

---

## The asymmetry between morphology and word order with respect to informativity

---

Mittwoch  
08.03.2017  
17:30 – 18:00  
B4 1, 0.26

Simon Kasper  
*Philipps-Universität Marburg*  
[simon.kasper@staff.uni-marburg.de](mailto:simon.kasper@staff.uni-marburg.de)

In the presentation I will argue that

- (a) word order (of S and O in the sense of Dryer 2013) is in important respects motivated by extra-linguistic matters of general event cognition guiding language users' expectations and predictions in (incremental) interpretation, and that
- (b) morphological markers are language-inherent means of either (i) redundantly satisfying the predictions for word orders during the time-course of (incremental) interpretation or (ii) relevantly overriding the predictions for word orders.

The rationale behind (a) is firstly based on the observation of an actor preference in language comprehension. Neurophysiological studies point to the conclusion that in incremental interpretation language users tend to interpret the first ambiguous NP in a clause as the actor of the event (cf. Bornkessel-Schlesewsky & Schlewsky 2009).

It is secondly based on the observation that a similar but obviously more general interpretation principle is present in (non-linguistic) event perception. According to social psychological studies, and based on the assumption that agentivity cannot be directly perceived, cognizers try to identify the causer or responsible causer (= agent) of an event as fast as possible and choose the first one that affords (responsible) causation. In terms of human ecology, the quick identification of the (responsible) causer in an ongoing event allows the prediction of the most probable outcome of that event and a quick behavioral adaptation to it, i.e. this "Responsible Causer Preference" is the most efficient way of mediating cognizers' perceptions and actions (cf. Kasper [submitted]). If language, as I will argue, mediates between someone's perception and somebody else's action, the most efficient way of verbalizing events is in a diagrammatically iconic S-O structure (cf. Kasper 2015).

That morphological markers are asymmetric with respect to word order, as (b) states, follows directly from the aforementioned. Since the "zero hypothe-

sis” of language users is that the word order of an utterance will conform to the Responsible Causer Preference, the functions of morphological markers require a fundamental reassessment, from both an offline, static, competence-based perspective and an incremental, dynamic, performance-based perspective. From the former perspective the morphological case-markers in a sentence like ...*dass der Chefkoch den Eintopf gewürzt hat* (‘that the chef.NOM seasoned the stew.ACC’) are *redundant* information in that they merely actuate an interpretation which was the default prediction anyway. Thus, they have no informational value. From the latter, the incremental, perspective the morphological markers do have a function: not to distinguish meanings, of course, but to confirm the default expectation of an S-O structure even before the speech act is ended. This is what (i) in hypothesis (b) says.

The back side of the asymmetry, referring to (ii) in hypothesis (b), shows up in sentences like ...*dass den Eintopf der Chefkoch gewürzt hat* (lit. ‘that the stew.ACC seasoned the chef.NOM’). Here, case markers become *relevant* from the offline perspective in that they contradict, and in fact override the word order expectation; and they not merely contradict the prediction in incremental interpretation but also require a reanalysis which produces cognitive costs.

Finally, the default S-O expectation does not only determine the informational relevance or redundancy of morphological markers, but is itself functional, namely as a strategy for interpreting morphologically ambiguous sentences or those without morphological markers. In the presentation I will present historical, typological, and neurophysiological evidence for the asymmetry hypothesis presented in (a) and (b).

**References:** • Bornkessel-Schlesewsky, I./Schlesewsky, M. (2009): The role of prominence information in real-time comprehension of transitive constructions. A cross-linguistic approach. In: *Language and Linguistics Compass* 3(1), 19–58. • Dryer, M.S. (2013): Order of Subject, Object and Verb. In: Dryer, M.S./Haspelmath, M. (eds.): *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. (Available online at <http://wals.info/chapter/81>, Accessed on 2016-06-17.) • Kasper, S. (2015): *Instruction Grammar. From Perception via Grammar to Action*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter. • Kasper, Simon (submitted): Frequency and iconicity revisited. Towards an integrative ecological perspective. In: Herbeck, P./Tschugmell, N./Wolf, J. (eds.): *Living Economies*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter.