Double face evidentials in German: Reportative ‘sollen’ and ‘wollen’ in embedded contexts

It is well known that the German modal verbs ‘sollen’ and ‘wollen’ have evidential (reportative) uses, illustrated in (1), but to date there is no satisfactory formal semantic account of these uses: Most existing accounts focus on unembedded occurrences of these verbs and derive incorrect predictions for the embedded cases. Based on corpus data and a survey study, it will be argued that ‘sollen’ and ‘wollen’ introduce a reportative presupposition, similar to the reportative subjunctive (Fabricius-Hansen and Sæbø 2004), and a binding-case assertion.

(1) a. Adam soll den Mt. Everest bestiegen haben
   Adam SOLL the Mt. Everest climbed have
   ‘It is said that Adam climbed Mt. Everest’
   b. Adam will den Mt. Everest bestiegen haben
   Adam WANT the Mt. Everest climbed have
   ‘Adam claims that he climbed Mt. Everest’

Truth-conditionality  Evidentials in many languages operate at the illocutionary rather than the propositional level (cf. e.g. Faller (2002) on reportative ‘-si’ as an illocutionary modifier in Cusco Quechua). However, the German reportatives ‘sollen’ and ‘wollen’ do contribute to truth-conditional content (cf. Faller (2006)). For example, they can be embedded in the antecedent of conditionals:

(2) Wenn es über Nacht regnen soll . . . und Sie am nächsten Morgen Turnier haben lassen Sie den Platz auf keinen Fall trocken und locker liegen.
   ‘If it is said to rain over night . . . and you have a tournament the next morning, do under no circumstances let the arena lie dry and loose.’ (from Faller (2006))

Against pure modal analyses  Most formal semantic accounts of evidentials with truth-conditional effects assimilate evidentials to epistemic modals, starting with Izvorski (1997) on Bulgarian. Similarly, Ehrich (2001) analyses the reportative uses of German ‘müssen’, ‘sollen’ and ‘wollen’ in the possible worlds framework of Kratzer (1991). According to her analysis, for example, SOLL(φ) is true in a world w iff for every world w′ in which the claims of X in w are true, it holds that w′ ∈ φ (where X is understood as the contextually supplied source of the relevant claims). One obvious problem for such an account is the question of how to determine the relevant claims and the intended source of these claims. But there is also a more interesting problem, if we consider embedded occurrences of ‘sollen’, as in the authentic examples from German newspapers in (3).

(3) a. Daß er dem Schüler auch auf den Kopf geschlagen haben soll, streitet der Lehrer entschieden ab.
   ‘The teacher resolutely denies that he hit the pupil also on the head (as it is alleged)’
   b. Daß es in ganz China im Vorjahr “nur” etwas mehr als 60.000 Verkehrstote gegeben haben soll, erscheint angesichts dieser rauhen Sitten wie ein Wunder.
   ‘In view of these tough customs it seems like a miracle that there were “only” slightly more than 60.000 traffic deaths in China last year (as it is alleged)’

The crucial observation here is that (3a) is not interpreted as saying that the teacher denies that it is said that he hit the pupil on the head, as the modal account predicts. Rather, (3a) expresses that somebody claimed that the teacher hit the pupil on the head and the teacher denies that the contents of that claim is true. Similarly, (3b) does not express that it seems like a miracle that it is said that there were only slightly more than 60.000 traffic deaths.

An embedding dilemma  Comparing unembedded and embedded reportative ‘sollen’, we are facing the following dilemma (presupposed material is underlined):

- Unembedded SOLL(φ) receives a weak interpretation (cf. (1)): ‘□REPφ’ (≈ ‘It is said that φ’)
- Embedded SOLL(φ) can receive a strong interpretation (cf. (3)): ‘φ, □REPφ’

The pure modal approach uniformly assigns the weak interpretation to ‘sollen’, thus cannot account for embedded occurrences. A simple non-modal approach, stating that SOLL(φ) presupposes that it is said that φ and asserts that φ, gets the embedded cases right, but wrongly predicts that an utterance of SOLL(φ) commits the speaker no less to the truth of φ than uttering simply φ.
Proposal To get out of this dilemma, I propose the following entry for reportative ‘sollen’, involving the novel concept of binding-case assertion:

\[ \textsc{Soll}(\phi) \]
Presupposition: \( \square_{\text{REP}} \phi \)

Binding-case assertion: \( \phi \)

The basic idea is simple: \( \textsc{Soll}(\phi) \) introduces the presupposition \( \square_{\text{REP}} \phi \) and if that presupposition can be bound (typically by a higher utterance predicate), the assertion part \( \phi \) is added. If, on the other hand, the presupposition has to be accommodated, the assertion part is not added.

Predictions The entry in (4) predicts the intuitively correct interpretations of reportative ‘sollen’ in various contexts. In an unembedded case like (1a), the reportative presupposition needs to be accommodated, resulting in the desired interpretation ‘It is said that Adam climbed Mt. Everest’. If ‘sollen’ is embedded under an utterance predicate, as in (5a), the reportative presupposition is typically bound to the matrix verb and, according to (4), the binding-case assertion is added, yielding the intuitively correct reading ‘Adam claims that Berta climbed Mt. Everest’ (cf. Letnes (1997)).

(5) a. Adam behauptet, dass Berta den Mt. Everest bestiegen haben soll
   Adam claims that Berta climbed Mt. Everest
b. Adam glaubt, dass Berta den Mt. Everest bestiegen haben soll
   Adam believes that it is said that Berta climbed Mt. Everest

In contrast, if ‘sollen’ is embedded under a propositional attitude predicate, as in (5b), this allows for a reading in which the reportative presupposition is locally accommodated, preventing addition of the binding-case assertion. The resulting interpretation for (5b) is that Adam believes that it is said that Berta climbed Mt. Everest. The type of the embedding predicate is just one of various factors that influence the fate of the reportative presupposition.

Comparison with the subjunctive The reportative use of ‘sollen’ is similar in function to the reportative subjunctive (ten Cate 1996). Both seem to introduce a presupposition to the effect that somebody utters the argument proposition (cf. Fabricius-Hansen and Sæbø 2004). However, there are interesting differences that relate to the accommodation force of the introduced presupposition: The presupposition introduced by the subjunctive is much harder to accommodate than the presupposition introduced by ‘sollen’. This explains why unembedded occurrences of the reportative subjunctive are limited to free indirect speech contexts, whereas unembedded ‘sollen’ is not restricted in this way (cf. (1)). Another difference is that unlike the subjunctive, reportative ‘sollen’ can easily be embedded in a 1st person present and/or factive matrix clause, hence there is no dissociation requirement for ‘sollen’.

(6) a. Ich weiß, dass er von den schwarzen Konten gewusst haben soll
   I know that it is said that he knew of the black money accounts
b. * Ich weiß, dass er von den schwarzen Konten gewusst habe
   (intended:) I know that he knew of the black money accounts

References


