

Interaction of alignment cues in German and English - tweaking redundancy

In what way do alignment and argument morphosyntax interact in German and English essay texts? I investigate a number of parameters related to referential choice and alignment patterns based on a deeply annotated dataset from an English and a German argumentative essay corpus, respectively. One goal is to assess the level of redundancy pertaining to reference identification on the one hand, and subject assignment on the other, that is brought about by different cues such as word order, verb agreement, case marking, and transitivity prominence.

Even though these parameters do all deal with alignment I am not primarily interested in the overall typological alignment profile of either language, but rather the form different alignment patterns take in concrete instances, and the degree to which speakers may adjust their choice of referential expression and thus tweak alignment manifestations. How can alignment manifestations be adjusted at all? First, German and English differ as to their means: the structural trade-off between word-order and word-internal-structure leans more towards the former in English, while being at intermediate levels in German (Koplenig et al., 2017). While this is directly reflected in the way these two languages align arguments, the concrete manifestations of alignments critically depends on the degree of accessibility in referential choice Ariel (1990): while, e.g. pronouns, are marked for case in both languages and therefore exhibit accusative alignment, full NPs are critically not case marked in English, and remain unmarked in some contexts in German, too (e.g., definite female A on definite female P) - and therefore, on a local scale, exhibit neutral alignment. My use of terminology is Bickelian in Haspelmath's (2011) sense, since I do not restrict myself to a selection of verbs, but also in order to justify a role assignment at all, that for its local nature cannot be based on purely syntactic criteria, but must fall back on semantic entailments.

Therefore, my research questions are: In what way does the adjustment of the redundancy level by choice of referential expression (which can be higher or lower on the accessibility scale) give rise to preferences for certain alignment patterns, but not others? Are ambiguities, where possible, resolved in favour of the dominant alignment pattern? Is the level of redundancy pertaining to subject coding kept at certain level, or under which circumstances does that level change?

References

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