

Gradience and/in? Grammar Or: is there “gradient” structural case?

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Abstract The presentation reflects on a problem of grammatical analysis that can be classified as somewhat epistemological: how can we as grammarians be sure about the rules of the grammar we are investigating, about the nature of grammaticality and the relation between the observed behaviour of speakers (who robustly display gradient acceptability ratings) and the grammar that we propose to be located in their minds (which still may not be gradient)?

The example that I have chosen for this reflection is the case system of German. German has three still productive morphological cases in the verbal domain (leaving aside prepositional objects for now), nominative, accusative and dative. Their functions and interrelations are well understood. Nominative and dative stand out in that they are much more frequent than accusative and face only minimal semantic restrictions of their use. Therefore, they have been labelled as structural or default cases for the grammatical functions of subject and object.

This distinction correlates with the fact that subordinate clauses may only stand in place of nominative and accusative. A dative case required by a verb cannot be omitted and only nominal elements can have case markings in German, especially determiners and pronouns. Subordinate clauses, by standard assumption, cannot be case-marked.

But there appears to be one exception to this, free relative clauses as in sentences like *Ich helfe wem ich vertraue* ('I help who.DAT I trust'). And this is not an isolated fact of German. Syntacticians have a hard time finding a plausible syntactic analysis for this phenomenon which would motivate such an exceptional case marking of sentences.

Furthermore, free relative clauses in many languages can be found in mismatching configurations like *Ich lade ein, wem ich vertraue* ('I invite who.DAT I trust') with dative instead of accusative. Whereas the former problem could be “explained” with the assumption that the relative clause is case-marked, that very same assumption should lead to ungrammaticality in this case, just as in cases like **Ich lade der Freundin ein* ('I invite the friend.FEM.DAT'). Instead, we only find slightly degraded acceptability, but not ungrammaticality in elicitation. This observation would be in line with the assumption that the free relative clause is NOT case-marked.

I will explore the feasibility of an alternative way out of this dilemma, building on empirical studies and my own previous analyses, that rests on the assumption that there could be situations where everyone, speakers as well as linguists, “get it wrong”: a class of sentences is judged as well-formed and used productively although it does not strictly speaking fit into the language’s grammatical rules.

More generally, the presentation will reflect on the amount of imperfection in languages and their grammars that we are willing to accept, and the consequences for the study of grammar that follow from this.