

## Es ist dies – A Special Use of German Prefield-es

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**Introduction:** We present a corpus study on a use of the prefield-*es* as shown in (1), which has not been discussed in the literature so far. Based on our findings, we propose a modification of Speyer’s (2008, 2009) stochastic Optimality Theoretic (OT) model of prefield ranking.

- (1) **Es ist dies** der schlimmste Fall von Marktmanipulation, den wir je gesehen haben  
it is this the worst case of market manipulation that we ever seen have  
‘This is the worst case of market manipulation that we have ever seen.’

The *Es* in (1) is clearly a case of prefield-*es* since, first, it is non-phoric and, second, the sentence features a subject (*dies*); thus, it cannot be an expletive subject-*es* (see Pütz 1986, Tomaselli 1986, Cardinaletti 1990, Zifonun 1995, Paranhos Zitterbart 2002, and Pittner/Bermann 2004 for the different uses of *es*). Speyer (2009), who investigated the conditions that allow the occurrence of *es* in the prefield, characterizes the use of prefield-*es* as a last resort to fill the prefield in order to have V2-sentence if there is no better candidate available. In cases like (1), however, the demonstrative pronoun *dies* would be suitable to fill the prefield which makes the *es* seem redundant. Presented with data like example (1), native speakers judge the construction to be rather marked and do not have intuitions about its function or conditions of use.

**Method:** To investigate the use of this construction, we annotated 150 *Es ist dies*-sentences randomly taken from the DeRoKo corpus “W-öffentlich” with regard to properties of the source they occurred in, the properties of *dies*’s antecedent and the sentence’s content. These sentences were compared to *Dies ist*-sentences, which can be regarded as the unmarked counterpart to the *Es ist dies*-construction. They were taken in the same proportion from the same sources as the *Es ist dies*-sentences to achieve a maximally exact mirroring.

**Results:** The vast majority of *Es ist dies*-sentences occurred in press texts (96%). Further, it was found that the construction is mostly used in southern regions: 90% of the texts were from Austria, Bavaria or Switzerland. The results of the measurement of the distance to the antecedent are presented in table 1. The  $\chi^2$ -test yielded significant differences between the two samples with regard to this feature ( $p < .05$  both for the measurement in finite verbs and for the measurement in matrix verbs). Concerning the content, we found 47 instances of counts (see ex. (2)) in the *Es ist dies*-sentences opposed to 16 instances among the *Dies ist*-counterparts. The  $\chi^2$ -test yielded a significant result for this difference ( $p < .001$ ), too.

**Discussion:** According to Speyer (2009), topics either need to be discourse-old, that is to say they occur in the preceding sentence, or be relevant in the further course of the text in order to be allowed in the prefield. Unlike Speyer’s ranking (2008, 2009; see table 2) predicts, in the majority of cases, the *dies* of the *Es ist dies*-sentences refers to an antecedent in the preceding sentence. The ranking further specifies that *Es ist dies* would be the optimal candidate in cases in which *dies* refers to an antecedent that is not located in the preceding sentence. Instead, the fact that the *Dies ist*-version is generally more frequent and that *Es ist dies* is a marked construction should be represented in the ranking. We, therefore, suggest replacing TOPIC-VF with two different constraints (see table 3): ABOUTNESSTOPIC-VF and MARKSHIFT-VF. The former constraint specifies that the topic, understood as an ‘aboutness’ topic following Reinhart (1981), should be located in the prefield. Unlike TOPIC-VF, ABOUTNESSTOPIC-VF does not require the topic to be discourse-old which accounts for the higher frequency of *Dies ist-sentences* in general. The latter constraint reflects the discourse connecting function of the prefield. It requires a marking of shifts or unexpected moves in discourse. It has often been observed that shifts of topics tend to be marked (see Givón 1983, Bestgen/Vonk 2000, and Breindl 2008, 2011). We assume that MARKSHIFT-VF slightly overlaps with ABOUTNESSTOPIC-VF which has the effect that, at times, ABOUTNESSTOPIC-VF is outranked by MARKSHIFT-VF. This accounts for the difference between *Es ist dies*- and *Dies ist*-sentences with regard to the distance to the antecedent since referring back to an antecedent that is located at a greater distance is an unexpected discourse move. The

significant difference in the content category “count” is also in line with the overlapping of these two constraints as it makes sense to indicate a break in discourse when taking stock.

**Conclusion:** Our modified prefield ranking incorporates a use of prefield-*es* the old model did not factor in and two significant differences between *Es ist dies*-sentences and their unmarked counterpart could be explained by the addition of MARKSHIFT-VF. Next, we must look for further factors that license the use of *Es ist dies*-sentences in those cases in which *dies* refers to an immediately preceding antecedent. Also, the data set must be extended and experimental evidence should be gathered.

DISTANCE TO THE ANTECEDENT SENTENCE TYPE		
Number of finite verbs	<i>Es ist dies</i>	<i>Dies ist</i>
0	111	123
1	21	14
2 or more	14	5
Number of matrix verbs		
0	119	129
1	17	11
2 or more	10	2

**Table 1: Distance to the antecedent (absolute values)**

(2) (Together with friends, the „singing club Coram Publico Großrußbach“ has been preparing for weeks for Joseph Haydn’s „**Missa Sancti Nicolai**“, which will be celebrated and performed on Sunday, June 10, in Großrußbach’s church.)

**Es ist dies die** sechste Messe des bedeutenden niederösterreichischen Komponisten [...].

It is this the sixth mass the-GEN major Lower Austrian composer

‘This is the sixth mass of the major Lower Austrian composer.’

(Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, 07.06.2012)

Candidates	1-VF	SCENESSETTING-VF	POSET-VF	TOPIC-VF
☞ <i>Dies ist</i> <sub>Preced.Sent.</sub>				
<i>Es ist dies</i> <sub>Preced.Sent.</sub>				*
<i>Dies ist</i> <sub>NotPreced.Sent.</sub>				*
☞ <i>Es ist dies</i> <sub>NotPreced.Sent.</sub>				

**Table 2: Speyer’s (2008) prefield ranking**

Candidates	1-VF	SCENESSETTING-VF	POSET-VF	ABOUTNESSTO-PIC-VF	MARKSHIFT-VF
☞ <i>Dies ist</i> <sub>Preced.Sent.</sub>					
<i>Es ist dies</i> <sub>Preced.Sent.</sub>				*	
☞ <i>Dies ist</i> <sub>NLS</sub>					*
<i>Es ist dies</i> <sub>NLS</sub>				*	
☞ <i>Dies ist</i> <sub>Count</sub>					*
<i>Es ist dies</i> <sub>Count</sub>				*	

**Table 3: Modified prefield ranking**

**Source** • Das Deutsche Referenzkorpus DeRoKo, <http://www.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora/>, Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim. •

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