Emerging into your family of constructions
German [IRR was] ‘no matter what’

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Starting from the term “family of constructions”, the present article investigates lexical and syntactic variation in a subtype of German concessive conditionals which is marked by was (‘what’) in combination with expressions of irrelevance like egal (‘no matter’). 12,894 examples from the DeReKo corpus (Deutsches Referenzkorpus) are analysed manually for seven variables. Both the quantitative and the qualitative results suggest that combinations of was with an expression of irrelevance, or “[IRR was]” for short, form part of a recently entrenched constructional schema [IRR w−] of concessive-conditional subordinators which are emerging into the family of concessive-conditional constructions in present-day German. [99 words]

Keywords: concessive conditionals, construction grammar, grammaticalisation, corpus linguistics, family resemblance, family of constructions, prototypicality, desententialisation, intersective gradience, schematicity, lexical specification, German

1. Introduction

Over recent decades, “family” has established itself in Construction Grammar as a non-technical label for sets of constructions with a similar meaning or function despite striking differences in form. Goldberg & Jackendoff’s (2004) work on “the English resultative as a family of constructions” is a case in point. This usage of “family” goes back, at least in part, to Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances” (2009[1953]:39) as mediated through cognitive psychology and semantics (Goldberg & Jackendoff 2004: 536, 542; cf. Taylor 2003:102–122, Geeraerts 2010: 183–203). A major link in this lineage is the notion of prototypicality: families of constructions form networks around prototypical instantiations, with more marginal members related to the core, to one another and to members of neigh-

In the present paper, “family of constructions” will be used in the same informal, yet theoretically grounded sense, to refer to a group of semantically/functionally related constructions called “concessive conditionals”. In Standard Average European (SAE) and indeed in many other languages (Haspelmath & König 1998; Bossuyt forthc.) concessive conditionals show such a striking diversity of form that their underlying unity has often been overlooked. This is for two reasons: because their individual family resemblances to other categories appear at first blush to be stronger than their own mutual family resemblances, and secondly, because it took time to establish the semantic/functional domain of concessive conditionality as a mainstream category of grammatical analysis. This development gained traction largely through functional-typological work by König (1986, 1988, 1992, Haspelmath & König 1998) and authors following in his footsteps (Leuschner 2006; Bossuyt 2016; Bossuyt, De Cuypere & Leuschner 2018; Vander Haegen 2019).

Family-related terminology does not appear in this literature except casually in Fujii (1994), who calls concessive conditionals a “family of constructions” in Japanese. However, its application is clear enough. Using examples from German, the prototypical concessive conditional in SAE has the form of a straightforward if-conditional, which is in the scope of a scalar-additive focus particle like German selbst, English even, etc.

(1) Selbst wenn sich Hunderte von Radfahrern auf den Fähren drängen, bleiben die Mitarbeiter freundlich und hilfsbereit [...] (Rhein-Zeitung, 02/08/2019)

‘Even if the ferries are crowded with hundreds of cyclists, the employees stay friendly and helpful.’

The other members of the concessive-conditional family show family resemblances with interrogatives and/or free relatives:

(2) Ob die Männer von einer unglücklichen Liebe sangen oder vom Wasser [...] dem Publikum ging es kalt den Rücken hinunter. (St. Galler Tagblatt, 16/12/1997)

‘Whether the men were singing about an unrequited love or about water, the public had shivers going down their spines.’

(3) Was immer die Regierung macht, sie schafft sich Feinde. (Salzburger Nachrichten, 24/11/1998)

‘Whatever the government does, it makes enemies.’

1. Unless stated otherwise, all examples are from the Deutsches Referenzkorpus (DeReKo; cf. Kupietz, Lüngen, Kamocki & Witt 2018). See Section 3 for methodology.
What all three constructions have in common is their quantificational nature, i.e. the fact that their consequent holds under an open-ended range of antecedent conditions: ‘if \{p_1, p_2, p_3, \ldots\}, then q’ (König 1986; Leuschner 2006). The fact that the consequent q is therefore in effect asserted unconditionally, is echoed by the label “unconditionals” in parts of the literature (Zaefferer 1991; Rawlins 2008). The label “concessive conditionals”, by contrast, highlights the basically conditional nature of the relationship, as also emphasised by the fact that all subtypes of concessive conditionals are marked more or less uniformly as conditionals in many non-SAE languages (Haspelmath & König 1998; Bossuyt forthc). In turn, the epithet “concessive” is informed by at least three observations: that the apodosis of concessive conditionals is normally factual (König 1986), that the protasis tends to be read as factual as well (“Existenzimplikatur” in Zaefferer 1987: 270; cf. Haspelmath & König 1998: 573 on the role of the real world in the interpretation of concessive conditionals), and that some types of concessive conditionals are a major historical source of concessives crosslinguistically (König 1988).

On the other hand, the three constructions are mutually distinguished by the different quantificational strategies used to evoke the set of antecedent conditions (König 1986 and later). In (1) the focus particle marks p as extreme or particularly informative; in (2) the disjunction ob … oder (‘whether … or’) states the extremes of the scale in question; and in (3) the quantificational adverb immer (‘ever’) signals a free-choice reading of the w-pronoun as part of the open proposition “die Regierung macht x” (‘the government does x’), inviting the addressee to check the truth of q under an arbitrary instantiation of x. Concessive conditionals using one of these methods of quantification are respectively called “scalar”, “alternative” and, somewhat misleadingly, “universal” concessive conditionals (Haspelmath & König 1998). In each case, the consequent q is “deconditionalised” with respect to the antecedent set (Leuschner 2006: 70, adopting a term from Zaefferer 1987). As a result, q can be asserted with all the more rhetorical force or hyperbole. To enable the deconditionalisation of a proposition q with respect to antecedent conditions

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2. To call the free-choice subtype “universal” is convenient, but misleading, because the meaning of ‘wh-ever’ style quantifiers is much more akin to positive-polarity any than to standard universal quantifiers like every, as Haspelmath & König readily admit (1998: 571f.).

3. It is often claimed in this context that the antecedent values expressed by the protasis include an “unfavourable circumstance”, again justifying the epithet “concessive” (Haspelmath & König 1998: 567, inter alia). It seems to be uncontroversial that the antecedent conditions form a partially ordered set (or “poset” for short) along a semantic parameter established lexically by the protasis (Leuschner 2006: 20). But unless forced by scalar expressions like English even or German selbst and sogar (cf. Bücker 2016 on the latter in comparison with auch ‘also’), the concessive presupposition appears to be context-bound rather than semantic in nature and rare in actual usage (Duffley & Larrivée 2020 on English wh-ever).
that are actually or potentially under discussion is the main function of concessive conditionals synchronically and a major motivation for their grammaticalisation diachronically (Leuschner 2006).

In keeping with the standard tenets of usage-based Construction Grammar (e.g. Goldberg 2006), the assumption is made in the present paper (a) that “family of constructions” is shorthand for any part of the constructicon of a given language (German in this case) containing different constructions with a shared meaning or function; and (b) that the family members in question project onto the constructional network as nodes with different degrees of schematicity and lexical specification. Applying this premiss to concessive conditionals, it is assumed specifically that abstract constructions representing the “scalar”, “alternative” and “universal” strategies of quantification constitute nodes on the same level of the constructicon, i.e. peers (Leuschner 2020). Therefore, unlike what is implied by d’Avis (2016) and Oppliger (2018), we do not believe that the family of concessive conditionals consists of a more or less disorderly set of atomic members. We suggest instead that this family, at least in SAE languages but potentially also elsewhere, has exactly three members at the highest, most schematic level, and that actual constructions as exemplified in (1) to (3) constitute structurally and/or lexically specified members of subfamilies, i.e. once again peers, at the next lower level of the constructicon, instantiating (or more technically: inheriting) one of the three quantificational strategies, and so on.

