

Left outside: nominal operators in German and French

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DOI: 10.54103/milanoup.233.c770

ABSTRACT

Building upon previous research on German, and on French, constructions of the type < NP/N + UTTERANCE > are analysed. These constructions are used semantically and pragmatically for the discursive evaluation of an argument and contribute to the structure of the discourse. Placing these nouns in initial position, in advance of the sentence frame, signals the discursive or argumentative interpretation of the following statement, as does the prosodic break and the graphic marking (colon or dash, e.g. *conclusion: ...*) and means that these words are significantly similar to text operators. On the basis of an extended concept of grammar, the construction can be seen as a discourse marker.

The starting point of the study is German, which has a larger number of forms used in this way. A comparison with French shows how differences can be explained which are not system related. These are related to usage, but also to the semantics of the nouns. The use of this construction in certain types of texts and communication is related to the progression of the text, and through a certain degree of routinization (Detges and Waltereit, 2016) these nouns have developed a new (discursive) status.

Keywords: left periphery; pragmatization; nominal operators.

1. Introduction

The construction of sentences can be visualized as consisting of a number of “fields”, and we shall be concerned here primarily with what will be termed here “outer field”, which fulfils similar functions in both German and French¹. These fields play an important role at both the textual and interactional level, both in the structuring of information and in the expression of attitudes or cognitive and discursive processes by the speaker. What we will call the “left outer field”² has a special function in the context of the present study, which is

1 In French syntax, the term “fields” (*champs*) is rarely used, but there is also work on the “detachment” in the left periphery (e.g. Charolles, 2005, 2009; Combettes, 1998, 2005) or “addition” (*ajout*) in the right periphery (e.g. Authier-Revuz and Lala, 2002; Berrendonner, 2002; Deulofeu, 2021).

2 Terms such as *Herausstellung* or *Linksversetzung* denote other operations and positions (the *Vorvorfeld* or the *Vorfeld*), cf. e.g., Averintseva (2007); Frey (2004, 2005a, 2005b); this study is

concerned with the utterance-initial position of a nominal component located on the left periphery, i.e. outside the sentence frame proper, but belonging to the utterance, and marked by a prosodic break or by punctuation (a colon or a dash, e.g. *Fazit: ...*).

Previous work on German³ and French has shown that a similar syntactic-semantic feature occurs in both languages (cf. e.g., the operator-scope structures in Fiehler, 2012, or constructions of the type < noun + utterance > in Rossari and Cojocariu, 2008 and Rossari, 2007, 2011a). Here we shall examine nouns in the construction < NP/N: + utterance >, and their role will be analyzed morphologically as well as semantically and pragmatically. This brief study is limited to nouns which are used to characterize the sentence following at the metadiscursive level (e.g. *Fazit*, *Frage*, ...). Certain nouns occur particularly frequently with this function in this position (e.g. *Fazit*, *Grund*).

The analysis is based on corpora of written language⁴, in which a part has characteristics of spoken language (conceptual orality)⁵, and on corpora of spoken language, which have been written down⁶.

Since the construction is relatively productive, the list of nouns occurring in this position is still open and we cannot claim to deal with all possible relevant lexical items here. Nevertheless, an analysis of the most frequent occurrences and their contexts is relevant in order to describe the semantics of the nouns used, which can be with or without a preceding article and/or adjective. The discursive role of this construction and its patterning in certain contexts (text and discourse types) will then be determined on the basis of our observations. Finally, we shall examine how the use of such words in this construction has become fixed and the status of some of the most frequent nouns will be discussed.

concerned with the “left outer field” – which belongs to the left sentence periphery and is sharply separated here from the *Vorvorfeld*, cf. Wöllstein, 2014.

