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Comparing grammatical doubts in Germanic and Romance

Cases of overabundance in the inflection of word-formation products

Keywords: grammatical doubts/uncertainties; overabundance; inflection of compounds; Germanic languages (German, Dutch, Swedish); Romance languages (Italian)

Unquestionably (or: undoubtedly), every competent speaker has already come to doubt with respect to the question of which form is correct or appropriate and should be used (in the standard language) when faced with multiple competing variants (e.g. Ger. *Pizzas/Pizzen/Pizze* ‘pizzas’; Dut. *de drie mooiste/mooiste drie stranden* ‘the three most beautiful/most beautiful three beaches’; Swe. *större än jag/mig* ‘taller than I/me’; Ita. *La maggioranza delle persone è cattiva/sono cattive* ‘The majority of people is/are mean’). Such linguistic uncertainties or “cases of doubt” (cf. i.a. Klein 2003 and Schmitt/Szczepaniak/Vierregge 2019) systematically occur also in native speakers and do not necessarily coincide with the difficulties of second language learners. Most grammatical doubts can be attributed to processes of language change in progress, to language or variety contact, to gaps and rule conflicts in the grammar of every language or to psycholinguistic conditions of language processing. In present-day German, many uncertainties occur in the domains of inflection (plural formation, genitive allomorphy, weak masculines, strong/weak adjectival inflection, comparison forms, strong/weak verb forms, perfect auxiliary selection) and word-formation (linking elements in compounds, separability of complex verbs). As for syntax, there are often doubts in connection with case choice (pseudo-partitive constructions, prepositional case government) and agreement (especially due to coordination or appositional structures).

In order to obtain a more fine-grained typology of grammatical instabilities and their causes, this contribution takes as a starting point the rather well-researched situation of doubts in German and aims to present a contrastive approach to morphological and syntactic uncertainties in some contemporary Germanic and Romance languages characterized by an increasing genetic, typological and/or areal distance from German but comparable diasystematic conditions (pluricentric/pluriareal languages with marked dialectal/regiolectal variation etc.), namely Dutch, Swedish, and Italian. The data used for this objective stem from the respective largest collections of cases of doubt such as Duden vol. 9 (Duden Editorial Office), Taaladvies.net (Dutch Language Union et al.), Språkriktighetsboken (Swedish Language Committee/Council) and Consulenza linguistica (Accademia della Crusca), which constitute very valuable and comprehensive (qualitative) “corpora” on attested doubtful cases. A cross-linguistic comparison of critical areas in (closely) related languages and language families is an innovative and important contribution to the questions of 1.) which of the established (cross-linguistically valid) explanatory approaches can be applied to which phenomena, and 2.) whether the new data reveal further lines of explanation for the empirically observable

(standard) variation (cf. Strobel 2023). For this purpose, the talk will discuss in more detail peculiarities, variation and changes in the inflectional behavior of word-formation products (especially compounds) compared to simple words, in particular:

- the plural formation of compound nouns (e.g. Swe. *datormöss/datormusar* ‘computer mice/mouses’, showing a semantic differentiation between literal and figurative meaning, as well as the copulative/determinative compounds Dut. *ministers-presidenten/minister-presidenten* ‘prime ministers’ and Ita. *altipiani/altopiani* ‘plateaus’, displaying two vs. one plural marker),
- the competing comparison forms of adjectival compounds (adj.+adj./part. as in Ger. *höchstrangig/hochrangigst* ‘most high-ranking’ and Dut. *dieper gaand/diepgaander – diepst gaand/diepgaandst/meest diepgaand* ‘more/most profound’ or “double/multiple marking” of the superlative, especially with participles or semantically atypical adjectives as second constituents as in non-standard, mainly spoken Ger. *höchstgelegent* ‘highest situated’, *größtmöglichst* ‘greatest possible/utmost’ etc.),
- the separability of complex verbs and inflection of verbal compounds – emerged through borrowing, noun incorporation, back formation etc. –, potentially undergoing reanalysis as a simple verb (cf. Ger. *downgeloadet* > *gedownloadet* ‘downloaded’, *schlussgefolgert* > *geschlussfolgert* ‘concluded’) and exhibiting distinct inflection patterns (strong/weak or irregular/regular) for compounds versus the corresponding simple verb (Ger. *saugte Staub/staubsaugte* – *Staub gesaugt/gestaubsaugt* and Dut. *stofzuigde* – *gestofzuigd* ‘vacuum-cleaned’ vs. *sog/saugte* – *gesogen/gesaugt* resp. *zoog* – *gezogen* ‘sucked’; Dut. *glim-/grijnsachte* – *geglim-/gegrijnsacht* ‘smiled / grinned’ vs. *lachte/loech* – *gelachen* ‘laughed’; Ita. *soddisfaccio/soddisfo* ‘(I) satisfy’ vs. *faccio/*fo* ‘(I) do/make’ etc.).

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