixed. Rather, the value of x must be left open to check whether for almost every assignment of a value to x it is true that x has flirted with someone while x was already engaged, as required by the quantifier in the main clause.

REFERENTIAL COMPLETENESS is rooted in the concept of assertion: We cannot state/claim/confess etc. a proposition p when the reference of an internally free variable in p is not fixed, because we wouldn't know what proposition p is and, consequently, we couldn't commit to believing p or lead others to believe p.

REFERENTIAL COMPLETENESS has far-reaching effects on *relative* clauses. It explains why typical restrictive uses of adnominal relative clauses are not assertions. In these uses, the value of the variable corresponding to the relative pronoun must be left open so that the relative clause can function as a property that helps to identify the individuals in the extension of the noun phrase. The same holds for temporal or local relative clauses (*when-* or *where-*clauses in English) when they function as adverbials that identify the time or location of the event of the main clause. In certain uses of restrictive relative clauses, however, just as in

non-restrictive uses, an assertion is licensed by a context-based construction of a referent for the relative pronoun, cf. Jacobs (2025: 2.4.2.3, 2.5).

Contextual information sometimes also allows a referring use of externally bound pronouns in adverbial clauses and, consequently, an assertion. Consider the causal clause in (44), borrowed from Pauly (2013):

- (44) Allerdings ist zu erwarten, dass jeder betroffene Senator_i rechtliche Schritte dagegen einleitet, da er_i sonst [ja] sein_i Fehlverhalten öffentlich eingestehen würde.
 'However, it is to be expected that each of the senators that are affected_i will take legal action, as otherwise he_i would [JA] be publicly admitting his_i misconduct.'
 (from Pauly 2013: 189).

An assertoric use of the *da*-clause, indicated by *ja*, is possible because, in a likely interpretation, the writer or speaker of (44) mentally associates the quantifier *jeder betroffene Senator* with a specific group of individuals and refers to a typical member of this group by the pronoun *er* in the *da*-clause. At least, a referential reading of the pronoun seems to be much more natural here than in the temporal clause in (43), where it is unlikely that the speaker associates the quantifier in the main clause, *fast jeder* ('almost everyone'), with a specific group of individuals which could provide a referent for the bound pronoun.

The connection between specificity of quantifiers and referential readings of bound pronouns is well known.¹² But now, we also have an explanation why specificity of quantifiers can license assertoric uses of subordinated clauses with bound pronouns. Cf. Jacobs (2025) for more details and discussion of some technical problems.

5.2.3 Usefulness

USEFULNESS

Speakers are expected not to add an assertoric intention to the expressive content of an utterance *u* when it is evident that the intended effect has already been achieved when they make *u*.

(45) illustrates the working of this norm:

- (45) A: Die Zahl der Mütter im gebärfähigen Alter geht seit langem zurück.
 'The number of mothers of childbearing age has been declining for a long time'
 B: Das stimmt. Aber weil das (??)ja/*ehrlich gesagt) so ist, überrascht der Anstieg in der Geburtenrate.
 'That's true. But because this is the case, the rise in the birth rate comes as a surprise.'

(45B) is based on (17), but adapted to a context in which an assertoric use of the causal clause would be in conflict with USEFULNESS. The intended effect of an assertoric intention is that the addressee believes *p* or is informed that the speaker believes *p*, cf. section 2. At the time of the utterance of the causal clause in (45B), it is evident that these effects have already been achieved: The addressee of a possible assertion of the clause, the speaker of (45A), has already publicly committed to believing that the number of mothers of childbearing age is declining, and the speaker of (45B) has explicitly agreed before s/he uttered the causal clause.

In popular terminology, the proposition of the causal clause is in the *Common Ground* of the utterance of the causal clause in (45B). Following Stalnaker,¹³ Common Ground is usually defined in terms of mutual acceptance by the interlocutors, like in (45B). But other cases in which an assertoric intention is excluded because its goal has already been reached are

¹² See already Reinhart (1983).

¹³ E. g. Stalnaker (2014).

not based on mutual acceptance but on a contextual calculation of evidently converging beliefs of the interlocutors.¹⁴ For simplicity, I subsume these cases under the term "Common Ground".

The fact that Common Ground (in some sense) and assertion are opposed is itself common ground in linguistics. But it has not been explicitly related to a norm of rational communication¹⁵ which, when properly generalized, holds for illocutionary intentions of all kinds. For example, generalized USEFULNESS also excludes *directive* intentions whose inherent goal has evidently already been reached.

5.3 Assertion and focus-background structure

Some researchers assumed that clauses used as assertions always have their own FBS, separated from the FBS of the host clause.¹⁶ But this is empirically untenable, see (46):

- (46) A: Weshalb überrascht der Anstieg in der Geburtenrate?
'Why is the rise in the birth rate surprising?'
B: [_{Background} Der Anstieg überrascht], [_{Focus} weil ja eigentlich die Zahl der Mütter im gebärfähigen Alter seit langem zurückgeht].
[_{Background} The rise is surprising] [_{Focus} because the number of mothers of childbearing age has JA actually been declining for a long time].'

