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Gradience in German grammar and the feature hierarchy – A usage-based account

The „Hierarchy of features and ergativity“ has been established in order to describe case splits in languages that display ergativity in a part of their grammar. It is an implicational hierarchy that can be used to predict the case marking pattern (ergative or accusative) that will be found with the respective type of NP in a given language.

The ordering of the positions on the hierarchy is generally explained with respect to crosslinguistic tendencies concerning the argument positions in transitive sentences: Nominals from the top of the hierarchy tend to occur as “agents”, while those from the bottom of the hierarchy rather occur as “patients”. In most constructions across languages, nominals from the top of the hierarchy tend to be the “privileged syntactic argument” (the grammatical “subject”) (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997).

The Hierarchy of features and ergativity (Silverstein 1976); simplified depiction after Dixon (1994)

1st person (speaker)	+definite/referential/specific
2nd person (addressee)	Highest probability of accusative marking
3rd (pronoun)/demonstrative name, kin term human being	Lowest probability of ergative marking
animate	-definite/referential/specific
inanimate	Lowest probability of accusative marking
abstract	Highest probability of ergative marking

The hierarchy can also be used to describe gradience phenomena in non-ergative languages. For German case marking, word order with ditransitives and passive formation, it can be shown that pronouns are treated differently from nouns, in terms of grammar and/or statistics. As for case marking, there is an accusative marker for 1st and 2nd person pronouns and masculine singular 3rd person pronouns, demonstratives and articles. Furthermore, one out of ten declension classes for nouns has distinctive marking for nominative and accusative in the singular. Most members of this masculine class are expressions for human beings and higher animals. This hierarchy-relevant fact is a result of changes in declension class-membership that took place around the transition from Middle High German to New High German: Almost only the aforementioned kinds of nouns were left in the class. Accordingly, there seems to be another split with respect to the gender distinction, and, furthermore, there seems to be a semantic correlation between gender and animacy in that for common nouns, the feature cluster [masculine+animate/human] is decisive for the stability of the membership in the accusative-marking declension class.

In the paper, it will be argued that there is a motivation for the grammatical treatment of pronouns in terms of topicworthiness due to presupposition in discourse. The motivation for the changes in declension class membership can be seen in the effects of frequency of usage. Thus, the hierarchy as a whole can be regarded as an index for the correlation between discourse and grammar.

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