

Theoretical and psycholinguistic approaches to case and word order (with Jana Häussler and Philipp Weisser)

SS2018, University of Leipzig (MA, 04-046-2035 module language in focus – IGRA07/08)

Course description

The linear order of constituents in the clause is determined by various factors. In these two jointly taught seminars, which form one coherent course, we will focus on the role of case in argument encoding and its influence on word order.

We will approach this question from both a theoretical and a psycholinguistic (acquisition, processing) angle, trying to find out where the two perspectives inform, contradict or complement each other, with the ultimate goal of deepening our understanding in both areas. An obvious starting point is the well-known correlation between the availability of morphological case (and/or agreement) and the possibility of free word order. This relationship is easily stated in prose and well-researched in psycholinguistic work but by no means trivial to model theoretically. Further possible topics include (but are not limited to):

- syntactic ambiguities (subject-object, object-object); disambiguation and reanalysis
- structural vs. inherent (lexical) cases
- case attraction in grammar and parsing (direct and inverse)
- superiority
- ergative vs. accusative languages
- quirky cases/subjects
- long wh-extraction (how case can facilitate long extraction):
- differential object marking, global case splits, pseudo-noun incorporation
- case-stacking and movement
- Agree-model vs. dependent case theory
- structure-based vs. expectation-based parsing
- the relationship between case and word order

While case has been intensely studied in both disciplines, there are quite a number of areas where theoretical proposals have not yet been subjected to empirical (psycholinguistic) verification. Possible topics for seminar papers may thus include experiments that aim at testing the predictions of particular theoretical proposals (with the challenge being to find a method that is suitable to test the predictions). Conversely, psycholinguistic observations may also be the trigger to rethink our theoretical assumptions.