- 3 In German, few authors have looked at nouns in the left outer field. Most work on the *linkes Außenfeld* focuses on the use of adverbial, verbal or participial forms (*mit anderen Worten*, *kurzum*; *guck mal*; *ehrllich gesagt*, ...), cf. e.g., Günthner, 2017; Imo, 2016. In oral language, where the notions of “sentence” and “field” are irrelevant, the term “beginning of a turn” is used, cf. e.g., Blühdorn, Foolen and Loureda, 2017.
- 4 These are press articles from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) of the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache: “W-Archiv der geschriebenen Sprache” (W-öffentlich - all public corpora of the W Archive (with new acquisitions).
- 5 These are Wikipedia discussions from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) of the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache, which exhibit features of orality although they are written. Archiv: EuroGr@mm-WPD-DE-DISC - Wikipedia Diskussionen (deutsch – TreeTagger); Korpus: Wiki_DE_DISC-öffentlich - öffentliche deutschsprachige Wikipedia-Diskussionen [2002-2011, 246.028.026 words]. On the notion of “conceptual orality” cf. Koch and Oesterreicher, 1985.
- 6 These are parliamentary plenary protocols (1949–2021), from the German Reference Corpus (DeReKo) of the Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache. Archiv W-öffentlich, Korpus: Plenarprotokolle [507.738.346 words].

2. Nouns and contexts

2.1 Binary structure

The analysis deals with a range of different forms which are realized in different ways (with or without an article, an adjective, a possessive). What they have in common is that they occur in initial position in a binary structure and their projective force. Such nouns focus attention on the following sentence and their meaning points to its role in the argument being presented. The following three examples give an initial insight into the use of such introductory nouns:

- (1) Ein sinnvoller Pakt würde am Inflationsproblem, also an der Geldwertstabilität nach innen und nach außen, ansetzen. Das ist aber in dieser Konstruktion nicht gewährleistet. *Fazit*: Der Stabilitätspakt in der vorliegenden Form ist definitiv nicht zielführend. (Bayerischer Landtag, 10.12.2003)
- (2) Das Ganztagsschulprogramm des Bundes kann in Brandenburg nicht wie erforderlich umgesetzt werden. Auch hier ist Brandenburg erneut Schlusslicht. *Der Grund*: Es fehlt an den entsprechenden Lehrerstellen, die das Land zu finanzieren hat. (Landtag Brandenburg, 30.08.2005)
- (3) Wir haben ein schwieriges Thema auf der Tagesordnung. Finanzausgleich ist ja keine leichte Sache. Wenn dazukommt, dass die Decke insgesamt ziemlich kurz ist und deshalb durch Hin- und Herschieben mal ein Arm, mal ein Bein herausguckt, wird es insgesamt nicht leichter. (Bischoff [SPD]: *Hauptsache*, wir frieren nicht!) (Landtag Brandenburg, 26.06.2006)

These extracts from parliamentary debates have the same structure. In all three cases the noun points to the central proposition of the following sentence. In the first example (1) we have a summarizing conclusion (*Fazit*), and the second (2) is about how the impossibility of implementing a school policy programme in Brandenburg can be justified (*Grund*). The third case (3) is about the highlighting of an important issue which must not be lost sight of (*Hauptsache*). This occurs in the course of a dialogue during an interjection, with the speaker picking up the metaphor of a blanket (for fiscal equalization used as a protective measure) which had been used by the previous speaker in a humorous way.

2.2 Forms

The following examples show (formal) differences typical of the use of nouns in functions of this kind. Some nouns are commonly used without an article as in (4):

- (4) Für seine Studie hat Stephan Frettlöhr 150 Unternehmen aus den Branchen Auto, Stahl, Pharma, Energie, Chemie und Telekommunikation untersucht, die zusammen jeweils 60 % des Marktes beherrschen. *Ergebnis*: „Der Personalbedarf schrumpft.“ (VDI Nachrichten, 18.08.2006; Der Alptraum vom menschenleeren Büro)

However, most nouns are only or also used with the definite article or a possessive, as in (5) and (6):

(5) Als er sich im 1934 gedrehten Film “Es geschah in einer Nacht” auszog, um ins Bett zu gehen, trug er – unfassbar für diese Zeit – KEIN Unterhemd! Millionen Männer taten es ihm im echten Leben nach – und verzichteten ab sofort ebenfalls auf ihre Unterhemden. *Die Folge*: Ganze Unterhemdfabriken gingen pleite! (Diskussion: Clark Gable, Wikipedia 2011)

