

The effect of information structure on the German double object construction

In German double object constructions with nominal dative and accusative objects, both the dative > accusative and the accusative > dative order are possible and have the same meaning:

- (1) a. Peter hat [dem Studenten]_{DAT} [das Buch]_{ACC} gegeben.
b. Peter hat [das Buch]_{ACC} [dem Studenten]_{DAT} gegeben.

In the literature there has been a debate regarding the 'normal' order of nominal objects and how this order can be identified. The numerous different approaches taken to the problem indicate that the relative order of nominal objects is probably a result of the interplay of several conflicting principles: factors as different as syntactic function (Lenerz 1977), definiteness (Engel 1970), animacy (Hoberg 1981, Zifonun 1997) and thematic roles (Haider/Rosengren 2003) have been considered the governing principle in the ordering of the objects. But factors such as animacy, definiteness and thematic roles are not directly linked to the case of an object (acc or dat); therefore a particular verb can be associated with different base orders. As a result, one cannot tell from the grammatical function of the objects whether a given order corresponds to the base order, or whether it is derived. As a consequence, the dative > accusative as well as the accusative > dative order are possible base orders.

The dative > accusative order is by far the most common one, whereas the accusative > dative order is often associated with a particular verb class. The verb *aussetzen* ('expose to'), for instance, strongly favours the accusative > dative order:

- (2) Die anderen Eltern würden [ihre Kinder]_{ACC} sicher nicht [dieser Gefahr]_{DAT} aussetzen wollen (HP3:366).

A reversal of the base order results in a structure that is appropriate only in particular contexts. Word order changes of this type are normally attributed to principles of information structure, but it is not yet clear what the exact factors involved are, and to what extent they have an effect on word order. Existing corpus studies of the phenomenon rest on relatively small corpora, which cannot be said to be representative. The present study of the double object construction is based on a corpus consisting of 2085 nominal double object sentences excerpted from a total of 55 novels by 35 different authors. The construction is found with 370 different verbs. While the objects come in the order dative > accusative in 1748 of the corpus sentences, the accusative object occurs in a position in front of the dative object in 337 of the cases. In order to shed light on the question of the driving forces of the word order alternation in question, the factors of referential status, definiteness, animacy, thematic roles, and relative length of the objects are investigated. The purpose of the talk is to present some preliminary results from the study.

References

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