

New Perspectives on the Order of Pronominal Objects in New High German

In modern German, the order of pronominal accusative objects preceding pronominal dative objects (Acc>Dat) is largely fixed (1). This pattern contrasts with historical German, where the Dat>Acc order is still attested (2), and sequences of nominal objects in both modern and historical German, in which Dat > Acc is the unmarked order.

This study aims to investigate the influence of the degree of givenness (Rauth 2020), the uniformity of the information profile (Levy and Jaeger 2007), and prediction (Voigtmann, accepted) on the order of pronominal objects. For nominal objects, Rauth (2020: 314) has demonstrated that the unmarked Dat > Acc object order can be deviated from when both objects are given but the distance of the previous mention of the Acc in the text-internal context is less than that of the Dat. Moreover, distance effects have been subsumed into accounts positing fine-grained givenness categories (e.g. Riester & Baumann 2017), suggesting one sole factor of givenness is at play here. Hence, we propose a similar influence for pronominal objects:

(H1) Dat>Acc is more likely when the dative is more given than the accusative.

This hypothesis aligns with the observation that most instances with Dat> Acc involve first- or second-person (singular) dative objects (Fleischer 2005; 2010a; 2010b; 2013). Following Riester and Baumann's (2017: 5) RefLex-Givenness-Scheme, first- and second-person pronouns are categorised as more given compared to third-person pronouns, since they refer to individuals in the direct text-external context. Similarly, we expect givenness effects for all pronouns when their distance from previous mention in the text-internal context is minimised. Our second hypothesis, based on Levy and Jaeger's (2007) Uniform Information Density Hypothesis (UID), suggests that information is distributed evenly across an utterance. Wallenberg et al. (2021), and Ortmann et al. (2024) have demonstrated that a smooth information profile is associated with word order variation. Thus, we propose:

(H2) Dat>Acc is more likely when Acc>Dat exhibits a less smooth information profile.

Furthermore, we aim to establish a connection between the pronominal object order and prediction (H3), depending on the position of the lexical verb. When the lexical verb containing the valency information follows the objects, Dat>Acc is preferable because recipients tend to discard sentence continuations with transitive verbs earlier (Levy 2008). Conversely, if the full verb is presented first, a specific object order becomes less critical as the objects' necessity is already known and so the marked order is chosen.

(H3) Dat>Acc is more likely when the lexical verb follows the objects.

To test these hypotheses, we used the GerManC corpus (Bennett et al., 2012), from which we automatically extracted instances of the pronominal double object construction. Subsequently, we manually annotated the pronouns' givenness status, the position of the lexical verb, and the distance to their closest coreferent as a measure of salience. We analyze 22 Acc>Dat-sentences and 21 Dat>Acc instances. Notably, the majority of them (n=35) originate from Central German dialects (similar to the findings of Fleischer, 2010: 157), and all of the Dat>Acc-cases involve first- or second-person pronouns. To test hypothesis (H2), we use deviation of the rolling mean (DORM) measures (Cuskley et al., 2021; Ortmann et al. 2024).

- (1) Ich gebe es dir.
I give it.ACC you.DAT
'I give it to you.'
- (2) Junge, wer gab dir ihn?
Boy who gave you.DAT him.ACC
'Boy, who gave it to you?' (GerManC, NARR_P3_WMD_1775_Bacchidon-68)

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