In (46B), example (17) is used in a context where the causal clause is the focus and the host clause is the background. So, the causal clause, in spite of being asserted, doesn't have an FBS of its own, but is integrated into the FBS of the host clause.

On the other hand, an adverbial clause doesn't have to be asserted to have its own FBS. Consider (47):

- (47) A: Einer von uns ist heute mit Abspülen dran.
'One of us is on dishwashing duty today.'
B: Falls [_{Focus} ich] [_{Background} das (*ja) bin], möchte ich es lieber morgen machen.
'In case [_{Background} it's] [_{Focus} me] I'd rather do it tomorrow'

In (47B) the conditional clause has its own FBS, with the subject as focus, the VP as background. But the clause is not asserted, and it couldn't be, because it is non-veridical.

There seems to be just one hard restriction on the interaction of assertion and FBS: Utterances of subordinated clauses that are in the background of a free focus are never assertions.¹⁷ A possible explanation is a prosodic law posited by Truckenbrodt (2013) (inspired by Downing 1970): If an utterance *u* is an assertion, *u* comprises *at least one intonation phrase*, indicated by at least one main accent. This law seems to hold without exceptions, and, to the extent that backgrounds of free focus don't form intonation phrases, it captures the mentioned restriction. But unfortunately, subordinated background clauses *can* be intonation phrases in German when they precede the focus in the main clause, as does the argument clause in (48B):

¹⁴ Cf. Simons (2025).

¹⁵ Rather, cases in which Common Ground blocks assertion are often discussed in terms of assertion vs. presupposition. This leads to conflicts with the traditional assumption that presuppositions are immune to negation. Several types of subordinated clauses are immune to negation but can nevertheless be asserted, e. g. appositive relative clauses and also some adverbial clauses, e. g. temporal clauses headed by *seit* ('since'), which evade negation but can be assertions, see (10).

¹⁶ Cf. Jacobs (1984), Reich & Reis (2013: 3.1), Freywald (2018: 115).

¹⁷ Free (or discourse) focus is focus not associated with a lexical operator like *nur* ('only'), For focus associated with lexical operators the restriction does not hold, cf. Jacobs (to appear).

- (48) A: Wie kommst du auf die Idee, dass Paul nichts von Kunst versteht?
 'Why do you think that Paul doesn't understand anything about art?'
 B: [_{IP} Dass er nichts von KUNST versteht], [_{IP} bemerkte ich bei unserem Besuch im MuSEum].
 'It was during our visit to the museum that I realized that he doesn't understand art.'

The fact that the utterance of the argument clause cannot be an assertion is obviously due to its being background after the question (48A). (The clause is neither non-veridical, nor referentially incomplete, nor in the Common Ground.) Nevertheless, in a natural pronunciation the utterance of the argument clause in (48B) forms an intonation phrase.

Another explanation for why background clauses cannot be used as assertions could start from the idea, essentially going back to Hooper & Thompson (1973), that a subordinated clause is asserted only if it is the *main point of the utterance* (MPU). But how can we define the intuitive notion of MPU in such a way that it becomes a necessary condition for assertion? One might propose that an utterance *u* of a subordinated clause is MPU iff *u* is the part of the utterance of the entire clause that is most relevant to the question under discussion (QUD), cf. Simons (2007: 1035). In this sense, the utterance of the backgrounded argument clause indeed fails to be the MPU, because it is not the part of (48B) that is most relevant to the question (48A). But being most relevant to the QUD is not a necessary condition for an assertoric use of clauses, as witnessed by appositive relative clauses and also by adverbial clauses like in (49B):

- (49) A: Was unternimmst du mit Paul, wenn er dich morgen besucht?
 'What are you going to do with Paul when he visits you tomorrow?'
 B: Da er sich (ja/ehrlich gesagt) nicht für Kultur interessiert, gehe ich mit ihm einkaufen.
 'Since he (JA/frankly) is not interested in culture, I'll go shopping with him.'

The utterance of the causal clause is an assertion, but clearly not the most relevant part of (49B) in regard to the question (49A).

Therefore, the reason why background clauses cannot be assertions is *not* that they are not MPU, if this notion is defined in terms of the QUD. The ban on assertoric uses of background clauses remains to be explained.

6. Summary

I argued that the assertoric potential of adverbial clauses in German does not depend on grammatical factors like syntactic integration, verb position, possible root transformations or semantic function. Rather, what seems to be crucial is whether adding an assertoric intention to the meaning of the utterance of an adverbial clause is compatible with certain norms of rational assertion and with some aspects of information structure.

This account predicts that adverbial clauses don't differ from other clauses in regard to assertoric potential, since the norms of rational assertion and the requirements of information structure can be expected to hold for all kinds of clauses, e. g. also for argument clauses, relative clauses, and even for independent sentences. Moreover, as the norms are assumed to be special cases of general norms of rational illocution, their effects should have counterparts when non-assertoric illocutions are involved. These predictions seem to be borne out, cf. Jacobs (2025).

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