That the constructions in (1)–(3) really are members of distinct subfamilies is shown by synonymous alternatives displaying the same three quantificational strategies. Thus, (1) may occur with sogar or auch instead of selbst; (2) may have ob ... ob instead of ob ... oder; and (3) may have auch instead of or in combination with immer (Bossuyt, De Cuypere & Leuschner 2018). More conspicuously, there are also synonymous alternatives to (2) and (3) as in (4) and (5) respectively.

(4) Einen Blick ins Horoskop werfen viele, sei es aus amüsierter Neugier oder aus ehrlichem Interesse. (St. Galler Tagblatt, 31/12/1997)
‘Many take a glance at the horoscope, be it out of amused curiosity or genuine interest.’

(5) Egal was passiert, es ist immer jemand für Dich da! (Braunschweiger Zeitung, 27/11/2010)
‘No matter what happens, someone is always there for you!’

Whereas the alternative formulations listed in the paragraph immediately above, (4) are differentiated from (1) to (3) by small differences in lexical specification, (4) and (5) suggest that the same quantificational strategies are in these cases instantiated by distinct constructional schemata. In (4), the disjunction is evoked by a verb-based quasi-subordinator specified syntactically (by subject-verb inver-
sion), lexically (by sein ‘be’) and morphologically (by the subjunctive sei and 3rd person es ‘it’, although the plural version seien sie also occurs). In (5), lastly, the protasis is introduced by an expression of irrelevance (e.g. egal ‘irrelevant, no matter’) in combination with a w-pronoun such that the expression of irrelevance precedes the w-pronoun, unlike immer in (3), which follows it.

It is the subtype in (5) that is the topic of the present paper. Our main focus is on the family resemblance between concessive conditionals like (5) and constructions involving embedded w-interrogatives (cf. below for examples) from the point of view of gradience (cf. Traugott & Trousdale, eds. 2010). For the purposes of the present paper, gradience is conceptualised in terms of desententialisation (Lehmann 1988), i.e. of degrees to which a matrix clause of irrelevance embedding a w-interrogative is syntactically independent and assertive, as for example in es ist egal, was passiert ‘it doesn’t matter what happens’, or the quantificational member of a complex sentence construction with overall concessive conditional semantics. The associated gradience manifests itself in the ellipsis of verbal and other elements that freely occur at the least grammaticalised end of the cline, but not at all or only in very well-specified ways, at the most grammaticalised end (Leuschner 2006). As a result, our discussion can also help refine existing hypotheses concerning the diachronic emergence of concessive conditionals from combinations of independent sentences (cf. provisionally Leuschner 2006). Except for some brief remarks on reanalysis and directionality, however, diachrony will be left aside in the present paper, as will another promising avenue of future study, i.e. crosslinguistic comparison. Nor will we be able to revisit the discourse functional reasons, anchored in the conflictual potential of irrelevance in communication, for the astonishing variety of lexical expressions of irrelevance in German and other languages (Leuschner 2005) and for speakers’ tendency to apply intensifying degree particles, modal particles, etc. when asserting irrelevance in conversation (Leuschner & Segers 2010). Our results testify to the consequences, as seen e.g. in the entrenchment of lexically specified subschemata like ganz gleich, but the discursive motivations must remain in the background.

Instead, a fine-grained empirical analysis will be developed based on 12,894 examples from the Deutsches Referenzkorpus, annotated manually for seven relevant variables, in order to ascertain the constructional status of the quantificational phrase introducing the protasis in concessive conditionals like (5). As we will argue, these combinations instantiate a constructional schema which is the German equivalent to English no matter wh- subordinators. In contrast to the fully entrenched no matter wh- schema, whose historical source it is no matter wh- is archaic in present-day English, the German version is still emerging and taking its place alongside the well-established, synonymous w- immer auch-type, as seen in (3) (cf. English wh-ever). The new subordinator schema, which will henceforth
be referred to as “[IRR w-]”, has two slots available for lexical specification: the expression of irrelevance “IRR” (e.g. egal, but also gleich, schnurz, wurst, etc.), including the option of intensification (e.g. völlig egal, ganz gleich ‘completely irrelevant’), and the w-pronoun. Since the present investigation is designed to be a mere pilot study in a larger investigation, its scope will be restricted to data in which the second slot is specified by was ‘what’, whence the shorthand “[IRR was]”, complementing Bossuyt (2016) in this respect. In Sections 2 to 4, variation along the desententialisation cline is presented first in qualitative terms (Section 2) and then, after an exposition of our corpus methodology (Section 3), in quantitative detail (Section 4). A discussion of the results follows in Section 5, with special attention paid to the constructional status of [IRR was], starting from Goldberg’s well-known definition of “construction” (2006: 5), and the distinction between intersective and subsective gradience (Aarts 2007). The closing Section 6 summarises the results from the combined points of view of Grammaticalization Theory and Construction Grammar and suggests directions for future research, both synchronic and diachronic.

2. Concessive conditionals between discourse and syntax

As first pointed out by König (1992), several subtypes of concessive conditionals arose relatively recently in the Germanic languages through the “syntacticization of discourse” (König 1992). [IRR w] introduced concessive conditionals are a particularly clear case, as suggested by the fact that hypotactic examples like (5) are at the opposite end of a range of variation from loose, paratactical combinations of independent sentences like (6):

(6) Es ist egal, was ich bin, ich bin ich.  
‘It doesn’t matter what I am, I am myself.’

4. In contrast to an anonymous reviewer, we do not believe that sharp semantic distinctness between categories is a precondition for intersective gradience to obtain between them. Regardless of whether one accepts the intersective/subsective distinction on principle, semantic overlap tends to motivate and support gradience between categories in synchrony and typical pathways of change in diachrony. As a result, the literature on gradience (see especially Traugott & Trousdale, eds. 2010) tends to reject semantics as a criterion in distinguishing between intersective and subsective gradience. In our case, the semantic overlap is clear enough, i.e. free-choice quantification, but so is the functional difference between a matrix clause of irrelevance embedding a w-interrogative, on the one hand, and the quantificational member of a complex-sentence construction with overall concessive-conditional semantics, on the other hand.
Example (6) represents the kind of loose rhetorical unit serving deconditionalisation that Leuschner (2006: 79–90) identifies as the starting-point of the grammaticalisation of [IRR \( w \)-introduced concessive conditionals. More specifically, he posits a conversational routine in which the irrelevance of the choice between potential antecedent conditions \( \{ p_1, p_2, p_3, \ldots \} \) is asserted, and then immediately relegated to the conversational background by the same speaker in favour of another, more important assertion \( q \) (see Vander Haegen (2019: 118) for a conversational example). This is exactly the discursive structure displayed by (6) and indeed also by (5), the difference being that the expression of irrelevance \( egal \) in (6) serves as predicate nominal in the full copula clause \( Es \ ist \ egal \), with \( was \ ich \ bin \) as embedded interrogative, whereas in (5) \( egal \) and \( was \) together form a free-choice quantifier that introduces the protasis in a hypotactic clause complex in which only the consequent \( q \) is asserted.

Examples like (5) and (6) open up a space of variation that is amply documented in our written data. (7) and (8) below begin with the fully-fledged main clauses \( Mir \ ist \ es \ egal \) and \( Mir \ ist \ völlig \ schnurz \). While (7) has a preliminary subject \( es \) ‘it’ as in (6) replacing the right-dislocated interrogative \( was \ andere \ über \ mich \ denken \), (8) contains the intensifier \( völlig \) ‘completely’ and the colloquial expression of irrelevance \( schnurz \), but no preliminary subject.\(^5\)

(7)\(^\text{5}\) Mir ist es egal, was andere über mich denken, mich interessiert das Thema halt. (\textit{Nordkurier, 03/07/2002})

‘It doesn’t matter to me [lit.: to-me is it irrelevant] what others think of me, the fact is that I’m interested in the topic.’

