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6 *Wehe* ‘woe’ + verb-second conditional clause in German: A conventionalized threat construction?

Abstract: This paper is concerned with the German interjection *wehe* (‘woe’) and its potential role in indicating the illocution of a threat. While it is well-known that *wehe* can have a lamenting usage and a usage as prediction of calamity, also attested for English *woe*, less is known about the usage of German *wehe* in threats. The paper starts with the observation that *wehe* has various usage patterns, one of them being the usage as a matrix element embedding a conditional clause. This usage can receive either a prediction or a threat reading. Based on a discussion of the functional and formal properties of threatening in German and a close description of the grammatical properties of *wehe*, a corpus study is carried out to investigate whether there is evidence for a more particular pattern of *wehe* embedding conditional clauses that is conventionally linked to a threat reading. The results of the study provide initial evidence for the existence of a syntactic construction *wehe* + verb-second conditional clause with 2nd person subject that is reserved for threats. Still, the interpretation of instances of this construction as threats is context-dependent to some degree, suggesting an analysis as illocutionary force indicator in the sense of Searle, i.e. a linguistic means signaling a threatening illocution by default, which can be overridden in context.

Keywords: corpus study, interjection, illocutionary indicator, syntactic construction, threat

1 Introduction

It is a standard assumption in research on the interaction between grammar and pragmatics that there are certain default relations between (types of) linguistic means and (types of) illocutions. Searle (1969: 30) introduced the notion of “explicit illocutionary force indicators” to capture this insight. The notion of “indicator” reflects that this relationship is conceived to be relatively stable but can still be overridden in context. The most prototypical explicit illocutionary force indicator, according to

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Searle (1969), is the explicit performative construction (e.g., uttering *I promise, I'll do my homework* to make a promise). While there is a relatively stable relationship between the explicit performative construction *I promise* and promises, this relationship can be overridden in context, e.g. if a speaker uses *I promise* not in a promise, but in an affirmation, as in *I promise, it wasn't me*. Beyond performative verbs, other means such as sentence types, verbal mood, modal particles, and prosody have been shown to play an important role in signaling illocutionary force. For example, most languages avail themselves of an interrogative sentence type signaling the illocutionary force of a question (Wunderlich 1976; Siemund 2018). Similarly, there are systematic links in the world's languages between imperative sentences and directive speech acts, as well as between declarative sentences and assertions. On the other hand, it has long been taken for granted that most expressive speech acts, particularly those used in impolite interaction, such as insults or reproaches, do not have specific grammatical correlates, but receive their interpretation primarily based on socio-pragmatic and interactional factors (Mills 2003; Locher and Watts 2008).

More recently, though, particular grammatical constructions have been identified in various languages that seem to be conventionally associated, to varying degrees, with impolite speech acts (cf. Finkbeiner, Meibauer, and Wiese 2016). For example, Van Olmen, Andersson, and Culpeper (2023) investigate the insulting construction *You*+NP in English, Dutch, and Polish, finding a great degree of conventionalization across these three languages (see also Van Olmen et al., this volume, and Van Olmen and Andersson, this volume). Van Olmen (2018) examines the relationship between imperative constructions and the function of reproaches in Dutch and other languages of Europe, finding evidence for a hybrid reproachative construction. As for threats in English, Muschalik (2018) finds empirical evidence for the existence of a set of recurrent linguistic means including formulae like *you better*, swear words, 'violent verbs' (e.g., *hit, beat, smash*), and conditionals (cf. also Culpeper 2011), rebutting Limberg's (2009: 1378) categorical claim that "[t]hreats do not come in a standardized linguistic format" (see also Dobrushina, this volume, on curses in Nakh-Daghestanian languages).

For German, the literature on threats is sparse, and very little is known as to the potential grammatical correlates of threats. Existing work (e.g., Apeltauer 1977, Falkenberg 1992) mostly starts out by listing constructed examples taken to illustrate prototypical threat utterances. Interestingly, these lists often include utterances containing the interjection *wehe* ('woe'), cf. (1)-(2).

- (1) *Wehe, wenn du das machst.*
 woe if you that make.PRS.2SG
 'Don't you dare do that'
 (Apeltauer 1977: 188)

- (2) *Wehe, du lässt dich hier noch einmal blicken!*
 woe you let.PRS.2SG you.ACC here else once see
 'Don't you dare show your face here once again'
 (Falkenberg 1992: 178)

In contrast to German, the English interjection *woe* cannot immediately embed a conditional clause. This is only possible if *woe* is part of a complete matrix clause *woe betide* (+ object) [+ if-clause], with the usage without object being described in the Oxford English Dictionary (henceforth OED) as "archaic" and "rare" (cf. reading P.3. in the OED). In contrast, the Modern German examples (1)–(2) are completely unmarked choices if one wants to express a threat. Furthermore, the usage of *woe betide* + object is characterized in the OED as "colloquial with weakened sense 'you (he, etc.) will get into trouble (if . . .)'"'. The Modern German examples (1)–(2), however, are clear, unattenuated threats. The most adequate translation for (1)–(2) therefore seems to be one that uses an English threat expression such as 'don't you dare'.

While Apeltauer (1977) does not say anything about the status of *wehe*, Falkenberg (1992: 179), in a side-remark, suggests that *wehe* might be one of few existing lexical indicators of threats in German. However, this suggestion so far lacks systematic empirical substantiation. What is more, from the perspective of a "grammar of impoliteness" research agenda, examples (1)–(2) raise the question whether an analysis of *wehe* as a *lexical* illocutionary indicator of threats is on the right track. Crucially, *wehe* does not unequivocally indicate threats, but has – as will be demonstrated below – a range of other usages, e.g., in lamentations. On the other hand, if one takes a closer look at (1) and (2), one finds that in both cases, *wehe* is used as a sentence-initial matrix element embedding a clause, and that in both (1) and (2), the embedded clause – a *wenn*-clause in (1), a verb-second (henceforth V2) clause in (2) – receives a conditional reading. This suggests that the threat reading of (1) and (2), rather than being indicated by *wehe* in itself, might be indicated by the larger syntactic construction it appears in, namely, the syntactic construction '*wehe* + embedded conditional clause'.

However, one can easily find uses of *wehe* + embedded conditional clause that are not threats. By uttering (3), the speaker does not threaten anyone but merely foreshadows negative consequences of the possible event that the radioactive cloud moves into the direction of Tokyo.

- (3) *Wehe, wenn der Wind dreht und die radioaktive*
 woe if the wind turns and the radioactive
Wolke damit Richtung Ballungszentrum Tokio weht
 cloud therewith direction congested-area Tokyo waves

‘Woe betide if the wind turns and the radioactive cloud waves into the direction of the metropolitan area of Tokyo’
(St. Galler Tagblatt, 03/22/2011)

The embedded clause in (3) is a *wenn*-clause. Based on the examples (1)–(3), one might thus hypothesize that the utterance of *wehe* + embedded *wenn*-clause may convey a threat reading, cf. (1), or a predictive reading, cf. (3), while utterances of *wehe* + embedded V2 clause might be more restricted in their illocutionary potential, preferably conveying threats.

Starting from these initial observations, the question arises whether there is indeed a particular syntactic construction consisting of *wehe* as a matrix element and an embedded V2 conditional clause that functions as a *grammatical* illocutionary indicator of threats, and if so, how its linguistic properties should be specified. To find an answer to this question, I will empirically investigate the usage of *wehe* in a large, annotated corpus of *wehe*-utterances compiled from DeReKo (German Reference Corpus). As to the theoretical framework used, I adopt a Construction Grammar approach (Goldberg 2013), which regards syntactic constructions as complex, conventionalized form-function pairings. Conventionalization can be defined with Terkourafi (2005: 213) as “a relationship holding between utterances and context, which is a correlate of the (statistical) frequency with which an expression is used in one’s experience of a particular context”. To assess the conventionalization status of a potential threat construction, a feasible way is to show that the majority of utterances containing this particular construction in a given corpus are threats. Note that this definition of a conventionalized construction still allows for the existence of utterances of the construction that are not threats. It is thus compatible with the notion of illocutionary indicator as a default grammatical means for a particular illocutionary function that can be overridden in context.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. In Section 2, I go into the basic functional properties of threats, with a focus on German, and into their potential grammatical correlates. In Section 3, I take a closer look at the grammatical properties of *wehe*. In Section 4, I present the results of the corpus study on *wehe*, providing a quantitative and qualitative analysis and arguing for the existence of a conventionalized syntactic threat construction ‘*wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject’. Section 5 concludes.