(6) Ich fasse kurz zusammen: Stärkung der Patientenorientierung, qualitative Verbesserung der Versorgung von Patienten und Pflegebedürftigen sowie die Erhaltung des solidarischen Krankenversicherungssystems bis hin zur Ausschöpfung der Wirtschaftlichkeitsreserven, was eine noch größere Aufgabe darstellt. (Beifall bei der SPD sowie bei Abgeordneten des BÜNDNISSES 90/DIE GRÜNEN - Dr. Michael Luther [CDU/CSU]: Alles Blabla)

Mein Fazit: Wir haben viel für die Menschen erreicht. (Deutscher Bundestag 29.11.2001)

and quite frequently with an attributive adjective:

(7) Eine aktuelle Studie der schwedischen Zentralbank hat 200 Wahlen in Europa ausgewertet. *Das eindeutige Ergebnis*: Die Kürzungspolitik der Regierungen in Europa hat rechtsextreme Parteien stark gemacht. (Deutscher Bundestag, 02.02.2024)

(8) Er geht nach dem Motto: Wir können nicht fair, wir können nur billig. *Logisches Ergebnis*: Ausgebildete Lehrkräfte verlassen das Land und gehen anderswohin. (Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen, 23.03.2001)

Modal adjectives (*möglich, vermutlich, mutmaßlich*) also occur in the relevant NPs:

(9) Schon andere Biografen haben über Chanel's Liebschaft mit dem deutschen Diplomaten Hans Günther von Dincklage und die “Operation Modellhut” berichtet, bei der Chanel gegen Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs auf einer Reise nach Madrid Winston Churchill geheime Gespräche mit deutschen Funktionären vorschlagen sollte. *Vermutliches Ziel*: ein Separatfrieden mit Großbritannien. (Wikipedia-Diskussion 2011)

The noun *Hauptsache*, which is also being used with a slightly different meaning here⁷, is generally used without an article. It may also be noted that *Hauptsache* is often followed by a comma, in contrast to other nouns, which are usually followed by a colon. Compare (3) and the following example:

7 With the discursive use of *Hauptsache* at the beginning of the sentence, without an article and separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma, further argumentation is excluded. The noun primarily has an interactive function. Cf. Finkbeiner, 2018 and Robles Sabater, 2021.

(10) - Tja, liebe Grüne, da kommen Sie beinahe 22 Jahre zu spät. Egal. *Hauptsache*, die Landesbediensteten bekommen endlich ihren gerechten Mindestlohn. (Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, 22.03.2012)

Both Finkbeiner (2018, 153–155) and Robles Sabater (2021, 194) show how the form *Hauptsache* has nowadays become fully established and hardly ever competes with other lexical alternatives⁸. In this respect this noun behaves in a different way to the nouns listed above, in that it seems to have progressed further on its way to becoming a discourse marker, i.e. to have reached a further stage of grammaticalization⁹.

2.3 Frequency and reduction

The context of use, i.e. the form of the discourse and the text type, plays an important role in the choice of noun. A search in the Deutsches Referenzkorpus (DeReKo) shows the predominance of *Fazit* (426)¹⁰, *Ergebnis* (245), *Folge* (174) and *Grund* (152) in the parliamentary minutes. The frequency in the Wikipedia discussions is similar, except that there the noun *Grund* is in second place. The following tables give figures for the most frequent nouns:

Table 1. Parliamentary minutes

<i>Fazit</i>	426
<i>Ergebnis</i>	245
<i>Folge</i>	174
<i>Grund</i>	152
<i>Ziel</i>	75
<i>Fakt</i>	26
<i>Tatsache</i>	20
<i>Hauptsache</i>	12
<i>Schlussfolgerung</i>	12
<i>Ursache</i>	8
<i>Folgerung</i>	3

Table 2. Wikipedia Discussions

<i>Fazit</i>	463
<i>Grund</i>	206
<i>Ergebnis</i>	81
<i>Folge</i>	56
<i>Tatsache</i>	43
<i>Ziel</i>	40
<i>Schlussfolgerung</i>	34
<i>Ursache</i>	14
<i>Fakt</i>	12
<i>Folgerung</i>	12
<i>Hauptsache</i>	9

It is noticeable that in actual usage the nominal component is reduced simply to a simple noun in this construction < NP/N: + utterance >. Apart from the lexeme *Hauptsache*, which clearly has a different status, some nouns occur frequently in this reduced form: *Fazit*, *Grund*/*Hauptgrund*, *Ergebnis*, *Konsequenz*.

