

Will Benware
 University of California, Davis
 Linguistics Dept., UCD, Davis CA 95616
 Phone: (530)752-2999/FAX (530)752-3156
 wabenware@ucdavis.edu

A polycentric approach to stress in German

When it comes to the predictability of lexical stress, German lies on a cline between languages such as Turkish and Polish, on the one hand, where stress assignment is largely limited to a particular syllable, and Russian and Serbo-Croatian, on the other, where stress is mobile, and thus largely unpredictable. The facts of lexical stress placement in German suggest that other than strictly prosodic factors play an essential role. A polycentric approach (Dressler 1977) to linguistic description is based on the notion that the various analytical components – prosodic phonology, segmental phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, etc. – interact with one another, and for this reason none exhibits a completely consistent unmarked system.

This approach will be illustrated with compounds in German which have an [[AB]C] structure, where the A-constituent is a numeral. A representative sample:

Stress on A		Stress on B	
Einachsfederung	‘single axle suspension’	Einmeterbrett	‘one meter board’
Zweibettzimmer	‘room w/ 2 beds’	Zweifarbendruck	‘2-color printing’
Dreiecksverhältnis	‘love triangle’	Dreitagefieber	‘3-day fever’
Dreifruchtjoghurt	‘3-fruit yoghurt’	Dreizehenspecht	‘3-toed woodpecker’
Viertaktmotor	‘4-stroke engine’	Viersternegeneral	‘4-star general’
Fünfsatzkampf	‘5-set match’	Sechstagerennen	‘6 day race’
Zehnganggetriebe	‘10 gear transmission’	Zehnklassenschule	‘10-grade school’
Zwölfonmusik	‘12 tone music’	Zehnmeterbrett	‘10 meter board’
Einachsenanhänger	‘single-axle trailer’	Stress on A or B	
Einelternfamilie	‘single-parent family’	Einmarkstück	‘one mark piece’
Einklassenschule	‘one-class school’	Dreifarbistift	‘3-color pencil’

There are approximately equal numbers of compounds stressed on A as on B. There are also a few which can be stressed on either constituent. It is proposed that there are six possible hypotheses to predict lexical stress. Four (1-4) use formal criteria alone; two (5-6) are based on a polycentric approach.

- (1) [A'B]C is the unmarked pattern; the [ʼAB]C has to be explained;
- (2) [ʼAB]C is the unmarked pattern; [A'B]C has to be explained;
- (3) Stress is assigned according to the syllable structure of B;
- (4) [ʼAB]C follows the rule for compound stress; [A'B]C follows the rule for phrasal stress, i.e. wherever [AB] is itself a phrase which functions as the attribute of the compound;
- (5) lexicalization accounts in part for the [A'B]C pattern. Otherwise stress is determined by one of the other hypotheses;
- (6) stress on some [ʼAB]C compounds is due to a contrastive relation with other lexical items; stress for the remaining compounds is determined by one of the other hypotheses.

A combination of (6),(5) and (3) yield the most satisfactory account. Where the B-constituent is polysyllabic, the stress falls there. Otherwise it falls on A. Those not following this pattern, mainly compounds with polysyllabic B-constituents but with stress on A, are marked in some way, either because of an implicit contrast with a simplex, or an explicit contrast among the members of a coherent set. Variable stress can be viewed as a choice between (3) and (5).