**Upper German case forms and argument marking: a study on dialect case systems**

German dialects use case marking as well as word order regularities in order to denote argument structure. In view of the semantic roles expressed by the arguments, Primus (2012) argues that there is a tendency of agent-before-patient word order in German clauses. Nevertheless, especially in spoken language, clauses of divergent word order can be found. Due to phonological and morphological processes, there has been an excessive reduction of forms in the German case system (see Blake 2001). Syncretism therefore is frequently met in Standard German and even more so in German dialects. In this regard analyzing dialects seems to permit a diachronic access to German case systems since they show a more innovative behavior compared to Standard German.

Showing a tendency of case syncretism as well as the possibility of relative free word order, it is interesting to investigate how German dialect systems, ensure argument marking. For my dissertation project I attempt to analyze case forms and their use in morphosyntactic and semantic contexts. In doing so, I am investigating the influence that syntactic and semantic phenomena such as word order, transitivity and animacy as well as the need of argument marking have on the distinctiveness of case forms.

Shrier (1965) observes different characteristics of syncretism in Upper German dialects. While case marking is implemented mostly on determiners, adjectives and pronouns in German, the tendencies of syncretism affect word classes differently depending on dialect regions. While the western Upper German dialects, such as Alemannic, tend to show syncretism between nominative and accusative in masculine items, the eastern dialects, such as Bavarian and East Franconian, show tendencies of syncretism between accusative and dative forms. With regard to the disambiguation of semantic roles, western Upper German dialects are therefore supposed to have fewer possibilities to assign the agent by means of case marking than the eastern ones, since the agent correlates with a (distinct) nominative.

Correspondingly, Werlen (1994) argues that word order is particularly fixed in Alemannic dialects due to this missing morphological distinction. However, no such tendencies could be found in a previous corpus-based analysis of spoken-language transcripts based on over 700 Upper German clauses. Therefore one has to assume a certain amount of variation in syncretism in Upper German paradigms caused by the necessity to assign arguments.

Variation in case marking is recognized in several studies concerning German dialects (see Dal Negro 2004). Still there are neither convincing studies on what affects morphological variation in German dialect case systems nor an appropriate method of mapping this variation so far.

In my talk I am going to present a corpus-based analysis of a sample of East Franconian idiolectal case systems on the basis of a sample provided by Ruoff (1984). This sample contains transcripts of Upper German spoken language that offer a good starting point for morphological investigations since morphosyntactic phenomena are expressed in a detailed manner. For the purpose of this study each case form will be looked at separately with regard to its morphosyntactic and semantic context. In doing so, special attention will be paid to animacy and agentivity of varying case forms as well as to word order, transitivity and structural ambiguity in the clauses concerned. Based on this data I am going to outline a first attempt of how Upper German dialect systems involve case as well as syntactic and semantic properties in argument marking. In this respect despite tending to syncretism some systems seem to permit distinct case marknings in certain contexts in order to prevent ambiguous relations.
References