2 Threats: From function to form

Threatening can be defined as “a linguistic strategy that is used to manipulate or even coerce the addressee into (not) doing something which has an undesirable outcome for him/her [i.e., the speaker], where “[i]n case of the addressee’s non-compliance, the threatener may initiate negative consequences directly or indirectly as a kind of punishment for non-cooperation” (Limberg 2009: 1378). More generally, the communicative function of threats has been characterized in pragmatics both “as a means of manipulation, [. . .] a form of (verbal) impoliteness and [. . .] as an exercise of power by a speaker” (Muschalik 2018: 20). If one takes impoliteness to refer to “language that is used to cause offence” (Culpeper 2018), or to “strategies that are oriented towards attacking face” (Culpeper 1996: 350), threats are impolite speech acts in that they involve “coercive action that is not in the interest of the target, and hence involves both the restriction of a person’s action environment and a clash of interests” (Culpeper 2011: 226; cf. also Falkenberg 1992: 182).

In most pragmatic approaches to threats, the fact is acknowledged that threats combine both a commissive aspect, i.e., the speaker’s conditional commitment to punish the addressee in case of non-compliance, and a directive aspect, i.e., the speaker’s attempt to make the addressee do something (or refrain from doing something). What is sometimes neglected, however, is the expressive aspect of threats, explicitly put by Falkenberg (1992: 187) as “*Drohungen bestehen im Einflößen von Furcht oder von ‘negativ’ besetzten affektiven Einstellungen*” (‘Threats consist in instilling fear or ‘negatively’ loaded affective attitudes’, my translation; cf. also Fraser 1998: 161). Rolf (1997: 223) proposes an account according to which expressive speech acts essentially are attempts to affect the emotional state of the addressee. The expression of a certain psychological state by the speaker – Searle’s (1978) original essential condition of expressive speech acts – is modeled by Rolf as the sincerity condition of expressive speech acts. Under Rolf’s definition, the expressive aspect of threats can be seen in them being attempts to instill fear into the addressee. It seems that it is exactly this expressive aspect which relates threats to impoliteness – in contrast, for example, to warnings, which resemble threats in many ways, but lack an expressive aspect, and usually are not taken to be impolite speech acts. The expressive aspect of threats is also reflected, e.g., in the fact that threats can be assigned to “output strategies” such as “frighten[ing]” and “invading the other’s space” in Culpeper’s list of negative impoliteness strategies (cf. Culpeper 1996: 358).

Current research into threatening in English suggests that there are certain linguistic means that are conventionally associated, to a greater or lesser degree, with the interpretation of the utterance as a threat (e.g., Culpeper 2011; Muschalik 2018; Culpeper, Van Dorst and Gillings, this volume). For example, Culpeper

(2011: 136) lists the following conventionalized impoliteness formula for threats in English:

- (4) [I'll/I'm/we're] [gonna] [smash your face in/beat the shit out of you/box your ears/bust your fucking head off/straighten you out/etc.] [if you don't] [X]
- (5) [you'd better be ready Friday the 20th to meet with me/do it] [or] [else] [I'll] [X]
- (6) [X] [before I] [hit you/strangle you]

In (4)–(6), several structural features become apparent that have been systematically examined on a broad empirical basis by Muschalik (2018). She starts out with the following list of alleged linguistic properties of threats which she then checks against a corpus of utterances meta-linguistically classified as threats (Muschalik 2018: 52–53):

- (a) conditional language
- (b) futurity
- (c) “violent” verbs
- (d) expressions of speaker agency
- (e) use of personal pronouns (1st and 2nd person)
- (f) swear words
- (g) the mention of weapons

Muschalik's findings on the frequency and combinatory patterns of these properties suggest a higher degree of predictability and systematicity regarding the form side of threats – e.g., syntactic, morpho-syntactic and lexical features – than assumed in earlier studies (Muschalik 2018: 181–182). Thus, empirical work has contributed to a more differentiated view of the form-function relationship with respect to threatening in English. At the same time, it is uncontroversial that threatening can also be achieved in the absence of particular grammatical means and that apparent threat utterances can be interpreted differently, depending on context.

Threatening in German is so far largely under-researched. One of the few papers dealing with the linguistics of threatening in German is Falkenberg's (1992) very concise study on the notion of threatening. He develops the following list of characteristic formal and functional properties of threats in German:

- (i) There is no preferred sentence type for threats.
- (ii) There are only few lexical indicators of threats (with *wehe* as a candidate).
- (iii) Threats do not allow for illocutionary explicitness (*drohen* ‘to threaten’ cannot be used in an explicit performative construction).

- (iv) Threats can be performed quasi-explicitly by other illocutionary verbs such as *versprechen* ('promise') or *empfehlen* ('recommend').
- (v) The basic propositional structure of a threat is conditional: In case the addressee B does X (antecedent), the speaker A will do Y (consequent).
- (vi) By means of a threat, the speaker (conditionally) commits themselves to a future action.
- (vii) Threats can be propositionally implicit in that the consequent may be missing.
- (viii) The goal of a threat is to make the addressee refrain from an action X (deterrent threat) or to make the addressee perform an action X (extortionate threat).
- (ix) There is something like a "threatening intonation".
- (x) Threats can be performed non-verbally, without much contextual effort.
- (xi) Threats consist in instilling fear or 'negatively' loaded affective attitudes.
(Falkenberg 1992: 1992: 179–187; my translation)

While a close examination of properties (iii), (iv), (x) and (xi) is beyond the scope of this chapter, the properties (i) and (ii) will come under scrutiny in the corpus study (see Section 4). As to property (ix), I assume that phonological features of threat constructions are part of their inherent properties, without being able to substantiate this claim based on my (written) data. Falkenberg's property (vii) should, more properly, be regarded as an addendum to (v), clarifying that the conditional basic structure does not have to be realized overtly. As becomes clear, Falkenberg's properties (v), (vi), and (viii) are reminiscent of Muschalik's (2018) properties (a), (b), (d), and, more indirectly, (e), rendering these properties particularly interesting. Therefore, the present study will take these properties as a starting point, deriving from them a number of basic linguistic criteria to be used as a heuristics to identify, as a first methodological step, potential candidates of threatening *wehe*-utterances in the corpus. Before we get there, a short discussion of these properties is in order.

Let us start with (v). According to Falkenberg (1992), threats are necessarily propositionally conditional, as they express a conditional intention. The "basic propositional structure" consists in that the speaker makes the action denoted by the consequent conditional to the addressee's (non-) compliance with the action denoted by the antecedent. Propositional conditionality can be realized at the syntactic surface in various ways, including, for example, *wenn*- ('if') clauses, disjunctives (*entweder-oder* 'either-or'; *sonst* 'or else'), and pseudo-imperatives (e.g., *Sag noch ein Wort und ich schreie* 'Say one more word and I'll scream'; cf. Dacyngier 1998: 188–192). Conditionality can also be purely implicit, as in *Hat sonst noch jemand Lust auf eine Abreibung?* ('Anybody else who likes to be beaten up?', Falkenberg 1992: 179). In the next sections, we will see that also *wehe*-threats display a conditional basic structure, typically realized syntactically by a conditional clause

embedded by *wehe*, which is interpreted as the antecedent in the conditional structure.

Property (vii) relates to the potential implicitness of conditionality in threats. To perform a threat, it is, in appropriate contexts, sufficient to mention the antecedent and leave the consequent open to be inferred. Such cases are, on Falkenberg's account, still propositionally conditional. In Muschalik's (2018: 14) study, this is modeled by the concept of gradable pragmatic explicitness. While some authors, such as Limberg (2009: 1379), also allow for semantically non-conditional threats (e.g., "I will do X"), Falkenberg (1992) convincingly argues that utterances such as *Ich werde dir meine Leute auf den Hals schicken!* ('I will send my people after you'), said by a convict towards the judge at the end of a court hearing, or, similarly, utterances like *Das wird dir noch einmal leid tun!* ('You will regret this someday'), are not threats, as they are uttered after the action from which the speaker wanted to prevent the addressee. They thus do not fulfil the central illocutionary point of a threat, as defined by Falkenberg in (viii). Falkenberg suggests treating such utterances, instead, as predictions or as affirmations of the consequent of a previously performed threat.

