

German endpoint focus verbs and their role in case alternation with two-way prepositions: A qualitative and quantitative analysis

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The dative/accusative (DAT/ACC) case alternation with German two-way prepositions has become a classic example in Cognitive Linguistics to show how cases are inherently meaningful, and how the semantics of prepositions can be grasped by the spatial terminology of landmark, trajector and search domain (e.g. Langacker 1991). Smith (1995) defines a class of 'endpoint focus verbs' whose semantics allow a speaker to "highlight" either the path (ACC) or the endpoint (DAT) of a process, according to his own estimation and communicative intentions:

- (1) Der Wagen versinkt in den_{ACC} Schnee
- (2) Der Wagen versinkt in dem_{DAT} Schnee

Smith thus recognizes the verb's role in the case selection and the semantic differences between this type of verbs and "neutral motion verbs" like *laufen*, whose meaning does not encompass any endpoint. Although this view has been widely accepted (e.g. Serra-Borneto 1997, Vandermeeren 2004), a systematic analysis of endpoint focus verbs and their influence on the case selection with two-way prepositions remains wanting. Two questions are central to such an analysis. First, to what extent is this group of verbs semantically homogeneous, i.e. do all the verbs share certain semantic properties that are relevant in explaining case selection? Second, to what degree is a speaker free to highlight one part or the other of the verb's meaning?

The study focuses on 20 endpoint profile verbs, described in Duden 2009. First, the semantics of the verbs are examined, focusing specifically on their different uses, the semantic contribution of verb particles to the verb meaning and the co-occurrence of the verbs with specific prepositions, in order to find a common semantic ground that can be linked to the case alternation. Second, these verbs are subjected to a detailed quantitative analysis (500 tokens per verb) of the influence of semantic factors (specific verb uses; verb particles; prepositional meaning; use of adverbials) and morphosyntactic factors (tense, cf. also Smith 1995: 308; voice, cf. Duden 2009: 269 on *einschreiben in*; transitivity, cf. Duden 2009: 116 on *aufsetzen auf*; verb complexity) on the case selection. A decision tree analysis is used to test for the simultaneous effect of these factors. My talk will mainly focus on the discussion of the results of this second part.

The analysis indicates that the role of verbal semantics in the DAT/ACC alternation is more complex than what has hitherto been recognized, with particular verb uses preferring one of both cases. Moreover, the results of the corpus study suggest that other factors also correlate with a particular case, including: transitivity, the prepositional meaning and the use of specific adverbials. It appears not only that the freedom of case selection is more restricted than most scholars acknowledge, but also that a general path/endpoint opposition for the DAT/ACC alternation cannot be maintained. Case selection with endpoint focus verbs seems to rely on a complex interplay of several factors, and thus the dominant role of the speaker's profiling preference with this type of verbs must be revised.

References

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