(8) Mir ist völlig schnurz, was ihr für wahrscheinlich haltet oder was nicht oder was noch alles möglich sein könnte; für den Artikel ist nur relevant, was die Wissenschaft sagt. (\textit{Wikipedia discussion: Jesus von Nazaret, 2006})

‘I really don’t care [lit.: to-me is completely irrelevant] what you consider to be plausible and what not or what else may be possible; for the article, only what science says is relevant.’

Corresponding examples can be found in English and other Germanic languages, but the potential for variation is particularly great in German, because of the latter’s large number of lexical expressions of irrelevance for use in impersonal or

\(^5\) A literal gloss of the German structure of each example is added in parenthesis to the idiomatic English translation. The German expression of irrelevance is invariably glossed as “irrelevant” in order to emphasize structural differences and similarities over and above lexical ones.
copula constructions (cf. Leuschner 2005)\(^6\) and ample means of modification at both phrase and clause level. Modification at phrase level is served by a number of intensifying adverbs like *ganz* and *vollig* (‘completely’, e.g. in *vollig schnurz* ‘completely irrelevant, no matter at all’), and at clause level by experiencer expressions like *mir* (‘to-me.DAT’) and *für mich* (‘for me.ACC’) and various modal particles.

The patterns of use or non-use of one or more of these expressions collectively instantiate the intersective gradience between independent matrix clauses of irrelevance embedding w-interrogatives, on the one hand, and the quantificational phrases introducing grammaticalised concessive conditional protases, on the other hand. For example, (9) and (10) illustrate the presence of the experiencer *mir* and its plural form *uns*, respectively, and of the modal particle *doch*, which adds an attitude of subjective contrariness. Compared with (6)–(8), however, they lack the copula *ist*; compared with (6) and (7), they lack the preliminary subjects; compared with (8), they lack the intensifier.

(9) Mir doch egal, was du willst, du machst das jetzt.

(St. Galler Tagblatt, 17/09/2014)

‘No matter [lit.: to-me PRT irrelevant] what you want, you do it – now.’

(10) Uns doch wurscht, was die Jungs davon halten, jetzt sind wir an der Reihe!

(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 22/06/2013)

‘We don’t care [lit.: to-us PRT irrelevant] what the boys think of it, now it’s our turn!’

The crucial factor is the absence of the finite verb, as both *Mir doch egal* in (9) and *Uns doch wurscht* in (10) lack the syntactic independence displayed by *Mir ist es egal* in (7) and *Mir ist völlig schnurz* in (8). Adopting the terminology coined by Lehmann (1988: 183), it can be said that (9) and (10) are partly “desententialised”, constituting proto-protases rather than independent sentences, while still being modified semantically by an experiencer expression and pragmatically by a modal particle.

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6. As an anonymous reviewer points out, lexical and phraseological variation in the expression of irrelevance is great in many languages, including English, as shown by series like “I don’t give a fuck/shit/damn/…”. These are personal expressions asserting versions of the negative proposition ‘X doesn’t care’, however, and they do not allow for the separation of the lexical-semantic expression of irrelevance from its positive assertion in the way copula constructions do. Only personal constructions with this clear internal articulation can undergo deassertion and desententialisation while keeping the lexical expression of irrelevance in place (cf. discussion later in this section), and only they can therefore display the gradience that is at issue in our investigation. Any comparison with English will show that German is lexically rich in this type of construction, due in part to its propensity for compounding, while English is poor.
At the hypotactic, fully desententialised end of the cline are examples like (5), repeated here for convenience as (11) and (12):

(11) Egal was passiert, es ist immer jemand für Dich da!

(Braunschweiger Zeitung, 27/11/2010)
‘No matter [lit.: irrelevant] what happens, someone is always there for you!’

(12) Gleichviel was Dichtung und Wahrheit ist, die neue deutsche Daviscup-Ära hat auf jeden Fall phantastisch begonnen.

(Frankfurter Rundschau, 03/04/1998)
‘No matter [lit.: irrelevant] what is myth and (what is) truth, the new German Daviscup era went off to a brilliant start either way.’

Not only are the copula and the preliminary subject missing in (11) and (12), there is no trace of semantic or pragmatic modification either. Note also the absence of a comma after egal and gleichviel, respectively: whereas a comma is otherwise obligatory between matrix and embedded clauses according to standard rules of German punctuation (Duden-Grammatik 2016: 1080), the comma may be omitted after elliptical expressions of irrelevance (Duden-Zweifelsfälle 2016: 251f.).

Focusing for a moment on the presence or absence of the copula and the preliminary subject, one finds different degrees of ellipsis in the abovementioned examples, ranging from fully independent, zero-elliptical matrix clauses, as in (6), to dependent protases introduced by bare lexical expressions of irrelevance, as in (11) and (12). We will henceforth refer to such radically reduced [IRR w-] clauses as “fully elliptical” and derive from their existence the hypothesis, to be discussed in Section 5.2, that they instantiate an emerging [IRR w-] subordinator schema represented in the present case study by [IRR was].

The different degrees of desententialisation displayed by [IRR w-]-introduced clauses in turn reflect differences in communicative weighting (Leuschner 2006: 90). In contexts where the potential relevance of different antecedent values for q is under discussion, speakers may wish to assert irrelevance, as in (6)–(8). In contexts where different antecedent values are contextually available but not necessarily under discussion (yet), speakers may wish to introduce the irrelevance as a mere presupposition into the conversational background by means of a dependent concessive-conditional protasis, as in (11)–(12); this effect is called “pragmatic downgrading” by Leuschner (ibid.). Borderline cases involving semantic and pragmatic modification are possible, as seen in (9) and (10). At the fully desententialised end of the cline, the expression of irrelevance functions as a quantificational element in a [IRR w-] subordinator phrase introducing the protasis in a hypotactic structure which is designed to assert the consequent q with maximal rhetorical force, while keeping the communicative weight of the irrelevance low.
3. Methodology

The only previous study of [IRR w]-introduced concessive conditionals using (albeit rudimentary) corpus-based statistics is by Leuschner (2006). It was based on data from the Mannheimer Korpus, at 2.5 million tokens a very small corpus by today’s standards. By contrast, the present study uses data from the much larger Deutsches Referenzkorpus (DeReKo), which contained over 43 billion tokens as of 2017 and includes the Mannheimer Korpus as one of its many subcorpora (Kupietz et al. 2018:4353). Furthermore, whereas Leuschner (2006) included just five German expressions of irrelevance in his study (egal, gleich, gleichgültig, gleichviel, einerlei), the present investigation refers to sixteen. In addition to Leuschner’s five, they include four compounds with egal (schnurzegal, schnurz-piepegal, scheißegal, stinkegal) and seven independently formed synonyms (Banane, Jacke wie Hose, latte, schnuppe, schnurz, wurscht, schnurzpiepe). All the newly added expressions are colloquial, if not slightly vulgar (scheiß-egal ‘shit-irrelevant’), and represent the spectrum encountered in standard-oriented German over many years of observation. Dialectal expressions are excluded, but do not tend to occur in DeReKo data anyway.

