Animacy-related differential object marking in Bavarian: a frequency - based approach

Gertraud Fenk-Oczlon,
Department of Linguistics and Computational Linguistics,
Alps-Adriatic University of Klagenfurt, Austria

Differential object marking (DOM) refers to the phenomenon that in a remarkable number of languages with overt case marking, not all direct objects are marked in the same way. Objects ranking higher on a relevant scale, the animacy scale or the definiteness scale, are more likely to be overtly case marked (e.g. Bossong 1985, Lazard 1998). For explaining this phenomenon three main hypotheses are proposed in the literature. (1) The Ambiguity Hypothesis (e.g. Comrie 1975, Bossong 1985): Languages tend to mark direct objects if they are too similar to typical subjects. (2) The Transitivity Thesis (e.g. Hopper & Thomson): Salient direct objects are overtly marked. (3) Economy-based explanations (e.g. Hawkins 2004, Haspelmath 2008): The more frequent inanimate direct objects are zero-coded for economic reasons. In a previous study (Fenk-Oczlon & Fenk 2008) we also argued in favour of frequency- and economy-based explanations of DOM, and could demonstrate that exceptions to general economy-based explanations of DOM can again be explained by frequency distributions in the respective language system.

The main goal of this paper is to show that there are indications of animacy-related differential object marking in some Austro-Bavarian dialects and that the emergence of it can again be explained by frequency distributions in the German language system.

Gender-related DOM in Standard German

Animacy and definiteness are the prevalent underlying factors determining DOM in most languages (e.g. Hindi, Spanish). In Standard German, however, DOM is exclusively conditioned by gender (e.g. Fenk-Oczlon & Fenk 2008, Krifka 2009).

In the singular only masculine direct objects are overtly case marked, irrespective of whether they are animate or inanimate, definite or indefinite. And though females are not less animate than males, the frequency distributions of personal pronouns and definite/demonstrative articles indicate that the feminine tends more often to be patient or object than agent or subject. The split between overtly case marked masculines and zero-coded feminines can be attributed to different frequency distributions. The masculine is less frequent in the accusative and therefore overtly case marked (Fenk-Oczlon & Fenk 2008).

Animacy-related DOM in Bavarian?

Evidence suggests that in some Austro-Bavarian dialects there is an emergence of animacy – related DOM in the personal pronouns. Dative pronouns such as *eam/eahm* (him), *ihra/ira* (her) tend to be used for animate direct objects:

Examples (in brackets the relative frequencies found in Google, Nov 14, 2009):

i mog eam/ eahm (ich mag ihn)	'I like him'	(16. 808 times)
i mog ira/ ihra (ich mag sie)	'I like her'	(12 times)
i kenn eahm/eam (ich kenne ihn)	'I know him'	(25.720 times)
i kenn ira/ihra (ich kenne sie)	'I know her'	(326 times)
i siach eahm/eam (ich sehe ihn)	'I see him'	(225 times)

i siach ihra/ira (ich sehe sie)   'I see her'   (1 time)

When asking native speakers of Bavarian (colleagues, students in my seminars, friends from my home town in Salzburg) whether they could use *eam/ihra* only for animate direct objects, they confirmed it. Only very few had the feeling that they could use *eam* also for inanimates in cases when the direct object is 'very definite' or emphasized. But none of my informants could use the feminine dative pronoun *ihra* for inanimate direct objects. A more systematic and more comprehensive questioning of Bavarian native speakers is planned in the near future.

The role of frequency in the emergence of DOM
That frequency distributions in the respective language system play a decisive role in the emergence of DOM and also in the choice of the case that is used to differentiate direct objects becomes apparent when comparing different languages.
Why is in Bavarian like in most languages the **dative** used to mark animate objects but in Russian the **genitive**?
In German the dative is a very frequently used case for animates (c.f. Wegener 1985). Important classes of verbs such as interaction verbs, possession verbs or communication verbs require the dative. Therefore the use of dative pronouns instead of accusative pronouns for animate direct objects is a consequence of their frequent use and the high familiarity of the association between animacy and dative pronouns.
In Russian, on the contrary, a high number of verbs (of desire, approach, fear, avoidance, etc) that govern in other languages the dative or accusative, govern the genitive case in Russian. And, before the emergence of the genitive-accusative for animate masculines, objects in the genitive were already quite frequent and therefore familiar (Vlasto 1986: 209): In Old Church Slavonic any suitable verb could have partitive objects in the genitive. And in sentences with negative verbs the genitive was already in usage.

Comrie, B. (1975). Definite and animate direct objects: a natural class. Linguistica Silesiona 3, 13–21

Bossong, G. (1985). Empirische Universalienforschung. Differentielle Objektmarkierung in den neuiranischen Sprachen. Tübingen: Narr

Fenk-Oczlon, G. & Fenk, A. (2008). Scales and cognitive economy. In V. Polyakov (ed.) Text processing and cognitive technologies: Cognitive modeling in linguistics: Proceedings of the Xth Int. Conference, 5/2, 234-242. Kazan: Kazan State University Press

Haspelmath, M. (2008). Frequency vs. iconicity in explaining grammatical asymmetries. Cognitive Linguistics, 19, 1, 1-33

Hawkins, J. A. (2004). Efficiency and complexity in grammars. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hopper, P. & Thompson, S. (1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *Language 56*, 251-299

Krifka, M. (2009). Case Syncretism in German Feminines: Typological, functional and Structural Aspects. In P. Steinkrüger & M. Krifka (eds.) On Inflection: Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

Lazard, G. (1998). Actancy. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

Vlasto, A. P. (1986). A linguistic history of Russia to the end of the eighteenth century. Oxford: Clarendon Press

Wegener, H. (1985). Der Dativ im heutigen Deutsch. Tübingen: Narr