

The case of German two-way prepositions

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In case languages, case is assigned to nominal phrases by their heads, typically verbs assigning case to their arguments to indicate syntactic relations. In German prepositions, too, assign cases to their complements, normally either accusative or dative case independent of context of use. A notorious exception to this rule are the so-called two-way prepositions that occur with both accusative and dative case depending on context, as in (1).

- (1) a. Ich stelle den Reis auf den-ACC Tisch
"I place the rice onto the table."
b. Der Reis steht auf dem-DAT Tisch.
"The rice is on the table."

The current study investigates what determines the case of two-way prepositions in a large corpus sample of authentic language use. The variation is often attributed to different underlying meaning construals (Langacker, 1999) but recent exploratory corpus studies propose that the variation in addition depends on multiple co-occurring contextual features and specific lexical items (Willems, De Cuyper, and Rys, 2018). A sample of 9.332 sentences containing two-way prepositions was extracted from a large corpus of present-day German (Goldhahn, Eckart, and Quasthoff, 2012), automatically lemmatized and parsed, and then annotated for relevant lexical and structural features such as individual prepositions and surrounding lexical items, collocation strength, syntactic role of the prepositional phrase, type of head and complement, form of the preposition, transitivity of the verb, and others. The annotated features were used as predictor variables in multivariate logistic regression and collocation analyses to predict case (dependent variable) from context of use.

Contrary to expectations, the results of the regression analysis indicated that none of the structural features had much influence on case, suggesting that the effects observed in the literature only hold for specific contexts. Instead, estimates of item-specific effects and the results of the collocation analysis indicated strong associations of accusative and dative with individual prepositions and specific lexical items in the context. Case varied with verbs from two larger meaning clusters (accusative with telic verbs such as *stellen* "to place", *legen* "to put", and *setzen* "to sit down" vs. dative with atelic verbs such as *stehen* "to stand", *liegen* "to lie", and *sitzen* "to sit"). Moreover, accusative and dative were often used as parts of relatively fixed lexical verb-preposition strings (e.g., *sich freuen über ACC* "be happy about", *jemanden vor etwas-DAT warnen* "to warn somebody about something"). Last, dative frequently occurred in a handful of fixed preposition-(pro)noun strings (e.g., *vor allem-DAT* "especially", *in der-DAT Regel* "as a rule").

Framed in terms of usage-based construction grammar (Diessel, 2019), this is interpreted as a network of item-specific constructional prototypes that emerge from usage patterns and, once established, determine case based on form-meaning overlap with the current context of use. Frequent and invariant strings are stored as lexical wholes. At this level of representation case markers are little more than forms that complete routinized idiomatic patterns. More schematic constructions are gradually build up as language users generalize across lexical strings of similar form and meaning. From the two verb meaning clusters two lexical prototypes emerge which

gradually break away from individual verbs and become available for meaning construal in other contexts.

References

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