Property (vi) comprises a futurity aspect. The speaker's commitment to a future action may be modeled, in Searlean terms, as the sincerity condition of threats, and is therefore closely related to the aspect of intentionality, i.e., the expression of the speaker's intention to act in a certain way (Muschalik 2018: 53, cf. also Fraser 1998: 168). Because of the semantic futurity/intentionality aspect of threats, one may expect that the consequent will not contain past tense verbs (*?If you don't do your homework, I punished you*). Furthermore, threats are about a potential (non-factive) action of the addressee which is taken to be the condition for a subsequent speaker action. The potential addressee action is denoted by the antecedent. Therefore, one may expect the antecedent of a threat not to include verbs in the past tense. Apparent counterexamples such as *Wenn du mich angelogen hast, dann gnade dir Gott!* ('If you lied to me, then may God help you') do not denote a factive event in the past (that the addressee has lied to the speaker), but are interpreted as containing an epistemic aspect, resulting in a potential (non-factive) reading: 'If it turns out that you lied to me, then God may help you'. Such examples would not count as threats under Falkenberg's definition, as they violate property (viii) according to which the goal of a threat is to make the addressee refrain from an action.

Property (viii) is about speaker agency and addressee-orientation. In a threat utterance, the speaker (agent) imposes some (non-)action upon the addressee (target). From this, one can expect that threateners will regularly refer to themselves and their addressees in uttering threats. We may thus expect that person-deictic pronouns will be used consistently in threat utterances. It goes without saying that the use of pronouns may vary along with the degree of explicitness of the threat. For example, in

threats in which there is no explicit consequent also the agent of the inferred future action (the 1st person) will remain implicit. While Muschalik (2018) also takes into consideration utterances that do not target the addressee, but a third person, it is questionable whether such utterances are threats. On Falkenberg’s definition, an utterance like *If Reagan came to Sheridan, I would shoot him* (Muschalik 2018: 103) does not count as a threat towards Reagan. This is because the speaker cannot coerce the referent of the 3rd person subject, Reagan, into (not) doing something, by uttering this sentence towards an addressee different from Reagan, say, Peter. Neither can the speaker, in uttering this sentence towards Peter, instill fear into Reagan.

By way of interim conclusion, from the general illocutionary function of threats as outlined above, whose illocutionary point is to make the addressee refrain from an action or to perform an action, in that the speaker conditionally commits themselves to a future action, we can derive a number of linguistic features that may be indicative of threat utterances in German: the basic conditional structuring of the propositional content of the utterance (including implicit conditionality), choices of verbal tense that are consistent with a future action in the consequent and a potential action in the antecedent, as well as the use of 1st and 2nd person pronouns in order to refer to agent and target of the threat. In the present corpus study, these characteristics will be used to search for relevant occurrences of threats, i.e., as heuristic criteria, not as definitional ones. As they can be taken to be characteristic – but neither necessary nor sufficient – for threats, they may be used to pre-select hits from the corpus, which then must be checked manually in context to determine whether they indeed are used as threats. As the study focuses on potentially threatening *wehe*-utterances, the general threat characteristics developed here will be complemented by characteristics derived from the grammatical properties of *wehe*, to be used, in the same methodological way, as pre-selectors. These will be developed in the next section.

3 *Wehe* (‘woe’): Grammatical properties

Etymologically, Modern German *wehe* and its variant *weh* have developed from Old High German (OHG) *wah* and Middle High German (MHG) *wē* (Kluge 2011: 879), with correlates in other Germanic languages such as Old English *wā*, English *woe*, Old Norse-Icelandic *vei*, Middle Dutch *wee* (*Wörterbuch der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, henceforth WDG). Barðdal et al. (2013) reconstruct in detail the syntactic properties of Proto-Indo-European **wai* (‘woe’) to which also *wehe* – as well as its cognates from Indo-Iranian, Italic, Baltic, Slavic and Germanic – can be traced back.

There seems to be consensus across sources that already in OHG and MHG, *weh(e)* was used as an interjection (Kluge 2011: 879), instantiating (i) an exclamation of dismay (a lamentation) or (ii) a prediction of something hideous or malign. The readings (i) and (ii) are provided by both the *Deutsches Universalwörterbuch* (henceforth DUW) and the WDG. By contrast, Barðdal et al. (2013: 327) assign to **wai* only reading (i): “[It] was generally used when something bad happened to people. It is exploited to convey anguish and consternation, basically functioning as ‘*Ausdruck des Jammers*’ [‘expression of lament’].” Furthermore, they mention, in passing, the functions of curse and insult (Barðdal et al. 2013: 327). While there is no mention of either a predicting or a threatening function of **wai* in Barðdal et al. (2013), both the DUW and the WDG point to the threatening potential of the prediction reading (ii) of *wehe*. As argued in Section 2, threats always include the announcement of a (conditional) future action of the speaker. Thus, the alleged threatening use of *wehe* can be regarded as a subtype of the predicting use.

Apart from the interjection, the dictionaries also list entries of *weh* as a neuter noun (*das Weh*, *das Wehe* ‘pain’, ‘distress’) and as adjective (sometimes also classified as adverb) *weh* (‘painful’, ‘wistful’) (cf. WDG, DUW). It is not quite clear how interjectional, nominal and adjectival *weh(e)* are interrelated. While the WDG suggests that the noun developed in the 9th century based on the OHG interjection, which is said to occur since 800, Kluge (2011: 879) lists both the interjection and the noun as occurring alongside each other since the 7th century. The typical adjectival context for *weh(e)* is the predicative usage with a copular verb as in *mir ist weh ums Herz* (‘me.DAT is woe round the heart’; DUW), which is structurally analogous to something like *mir ist kalt* (‘me.DAT is cold’). This predicative use of *weh* sounds rather archaic in modern German but can still be found in poetic language. The attributive use of *weh* (e.g., *seine wehen Füße* ‘his aching feet’), on the other hand, developed only later, according to WDG.

As to the interjection *weh(e)*, it is important to note that according to the dictionaries, readings (i) and (ii) can be distinguished from early on. That is, already in OHG, there is a lamenting and a predicting usage. The two usages can be illustrated by the following examples taken from WDG.

- (7) a. *O weh!*
 oh woe
 ‘Alack!’
 b. *Weh mir!*
 woe me.DAT
 ‘Woe betide me!’

- (8) a. *Weh(e) dem, der das tut*
 woe DEM.DAT who.NOM this does
 'Woe betide the person who does this'
- b. *Wehe, wenn du nicht pünktlich nach Hause kommst*
 woe if you not on-time toward home come
 'Woe betide you if you don't get home on time'

Lamenting (7) and predicting (8) *wehe* can also be distinguished on formal grounds. Firstly, as the WDG notes, the lamenting use preferably features the form *weh*, while the predicting use preferably features *wehe*. However, in combination with a dative complement, the form *weh* can also be used in predictions (8a). Secondly, it seems that lamenting *weh* is often combined with other (lamenting) interjections such as *o* or *ach* (both corresponding, roughly, to English *oh*), cf. (7a). By contrast, predicting *wehe* cannot be combined with these interjections, cf. (8b').

- (8) b.' ?*O/?Ach wehe, wenn du nicht pünktlich*
 oh woe if you not on-time
nach Hause kommst
 toward home come

Thirdly, while lamenting *weh* (7a) can be replaced by other interjections such as *oje* ('oh dear') or *au wei(a)*¹, this replacement is hardly acceptable with predicting *wehe*, cf. (8b'').

- (8) b.'' ?*Oje/?Au weia wenn du nicht pünktlich*
 oh dear if you not on-time
nach Hause kommst
 toward home come

These observations clearly support the view that there are two different interjections *weh(e)* with two different meanings.

