

Argument Structure and Agreement / Argumentstruktur und Kongruenz

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Abstract

In our presentation, we will focus on the encoding of argument structure and/via agreement, i.e. we will raise the general question on how spoken languages mark verbal arguments and if the specific phenomenon of verbal agreement is explainable (only) as an argument marking device. First, with respect to word order, we envisage to discuss the following questions: How relevant is the distinction between the thematic roles of agent and patient, between subject and object, figure and ground as well as topic and focus for the order of the verbal arguments in a sentence in spoken language? One aim is thus to present an overview of relational concepts that are essential to describe the word order regularities of a spoken language. For this purpose, on the one hand, we refer to valency theory and the distinction between syntactic and semantic valency (cf. Primus 2009), on the other hand, we consider the information structure of sentences (cf. Krifka 2008). Second, after an overview of the principled aspects of verbal agreement in spoken languages following Corbett 2006, we will discuss categories and feature values that are *not* marked in verbal agreement (cf. Aronoff/Padden 2011: 147, Mathur/Rathmann 2012 for sign languages). Are there any systematic correlations between absent, optional or defective agreement and other semantic or syntactic phenomena such as expletives, different verbal arguments (internal vs. external), different verb classes or different word order phenomena (cf. Greenberg 1963, Chomsky 2001) that are typical of spoken languages? The specific relationship between pronouns and agreement will also be discussed taking up the much debated question whether non-standard French clitics are verbal arguments or agreement markers (cf. Fuss 2005, Culbertson 2010). Empirical evidence for our talk comes from the newly established Swiss reference corpus of text messages (www.sms4science.ch, cf. Dürscheid/Stark 2011). Since this corpus shows many correspondences to spoken language, it is an ideal starting point for investigations in the relation between orality and literacy. On the basis of examples taken from the German and the French subcorpus, we will point out some of the (ir-)regularities found in the morphosyntactic structure of these messages and discuss the question of how they can be described and explained.

References

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