8 *das Wichtigste* is less used in this context.

9 Grammaticalization is a gradual process that tends to follow the principle of unidirectionality.

10 Although these figures refer to the absolute and not the relative frequency, they are an important indicator for comparison.

(11) Also mir gefällt das erste Foto wesentlich besser. *Grund*: Auf dem zweiten Foto scheint der Porträtierte in einem Sessel mehr zu liegen als zu sitzen. Dadurch erscheint der Oberkörper unnatürlich verkürzt, das gilt insbesondere für die Oberarme. (Wikipedia-Diskussion, 2019)

The reduction to the noun leads to a certain stability in respect of the lexemes involved, which in this construction come close to the text operators, which are otherwise mostly adverbial. In the next section we will discuss the discourse function and the status of these nouns in more detail.

3. Interpretation of this construction

3.1 Projective force and pragmasemantic function

The fact that the noun is in first position in the binary construction and thus topologically (graphically and prosodically) separated from the rest of the utterance has a projective force. The reader's attention is directed to the following sentence, with the semantic content of the noun providing an indication of the discursive status of the sentence. The position of the noun thus contributes to the structuring of the discourse.

The most frequent lexemes (*Fazit*, *Schlussfolgerung*) are used to mark a concluding comment with which the speaker communicates their personal view, points to a logical implication or draws a conclusion. In other cases, we have a justification (*Grund*, *Hauptgrund*, *Annahme*; *Ursache*) or a reference being made to a conclusion which arises from a set of connected facts (*Ergebnis*, *Resultat*, *Konsequenz*). Nouns which serve to support a previous statement also occur in this position. This can be an illustration which emerges from reference to specific individual cases (*Beispiel*, *Ausnahme*), or a subjective, argumentative evaluation of the subsequent facts (*Vorteil*, *Nachteil*)¹¹.

References to evidence also serve to support an argument. Interestingly, the nouns *Fakt* and *Tatsache*, which otherwise usually occur in a matrix sentence (*Fakt/Tatsache ist*, [*dass*] ...), occur relatively rarely on their own. When the noun *Fakt* is used in this construction, it may occur in the context of a series, in which case it is marked accordingly:

(12) Bigbug21, Sie begreifen das Maßgebliche bei Ihren Handlungen und Ihren Erklärungen einfach nicht:

1. *Fakt*: am 15.04.09 15:55 habe ich das Foto ICE 3 bei Einfahrt in den Schulwaldtunnel bei Wikipedia hochgeladen und wie folgt lizenziert.
2. *Fakt*: Diese Datei wurde unter den Bedingungen der „Creative Commons Na-

11 According to Fiehler (2012, 35–36), evaluative lexemes do not count as operators, as they primarily refer to the facts and not to the quality of the utterance. However, we include them in the analysis here because they play a clear argumentative role.

mensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen Deutschland“-Lizenz (abgekürzt „cc-by-sa“) in der Version 3.0 veröffentlicht, mit der Maßgabe: Lizenz cc-by-sa V. 3.0 unter Nennung meines Namens (Wolfgang Pehlemann) direkt unter Bild und Sicherstellung der Weitergabe nur unter diesen Bedingungen. (Wikipedia-Diskussion, 2009)

Tatsache can also occur with reference to a series:

(13) Behauptung⁴, um die Wählerinnen und Wähler, Bürgerinnen und Bürger zu verunsichern: Am Flughafen Köln/Bonn finden europaweit die meisten Nachtflüge statt. *Tatsache*: Am Flughafen Frankfurt finden weit mehr Nachtflüge statt. *Weitere Tatsache*: In Leipzig ist das Nachtflugverhalten ähnlich groß wie in Köln/Bonn. Ich weiß nicht, woher Sie Ihre Zahlen haben. (Sitzung des Parlaments Landtag Nordrhein-Westfalen am 25.06.2009. Plenarprotokoll, Düsseldorf)

In both examples the access to a “fact” (*Tatsache*) was used to refute an attitude or the assertion by a third party.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that the fixed combination *und Tatsache* has become established. This introduces a statement which serves to further confirm a conclusion from the preceding statement. In such contexts this phrase is in competition with the modal adverb *tatsächlich*, see (14):