At the start of the investigation in March 2018, the search string [irrelevance expression] /+w3,s0 was was entered into DeReKo’s concordancing tool, COSMAS II (https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web/), a total of 16 times, each time using one of 16 lexical expressions of irrelevance listed above. The distance operator /+w3 yields tokens in which the irrelevance expression is up to 3 words away from the w-word, while the operator so ensures that the expression of irrelevance and the w-word are in the same sentence. After running this search query all 16 times and exporting the results into an Excel file, a total sample of 19,843 tokens remained.

Large though this sample is in comparison with Leuschner’s, it still does not yield a completely realistic picture of expressions of irrelevance in DeReKo. The most frequent expression of irrelevance in our list, egal, in fact turned up 27,298 tokens, bringing our total sample to 37,141 in theory. In practice, the number of tokens for export is automatically restricted to a random sample of 10,000 by COSMAS II. A random sample of 10,000 egal-hits was therefore exported rather than the 27,298 that COSMAS II had in fact found. After 309 invalid tokens were removed manually from the 10,000 (see below), 9,691 valid egal-tokens remained. To compensate for the inevitable skewing of the frequency of egal in our statistics, Figure 1 and Table 1 also include the extrapolated frequency of egal as calculated from the ratio of valid and invalid hits among the 10,000 egal tokens available for export. The extrapolation sets at 26,454 the estimated number of valid egal-tokens.
that our sample would have contained, had we been able to analyse all 27,298 hits rather than just 10,000.

The exported total of 19,843 hits (including 10,000 with egal) was subjected to manual deselection, leading to the retention of 12,894 valid tokens and the exclusion of 6,949 invalid ones. The main reason for exclusion was the polysemy of gleich: 6,081 of the 6,949 deselected hits contained gleich functioning as an adverb of temporal contiguity (ich komme gleich ‘I’m coming right away’), as opposed to just 1,319 valid tokens of gleich as an expression of irrelevance (ganz gleich was passiert etc.). With the other expressions of irrelevance, the vast majority of exported tokens were valid, although 868 tokens were still deselected for various other reasons, e.g. doubles.

The remaining 12,894 valid tokens were each annotated manually in Excel for seven variables in order to yield a comprehensive picture of variation along the desententialisation cline. The variable “Expression of irrelevance” captures which of the sixteen lexical expressions of irrelevance occurs in the token in question. The next three variables indicate whether the matrix clause contains a preliminary “Subject” (mostly es ‘it’, occasionally das ‘that’), a “Finite verb” and/or an “Experiencer” (either a dative like mir ‘to me’ or a prepositional phrase like für mich ‘for me’). These variables measure the degree of matrix clause ellipsis. Two variables refer to additional elements in the matrix clause, viz. the presence of a “Modal particle/Sentential adverb” and/or of a “Degree particle”. The former captures whether modal particles like ja or doch and/or sentential adverbs (including the negator nicht ‘not’ and complex modal phrases like ehrlich gesagt ‘honestly said, frankly speaking’), the latter is taken in a broad sense, referring to adverbs like ganz or völlig (‘completely’) which have the expression of irrelevance in their scope rather than the entire clause and signal different degrees of intensity, including complex expressions like echt komplett ‘really completely’ as in Es ist echt komplett scheißegal, was … (‘It is really completely irrelevant what ...., I really don’t give a shit at all what ...’). Finally, the variable “punctuation mark” captures whether or not punctuation, be it a comma or some other punctuation mark, is present between the irrelevance expression and the w-word.

4. Results

4.1 Expressions of irrelevance: Frequencies

Figure 1 shows the absolute frequencies of the sixteen expressions of irrelevance under consideration; Table 1 also includes their relative frequencies. For simplicity’s sake, egal and its four compounds are collectively treated as a single expres-
sion of irrelevance. Numbers for *egal* should therefore be taken to include the compounds *scheißegal*, *schnurzegal*, *schnurzpiewegel* and *stinkegal* unless stated otherwise.

*Egal* and the four compounds constitute by far the most frequent set of all expressions of irrelevance, collectively constituting 9,909 (= 76.85%) of all valid tokens in our sample. The simplex *egal* vastly predominates at 9,691 (cf. above). Just 218 of the 9,909 tokens are due to the compounds, of which *scheißegal* is the commonest at 194 tokens, with *schnurzegal* and *schnurzpiewegel* less frequent at 11 and 12 tokens, respectively. *Stinkegal* is a hapax legomenon in the entire DeReKo.

Compared with *egal*, *gleich*, *gleichgültig* and *wurscht* are much less common, occurring in 1,319 (= 10.23%), 938 (= 7.27%), 508 (= 3.94%) tokens, respectively, followed by the rest at less than 1% of tokens each. In some of the following statistics, only the six most frequent expressions of irrelevance are taken into account. Besides *egal* (with its four compounds), this set includes *einerlei*, *gleich*, *gleichgültig*, *schnuppe* und *wurscht*, which collectively constitute 12,824 tokens out of the total of 12,894. The remaining 70 hits (*gleichviel*, *schnurz*, *Jacke wie Hose*, *latte* and *Banane*) are too few in number per expression to satisfy the assumptions of some statistical tests, and are therefore eliminated from all statistics except for the inference tree at the end of Section 4.2.

**Figure 1.** Expressions of irrelevance with absolute frequencies, including extrapolated frequency for *egal*.
Table 1. Expressions of irrelevance with absolute and relative frequencies, including extrapolated frequency for *egal*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression of irrelevance</th>
<th>Absolute frequency</th>
<th>Relative frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>(egal, extrapolated)</em></td>
<td>26,454</td>
<td>(n/a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>egal</em> and compounds</td>
<td>9,909</td>
<td>76.85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>gleich</em></td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>10.23%</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>gleichgültig</em></td>
<td>938</td>
<td>7.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wurscht</em></td>
<td>508</td>
<td>3.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>schnuppe</em></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>einerlei</em></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>0.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>gleichviel</em></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>schnurz</em></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Jacke wie Hose</em></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.07%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>latte</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Banane</em></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>schnurzpiepe</em></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum (excluding the extrapolated frequency of <em>egal</em>, in brackets above)</td>
<td>12,894</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Matrix clause ellipsis

The variables “Subject”, “Finite verb” and “Experiencer” measure the degree of matrix clause ellipsis. The following four structural types (or cluster points) along the cline of variation as discussed in Section 2 can be distinguished:

a. zero-elliptical: matrix clauses with a preliminary subject (and thus also a finite verb), cf. (7)

b. finite verb, no subject: matrix clauses with a finite verb but no preliminary subject, cf. (8)

c. experiencer only: matrix clauses with experiencer but lacking a subject and finite verb, cf. (10)

d. fully elliptical: matrix clauses lacking subject, finite verb and experiencer, cf. (11)