However, there is also a certain syntactic overlap between the two usages. For example, as becomes clear from (7b) and (8a), both usages of *weh(e)* can function as the head of an interjection phrase in which *wehe* takes a dative complement denoting an experiencer or maleficiary. This dative complement may be internally complex, containing a relative clause, as in (8a). More generally, the capacity of interjections to take NP complements (which may denote varying semantic roles)

¹ *Au wei(a)* can be regarded as a more colloquial variant of (*oh*) *weh* in German.

is well-known from interjections such as, e.g., *o* ('oh') and *pfui* ('fie'), as shown in a series of works on German interjections by Fries (1996, 2002). Some examples from older stages of German are (9) and (10), (9) dating back to the 17th century (Early New High German), (10) to the 18th century (New High German).

- (9) *o dem verhängnis*
oh the.DAT doom.DAT
'Oh this doom'
(Opitz; cf. Fries 1996: 321)

- (10) *pfui des bösewichts*
fie the.GEN evildoer.GEN
'Ugh this evildoer'
(Herder; cf. Fries 1996: 321)

In modern German, the NP complement of interjections such as *o* and *pfui* typically takes the nominative case (*O diese Politiker* 'Oh those.NOM politicians.NOM'; *Pfui das Schwein* 'Ugh this.NOM pig.NOM'). *Weh(e)* can be regarded as a relict in this respect, having kept dative case with its NP complement.

On the other hand, the dictionary entries suggest that lamenting *weh*, as opposed to predicting *weh(e)*, cannot embed a clausal complement, cf. the contrast between (7a-b) and (8b). The different syntactic behavior of the two *weh(e)* interjections can be taken to reflect the differences in their speech act potential. A lamentation, in the sense of an exclamation of dismay, is an expressive speech act by which the speaker expresses a feeling of pain, distress or regret about some event, which is presupposed as factual.² This explains the incompatibility with a conditional *wenn*-clause. On the other hand, a prediction is a future-oriented speech act which may be conditional on some event, which explains the compatibility with a *wenn*-clause. At the same time, both speech acts feature an experiencer, someone that is affected by a past or future event. This explains the compatibility of both with a dative complement as the target.

As to the form of the clausal complement of predicting *wehe*, the entries in the WDG and DUW only list verb-final *wenn*-clauses (e.g., 8b). By contrast, Falkenberg's (1992: 178) example, see (2), features an embedded verb-second (V2) clause. The observation that *wehe* can embed a V2 clause is not trivial. Only particular classes

² It is in this sense that the WDG and the DUW describe lamenting *weh(e)* (German *Klage*); cf. also Barðdal et al. (2013) on **wai*. In a wider sense, the term "lamentation" may also refer to things like whining and moaning (German *Jammern*), which do not necessarily presuppose a factual event, but may also refer to prospective events or just describe the expression of a speaker's psychological state with no relation to any actual situation. This wider reading is not the one relevant here.

of verbs in German, such as *verba dicendi* and preference predicates, are taken to be licensors of embedded V2 clauses, cf. (11)–(12).

- (11) *Peter sagt, du kommst alleine*
 Peter says you come alone
 'Peter says that you come alone'
 (Sode 2023: 3)

- (12) *Es ist besser, du kommst alleine*
 it is better you come alone
 'It is better if you come alone'
 (Sode 2023: 2)

As Sode (2023) shows, V2 clauses such as (11) are declarative and can be replaced by *dass*- ('that') clauses without change of meaning. By contrast, V2 clauses such as (12) can "always be replaced by *wenn*- ('if') clauses without obvious change of meaning", but can only be replaced by *dass*- ('that') clauses "under certain conditions" (Sode 2023: 6). This indicates that V2 clauses of the type (12) are semantically not declarative, but conditional. It seems that the interjection *wehe* fits well into the class of licensors of conditional V2 clauses, cf. (13).

- (13) *Wehe, du kommst alleine*
 woe you come alone
 'Woe betide you if you come alone'

Firstly, a V2 clause embedded by *wehe* can always be replaced by a *wenn*- ('if') clause, indicating its status as a conditional clause. Secondly, similarly to the licensor in (12), *wehe* involves an evaluative component, with the difference that it does not mark the event in the embedded clause as something positive (preferred), as in (12), but as something dispreferred.

4 Corpus study

4.1 Corpus, search query, and annotation categories

For the study, the DeReKo (German Reference Corpus) was used, which can be searched via the COSMAS search platform provided by *Leibniz-Institut für deutsche Sprache*. DeReKo is the largest available collection of written texts of contempo-

rary German, comprising 57.6 billion words from a variety of text types, mainly newspapers, but also fiction, academic prose as well as conceptually or medially spoken text types (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985) such as Wikipedia discussions, fictional dialogues, or plenary debate protocols. The strength of DeReKo is its sheer size, which is especially important here because *wehe*, overall, is an infrequent phenomenon. A weakness of DeReKo is its unbalanced composition with regard to the shares of different text types, as it contains predominantly written genres such as journalistic texts.

The corpus was searched for sentences with either sentence-initial *wehe* or one of the sentence-initial clusters *doch wehe* ('yet woe'), *aber wehe* ('but woe'), *und wehe* ('and woe'), *oder wehe* ('or woe'), *denn wehe* ('because woe'), *sonst wehe* ('else woe'), *nur wehe* ('only woe'), while excluding sentences in which *wehe* co-occurred with *wohl/Wohl* ('well'), *Wind* ('wind'), or *losgelassen* ('let-go'), for reasons I will go into below. The search string used is specified in (14).

- (14) ((wehe:sa %0s,Max (wohl or (wind or losgelassen))) or (((doch:sa or (aber:sa or (und:sa or (oder:sa or (denn:sa or (sonst:sa or nur:sa)))))) /+1w,Max wehe %0s,Max (wohl or (wind or losgelassen))))

Restricting *wehe* to the sentence-initial position reduced the number of non-target hits to a minimum, as it excluded, for example, sentences containing the noun *Wehe* ('contraction') in descriptions of giving birth. While the interjection *wehe* typically occurs sentence-initially, it may be preceded by a connector, as listed in the clusters above. The exclusion of co-occurrences with *wohl/Wohl* ('well'), *Wind* ('wind'), and *losgelassen* ('let-go') further reduced the number of non-target hits. In combination with *Wind*, one is most likely dealing with a form of the verb *wehen* ('to blow'). In combination with *Wohl*, one is often dealing with the high-frequent formulae *Wohl und Wehe* ('weal and woe'). Both were irrelevant to the present study. In combination with *losgelassen* ('released'), the attestations correspond to the quotation *Wehe, wenn sie losgelassen* ('woe betide if they are released') from Schiller's poem *Die Glocke*, which occurs frequently in the corpus and whose inclusion would have skewed the search results.

The search resulted in 12.868 hits, of which 1.000 were randomly extracted. Of these, the first 500 were selected to form the data set of the study. The data set was represented by COSMAS as a list of key words in context (KWIC), the context comprising (mostly) one sentence to the left and one sentence to the right. The data set was manually annotated according to the categories listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Annotation categories.

Category	Parameter	Specification	Example
Type of complement	Ø	–	– <i>Wehe!</i> 'Woe'; <i>Wehe, wehe!</i> 'Woe, woe!'
	Phrasal complement (dative)	–expansion	– <i>Wehe dem!</i> 'Woe [betide] DEM.DAT.SG.M' – <i>Wehe den Besiegten!</i> 'Woe [betide] the.DAT.PL defeated.DAT.PL'
		+expansion by RC ³	– <i>Wehe dem, der erwischt wird</i> 'Woe [betide] DEM.DAT.SG.M who gets caught' – <i>Wehe dem Minister, der kein Geld herausrückt</i> 'Woe [betide] the.DAT secretary.DAT who does not fork out money'
		+expansion by CC ⁴	– <i>Wehe den Protokollbeamten, wenn der Füller kleckst</i> 'Woe [betide] the.DAT.PL keepers.DAT.PL of the minutes if the fountain pen blots'
	Clausal complement (CC)	wenn-clause	– <i>Wehe, wenn die irgendwo hinpinkeln</i> 'Woe [betide] if they pee anywhere'
		V2-clause	– <i>Wehe, die Personalzahlen sinken weiter</i> 'Woe [betide] if the personnel numbers continue to decrease'
Person marking	Dative argument	1 st	– <i>Wehe mir/uns</i> 'Woe [betide] me.DAT/us.DAT'
		2 nd	– <i>Wehe dir/euch/Ihnen</i> 'Woe [betide] you.DAT.SG/you.DAT.PL/you.DAT.POL'
		3 rd	– <i>Wehe ihm/ihr/ihnen/dem/der/denen/NP</i> 'Woe [betide] him.DAT.SG.M/her.DAT.SG.F/them.DAT.PL/DEM.DAT.SG.M/DEM.DAT.SG.F/DEM.DAT.PL/NP
	Subject of CC	1 st	– <i>Wehe, [wenn] ich/wir . . .</i> 'Woe [betide] [if] I.NOM/we.NOM'
		2 nd	– <i>Wehe, [wenn] du/ihr/Sie . . .</i> 'Woe [betide] [if] you.NOM.SG/you.NOM.PL/you.NOM.POL'
		3 rd	– <i>Wehe, [wenn] er/sie/es/sie/der/die/das/die/NP . . .</i> 'Woe [betide] [if] he.NOM.M/she.NOM.F/it.NOM.N/they.NOM/DEM.NOM.M/DEM.NOM.F/DEM.NOM.N/DEM.NOM.PL/NP