(14) Amtlich bestätigt! Keine Diskussion! Die Menschen haben einfach keine Ahnung von Statistik!
Und Tatsache: Computer, Fotoausrüstung, Stereoanlage sind billiger denn je. Aber dafür sind Dienstleistungen, Reinigung, Autoreparatur, Restaurantbesuch, Gas und Strom unglaublich teuer geworden. Das Statistische Bundesamt nennt das dann “Wahrnehmungspsychologie“ [...] (PBR/W07.00838 Sitzung des Parlaments Bundesrat am 09.11.2007. Plenarprotokoll, Berlin)

In the next section the discursive function of these nouns as indicators of the argumentative status of the sentence is discussed in more detail.

3.2 Discursive perspective

Most of the nouns in initial position in the above examples summarize the logical or evidential status of the content presented in the following sentence, with some containing an evaluation. As a result, they contribute significantly to the argumentative orientation of the utterance and its discursive function in the textual context. Indirectly, they serve a variety of frequent operations and strategies, such as support, justification, conclusion and confirmation. Their frequency and the use of reduced forms can be traced back to this role.

As indicated above, this use means that these nouns are very similar to operators, and the construction $\langle \text{NP/N:} + \text{utterance} \rangle$ can be considered a case

of “operator-scope structure” as described by Fiehler, 2012. Operators, in this sense, make a statement about one or more aspects of the utterance in their scopus (Fiehler, 2012, 35), i.e. operators fulfil an explicit function of denotation at the metacommunicative level. These authors consider that the term “operator” can refer to different lexical and syntagmatic forms, i.e. verbal as well as nominal, adverbial or prepositional units. Although the specific nouns are only mentioned in passing by the authors cited. Fiehler (2012, 36) refers to the use of *Frage*: in the section “Verdeutlichung des Handlungstyps”), all the other nouns discussed here fulfil similar metacommunicative functions.

Aside from the metacommunicative function, using nouns or a reduced NP focusses on a specific perspective within the argument of the following sentence. For example, the word *Grund* leads to an explanation which is to be understood as a justification, *Fazit* introduces a summary which, depending on the context, is to be interpreted as an evaluation or as a conclusion, and the words *Fakt* and *Tatsache* point to a conclusion which is to be interpreted as a confirmation or even as an affirmation.

The question now arises as to whether one should go one step further on the basis of how these words are used and include these lexicalized nominal forms in the category of discourse markers. This will depend on how we are to define a discourse marker, and this will be discussed in the following section.

3.3 Grammaticalization

Discourse markers have been understood and defined in different ways and in many ways that is still the case. Attempts to categorize them as a word type have not been fully successful, at least in respect of German (cf. Imo, 2012)¹². However, if the term “discourse marker” is interpreted functionally (as is the case with the term “operator” used here), then the question of the part of speech does not arise, or it arises in a different way.

Auer and Günthner, 2005, for example, take a functional view when they re-analyse the use of certain adverbs or conjunctions, imperatives, matrix clauses as ‘discourse markers’ (e.g. *jedenfalls, nur, weil, sag mal, ich mein ...*). Shifting the function of these words to the level of discourse brings in some very different forms, of different origins, but what they all have in common is the reference to the speech act and this thus also implies an interactional component.

The question of the grammaticalization of such forms is not easy to answer, either, since they have developed formally in different ways. Auer and Günthner

12 This also applies to the French equivalent “marqueurs discursifs” (cf. e.g., Dostie, 2004). Paillard (2017, 17–18), who also considers other languages, uses the term, but distinguishes six classes from the outset: “En fonction de la composante en jeu, nous distinguons six grandes classes de MD : quatre classes en relation avec la notion de dire (MD point de vue, MD catégorisant, MD écran, MD particule), une classe en relation avec la notion de vouloir dire et, enfin, une classe en relation avec l’espace (inter)subjectif.”

(2005, 348–356) come to the conclusion that an extended concept of grammar and grammaticalization would be necessary in order to interpret the newly developed discourse markers as grammaticalized forms. They regard grammar as a ‘general structuring principle for verbal communication’, referring to Traugott’s concept of grammar (Traugott, 2003), which also includes pragmatic phenomena and considers it as a complex, conventionalized knowledge system with which language participants can communicate on the basis of forms and structures which have become routine.

