Object-initial sentences in German: The role of sentence topics

Markus Bader and Vasiliki Koukoulioti (Goethe University Frankfurt)

We present data from two coordinated corpus studies investigating the order of subject and object in two types of German clauses: main clauses in which either the subject or the object occupies the prefield and relative clauses. The main focus of our presentation will lie on the question of how an accusative object is ordered relative to a subject that is the aboutness topic of the sentence. In the case of main clauses, this amounts to the question of whether the subject occupies the prefield and the object remains in the middlefield or whether it is the other way around.

Main clauses. In contrast to older work, which saw the prefield as the default position for the sentence topic, more recent research (Frey, 2004; Rambow, 1993; Speyer, 2007) suggests that the topic's default position is at the left edge of the middlefield (sometimes called the Wackernagel position). Speyer (2007) proposes the prefield hierarchy in (1). The topic is put into the prefield only if a clause contains no element higher on this hierarchy.

(1)   a frame-setting element, a brandnew element >> a p-kontrast element [sic] >> a topic

One corpus study tested the hierarchy in (1) for the case of subject-object order in main clauses with either subject or object in the prefield. This study analyzed sentences from a random selection of Wikipedia texts. All sentences contained the subject pronoun *er* ('he') with the discourse function of topic. The object could either be a definite NP (n = 1750, 14% OS order), an indefinite NP (n = 884, 9% OS order) or a demonstrative NP (n = 243, 68% OS order). A preliminary analysis of these sentences reveals the following main findings: (i) Demonstrative objects occurred more often in the prefield (4) than in the middlefield (3). Despite their preference for the prefield, NPs of this type – given by an identity relation to a referent in the prior discourse, but not a topic – do not appear in Speyer's hierarchy. (ii) Brandnew indefinite NPs typically occur in the middlefield (5), whereas indefinite NPs standing in a relation of p-kontrast to a preceding referent often occur in the prefield (6). (iii) Definite NPs showed the most varied behavior in terms of discourse status. OS order occurred most often for definite NPs in a poset-relation (7) and for anaphoric NPs (8). For NPs which were situationally given, in contrast, SO order prevailed (9) (see Ward & Prince, 1991, for the difference between NPs given by a poset relation and NPs that are situationally given).

Our findings are only partially compatible with the prefield hierarchy in (1). We therefore propose the following revised prefield hierarchy for sentences in which subject and accusative object compete for occupation of the prefield.

(2)   a non-topical element given by identity or by a poset relation >> a topic >> a brandnew element

We will show how this hierarchy can be derived by a competition between two violable constraints: one constraint requiring old information to precede new information and a second constraint requiring the topic to appear at the left edge of the middlefield.

Relative clauses. In contrast to declarative main clauses, which leave a choice as to which element to put into the prefield, there is no choice of word order in relative clauses in which either the subject or the object is realized as a relative pronoun – the relative pronoun always has to come first. This difference notwithstanding, relative clauses have been reported to be similar to main clauses insofar as OS relative clauses occur particularly often with a pronominal topic as subject (Fox & Thompson, 1990; Mak, Vonk & Schriefers, 2008). In order to validate this claim for written German relative clauses, we analyzed about 1700 relative clauses randomly drawn from the deWac corpus (Baroni, Bernardini, Ferraresi & Zanchetta, 2009). As expected, we found an SO preference when the NP following the relative pronoun was not the topic but an OS preference when it was.

General discussion. Based on the joined findings for main and relative clauses, we will argue for a common discourse functional account of OS order and against syntactic accounts in terms of generalized minimality (e.g., Friedmann, Belletti & Rizzi, 2009).

(3)   „Young Tom" war der beste Golfspieler seiner Zeit, vermutlich sogar der beste des 19. Jahrhunderts: er gewann die Open Championship (auch „British Open" genannt) zum ersten Mal 1868 im Alter von nur 17 Jahren. Er wiederholte diesen Erfolg in den Jahren 1869, 1870 und 1872.

(4)   Vier Jahre später feierte Durward Knowles seinen größten Erfolg. Bei den Olympischen Sommerspielen 1964 in Tokio wurde er Olympiasieger. Diesen Erfolg konnte er nicht wiederholen und wurde bei den Olympischen Sommerspielen 1968 in Mexiko-Stadt Fünfter.

(5)   Honigmann besuchte die Hillhead High School in Glasgow. Er erwarb einen Abschluss in englischer Literaturwissenschaft an der University of Glasgow und einen Bachelor of Literature zur Chronologie von Shakespeares Dramen am Merton College in Oxford bei James Coutts Maxwell (1916–1976).

(6)   Charles Phelps Taft wurde in Cincinnati als Sohn von Alphonso Taft geboren. Der spätere US-Präsident William Howard Taft war sein Halbbruder. 1864 schloss er an der Yale University ab, 1866 an der Columbia University. Er studierte an beiden Universitäten Jura. Einen weiteren Abschluss erhielt er 1867 von der Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg.

(7)   Loos starb im Sanatorium Kalksburg bei Wien, wo er mit einer Krankenschwester befreundet war, die er dem Vernehmen nach heiraten wollte. Er ruht in einem Grab auf dem Wiener Zentralfriedhof (Gruppe 0, Reihe 1, Nummer 105). Den Grabstein hatte er selbst entworfen.

(8)   Im Dezember 2008 überquerte Fonda den Pazifischen Ozean an Bord des Frachtschiffs Portland Senator auf der Route von Los Angeles nach Shanghai. Seine Erfahrungen auf See schlugen sich in dem zehnminütigen Video Ten things I have learned about the sea nieder. Den Film unterlegte er mit Musik der Band Hammock aus dem Album Maybe They Will Sing for Us Tomorrow.

(9)   Als 1848 der Bremer Arnold Duckwitz als Reichsminister Admiral Brommy mit dem Aufbau einer Kriegsflotte beauftragte, wurde Ulrichs einer der Berater. Er erhielt bald darauf den Auftrag zum Bau zweier Ruder-Kanonenboote, zwei weitere wurden auf der Werft von Johann Lange gebaut.

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