

Stability and change in German case systems

Whereas the general development of case systems from Proto-Indo-European to Modern Standard German (MSG) can be characterized as a reduction process, reductive tendencies are not the only ones. As Dal (1962) points out, German shows remarkably stable areas in the diachronic development of case, too. The relationships between stable and changing aspects of German case are in need of an explanation.

In **section 1**, we will sketch the relevant developments from Old High German to MSG:

- (i) proliferation of determiners as the locus of case inflection,
- (ii) nonetheless reduction of the *formal* visibility of the nominative-accusative distinction,
- (iii) increasing *functional* limitation of the genitive as the case for adnominal dependents (attributes; Teuber 2000),
- (iv) grammaticalization of prepositions (often governing the dative).

Section 2 analyzes these developments, their causes and their consequences in the light of Realizational Morphology (Spencer 2001) and the distinction between structural vs. lexical case assignment (Wegener 1990). We observe (i) that the preservation of the dative case, both formally and functionally, is striking, and (ii) that the four cases of MSG can be grouped in two pairs: an unmarked direct case pair (nominative/accusative) and a marked oblique case pair (dative/genitive) (cf. Eisenberg 2006). The contrast between direct vs. oblique is sharp, but not within each of the pairs. Within the direct pair, the formal distinction is weakening. Within the oblique pair, the functional distinction is weakening. Structurally assigned genitive and dative occur in predictable, complementary distribution: genitive within NP, dative in all other contexts where oblique case is required. Therefore, we will propose an uncanonical solution: the MSG case forms traditionally referred to as ‘genitive’ and ‘dative’ are just allomorphic realizations of the same syntactic case feature ‘oblique’.

Section 3 demonstrates that the same tendencies already known from the OHG>MSG development have been applied in Alemannic dialects, too, but in a much more rigorous way. First, the nominative-accusative distinction is levelled in all categories except personal pronouns. Second, the allomorphic realization of the syntactic oblique case feature (violating Mayerthaler’s 1980 principle of Uniformity) is adjusted such that one of the two allomorphs (the genitive) is eliminated altogether. Crucially, however, the oblique/dative case is morphologically fully distinct. The exponent side of the oblique/dative is even reinforced by the introduction of prepositional case markers, which can be explained as analogical extension the most frequent context of datives, namely post-prepositional. As a result, Alemannic has a ‘cleaned-up’ two-case system in most categories: a direct case (for subject and direct object) vs. an oblique (post-prepositional) case.

In the concluding **section 4** we will argue that the difference between the astonishingly regular Alemannic pattern and the somewhat less consistent MSG pattern is inexplicable from a purely systemic point of view but must be motivated on language-external grounds.

References:

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