

Argument linearization in Dutch and German: a multifactorial approach

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Although Dutch and German are two closely related languages, they also differ in many aspects. In this paper we address the question whether differences in preferences of argument linearization in Dutch and German can be attributed to differences in overt case marking between these two languages.

Dutch, with no overt case marking of full noun phrases, exhibits a strong preference for subject-before-object (SbO) sentences. This preference seems to be strongest for sentences in which an animate subject precedes an inanimate object which is often the case with agentive or experiencer-subject verbs (e.g. Lamers, 2005). For German, a language with overt case marking of full noun phrases, this so-called subject-first preference seems to be less robust. Psycholinguistics studies have shown that for sentences with verbs that assign dative case, it is the ObS order that is preferred (e.g. Bornkessel & Schlesewsky, 2006; Bornkessel-Schlesewsky & Schlesewsky, 2009).

To establish this difference in word order preference we performed two similar sentence production studies, one in German, and one in Dutch. In both studies verbs with different characteristics were used in such a way that it became possible to isolate the influence of case marking from other factors that might influence the linearization of the arguments (i.e. selection restrictions, animacy, thematic role assignment).

In both studies participants were asked to construct a sentence using the words (i.e. two arguments and a verb) that were provided in a prompt (see Ferreira, 1994). In the Dutch study three different types of verbs were used: experiencer-subject verbs selecting an animate subject, and causative and unaccusative psych verbs, selecting an animate object. Whereas experiencer-subject and causative psych verbs can passivize, unaccusative psych verbs can not. In German experiencer-subject and causative psych verbs assign accusative case to the object, and unaccusative psych verbs assign dative case. In the German study yet another verb type was used, an agentive-dative verb assigning lexical dative case to the object. In this study the verbs were either combined with two animate arguments or an animate and an inanimate argument (for an overview, see table I).

The results of the Dutch study provide evidence for the influence of both animacy and verb type on word order. For each verb type more SbO than ObS were produced. Stimuli with causative psych verbs resulted in more passive constructions than with experiencer-subject verbs. ObS structures were most frequent with unaccusative psych verbs. The results of the German study showed a different pattern with a clear subject-first preference for sentences with experiencer-subject verbs and causative psych verbs irrespective of the animacy of the arguments. The subject-first preference was also found for the agentive-dative verbs and was strongest for sentences with two animate arguments. However, prompts with unaccusative psych verbs resulted in more ObS than SbO sentences, with the highest occurrence for sentences starting with an animate object followed by an inanimate subject. Finding a difference in preference between the two verbs that assign dative case indicate that other factors than case marking underlie the ObS preference for unaccusative psych verbs.

To explain the differences in patterns between sentences with different types of verbs on the one hand, and between the two languages on the other hand, we follow a multifactorial approach as was proposed by Primus (1999). According to this approach argument realization results from the interplay of multiple factors. These factors give us several competing prominence principles (e.g. SubjectFirst, AnimateFirst and AgentFirst). We will show that next to the SubjectFirst, and AnimateFirst principles, prominence principles of case marking (NominativeFirst principle vs. DativeFirst principle) and thematic role assignment (ExperiencerFirst principle alongside the AgentFirst principle) play an important role in preferences of argument linearization in Dutch and German.

Table I. Examples of Dutch and German verb types and their characteristics. The example of a prompt with a combination of an animate and an inanimate argument is given in English (in bold).

Verbs	Selectional restrictions	Passivize	Case marking of the object	Examples of Dutch and German verbs Example of a prompt (translated in English)
Experiencer-subject	Animate subject	Yes	Accusative	German: kritisieren Dutch: bekritisieren Translation: criticize president affaire
Caustive psych	Animate object	Yes	Accusative	German: verblüffen Dutch: verbazen Translation: amaze president affaire
Unaccusative psych	Animate object	No	Dative	German: gefallen Dutch: bevallen Translation: please president affaire
Agentive - dative	Animate object	No	Dative	German: schaden Dutch: schaden Translation: damage president affaire

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