

Individual Differences in German Noun Phrase Agreement and its Mental Representations

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It is usually argued that native speakers master the morphological system of their language by around the age of 5 years. From a usage-based perspective, this view is incomplete: the learning process should be more gradual, non-linear and more individual variation can be expected, maybe even well into adulthood, as has been shown for morphosyntactic variation of the Polish dative (cf. Dąbrowska 2008a, 2008b). In the literature, you can find an established ‘case of doubt’, that is, the Dative Variation in German (cf. Moulin 2002, Münzberg & Hansen 2020, Nübling 2011) which is the point of departure for this study. We expected productivity and the ability to provide target forms to differ (sometimes considerably) among individuals beyond the known -em/-en patterns, indicating more variability in specific aspects of mental representation than previously discussed. The hypothesis that is pursued is that literacy (here mediated by educational background) and the extent to which people utilize written modalities can impact mental representations and thus the level of abstraction they are able to generalize, leading to varying degrees of representations.

As a first step, we wanted to know more about adults’ proficiency with German agreement phenomena. I present our initial approach to native speakers’ knowledge about NP agreement, based on a pilot study with 28 adults from differing age and educational backgrounds who completed a written nonce and real word task with varying number of adjectives and varying test conditions. For example:

- (a) Solche Dinge sind von _____, _____, _____ Interesse!
(groß) (allgemein) (wirtschaftlich)
- (b) Solche Dinge sind von _____, _____, _____ Interesse!
(weik) (öbelig) (harklich)

For gaps like the one in (a) and (b), one can find any imaginable pattern that would be classified as ungrammatical by standard reference grammars. Those patterns were coded as errors. Overall, the results indicate that people have a good command of the morphological system and that error rates are comparably low. However, as expected, some test conditions exhibit individual variation beyond the known variation. A first general observation is that people have more difficulties inflecting nonce words than inflecting real words. A second general observation is that level of education seems to influence the number of mistakes: The higher the level of education, the lower the error rates. A third observation is that, while error rates for most test conditions recede with increasing level of education, the error rate for dative NPs with nonce words stays comparably high across all levels of education and the errors are not systematic. A fourth observation concerns the varying performances of individual speakers. While some highly educated speakers perform at ceiling level and manage to quickly complete the task, other, less educated speakers take a long time to complete it and struggle with some of the conditions.

The results indicate that, while native speakers are productive, there are potential grey zones when it comes to the individual mental representations of morphosyntactic phenomena. They further indicate that there are potential phenomena with which individual speakers may not be fully productive. Both issues pose challenges to Construction Grammar and to language teaching in general.

References

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