We call type d. “fully elliptical” on the understanding that the combination of the *w*-word and the respective expression of irrelevance, preceded by an intensifying adverb if applicable, is retained, instantiating the putative [IRR was] subordinator construction.
Among the total of 12,894 tokens, type a. is found 2,827 times (21.9%), type b. 982 times (7.62%), type c. just 41 times (0.32%), and type d. 9,044 times (70.3%). The fully elliptical type d. is thus by far the most frequent type in the data at well over two thirds of all valid tokens. Together, it and its zero-elliptical counterpart a. represent 92.2% of tokens, while the intermediate types b. and c. are far less frequent. Table 2 shows the absolute frequencies of all four structure types for each of the six commonest expressions of irrelevance ($n=12,824$). The corresponding relative frequencies are illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 2. Absolute and relative frequencies of ellipsis in matrix clauses with the six commonest expressions of irrelevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>egal</th>
<th>einelei</th>
<th>gleich</th>
<th>gleichgültig</th>
<th>schnuppe</th>
<th>wurscht</th>
<th>Sums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. with subject</td>
<td>1,854</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>452</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>2,796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(18.71%)</td>
<td>(46.67%)</td>
<td>(6.97%)</td>
<td>(48.19%)</td>
<td>(76.00%)</td>
<td>(60.24%)</td>
<td>(21.80%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. finite verb, no subject</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>973</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.13%)</td>
<td>(6.67%)</td>
<td>(1.59%)</td>
<td>(11.51%)</td>
<td>(22.67%)</td>
<td>(22.64%)</td>
<td>(7.59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. experiencer only</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.30%)</td>
<td>(0.00%)</td>
<td>(0.23%)</td>
<td>(0.00%)</td>
<td>(0.00%)</td>
<td>(1.18%)</td>
<td>(0.30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. fully elliptical</td>
<td>7,318</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1,203</td>
<td>378</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>9,016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(73.85%)</td>
<td>(46.67%)</td>
<td>(91.21%)</td>
<td>(40.30%)</td>
<td>(1.33%)</td>
<td>(15.94%)</td>
<td>(70.31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sums</td>
<td>9,909</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>938 (100%)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>12,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As Figure 2 shows, over half of fully elliptical matrix clauses (type d.) contain the irrelevance markers _egal_ (or one of its compounds) or _gleich_. _Egal_ occurs in a fully elliptical clause in 73.9% of its instances, _gleich_ in no less than 91.2%. Full erosion is relatively common in matrix clauses with _einerlei_ or _gleichgültig_, too, in 46.7% and 40.3% of instances, respectively, but it is rare in clauses with _wurscht_ or _schnuppe_, which exhibit full erosion in just 15.9% and 1.3% of cases.

Though rare overall, elliptical matrix clauses containing an experiencer (i.e. type c.) occur most frequently in clauses with _wurscht_, 1.2% of which represent this structure type. By contrast, clauses containing _egal_ und _gleich_ show this pattern in only 0.3% and 0.2% of cases, respectively, while other expressions of irrelevance do not occur in such clauses at all. More common are matrix clauses with a finite verb that lacks a preliminary subject (i.e. type b.). This type is observed most frequently in clauses with _schnuppe_ or _wurscht_ at 22.7% and 22.6% of instances, respectively. Clauses with _egal_, _einerlei_ or _gleichgültig_ correspond to this pattern in 7.1%, 6.7% and 11.5% of cases, compared to a mere 1.6% of clauses with _gleich_.

Matrix clauses which contain both a finite verb and a preliminary subject (i.e. type a.) have the highest share of tokens with _wurscht_ (60.2%) and _schnuppe_ (76.0%). In other expressions of irrelevance, by contrast, the share of this type does not exceed half of all instances, viz. 46.7% and 48.2% with _einerlei_ and _gleichgültig_, and no more than 7.0% and 18.7% with _gleich_ and _egal_.

The statistical significance of the observed variation cannot be tested by means of a chi-square test because some of the expected frequencies are too low. A Fisher’s exact test was therefore carried out, whose p-value had to be approximated using Monte Carlo Simulations due to the high number of tokens. Based on 2,000 iterations, the observed variation proves statistically highly significant (p < 0.001).

Like experiencers, modal particles and sentential adverbs display a strong preference for clauses containing a finite verb. 39.1% of all non-elliptical clauses (1,490 of 3,809) exhibit at least one sentential adverb or modal particle, whereas only 0.67% (or 61 of the 9,085 elliptical clauses) contain one or more of these elements. On average, 12.1% of all tokens (1,554 out of 12,894) contain a modal particle and/or a sentential adverb.

In order to test for potential correlations between the absence of a finite verb and the ellipsis of other matrix clause elements, a conditional inference tree based on the variables “Finite verb”, “Subject”, “Experiencer”, and “Modal particle/Sentential adverb” was obtained in R through the `ctree()` function. Based on a series of binary questions about the values adopted by the predictor variables (here: “Subject”, “Experiencer” and “Modal particle/Sentential adverb”), conditional inference trees estimate and visualise the probability for the response
variable (here: “Finite verb”) to assume a certain value (Tagliamonte & Baayen 2012: 159). Depending on the answers to these questions, conditional inference trees divide the input data into subsets that are increasingly homogeneous with respect to the frequencies of the values adopted by the response variable (ibid.). Figure 3 shows the conditional inference tree obtained using the variables mentioned previously. Note that it refers to all 12,894 tokens, not just those containing one of the six commonest expressions of irrelevance.

The most significant predictor variable for the value adopted by “Finite verb” is “Subject”. Among matrix clauses without a preliminary subject, “Experiencer” proves to be an important predictor for the value of “Finite verb”; over 90% of clauses lacking a preliminary subject but containing an experiencer also have a finite verb. Interestingly, the input variable “Modal particle”/”Sentential adverb” turns out to be an important predictor for the value of “Finite verb” within the subset of clauses that lack both a subject and an experiencer. If such clauses lack sentential adverbs and modal particles, they never contain a finite verb, either, whereas clauses without subject and experiencer that do exhibit at least one sentential adverb or modal particle do contain a finite verb in over 60% of cases.

4.3 Expressions of irrelevance and degree particles

In 2,253 of the 12,894 clauses analysed (17.5%), the expression of irrelevance is preceded by a degree particle. Degree particles occur slightly more often in clauses
with a finite verb (866 of 3,899 clauses or 22.7%) than in elliptical clauses (1,387 of 9,085 clauses or 15.3%).

Table 3 shows the absolute frequencies of degree particles in clauses with respectively one of the six commonest expressions of irrelevance. The corresponding relative values are depicted in Figure 4. Degree particles are especially frequent in clauses with the irrelevance marker gleich, which is modified by a degree particle in more than 75% of its instances. Wurscht and schnuppe combine with a degree particle in 33% and 41% of cases, respectively, while egal, einerlei and gleichgültig are seldom preceded by particles of this kind.

Figure 4. Relative frequencies of degree particles before the six commonest expressions of irrelevance

Table 3. Absolute and relative frequencies of degree particles before the six commonest expressions of irrelevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>egal</th>
<th>einerlei</th>
<th>gleich</th>
<th>gleichgültig</th>
<th>schnuppe</th>
<th>wurscht</th>
<th>Sums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without degree particle</td>
<td>8,983</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>849</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>10,585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(90.65%)</td>
<td>(92.00%)</td>
<td>(22.59%)</td>
<td>(90.51%)</td>
<td>(58.67%)</td>
<td>(67.32%)</td>
<td>(82.54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with degree particle</td>
<td>926</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,021</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>2,239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.35%)</td>
<td>(8.00%)</td>
<td>(77.41%)</td>
<td>(9.49%)</td>
<td>(41.33%)</td>
<td>(32.68%)</td>
<td>(17.46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sums</td>
<td>9,909</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>938 (100%)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>12,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
<td>(100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A chi-square test indicates a strong and highly significant association between the presence of degree particles and the expression of irrelevance ($\chi^2=3904.3$, $df=5$, $p<0.001$, Cramér’s $V=0.55$).

The Pearson residuals obtained through the chi-square test as discussed above are displayed in Table 4. As the residuals show, the irrelevance marker *gleich* is modified by a degree particle much more often than expected by the test’s algorithm. Most other expressions of irrelevance, however, are accompanied by a degree particle less frequently than expected, a tendency which is most salient in clauses with *egal*.

### Table 4. Pearson residuals for the variables Degree Particle and Expression of Irrelevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>egal</th>
<th>einerlei</th>
<th>gleich</th>
<th>gleichgültig</th>
<th>schnuppe</th>
<th>wurscht</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-19.33</td>
<td>-1.96</td>
<td>52.11</td>
<td>-5.84</td>
<td>4.95</td>
<td>8.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8.89</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>-23.96</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>-2.28</td>
<td>-3.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The association plot in Figure 5 illustrates the residuals listed in Table 2. The height of each rectangle is proportional to the size of the relevant residual, whereas its width is proportional to the root of the expected frequency as calculated by the chi-square test (Gries 2013: 81).

