On the Form and Interpretation of German Non-Inflectional Constructions – Considering data of a structure in statu nascendi

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1 Introduction

In our talk we are concerned with German Non-Inflectional Constructions (N-INFL). These are syntactically independent constructions consisting of verb stems potentially projecting internal structure but lacking any inflectional morphology.[1]

(1)   *grins*
        smile[2]

(2)   *dich   in den Arm nehm*
        you-ACC in the arm take-STEM

These constructions are widely used in web-based conversations like chat or (informal) email. The very little linguistic work done so far on N-INFL rooting in diachronics and sociolinguistics is focussed on descriptive and terminological considerations (cf. Teuber 1998, Schlobinski 2001).

Going beyond, we will connect the specific formal properties of N-INFL, relying on data obtained by the Magnitude Estimation method (Bard et al. 1996), to their pragmatic function in a nonarbitrary manner.

2 Data and Analysis

Hypothesis 1: N-INFL are bare verbal structures lacking functional projections.
Hypothesis 2: Mapping form to function, N-INFL constitute separate performative speech acts.

According to Hypothesis 1, N-INFL do not have any functional projections. This hypothesis straightforwardly accounts for the lack of a subject position and morpho-

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[1] In this respect, German N-INFL differ from English asterisc expressions which are distributed in the same contexts but can never be modified or take arguments.

[2] Since N-INFL are not available in English, any close idiomatic translation would suggest not intended similarities with full-fledged constructions. Therefore, we give only word-for-word glosses.

logically coded functional inflection (cf. (3)). It also captures the obligatory final position of the verb stem (cf. (4)) as well as several restrictions on adverbial modification (cf. (5)).

(3)   *ich   dich   in den Arm nehm
      I-NOM you-ACC in the arm   take-STEM

(4)   *nehm   dich   in den Arm
      take-STEM you-ACC in the arm

(5)   *leider   dich   in den Arm nehm
      unfortunately you-ACC in the arm take-STEM

Corpora data as in Schlobinski (2001) as well as introspection provide inhomogeneous evidence with regard to the proposed formal properties. We claim that this is due to the fact that N-INFL are constructions in statu nascendi not readily available in its full fledged form for every German speaker. In order to test our assumptions on formal properties we relied on fine-grained grammaticality judgements achieved in a Magnitude Estimation study. Additionally, we asked how familiar subjects feel with the language used on the web, so that this method provides a means to check the assumed N-INFL characteristics and to correlate the results with familiarity.

The hypothesized formal restrictions and correlations were confirmed by our study:

- Distribution of the verb and subject: In appropriate chat-like samples, we tested combinations of ±subject and verb final vs. verb fronted. Interestingly, even constructions which could easily be reanalyzed as cases of simple 1st person singular forms with schwa-drop (cf. (6)) are judged less grammatical than N-INFL obeying the proposed grammatical restrictions [-subject, verb final] (cf. (7)).

(6) ich   nehm   dich   in den Arm
    I-NOM take-1stSG you-ACC in the arm

(7) dich   in den Arm nehm
    you-ACC in the arm take-STEM

We conclude that N-INFL represent an independent and robust phenomenon in specific communicational settings which subjects have clear intuitions about.
- Adverbial modification: Among different types of adverbial modification only event-related cases are clearly well-formed. I. e. sentence adverbials get significantly lower rates than event-related modification.
- Including chat frequency as a potential factor influencing grammatical judgements provided clear evidence for our hypothesis that the acceptability of N-INFL depends on familiarity with the construction. Specifically, the more familiar subjects are with chat communication the better they judge those N-INFL which obey the formal restrictions given above.

Proceeding to the form-function fit (Hypothesis 2), we suggest that N-INFL are

bare in a second respect lacking – in contrast to bare infinitive forms – any inflectional morphemes. Without such a morphological marking, N-INFL are not part of syntax proper: They do not give rise to any potential functional anchoring, thereby being radically semantically underspecified. We will argue that the given formal properties force a pragmatic enrichment in the sense of a separate performative (Portner 2007), which explains why N-INFL are directly performative speech acts used in order to „do" things linguistically which normally cannot be instantiated by linguistic expressions.

References

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