Broadening the perspective on the basis of an extended concept of grammar opens the way for a more coherent description of “discourse markers”, and structures such as binary operator-scope constructions can also be included in this description. If we follow Imo’s suggestion (Imo, 2012, 83) of defining discourse markers as constructions, the structure analysed here with a variety of lexical nominal fillings becomes clearer. The noun, or the reduced NP, which has a specific function within the discourse, introduces a projector construction and determines its status within the argument of the discourse. The meaning and function of the noun is linked to the construction, although whether this justifies a distinct status for such nouns as ‘discourse markers’ may be debatable. However, because of the obligatory utterance-initial position and the clear discourse reference, and because the list of candidates for the N-slot is limited, we would argue at this point in favour of such an approach. The interpretation is simplified by the fact that the position of these elements is fixed and their function has become standardized (Ewert-Kling, 2012, 112).

The procedure is similar in French – with different lexical material and possibly different writing and speaking practices. In the last chapter we will describe some French examples and make cross-linguistic comments.

4. Comparative aspects

As the French nouns in the construction analysed here have already been described (cf. Rossari, 2011; Rossari and Cojocariu, 2008), we will limit ourselves here to two aspects that are relevant for cross-linguistic comparison.

4.1 Semantic similarity and grammatical constraints

In French, the nouns *raison*, *conclusion* or (more rarely) *bilan* are used to indicate the status of the following sentence, as do *cause* and *résultat*, which have much the same meaning as the German nouns (*Grund*, *Schluss(folgerung)*, *Fazit*, *Ursache*, *Ergebnis*, *Resultat*). As in German, they may be used with or without an article, which testifies to the degree of grammaticalization:

- (15) *Le résultat* / *Résultat* : je me suis énervée et n’ai rien obtenu.
Ma conclusion : / *Conclusion* : il faut toujours surveiller les travaux.

Any differences between languages in respect of this construction can be explained either by usage¹³ or as the result of constraints in the language system which have an effect on the following construction¹⁴.

(16) *La raison* : il n'y avait pas assez de participants.

4.2 Dialogue-like structure, rhetorical dimension

Works on French have pointed out that the construction $\langle N: + \text{utterance} \rangle$ can be traced back to structures which are similar to a dialogue.¹⁵ In the context of a monologue, the presentation as a question enables the speaker to reinforce the relevance of the following statement (explanation, justification, confirmation, etc.).

(17) Sur le marché de la bière sans alcool, toutes présentaient jusqu'ici un taux d'alcool de 0,5 % au moins. Et aucune n'avait vraiment le goût de la bière. *La raison ?* Personne n'avait encore réussi à trouver la bonne technique de brassage d'une vraie bière sans alcool (un vrai goût de bière et 0,0 % d'alcool). (*Le Soir*, 06.02.2017)

In both languages this structure, which seems to be more frequent in French, can lead towards the standardization of signposts within the presentation of an argument.

5. Conclusion

In the dynamics of a type of language production which is oriented towards the addressee, the construction $\langle N/NP + \text{utterance} \rangle$ can be characterized as follows:

- Placing these nouns or NPs in question in initial position is linked to their projective force in that they signal the discursive-argumentative status of the following utterance.
- Given their semantic function within the discourse and their reduction to a simple noun or to a minimal NP, these forms come close to what may be considered as discourse markers.

13 This affects the frequency and the coining of certain forms. An interesting example is the noun *moralité*, used without an article. It marks an (only slightly moralizing) conclusion and has little to do with 'morality', in contrast to the complex form (*la*) *morale de l'histoire* (with a slightly different meaning). In German, we most often find *die Moral von der Geschichte* and there is no direct equivalent for *moralité*.

14 See nouns in subject position that do not occur without an article in French: **Raison* / *La raison est qu'il n'y avait pas assez de participants*.

15 Cf. Rossari (2011b); Rossari and Cojocariu (2008).

- The strength of the nominal forms is variable, and this testifies to different degrees of lexicalization. An obvious hypothesis which will require detailed diachronic investigation is that this construction, the origins of which are clearly rhetorical, has emerged from a dialogue-like structure.
- It is also clear that the successful use of this construction to support an argument in certain types of text and communicative structures has become normalized to a certain extent.

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