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The Destiny of Nominal Case Markers in German

In the history of German many nominal case markers have been lost. Moreover, all remaining nominal case markers are prone to variation in Contemporary German. For example, the use of the genitive-*s* of strong masculine and neuter nouns very often constitutes a doubtful case according to the definition of KLEIN (2003). In many instances both -*s* and - \emptyset are equally acceptable (cf. 1). Since the genitive case is unambiguously and overtly marked through the article (e.g. *d-es*), the expression of morphosyntactic functions of the phrase as a whole is still ensured in these examples. It is only that without the -*s*, the genitive is marked less saliently and less redundantly.

1. a) *die Farbe d-es LKW-s*
the colour the-GEN.SG lorry-GEN.SG
'the colour of the lorry'

b) *die Farbe d-es LKW- \emptyset*
the colour the-GEN.SG lorry- \emptyset
'the colour of the lorry'

Against this backdrop, it has often been predicted that all nominal case markers in German are going to be lost, and occasions of genitive-*s* omission were interpreted as harbingers of the imminent complete loss of nominal case markers (cf. e.g. WURZEL 1991; WIEDENMANN 2004). However, as I will show on the basis of synchronic and diachronic corpus data (taken from *DECOW*, *DeReKo* and *DTA*) no signs of such a development can currently be detected. Only a well-delimited group of peripheral nouns is occasionally used without genitive-*s* (mainly abbreviations, loan words and proper names). Prototypical German nouns are not prone to variation (e.g. **des Stuhl- \emptyset* , 'the-GEN.SG chair- \emptyset ') and many peripheral words even drift towards the pattern of these nouns (e.g. loan words such as *Klima: d-es Klima > d-es Klima-s*, 'the-GEN.SG climate(-s)').

In my talk, I will examine the reasons for the (somewhat unexpected) stability of the genitive-*s*, which are crucial to the explanation of the outlined variation. I will concentrate on the question why language users (still) use the genitive-*s* although nominal case markers seem to be expendable in German (see for example the disappearance of the dative-*e*, which is the most recent example of complete syntagmatic loss of a specific case marker), focussing on possible extra- and intra-linguistic factors such as prestige of variants, norm awareness, analogy and system-pressure (cf. SZCZEPANIAK 2014; HOCK 2003; HASPELMATH 2014). My study will be based on corpus data, acceptability judgements, and the analysis of (normative) grammars and of metalinguistic discourse.

I will compare genitive-*s* to other nominal case markers (dative-*e*, dative-plural-*n* and -*en* as marker of all oblique cases in the declension class of weak masculine nouns, cf. EICHINGER 2013 and KÖPCKE 1995 among others) in order to shed light on the state of the inflectional system as such. Finally, I will briefly compare the genitive-*s* to other doubtful cases in German, which will reveal aspects that are relevant for a classification of doubtful cases in general.

References

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