The myth of the word order flexibility differences in English and German

Clause structure and word order flexibility are often described as one of the main contrastive differences between English and German. German word order is traditionally regarded as relatively free while English word order is more fixed (König and Gast 2018, 188), and the main reason for this difference in word order flexibility is argued to be case marking. English has lost most of its inflectional morphology and thus has to rely on clause positions to express grammatical functions. Grammatical roles in German are expressed through case marking, which is why constituents in German can be moved around more freely to fulfill pragmatic and discourse functions rather than grammatical ones (Hawkins 1986, 42).

However, describing the German word order as generally flexible or inflexible is an over-simplification. German is a verb-second language, which means that the finite verb is typically in second position in German declaratives. If the finite verb is not conflated with the lexical verb, the German verb phrase is split up, and anything but the finite verb is moved to the back of the clause. These positions of the verb phrase divide the German clause into three fields: the forefield, the zone before the finite verb, the midfield, the zone between the finite verb and the lexical verb, and the postfield, the zone behind the lexical verb (Zifonun et al. 1997). Each of these fields differs heavily in terms of the number and the kinds of constituents they can contain as well as how flexible their constituent order is. Forefield and midfield are the zones that are typically argued to be more flexible in their word order compared to English because a more diverse set of word order variations are theoretically possible in German (see for instance Götze and Hess-Lüttich 2002; Engel 2004; König and Gast 2018); yet very little empirical data is available on the distribution and probability of these theoretically-possible clause constructions.

In this study, these assumptions will be put to the test with the help of a corpus-based analysis of clause openings and clause progressions in English and German. The data is taken from the CroCo corpus (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2012), a bidirectional translation corpus of German and English, which includes German and English original texts from eight different registers. For this study, 1,000 declarative clauses per language are analysed regarding the content and order of their constituents. These annotations include syntactic functions, case, part-of-speech, and givenness. The results are analysed statistically with the help of regression analyses to gauge in how far language predicts word order deviations.

Preliminary results show that German appears to be more flexible regarding fronted constituents than English given that the number of objects and adverbials in early German clause position is considerably higher (36.5% to 20.6%), and the difference statistically significant. However, a more detailed analysis of adverbials, which make up the majority of marked clause openings, shows that this difference is not primarily caused by word order flexibility. In fact, a single adverbial in English and German has an almost identical likelihood of being fronted and is thus almost equally flexible in its positioning. However, German clauses include a much higher number adverbials, regardless of position and it is this difference in general frequency and not a difference in word order that explains the discrepancy. Similarly, the analysis of English and German clause progression suggests that the two languages largely follow the same order principle of subjects before objects and given before new information. Deviations in the German midfield, while theoretically possible, are mostly negligible in terms of actual use. These results suggest that English-German differences regarding word order flexibility are, for the most part, overstated and more usage-based analyses are needed to truly discern the contrastive differences in clause structure between the two languages.

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