³ RC=relative clause⁴ CC=conditional clause

Table 1 (continued)

Category	Parameter	Specification	Example
Tense marking	Clausal complement (CC, RC)	–past tense	see examples above
		+past tense (preterite, perfect, pluperfect)	– <i>Wehe dem, der nicht die Wahrheit preisgab</i> ‘Woe [betide] DEM.DAT.SG.M who did not reveal [lit. not revealed.PRET] the truth’ – <i>Wehe aber, wenn einer sein Vertrauen missbraucht hat</i> ‘But woe [betide] if someone abused [lit. has abused.PF] his trust’ – <i>Wehe, wenn er [. . .] selber etwas gefunden hatte</i> ‘Woe [betide] if he himself had found [PLUPF] something’

For the analysis, the distribution of the 500 hits was explored with respect to the chosen annotation categories. Starting with the distribution as to types of complements, the exploration was refined in several steps, taking into account the distribution of person marking and tense marking. This procedure allowed zooming into those hits that displayed all the linguistic properties that were established above as heuristic characteristics of threats. Relevant attestations were then considered in their co-texts to assess their intended meanings. Additionally, selected clusters of attestations lacking one or more relevant linguistic characteristics of threats were cross-checked in their co-texts as to their intended meanings.

4.2 Results

In what follows, the quantitative results are presented for each of the selected categories.

4.2.1 Type of complement

Table 2 shows the distribution of attestations with respect to the type of complement embedded by *wehe*.

Table 2: Type of complement.

Parameter	Specification	Number	Total number	Percentage
Ø	–	10	10	2.0
Phrasal complement (dative)	–expansion	12	143	28.6
	+expansion by RC	124		
	+expansion by CC	7		
Clausal complement (CC)	<i>wenn</i> -clause	140 ⁵	335	67.0
	V2-clause	195		
Other		12	12	2.4
Total			500	100

In roughly two thirds (67%) of the cases, *wehe* is used with a conditional clause complement. Within this class, V2 clauses occur more frequently (58.2%) than *wenn*-clauses (41.8%). Phrasal (dative) complements are used in less than one third (28.6%) of cases. Of these, the vast majority (86.7%) features dative nouns or dative demonstrative pronouns expanded by a relative clause. Bare uses of the interjection, without complement, occur only very rarely (2%). The class of “other cases”, which is also very small (2.4%), subsumes some individual cases that did not fit into any of the other classes.⁶

4.2.2 Person marking

Table 3 zooms into the three largest classes in the corpus, which together make 478 of 500 hits: (i) *wehe* + phrasal (dative) complement, (ii) *wehe* + *wenn*-clause, and (iii) *wehe* + V2 clause. The table shows the distribution of person marking (1st, 2nd, 3rd) on the dative argument (i) or the subject of the conditional clause (ii), (iii), respectively.

⁵ Of the 140 examples of *wehe* + *wenn*-clause, 6 are elliptical (*Wehe, wenn nicht* ‘Woe if not’).

⁶ For example, there is one attestation of a temporal *als*- (‘when’) clause, cf. *Wehe aber, als die Außenwelt eindringt* ‘Woe betide when the outer world is intruding’ as well as one attestation with *über*-PP instead of a dative, cf. *Wehe dann über dich Elenden* ‘Woe betide upon you wretched’. As to examples of the type *Wehe dem, einer hatte gemogelt*, which were also assigned to this class, see (20) below.

Table 3: Person marking.

Category	Person marking	Number	Total number	Percentage
phrasal complement (dative)	1 st	2	143	1.4
	2 nd	3		2.1
	3 rd	138		96.5
				100
<i>wenn</i> -clause subject	1 st	12	140	8.6
	2 nd	2		1.4
	3 rd	120		85.7
	elliptic ⁷	6		4.3
				100
V2-clause subject	1 st	12	195	6.2
	2 nd	20		10.2
	3 rd	163		83.6
				100
Total			478	

In all three classes, *wehe*-utterances predominantly feature 3rd person marking. Of the cases with phrasal (dative) complement, 96.5% display a 3rd person dative. Of the cases with conditional clause complement, 85.7% of *wenn*-clauses and 83.6% of V2 clauses display 3rd person subjects. For illustration, cf. (15)-(19).

- (15) *Wehe dem, der nicht über die nötigen*
woe DEM.SG.DAT who.NOM not over the necessary
Beziehungen verfügt, um an die begehrten Jobs
relations disposes to at the sought-after jobs
zu kommen
to come
‘Woe betide those who do not dispose of the necessary contacts to get the hot jobs’
(Rhein-Zeitung, 06/24/2000)
- (16) *Wehe, der Gegner verliert den Ball und ist*
woe the opponent loses the ball and is
eine Sekunde lang unsortiert
one second long unsorted
‘Woe betide if the opponent loses the ball and is confused for one second’
(die tageszeitung, 01/31/2011)

7 Elliptical cases omit subject and finite verb, e.g., *Wehe, wenn nicht*.

- (17) *Wehe, wenn Per den Ball trifft: Der überzeugende*
 woe if Per the ball hits the convincing
Abwehrspieler trifft zum 2:1
 defender scores to-the 2:1
 'Woe betide if Per hits the ball: The impressive defender scores to make it 2:1'
 (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 06/17/2005)
- (18) *Wehe, wenn die Kurse fallen*
 woe if the stock-prices fall
 'Woe betide if the stock prices fall'
 (Rhein-Zeitung, 02/24/2000)
- (19) *Wehe, die Heizung fällt länger als eine Stunde aus*
 woe the heating falls longer than one hour out
 'Woe betide if the heating breaks down for more than one hour'
 (Frankfurter Rundschau, 01/11/1997)

By uttering (15)-(19), the speaker signals their foreshadowing of some future calamity resulting from the property or event denoted by the complement of *wehe*. The utterances thus convey the reading of prediction of calamity. In usages with a phrasal dative complement, cf. (15), the foreshadowed calamity targets the (human) referent denoted by the dative pronoun or noun. In usages with a conditional clause complement, the target of the calamity must be inferred from the utterance in context. While in (16), the target can be inferred to be identical with the human subject of the conditional clause (it is the opponents who suffer from their losing the ball), in (17), the target is not the subject of the clause. It is not the football player Per but the opponent team who suffers from Per's scoring. In (18)-(19), with no human subject contained in the clause, the target must be inferred as being some human individual who suffers from the fall of the stock prices or the breakdown of the heating, respectively.

A peculiar usage, which was assigned to the class of "other" uses as indicated in Table 2 (n=12), is illustrated by (20)-(21).

- (20) *Wehe dem, ein Stück bleibt aus Versehen im Karton*
 woe DEM.SG.DAT a piece remains out mistake in-the box
 'Woe betide if a piece by mistake remains in the box'
 (Nordkurier, 12/24/2011)
- (21) *Wehe dem, wenn diese Umleitung durch einen*
 woe DEM.SG.DAT if this redirection through a

Verkehrsunfall blockiert wird
traffic-accident blocked becomes
‘But woe betide if this redirection gets blocked by a traffic accident’
(Rhein-Zeitung, 03/29/2008)

What is peculiar about these cases is that the dative demonstrative pronoun *dem* is referentially empty. In this respect, (20)-(21) differ from uses such as (15), in which *dem* refers to the experiencer. As to their interpretation, (20)-(21) convey the same meaning as they would without *dem*. While one might assume that these are simply “erroneous” uses, the fact that there are four instances of this pattern among the “other” uses might be taken as some initial evidence for a process of reanalysis being under way, in which *dem* loses its referential meaning, being amalgamated with *wehe* to form some kind of complex interjection *wehedem* with the same meaning as *wehe*.

