

Case marking affects the processing of animacy with simple verbs, but not particle verbs: An event-related potential study

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In sentence comprehension, animacy contrasts are used in subject-object-disambiguation: Sentences with two animate arguments are more difficult to process than sentences with animate subjects and inanimate objects (Weckerly & Kutas 1999, Frisch & Schlesewsky 2001, Grewe et al. 2007). In German, this animacy effect is modulated by verbal case-marking pattern: Animacy effects are weaker for verbs assigning structural case (NOM-ACC) than for verbs assigning lexical case (NOM-DAT) (Czypionka 2014). However, it is still unclear if this modulation reflects the nonstandard syntactic structure or nonstandard argument semantics of the NOM-DAT verbs (Blume 2000, Meinunger 2007, Grimm 2010). Another complication is that comprehension experiments on NOM-DAT verbs so far have used a mix of different verbs in their stimuli: simple verbs and particle verbs. Simple NOM-DAT verbs are assumed to have more complex syntactic structures than simple NOM-ACC verbs (Bayer et al. 2001, but see Fanselow 2000), while particle verbs are more complex than the standard structure with both case-marking patterns. The nonstandard argument semantics are the same for both simple and particle NOM-DAT verbs.

We present the results of two ERP studies on German sentence comprehension, comparing the interplay between the processing of argument animacy and case-marking for both simple and particle verbs. Simple accusative verbs show an effect of object animacy, reflected in negative deflections at right-anterior sites, and positive deflections at left-posterior sites. Simple dative verbs did not show effects of object animacy. Particle verbs, however, show only animacy effects, and no modulations or main effects of caused by verbal case marking pattern.

Our findings suggest that the modulation of the object animacy effect for simple NOM-DAT verbs reflects the build-up of a more complex syntactical structure, in line with predictions from syntactic theory. We assume that the semantic difference between NOM-ACC and NOM-DAT verbs does not contribute crucially to the case effects found for simple verbs – otherwise, there should have been case effects and interactions of case and animacy for particle verbs, too. Our findings also support syntactic accounts assuming more complex syntactic structures for simple NOM-DAT than simple NOM-ACC verbs.