The influence of Person Hierarchies on preferences with word order in German ditransitive constructions

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In German, there is a dative case that distinguishes the recipient argument from both the agent and the theme argument in ditransitive transfer constructions. For the recipient/goal argument, it is also possible to be realized by a prepositional phrase, which happens mainly when it is inanimate or very "heavy" (in the sense of Hawkins 1994). Besides the case marking alignment system, there is a peculiarity in word order with ditransitive constructions that resembles findings from various dialects of English, which does not have dative case. As discussed by Bresnan and colleagues (Bresnan et al. 2007, Bresnan and Hay 2008), differences in givenness, pronominality, shortness of the referential expression, animacy and humanness are decisive for the position of a non-agent argument in a ditransitive construction: The double object construction (recipient>theme) is preferred when the recipient is pronominal, given and animate, and the prepositional dative construction is preferred when the theme is a short expression for a given, animate referent. In some English dialects, there is yet another possibility of serialization, in that a pronominal theme argument precedes a pronominal recipient, while the latter one occurs without a preposition (Gast 2007, Siewierska and Hollmann 2007).

The paper will report a similar observation for German and discuss it's implications for the formulation of word order rules in terms of case, on the one hand, and the positions of noun phrases on one of the Person Hierarchies (Silverstein 1976, Siewierska 2004), on the other hand.

In German, default word order with ditransitives is generally NOM-DAT-ACC (Lenerz 1977). This holds for full nouns and combinations of dative pronouns and accusative nouns, but not for ditransitive structures with an accusative pronoun. For those, NOM-ACC-DAT word order is strongly preferred (1) (Gast 2007, Diedrichsen 2008, Haftka 2004).

For combinations of two non-agent nouns, DAT>ACC is default (2), but this can be overridden by higher topicality of the accusative argument. ACC>DAT is strongly dispreferred when the accusative NP is indefinite (3). This is true regardless of the definiteness/indefiniteness of the dative NP.

A big Internet based corpus study reveals, however, that accusative pronouns in ditransitive constructions, and thus the NOM>ACC>DAT order, is statistically rare. This observation is in line with functional-typological surveys (Siewierska 2003, Gast 2007, Haspelmath 2007): Generally, in canonical ditransitive constructions, the recipient argument tends to be animate and discourse accessible, while the theme argument is frequently inanimate. With non-animate or complex recipients, alternative construction types may be chosen (Bresnan et al. 2007, Bresnan and Hay 2008, Haspelmath 2007).

Bearing in mind that hierarchies are generally "hierarchies of access to grammatical relations" (Bickel 2008, Givón 2001), it will be argued that the grammatical relation expressed in the non-prepositional dative (recipient, goal) argument is based to a significant extent on the hierarchy position of the referential expression. As grammatical relations are to be understood as syntactic relations between arguments and specific constructions (Bickel 2010), it follows that the emergence of the particular construction type can be motivated on the basis of the Person Hierarchy as well.

Examples (as referenced in text)

(1)   Pronouns: NOM-ACC-DAT

a)   Er   hat   sie (die Blumen)   mir   geschenkt.
      3MsgNOM   have.3sgPRES   3plACC   1sgDAT give.PSTP
      He has given them (the flowers) (to) me.

b)   ?? Er   hat   mir   sie   geschenkt.
      3MsgNOM   have.3sgPRES   1sgDAT 3plACC give.PSTP
      He has me them given.

(2)   DAT: noun, ACC: noun – NOM-DAT-ACC (Default)

a)   Meine   Eltern haben   meinem Bruder   den
      My.plNOM   parents have3plPRES my.sgDAT brother.sg   DEFMsgACC
      Computer   geschenkt.
      computer   give.PSTP
      My parents gave my brother the computer.

b)   Meine   Eltern haben   den   Computer   meinem
      My.plNOM   parents have3plPRES DEFMsgACC   computer   my.sgDAT
      Bruder   geschenkt.
      Brother.sg   give.PSTP
      My parents gave the computer (to) my brother.

(3)   DAT: definite, ACC: indefinite – NOM-DAT-ACC

a)   Er   schenkt   der   Frau   eine
      3MsgNOM   give.3sgPRES DEFFsgDAT   woman.sg   INDEFFsgACC
      Blume.
      flower.sg
      He gives the woman a flower.

b)   ??Er   schenkt   eine   Blume   der
      3MsgNOM   give.3sgPRES INDEFFsgACC flower.sg   DEFFsgDAT
      Frau.
      woman.sg
      He gives a flower (to) the woman.

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