4.2.3 Tense marking

Generalizing from (15)-(19) that *wehe*-utterances with 3rd person referents (i.e., 3rd person embedded clause subjects and most 3rd person datives) typically convey a prediction reading with no threatening involved, one may conclude from Table 3 that the vast majority of attestations of *wehe* + complement in the corpus are predictions. Interestingly, this is also true for 3rd person uses in which the embedded (conditional or relative) clause displays a verb in a past tense. Table 4 provides an overview of the distribution of past versus non-past tense forms in the embedded clauses (n=466) in the corpus. 14% of the conditional clauses and 8.9% of the relative clauses display past tense marking.

Table 4: Tense marking.

Category	Tense marking	Number	Total number	Percentage
Conditional clause	–past tense	294	342	86,0
	+past tense	48		14,0
				100
Relative clause	–past tense	113	124	91,1
	+past tense	11		8,9
				100
Total			466	

While past tense marking seems, at first glance, to be inconsistent with a prediction reading, these uses can be explained as narrative (reported) predictions, cf. (22).

- (22) *Der Schwiegersohn soll [...] das Atelier [...] nur unter
the son-in-law shall the artist-studio only under
strengsten Auflagen benutzt haben dürfen. Der Boden
strictest conditions used have may.PTCP the floor
musste abgedeckt sein. Wehe, irgendwo blieb ein
must.PST covered be woe anywhere remained a
Farbfleck zurück.
color-stain back*

'It is said that the son-in-law was allowed to use the artist studio only under the strictest conditions. Woe betide if some color stain was left behind.'

(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 03/23/2002)

Utterances like (22) occur in contexts in which a narrator foreshadows negative consequences of an event, of which the narrator has knowledge at the time of utterance, but of which the person narrated about does not have knowledge at the time of the narrated world. These specific narrative conditions allow for prediction readings in past tense.

While most 3rd person uses in the data set convey prediction readings with no threatening involved, it is clear that the mere appearance of a 3rd person subject does not prevent an utterance from expressing a threat. For example, one can find utterances such as (23)-(24), which under certain conditions may be perceived as threats.

- (23) *Wehe, wenn die irgendwo hinpinkeln, dann behalte
woe if DEM.PL somewhere pee then keep
ich die nicht
I them not*

'Woe betide if they pee somewhere, then I won't keep them'

(Rhein-Zeitung, 07/18/2003)

- (24) *Wehe, die Mitgift stimmt nicht
woe the dowry is-right not
'Woe betide if the dowry is not adequate'
(Rhein-Zeitung, 07/23/1997)*

In (23), the demonstrative 3rd person plural pronoun refers to two abandoned kittens the speaker was persuaded to accommodate. The utterance can be inter-

puted as a threat towards the speaker's interlocutors who persuaded the speaker to accommodate the kittens, i.e., who are responsible for them. While for (24), there is no further context provided by DeReKo, if uttered towards the bride's father by the groom, one may interpret the utterance as a threat towards the father, as the one responsible for the size of the dowry, despite its subject being a 3rd person NP.

4.2.4 Uses with person deixis

Let us now zoom into person-deictic uses, i.e., *wehe*-utterances with 2nd person or 1st person embedded clause subjects. Our heuristic criteria suggest that these should be good candidates for threats. Overall, 2nd person uses are quite rare in the corpus. However, Table 3 shows that the class of *wehe* + V2 clausal complement contains a comparatively large share of 2nd person (*du* 'you.SG', *ihr* 'you.PL', *Sie* 'you.SG/PL.POL') subjects (10.2%), as compared to only 2.1% for *wehe* + phrasal complement and 1.4% for *wehe* + *wenn*-clause. Examining these cases within their co-texts in more detail, it turns out that the majority of uses of *wehe* + V2 clausal complement with 2nd person subject (17 of 20) indeed convey a threat reading. These are listed in (25)-(41).

- (25) *Muttern passte gut auf: „Wehe, ihr esst*
 mother watched well up woe you.PL eat
sie nicht, dann gibt's eben gar nichts.
 them not then is-there PRT PRT nothing
 'Mother was very attentive: You better eat them, or you will get nothing instead'
 (Berger, Rudi W.: *Spitzenrausch*. Föritz 2006)

- (26) *„Wehe, du bist Punkt elf nicht zu Hause“⁸*
 woe you.SG are point eleven not to home
 'You better be at home at eleven o'clock sharp'
 (Nordkurier, 05/08/2004)

- (27) *Sie [. . .] drohte nur: „Wehe, du verlässt dieses Haus.“*
 she threatened only woe you.SG leave this house
Kaum war sie gegangen, stürzte ich hinaus.
 barely was she gone rushed I out
 'She just threatened: "Don't you dare leave this house." No sooner had she left than I rushed out'
 (NZZ am Sonntag, 10/26/2014)

⁸ DeReKo provides no further context for this example.

- (28) *Wehe, du erhöhst schon wieder die Umlage, mein
 woe you.sg raise already again the levy my
 Lieber!*⁹
 dear
 'Don't you dare raise the levy once again, my friend'
 (*Rhein-Zeitung*, 02/09/2013)
- (29) *Petra H. hatte auch gesehen, wie die beiden
 Petra H. had also seen how the both
 ein Klebeband mitnahmen, um den Automann zu fesseln.
 a tape along-took for the car-man to tie
 Und schließlich hatten die Räuber gedroht: „Und wehe,
 and finally had the robbers threatened and woe
 du sagst was!“
 you.sg say what
 'Petra H. had also observed how the two took a sticky tape to tie up the car
 dealer. And finally, the robbers threatened: "Don't you dare say anything"
 (*die tageszeitung*, 07/06/2001)*
- (30) *Der NPD-Politiker behauptet in seiner Anzeige, die
 the NPD-politician claims in his complaint the
 Männer hätten ihn wüst bedroht. „Wehe, du
 men had him wildly threatened woe You.sg
 gibst einem Schüler die CD – dann schlag
 give any pupil the CD then hit
 ich dir den Schädel ein!“
 I you.DAT the skull in
 'The NPD politician claims in his complaint that the men ranted and raved at
 him. "Don't you dare give the CD to a pupil – or I'll bash your head in!"'
 (*die tageszeitung*, 09/27/2007)*
- (31) *„Wehe, du erzählst es mir nochmal. Was
 woe you.sg tell it me again what
 meinst du, was ich mir den halben
 mean you.sg what I me the half
 Tag habe anhören müssen?“ „Aber warum hast
 day have listen must.PTCP but why have*

9 DeReKo provides no further context for this example.

du das denn nicht verhindert?“, rief Uwe.
 you.SG that PRT not impeded exclaimed Uwe
 “Don’t you dare tell me again. What do you think I have been listening to half
 of the day?” “But why didn’t you impede this?”, Uwe exclaimed.’
 (Braunschweiger Zeitung, 06/19/2006)

- (32) „Wehe, du heulst“, sagte ich. Arme, alte
 woe you.SG cry said I poor old
 Frau, sagte mein Gewissen [. . .]. Ich hörte nicht
 woman said my conscience I heard not
 auf mein Gewissen.
 on my conscience
 “Don’t you dare cry”, I said. Poor, old woman, my conscience said. I didn’t
 listen to my conscience.’
 (Zander, Wolfgang: *Hundeleben*. Meßkirch 2011)

- (33) Wehe, du vögelst meine Mom“, feuert Dyrus
 woe you.SG fuck my mom fires Dyrus
 John entgegen. „Besser, du gewöhnst dich dran“,
 John toward better you get-used you.ACC to-it
 zischt der zurück.
 spits this-one back
 “Don’t you dare fuck my mom”, Dyrus hurls at John. “You better get used to
 it”, John spits as a reply.’
 (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 12/02/2010)

- (34) Es waren Polizisten auf Streife [. . .].
 it were policemen on patrol
 Snowmobiler haben sich an die
 snowmobilers have themselves on the
 Verkehrsregeln zu halten. „Habt ihr
 traffic-rules to keep have you.PL
 denn nicht das Snowmobiler-Handbuch bekommen?
 PRT not the snowmobile-handbook received
 Diesmal geht es ohne Ticket
 this-time goes it without ticket
 ab. Aber wehe, ihr lest
 off but woe you.PL read

das Büchlein nicht.“

the booklet not

‘They were policemen on the beat. Snowmobile drivers must obey the traffic regulations. “Didn’t you receive the snowmobile handbook? This time, you’ll get away without a ticket, but you better read the booklet.”’

