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On German Dative Constructions

The dative case fills a variety of functions in the German language. Most notably, the dative case is used for indirect objects, with certain adjectives, with certain prepositions and with certain verbs. Wegener (1985) and Zifonun, Hoffmann & Strecker (1997) offer general descriptions of the dative case from a syntactic and semantic perspective, but do not focus on the semantic characteristics that are common to dative verbs. In this paper, I will focus on a semantic analysis of the various types of dative verbs. There are about 82 dative verbs, which present a puzzle for syntax and semantics. From the perspective of syntax, the question is what are the syntactic features of the dative participants. From a semantic perspective, the issue is what are the prototypical characteristics of the dative participant.

The proposed semantic analysis will be within the framework of Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987,1991). Various aspects of the dative case have been discussed in a variety of syntactic and semantic frameworks, but CG has been a popular theory in recent years (cf. Smith 1985; Rudzka-Ostyn 1992; Janda 1993, Dabrowska 1997, Maldonado 2002). As enlightening as these studies are about one aspect of the dative case, none has the complete picture. Further, these syntactic/semantic studies do not base their analysis on natural language data. In this paper, I will analyze examples of dative verbs from current German newspapers. Although I will not specifically be addressing the issue of frequency, I expect that patterns will emerge with respect to which types of predicates occur.

Dative participants are often considered to be experiencers. This analysis is insightful and most likely the prototype for dative verbs. There are, however, a number of dative verbs that have inanimate participants in the dative case and, as inanimates, they cannot be experiencers of anything. A more productive approach for describing participants with dative verbs will be to group the verbs according to their semantic characteristics and form a network model. This has been done for Czech (Janda 1993) and Polish (Dabrowska 1997) and this type of analysis can be transferred with some modifications to German.

References

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