

## **NP-functions and Grammatical Case in German – A Quantitative Perspective**

Noun phrases (NPs) in German occur in one of four grammatical cases (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive) and, as in many languages, may fulfil a range of different syntactic functions. Existing reference grammars typically offer qualitative descriptions of the differently case-marked NPs and their various functions (e.g. Zifonun et al. 1997: 1295–1355, Duden 2016: 821–833), but quantitative corpus analyses still constitute a desideratum, as do studies relating the respective findings to the description of the German case system.

The present study aims towards closing this gap. It is part of a new, corpus-based reference grammar aiming to provide an empirically adequate description of contemporary (written) German by taking into account usage frequencies and variation. The study is based on a random sample of 10.000 full (i.e. non-pronominal) NPs drawn from a large annotated corpus (40 billion words). The sample was obtained by searching for the NPs' head noun (tokens classified as NN by the TreeTagger and the MarMoT-Tagger); classification for case was done using MarMoT followed by manual correction where necessary.

The study shows that ca. 90% of all NPs are accounted for by one of only four syntactic functions: They serve as subjects occurring in the nominative, as direct objects occurring in the accusative, as complements of prepositions usually occurring in the dative or accusative, or as noun attributes in the genitive. All other functions, including indirect (dative) objects, are strikingly rare. Conversely, this means that three of the four cases are overwhelmingly found in only one function: the nominative prototypically occurs on subjects, the dative on prepositionally governed NPs, and the genitive on noun attributes. Only the accusative is frequent in two functions, most commonly marking the direct object but frequently also found on prepositionally governed NPs.

The results confirm that in the verbal domain, German is diachronically moving towards a three-case-system consisting of nominative, accusative and dative. The genitive does occur (on objects and predicate nominals), but only marginally so. The results are also well compatible with the idea of viewing the nominative and accusative as unmarked (or 'structural', cf. Haider 1985) within the verbal domain while viewing the dative and genitive as unmarked/structural within the prepositional and nominal domains, respectively. Finally, the findings provide quantitative justification for the idea of comprising the nominative and accusative under a common category 'direct case', contrasting with an 'oblique' category comprising the dative and genitive (Eisenberg 2016: 166–167).

### **References**

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