![Association plot for the variables Degree Particle and Expression of Irrelevance](image)

**Figure 5.** Association plot for the variables Degree Particle and Expression of Irrelevance

### 4.4 Use of commas

Table 5 shows the absolute and relative frequencies of a comma after a matrix clause containing one of the six commonest expressions of irrelevance. These frequencies are illustrated in Figure 6. All expressions of irrelevance except *egal* receive a comma in more than 80% of cases. After the irrelevance markers *gleichgültig, einerlei, wurscht* and *schnuppe*, commas occur more frequently (viz. in over 90% of cases) than after *gleich* (84.9%) and especially after *egal*, which is accompanied by a comma in 71.2% of its tokens.
Figure 6. Relative frequencies of commas following the six commonest expressions of irrelevance

Table 5. Absolute and relative frequencies of commas following the six commonest expressions of irrelevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>egal</th>
<th>gleich</th>
<th>gleichgültig</th>
<th>wurscht</th>
<th>schnuppe</th>
<th>einerlei</th>
<th>Sums</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>without comma</td>
<td>2,854</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>45 (4.80%)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>5 (6.67%)</td>
<td>3,149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(28.80%)</td>
<td>(15.01%)</td>
<td>(9.25%)</td>
<td>(2.25%)</td>
<td>(0.00%)</td>
<td>(0.67%)</td>
<td>(2.56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with comma</td>
<td>7,055</td>
<td>1,121</td>
<td>893 (95.20%)</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>9,675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(71.20%)</td>
<td>(84.99%)</td>
<td>(95.20%)</td>
<td>(90.75%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(93.33%)</td>
<td>(75.44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sums</td>
<td>9,909</td>
<td>1,319</td>
<td>938 (100.00%)</td>
<td>508</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>12,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
<td>(100.00%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A chi-square test to check the significance of the observed variation indicates a statistically highly significant correlation between the irrelevance marker and the frequency of a comma ($\chi^2 = 460.6$, $df = 5$, $p < 0.001$). The strength of association, however, is rather weak (Cramér’s $V = 0.19$).

The Pearson residuals obtained through this chi-square test are displayed in Table 6 and visualised in Figure 7. The association plot shows egal to be the only expression of irrelevance to receive a comma less frequently than expected. Also interesting are the residuals of the irrelevance marker gleichgültig, which receives a comma much more often than expected. The same tendency can be observed in wurscht, gleich, einerlei, and schnuppe, albeit to a lesser extent.
Table 6. Pearson residuals for the variables Comma and Expression of Irrelevance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Egal</th>
<th>Gleich</th>
<th>Gleichgültig</th>
<th>Wurscht</th>
<th>Schnuppe</th>
<th>Einerlei</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>−4.87</td>
<td>3.99</td>
<td>6.97</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>8.53</td>
<td>−6.99</td>
<td>−12.21</td>
<td>−6.96</td>
<td>−4.29</td>
<td>−3.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 7. Association plot for the variables Comma and Expression of irrelevance

5. Discussion

Based on the results above, Subsection 5.1 approaches structure types a.-d. as cluster points along the desententialisation cline linking independent matrix phrases of irrelevance embedding w-interrogatives, on the one hand, and [IRR was]-introduced concessive conditionals, on the other hand. Each type is discussed according to its degree of typicality, its prototypical internal structure and any register-related preferences. The constructional status of [IRR was] itself is then determined in Section 5.2 with special reference to its schematicity, lexical specification and onward grammaticalisation, paving the way for the concluding Section 6.

5.1 The desententialisation cline, revisited

29.5% of all clauses analysed are non-elliptical with preliminary es; at this end of the cline, the expression of irrelevance functions as a subject predicative to a copula verb. Irrelevance predicates contain experiencers and modal particles/sentential adverbs much more frequently than do elliptical matrix clauses; the conditional inference tree discussed above confirms that these constituents are significant predictors for the presence of a finite verb in the matrix clause. Experiencers, modal particles and sentential adverbs all contribute to the assertive character of the matrix clause, as they modify the irrelevance semantically and pragmatically with reference to a particular context (Duden-Grammatik 2016:602). Sentential adverbs perform a similar function in that they express the speaker’s assessment or opinion regarding the whole situation (ibid.: 598).
Not surprisingly, assertion-supporting elements occur more frequently in non-elliptical than in elliptical matrix clauses, see (13):

(13)  Es ist mir schnurzpiepegal, was nach irgendwelchen für mich völlig irrelevan-
ten Rechtsvor- schriften der korrekte Name dieser mehr oder weniger unwichtig-
tigen österreichischen Bildungs- einrichtung ist.

(Wikipedia discussion; Universität Graz, 2011)
“It doesn’t matter a hoot to me [lit.: it is to-me irrelevant] what, according to
some regulations that are completely irrelevant to me, is the correct name of
this more or less insignificant Austrian educational institution.”

The purpose of the irrelevance predicate in (13) is to assert that it is irrelevant
what the official name of Graz University is. The dative experiencer mir, which
signals that the irrelevance depends on the personal viewpoint of the author, sup-
ports this assertion.

Sometimes, a predicate of irrelevance is present but does not have a prelimi-
nary subject. At the functional level, irrelevance predicates lacking es (7.6% of all
instances; 25.8% of instances with finite verb) are virtually indistinguishable from
irrelevance predicates with es, since irrelevance is asserted by both types. The fre-
quency of modal particles and/or sentential adverbs is not significantly higher in
this structure type than in predicates with es (39.9% and 39.1% respectively). Expe-
riencers, on the other hand, do display a higher frequency in clauses lacking a
preliminary subject (84.5% lacking es vs. 69.3% of other non-elliptical clauses con-
tain an experiencer). The frequency of experiencers is higher in subjectless clauses
because the absence of preliminary es is usually motivated by the topicalization of
an experiencer such as mir in (8). Occasionally, sentential adverbs are topicalized.

(14)  Eigentlich ist mir egal, was sie für Texte bemüht, was sie singt.

(Nordkurier, 17/06/2002)
‘Actually, it’s all the same to me [lit.: actually is to-me irrelevant] what kind of
lyrics she appeals to, what she sings.’

However, empty es can also be elided without any other constituent being moved
into the structural position before the finite verb (the so-called forefield), as
Example (15) illustrates.

(15)  [0] Ist mir völlig wurscht, was dort steht.

(Wikipedia discussion; De Rosa (Unternehmen), 2011)
‘I couldn’t care less [lit.: is to-me completely irrelevant] what’s written there.’

As this contribution to a Wikipedia discussion suggests, constructions lacking a
preliminary subject like (15) are not restricted to spoken German, but also occur
in written texts suggestive of colloquial usage (so-called “conceptual orality”, Koch & Oesterreicher 1985).

Like es-less clauses, elliptical matrix clauses containing an experiencer (0.3% of all instances) occur chiefly in oral or conceptually oral usage; 9 of the 41 relevant instances occur in Wikipedia discussions; and in 19 instances quotation marks indicate direct discourse. Matrix clauses of this type contain assertion-supporting elements, such as experimenters, and (in 16 of 41 cases) modal particles and/or sentential adverbs, hence they cannot function as a (non-assertive) protasis in concessive conditionals (Leuschner 2006: 79). However, they can serve as independent assertions, often in form of exclamations (cf. ibid.).