(*Die Zeit*, 01/14/1983)

- (35) *Vor einigen Jahren [...] wurde mir von*
 before some years was me.DAT by
einer Therapeutin empfohlen, einen indianischen Traumfänger
 a therapist recommended an Indian dreamcatcher
ins Fenster zu hängen. Ich sollte
 in-the window to hang I should
aber unbedingt zwei meiner Haare hineinflechten.
 though absolutely two my.GEN hair in-braid
[...] Gott sei Dank wusste ich es
 god be thanks knew I it
aufgrund meines Studiums besser. Ich habe
 because my.GEN study better I have
sie später angerufen und ihr gesagt:
 her later phoned and her said
„Wehe, Sie wagen es, für diesen
 woe you.SG.POL dare it for this
Unsinn eine Rechnung zu stellen.“
 bullshit an invoice to issue
 ‘Some years ago, I got a therapist’s advice to put an Indian dreamcatcher in front of my window. It allegedly was very important to also braid into it two hairs of mine. Luckily, I knew better because of my academic education. I called her later and told her: “Don’t you dare invoice this bullshit.”’
 (*Zeit Wissen*, 08/02/2011; Letters to the editor)

- (36) *Manchmal wird auch ein hitziger Wortwechsel*
 sometimes becomes also a fierce quarrel
daraus. So wie [...] bei den Miami
 out-of-it so as by the Miami
Open zwischen der Spanierin Garbiñe Muguruza
 Open between the Spanish Garbiñe Muguruza
und ihrem französischen Coach Sam Sumyk.
 and her French coach Sam Sumyk

Muguruza maulte, und Sumyk konterte: „Wehe,
Muguruza grumbled and Sumyk countered woe
du sagst mir noch einmal, dass
you.SG say me.DAT again once that
ich, verdammt noch mal, den Mund
I damn again PRT the mouth
halten soll.“
keep shall

‘Sometimes it develops into an angry argument. Like during the Miami Open between the Spanish Garbiñe Muguruza and her French coach Sam Sumyk. Muguruza grumbled, and Sumyk countered: “You better don’t tell me again to shut-damn it-up.”

(*Berliner Zeitung*, 03/30/2017)

- (37) *Warum fragt ihr nicht mal den*
why ask you.PL not PRT the
Experten für historische Frankfurter Gebäude, gerne
expert for historical Frankfurt buildings gladly
auch auf dem nächsten Frankfurter Stammtisch?
also on the next Frankfurt stem-table
Und wehe, du sagst jetzt, das
and woe you.sg say now this
sei doch nicht belastbar –Haselburg-müller
be.SBJV PRT not sound –Haselburg-müller

‘Why don’t you ask the expert for historical Frankfurt buildings, preferably also at the next Frankfurt regular’s table? And you better not tell me now that this is not sound.’

(Wikipedia, 08/27/2011 – http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diskussion:Hessischer_Hof)

- (38) *„Wehe, du kotzt mir auf die Theke!“*
woe you.SG puke me.DAT on the counter
ist die erste ganz und gar eigene
is the first wholly and PRT own
Cartoonveröffentlichung des Zeichners.
cartoon-publication the.GEN drawer.GEN

“‘Don’t you dare puke on my counter” is the first completely own cartoon publication of the drawer.’

(*Spiegel-Online*, 09/09/2009)

- (39) „Ich bin um fünf in der Abtei.
 I am about five in the abbey
Und wehe, du lässt mich warten.“
 and woe you.SG let me wait
 'I'll be at five in the abbey. And don't you dare let me wait.'
 (Regnier, Sandra: *Das Flüstern der Zeit*, Band 1. Hamburg 2015)
- (40) Sarah blieb derweil vor mir stehen und
 Sarah kept meanwhile before me stand and
deutete auf ihre Haare. Doch statt mich
 pointed on her hair but instead me.acc
nach meiner Meinung zu fragen, sagte sie
 after my opinion to ask said she
grimmig: „Wehe, du sagst auch nur ein
 fiercely woe you.SG say also only one
Wort zu meiner Frisur...“
 word to my haircut
 ‚Meanwhile, Sarah kept standing in front of me, pointing to her hair. But instead of asking me for my opinion, she fiercely said: “Don't you dare say one single word about my haircut...”'
 (Riemer, Martina: *Road to Hallelujah*. Hamburg 2015)
- (41) Sie sagen, Sie würden helfen, die
 you.SG.POL say you.SG.POL would help the
Probleme zu lösen. Anschließend drohen Sie
 problems to solve subsequently threaten you.SG.POL
aber: Wehe, ihr macht etwas im
 though woe you.PL make something in.the
sozialpolitischen Bereich, dann werden wir euch
 socio-political area then will we you.PL.ACC
auf die Finger klopfen.
 on the fingers knock
 'You claim that you want to assist with solving the problems. But then you threaten: You better don't do anything within the area of social politics, otherwise we will rap your knuckles.'
 (Plenary speech, Parlament Hamburgische Bürgerschaft, 01/23/2002)

In all these examples, the *wehe*-utterances are represented as part of a real or fictional conversation in direct speech. They appear within (youth) novels (25), (32), (39), (40), news reports (26)-(31), (33)-(34), (36), in computer-mediated communica-

tion (37), letters to the editor (35) or political speeches (41). A special case is (38), where the *wehe*-utterance is a quotation that is used as the title of a cartoon book. Within its original context, (38) is an utterance of a bar keeper who threatens a restaurant guest. The interactions are often characterized by familiarity and by hierarchical power relations between the interlocutors, cf. the threats uttered by parents towards children (26), policemen towards teenagers (34), a tennis coach towards their coachee (36), or threats between teenagers, e.g. (39). In all examples, the (original) speaker of the *wehe*-utterance intends to make the addressee refrain from an action, e.g. (28), (32), (33), or to perform an action, e.g., (25), (26), (34), conditionally committing themselves to a future action. This future speaker action remains implicit in most cases; except (30) and (41). The utterances can be regarded, in many cases, as attempts to instill fear in the addressee. While, e.g., (29) and (30) will be perceived as highly intimidating, (25) and (31) seem to be less offensive. As to the contextual embedding, one finds illocutionary verbs characterizing the utterances, meta-linguistically, as threats, cf. (27), (29), (30), (41). Also, the ironic vocative *mein Lieber!* ('my friend') (28) is indicative of a threat, on a par with *Freundchen* ('buster'), which is a typical threat indicator according to Falkenberg (1992: 179). Furthermore, there are 'violent' verbs in some of the contexts, cf. (30), as well as *verba dicendi* that denote an aggressive verbal exchange, cf. (33), (36), (40).

The remaining three attestations of *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject do not convey threats. In these cases, the 2nd person pronoun is used generically, not deictically, cf. (42)–(44). Such cases can be regarded as predictions of calamity towards a generic group of people, where the calamity is not caused by the speaker.

- (42) *Auf den Rolltreppen zum Beispiel. In*
 on the staircases to.the example in
München heißt es rechts stehen, links
 Munich means it right stand left
gehen. Und wehe, du stehst links.
 go and woe you.SG stand left
Da wirst du sofort zusammengeputzt.
 then become you.SG immediately blasted
 'For example, on moving staircases. In Munich, they say stand right, go left.
 And woe betide if you stand left. You will be blasted immediately.'
 (Nürnberger Nachrichten, 03/23/2013)

- (43) *Twitter und Facebook haben die sogenannte*
 Twitter and Facebook have the so-called
Timeline zum Maß des Medienkonsums gemacht [. . .].
 timeline to.the measure the.GEN media.use.GEN made

*Wehe, du schaust auf dein Smartphone,
 woe you.SG look on your smartphone
 und seit einer Minute hat niemand
 and since one minute has nobody
 dich auf deiner Timeline kontaktiert. Dann
 you.SG.ACC on your timeline contacted then
 weißt du, was Einsamkeit ist.
 know you.SG what loneliness is*

'Twitter and Facebook turned the so-called timeline into a measure of media use. Woe betide if you look at your smartphone and nobody has been contacting you for one minute. Then you know what loneliness is.'

(Weltwoche, 06/26/2014)

- (44) *Jeder hier hat eine Geschichte zu
 Everybody here has a story to
 erzählen über die Flieger, die den
 tell about the planes that the
 Tod abwerfen. Wenn du leben willst,
 death drop if you.SG live want
 sagt einer, musst du ein Loch
 says one must you.SG a hole
 graben [...]. Und bleib weg von den
 dig and stay away from the
 Bäumen. Wehe, du bist unter einem
 trees woe you.SG are under a
 Baum, wenn die Bomben kommen.
 tree when the bombs come*

'Everybody here has a story to tell about the planes that drop death. If you want to live, one of them says, you must dig a hole. And stay away from the trees. Woe betide if you are under a tree when the bombs come.'

(Süddeutsche Zeitung, 11/02/2001)

As Table 3 shows, there are also 12 instances of *wehe* + V2 clause with 1st person subject. An example is (45).

- (45) *Meine Söhne fragen regelmäßig: „Wann gibt's
 My sons ask regularly when gives.there
 mal wieder Heimat?“ Damit meinen sie*

PRT again homeland therewith mean they
Königsberger Klopse. Und wehe, ich verändere
 Königsberg meatballs and woe I change
was am Rezept. Das muss immer
 what on.the recipe that must always
gleich schmecken.
 same taste

'My sons keep asking me: "When will we have homeland again?" By this, they mean meatballs 'Königsberg'. Woe betide me if I change something in the recipe. The taste must always be the same.'

(Frankfurter Rundschau, 04/01/1997)

Examples such as (45) do not convey a threat, as the antecedent denotes an action from the speaker, not a (dispreferred) action from the addressee. While the consequent in (45) is implicit, it can be inferred that the speaker conditionally predicts some calamity to affect her- or himself. The relevant 1st person attestations can therefore be regarded as predictions of calamity affecting the speaker, or as self-warnings.

Similarly, a check of the *wehe* + *wenn*-clause attestations with 1st person subject (n=12, cf. Table 3) in context reveals that they do not receive a threat reading, at least not under the definition adopted in this paper, cf. (46).

- (46) „*Wehe, wenn ich einen erwische, der*
 woe if I one catch who
nur einen Millimeter abweicht, den werde
 only one millimeter deviates whom will
ich eigenhändig aus dem Verein schmeißen.“
 I own-handed out the association throw

“Woe betide if I catch a anyone who deviates only one millimeter [from this requirement], I will fire him from the association.”

(Frankfurter Rundschau, 03/13/1998)

For examples such as (46), it is disputable whether one may speak of threats. While on Muschalik's account, (46) would count as a threat, on Falkenberg's account, it clearly would not, because the utterance does not target the addressee, but a 3rd person, indefinite, non-specified individual.

Typically, attestations of *wehe* + conditional clause (V2 or *wenn*-clause) with 1st person subject receive a prediction reading, including narrative predictions such as (47).

- (47) *Da saß ich dann ganz stolz*
 there sat I then wholly proud
im Sattel auf dem linken Hinterpferd
 in.the saddle on the left back-horse
und musste achtgeben, dass die Vorderpferde
 and must.PST watch-out that the front-horses
auf Zuruf vorrückten. Aber wehe, wenn
 on call proceeded but woe if
ich nicht aufgepasst hatte. Dann wurde
 I not looked-out had.IND then was
gewaltig geflucht.
 heavily cursed
 'There I sat very proudly in the saddle of the left back horse and had to look out for the front horses to move forward on call. But woe betide if I did not look out. Then people cursed heavily.'
 (Braunschweiger Zeitung, 08/28/2007)

4.3 Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the question whether one can identify, based on a quantitative and qualitative examination of utterances containing the interjection *wehe*, a particular, conditional clause embedding pattern of *wehe*-usages that is, to a high degree of conventionality, associated with a threat reading.

The results indicate, first, that in most cases, the interjection *wehe* is used as a matrix element that embeds a conditional clause or a (relative-clause embedding) dative pronoun or noun. In most of these uses, the pattern does not convey a threat reading, but the more general reading of a prediction of calamity. Thus, it is clearly not the case that German *wehe* is, univocally, a threat marker, as Falkenberg suggested. An important indicator for the interpretation of a given *wehe* + embedded conditional clause utterance as a (mere) prediction or a threat is person marking. The analysis shows that uses with a 3rd person subject in the conditional clause typically convey the speech act function of a prediction. By contrast, if the embedded clauses display a 2nd person subject, the chances are very high that the utterances convey threats.

Furthermore, it becomes clear from the analysis that there are distributional differences with respect to the two subtypes of conditional clauses embedded by *wehe*. On the one hand, both variants predominantly feature 3rd person subjects, indicating a default usage as prediction. On the other hand, among the (few) uses

with 2nd person subjects, there is a clear contrast between the two syntactic variants. While more than 10% of the V2 clauses display 2nd person subjects, only 1.4% of the *wenn*-clauses do. This contrast can be taken as an indication of the existence of a highly specific syntactic construction *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject – albeit relatively rarely used in the corpus – that is to a high degree conventionalized for threats. Of the 20 uses of *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject, 17 convey a threat reading. In the sense of Terkourafi (2005), it can be argued, based on this observation, that in German speakers' linguistic experience, there is a particularly close association between utterances of *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject and threatening contexts.

At the same time, the analysis shows that the interpretation of *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject is still context-dependent to some degree. Cases in which the 2nd person pronoun is used generically are not interpreted as threats. Note that the observation that the interpretation of instances of a syntactic construction may vary depending on context is not *per se* a problem for a construction analysis, as it is a basic tenet in Construction Grammar that conventionalization is a matter of degree (Goldberg 2013).

Overall, the study reveals that threat usages, as well as lamentation usages, are rather infrequent in the corpus. By far the most frequent usage is the one as a prediction of calamity. Among the predicting uses there are also narrative cases, in which predictions are performed by means of utterances with a past tense verb. Interestingly, this usage is not mentioned in the dictionaries. The findings may be taken to suggest that since the OHG and MHG times, the usage of *wehe* has changed such that in Modern German, the lamenting use with or without dative experiencer, which can be traced back to Proto-Indo-European (Barðdal et al. 2013), decreased in favor of the usage in predictions and (to a lesser extent) threats. However, it must be kept in mind that the corpus used in the present study mainly contains written (newspaper) texts, something that may have skewed the distribution of the various usage types in the data set. It may well be that, e.g., lamenting usages are more frequent in spoken dialogues (or monologues).

Further research therefore should examine the use of *wehe* in spoken data. Furthermore, it would be desirable to complement the findings on *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject by studies that take a perspective from function to form, i.e. that investigate the distribution of a broader variety of formal means to express threats in German. This would allow for an assessment of the status of *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject within the functional domain of threatening in German in comparison with other linguistic means of threatening.

5 Concluding remarks

The present study adds new evidence to the growing research on the grammar of impoliteness by describing a specific impolite construction in German, and providing empirical evidence for its existence, which has been neglected in the research literature so far. A theoretical implication that can be drawn from the study is that impoliteness is a phenomenon at the interface between grammar and pragmatics. To comprehensively understand this phenomenon, one needs to take into account both grammatical and pragmatic factors and to systematically describe their interaction in the process of meaning constitution. Studying utterances containing the interjection *wehe* (‘woe’) in a large corpus of German, it was shown that while the interjection cannot be regarded as a linguistic means univocally indicating the impolite speech act function of a threat, there does exist a specific syntactic construction *wehe* + V2 clause with 2nd person subject in German that is to a high degree conventionalized for threats. The fact that the construction is still context-dependent to a certain degree supports the assumption that we are dealing with a constructional illocutionary force indicator whose “literal” illocution can be overridden in context.

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Abbreviations not included in the Leipzig Glossing Rules

POL polite
PRT particle

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