(16) Denn, wie sagt der Spießer: Mir doch wurscht, was Trend ist! (Nürnberger Nachrichten, 05/09/2013)

‘For what does the philistine say? I don’t care [lit.: to-me PRT irrelevant] what’s trending!’

In (17), too, the elliptical expression of irrelevance expresses an independent assertion. This time, however, the assertion is immediately backgrounded by the subsequent assertion jetzt sind wir an der Reihe.

(17) Uns doch wurscht, was die Jungs davon halten, jetzt sind wir an der Reihe! (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 22/06/2013)

‘We don’t care [lit.: to-us PRT irrelevant] what the boys think of it, now it’s our turn!’

Here, the matrix clause ‘Uns doch wurscht, was …’ performs the part of a protoprotasis to the protopodosis jetzt sind wir an der Reihe. The lack of a finite verb in the former allows it to be asserted and still receive its appropriate communicative weight in line with the writer’s overriding discursive goal, i.e. claiming the “wir”-group’s turn regardless of other people’s opinions. If assertion-supporting experimenters are elided, too, clause combinations, like (17), are transformed into concessive conditionals with a fully elliptical matrix clause, i.e. the very structure type which occurs in 70.5% of all instances, and thus constitute most frequent of the four types. Since matrix clause ellipsis is functionally motivated by pragmatic downgrading (Leuschner 2006, cf. above), it is not surprising that elliptical matrix clauses like (11) contain assertion-supporting elements such as modal particles and/or sentential adverbs in a mere 48 (or 0.53%) of 9,044 relevant instances. However, Examples (18) and (19) demonstrate that it is not completely impossible for a sentential adverb, for example, to appear in an elliptical matrix clause.
(18) *Eigentlich egal, was bei den von Bonn und Washington vermittelten Verhandlungen zwischen Vertretern der Industrie und der Opfer hinter verschlossenen Türen erörtert wird – Eizenstat bleibt stets Diplomat.*

(Frankfurter Rundschau, 17/07/1999, our emphasis)

‘No matter, in fact [lit.: actually irrelevant], what is being discussed behind closed doors in the negotiations arranged by Bonn and Washington between representatives of the industry and of the victims – Eizenstat remains ever the diplomat.’

(19) *Beinahe egal, was er gerade wieder geschrieben hat: Wer es sich von Edward St Aubyn selbst vorlesen lassen kann, sollte das tun.*

(die tageszeitung, 08/30/2014, our emphasis)

‘Almost no matter [lit.: almost irrelevant] what he has just written again – anyone who can have Edward St Aubyn himself read it to them should do so.’

Note that protasis and apodosis are separated by a dash and a colon in (18) and (19), respectively. Such strong punctuation is routine in concessive conditionals with a protasis that contains an elliptical matrix clause. It matches the general failure of the protasis (if sentence-initial) to be syntactically integrated into the apodosis despite the clearly hypotactic nature of the construction as a whole. That this is only a tendency and not an absolute rule, is shown by examples in our data in which the protasis does fill the forefield of the apodosis verb:

(20) *Egal was sie unternimmt, kann die EZB nicht gewinnen.*

(Tiroler Tageszeitung, 04/09/2000)

‘No matter [lit. irrelevant] what action it takes, the ECB cannot win [lit.: can the ECB not win].’

There is even occasional evidence of so-resumption, i.e. of a semi-integrated structure familiar from some conditionals in which an anaphoric adverb equivalent to English ‘then’ fills the forefield.

(21) *Ganz gleich, was man von Spielberg oder seinem Holocaust-Drama halten mag, so läßt sich doch nicht leugnen, daß dieses ewige Wunderkind das Gesicht Hollywoods und des Weltkinos der neueren Zeit geprägt hat wie kein anderer.*

(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 24/01/1994)

‘No matter [lit. irrelevant] what one may think of Spielberg or his holocaust drama, then there is [lit.: so is there] no denying that this perennial wunderkind has shaped Hollywood and recent world cinema like no other.’

While resumption can be thought of as motivated by analogy with conditionals, lack of clause integration in universal (and also alternative) concessive conditionals is motivated on grounds of diagrammatical iconicity given the deconditionalisation of $q$, and hence its separate assertibility (König & van der Auwera
Scalar concessive conditionals, however, tend (again, not absolutely) to pattern with prototypical conditionals in this respect. This raises the issue of directionality: Will universal (and alternative) concessive conditionals eventually turn towards integration, as suggested by König & van der Auwera (1988), or towards disintegration, as expected by Leuschner (2006)? For the time being, the synchronous distribution in our [IRR was] data, once quantified, will probably display the mixed result of competing motivations, with disintegration likely to predominate by a wide margin.

5.2 From entrenchment to secondary grammaticalization

As seen in earlier sections, desententialisation transforms irrelevance predicates into instantiations of a quantificational subordinator phrase (structure type d.), denoted by the shorthand [IRR was]. The fact that it alone constitutes well over two thirds of tokens and that it and its zero-elliptical counterpart represent 92.2% of tokens between them, suggests that structure type d. is well entrenched as a construction in its own right.

Given Goldberg’s (2006) classic definition of “construction” as any linguistic pattern that is not strictly predictable in some respect from its component parts or from other constructions known to exist, or that occurs with sufficient frequency even if fully predictable (Goldberg 2006: 5). Furthermore, given the wide range of variation available with German expressions of irrelevance as seen prior, schematicity and divergent preferences for lexical specification constitute strong potential evidence of such entrenchment. The constructional status of [IRR was], and by extension [IRR w-], is of special significance in the context of our investigation, because one might conceivably question whether the family resemblance between [IRR w-]-introduced concessive conditionals and predicates of relevance embedding w-interrogatives constitutes intersective gradience in the first place. Perhaps it is a case of subsective gradience, instantiated by different degrees of ellipsis, within the interrogative-embedding construction?

Let us begin with schematicity: A straightforward observation indicating schematicity is the fact, above-stated, that elliptical matrix clauses rarely contain experiencers, modal particles or sentential adverbs. In stark contrast to the routine occurrence of sentential adverbs and/or modal particles in non-elliptical matrix clauses, frequencies of experiencers and modal particles/sentential adverbs in the fully elliptical structure type d. are extremely low at 0.45% and 0.70%, respectively.

Another indication of the separate constructional status of [IRR was] is given by distinct preferences for lexical specification: Some expressions of irrelevance occur in elliptical matrix clauses only, whereas others specialise for irrelevance predicates. While infrequent and colloquial expressions of irrelevance like
Lexical specification and schematicity combine in the fact that the expression of irrelevance *gleich* rarely occurs in [IRR *was*] without being modified by the degree particle *ganz*. Degree particles are found next to *gleich* in almost 80% of its instances, and in 97% of these it is the particle *ganz* that modifies it. In elliptical clauses with *gleich*, the relative share of intensifiers increase; 80.6% of elliptical *gleich* clauses contain a degree particle, whereas only 43.4% of non-elliptical clauses do. Since *gleich* combines very frequently, indeed almost exclusively (97%), with *ganz* in elliptical clauses, the use of this degree particle is unlikely to be lexically motivated in this particular construction any longer. Rather, we are probably dealing with a lexically specified subschema, [*ganz gleich was*], to the superordinate schema [IRR *was*], which in turn is a subschema to [IRR *w-]*.

There is thus clear empirical evidence to suggest that [IRR *was*] (and potentially [IRR *w-*]) is unpredictable vis-à-vis ungrammaticalised matrix phrases of irrelevance in some respects of its behaviour, including aspects of frequency. It must therefore be regarded as an entrenched construction in its own right and its family resemblance with *w-*interrogative embedding matrix predicates as a case of intersective gradience. Although [IRR *w-*] is still emerging and taking its place as a new type of concessive-conditional subordinator in present-day German, it has already spurned a lexically specified subschema (*ganz gleich was*) as part of this process.

Beside such direct evidence, there is also indirect evidence of schematicity, namely punctuation. As mentioned earlier, [IRR *was*] differs from irrelevance predicates in non-elliptical matrix clauses in that the comma between the expression of irrelevance and the *w*-word is omitted in 33.1% of tokens. Most irrelevance predicates in non-elliptical matrix clauses adhere to the prescriptive rule of standard German that a comma must be inserted between main and subordinate clauses: 3,647 of all 3,809 non-elliptical matrix clauses (95.7%) receive a comma, whereas only 6,081 of all 9,085 elliptical clauses (66.9%) have one. Furthermore, the 162 non-elliptical clauses lacking a comma are almost exclusively found in discourse types where prescriptive comma rules tend to be disregarded, such as Wikipedia discussions and parliamentary records.

Punctuation patterns with [IRR *was*] are of special interest because they suggest the underlying process of change by which [IRR *w-*] was able to arise historically as a constructional schema in its own right. The tendency to suspend the
prescriptive comma rule and omit the comma between the expression of irrelevance and the $w$-word suggests that the $[\text{IRR } w-]$ schema arose through a process of reanalysis as shown in (22) (adapted from Leuschner 2006:152).

(22) a. [Es ist egal,] [was passiert]
   ‘It doesn’t matter [lit.: it is irrelevant] what is happening’
   $>$ b. [Egal, was passiert]
   ‘No matter [lit.: irrelevant + comma] what is happening’
   $>$ c. [Egal was passiert]
   ‘No matter [lit. irrelevant] what is happening’

Once the clause boundary has been lost between a. and b., the reanalysis is actualised by the omission of punctuation. This matches the observation, reported in Section 4.4., that omission of the comma is most frequent in clauses with $\text{egal}$ and $\text{gleich}$, i.e. precisely with those expressions of irrelevance that occur in elliptical clauses in over 80% of their tokens.

Seen in a diachronic light, the empirical observations testifying to the separate constructional status of $[\text{IRR } was]$ as listed above can collectively be seen as evidence of the actualisation of the same process of reanalysis, supported undoubtedly by analogy with the model of the already established $w$- $\text{auch immer}$ subordinators.7 To this we may add examples like (23) in which $\text{egal was}$ is put to use as a free-choice indefinite pronoun equivalent to English $\text{anything}$ (cf. Haspelmath 1997:140f.):

(23) An der Bar verlangten wir blaue Mottodrinks, was der sächsisch nuschelnde Barmann erst nicht verstand, uns dann aber anbot, in egal was Blue Curaçao hineinzukippen.  
   (die tageszeitung, 13/03/2012)
   ‘At the bar we requested blue signature drinks, something the barkeeper with his Saxon mumble initially didn’t understand, eventually offering to add a shot of Blue Curaçao to anything [lit.: no matter what] (we ordered).’

Such cases reflect a process of secondary grammaticalisation which presupposes the primary grammaticalization (by reanalysis) of $[\text{IRR } w-]$ and mimicks a par-

7. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for reminding us of the potential role of analogy and the existing language system in grammaticalization, see e.g. Fischer 2008, 2013). Unlike the reviewer, we regard $w$- $\text{auch immer}$ subordinators as the most likely model of analogy for the $[\text{IRR } w]$ schema. We will be unable to do justice to the role of analogy in the emergence of $[\text{IRR } w]$ and its subschemas in the present paper, but in this case it would certainly be an exaggeration to describe analogy as the “driving force of language change”, as plausibly asserted by Gillmann (2021) in reference to a type of subordinate clause in historical German where emergence from discourse is not at issue.
allel development in the synonymous *w- auch immer* subordinators (Bossuyt 2016: 36–38). Since our other findings on *egal was* (cf. above) suggest that this combination has proceeded furthest along the path of primary grammaticalisation, we are not surprised that *egal was* should be involved in the process of secondary grammaticalisation too.

6. Conclusion and prospects

As stated in the Introduction, the present paper is a pilot study towards a larger investigation of [IRR *w*-] introduced concessive conditionals. Compared with earlier work on this subtype, we have sought to add value in several respects: the massively increased database, the constructionalist perspective on concessive conditionals as a family of constructions on various levels of a language-specific constructicon, and the more consistent distinction between the concessive-conditional clause complex, on the one hand; and the quantificational subordinator, on the other hand; and the strictly synchronic explication of the gradience between them in terms of desententialisation.

Significantly, the theoretical orientation of the present study towards usage-based Construction Grammar does not in any way delegitimise the grammaticalisation perspective that has been adopted in work elsewhere (above all, Leuschner 2006; cf., inter alia, Traugott/Trousdale 2013: 94–148 on the relationship of grammaticalisation theory and Construction Grammar). Not only are our findings perfectly compatible with a Lehmann (2015[1985])-style approach to grammaticalisation and the associated emphasis on loss of autonomy (Leuschner 2006; cf. Hopper & Traugott 2003: 175–211 for an approach to “grammaticalisation across clauses” along these lines), they are also subsumed easily and illuminatingly under Hopper’s (1991) five “principles” of grammaticalisation:

1. layering: [IRR *w*] is forming a new layer of free-choice subordinators and, secondarily, indefinite pronouns which joins, and may even come to compete with, the older *w- immer* layer;
2. divergence: [IRR *w*-] constitutes a constructional schema in its own right, with preferences for lexical specification (*egal*) and even a subconstruction with intensifier (*ganz gleich*);
3. specialisation: [IRR *w*-], or at least its instantiation [IRR *was*], shows a statistically significant preference for one specific expression of irrelevance, viz. *egal*;
4. persistence: [IRR w-] continues to rely on the lexical semantics of the original expression of irrelevance and the variable-like semantics of w- in order to function as a free-choice quantifier;

5. de-categorialisation: [IRR w-] has almost completely lost its association with the original assertive copula construction embedding a w-interrogative and its assertion-supporting elements.\(^8\)

The individualising perspective and panchronic tendency in these formulations are characteristic of grammaticalisation theory. Yet, it is the focus of Construction Grammar on form-meaning pairs which makes it possible to conceive of [IRR w-] as an emergent construction, including lexically specified subconstructions, from a synchronic perspective in the first place.

Following on from the present pilot study, the obvious next step is to extend our investigation to include the paradigm of wer (i.e. ‘who’ and its case forms). The aim of the study should be to complete the picture of the [IRR w-] construction and its subconstructions in relation to their respective peers. Intensifying prefixoids like scheiß- (‘shit’; as e.g. in scheißegal) should therefore be included on the basis of colloquial data. Furthermore, the protasis-apodosis link should be included in order to document the lack of clause-integration and its exceptions in light of the directionality issue, and so should secondary uses of [IRR w-] as indefinite pronoun and potentially in other functions (cf. Bossuyt 2016). Finally, our investigation should go diachronic and document historically the constructionalisation of [IRR w-]-introduced concessive conditionals, a process which according to the data in Baschewa (1980: 209, 214) occurred in German around 1800, ca. 150 years after the lexicalisation of modern, “equality”-based expressions of irrelevance (Leuschner 2005).

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8. An anonymous reviewer suggests that our understanding of de-categorialisation is more in line with the broad definition by Kuteva et al. (2019: 3f., 10f.) than with the original one by Hopper (1991: 22), who illustrates de-categorisation by shifts from the major word classes Noun and Verb to minor word classes. While this suggestion is correct, we do not necessarily share the implied assumption that Hopper regards the grammaticalisation of nouns and verbs as more than a convenient case for illustration.
References


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