

The alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat construction in Present-Day German: a corpus study

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Several scholars of German have claimed that certain verbs licencing a nominative and a dative argument are associated with a dative-before-nominative base order (den Besten 1985, Fanselow 2003, Bader & Häussler 2010, Haider 2010, Eisenberg 2013, Bader 2020, inter alia). Thus, they assume that these verbs instantiate a Dat-Nom construction, while also maintaining that the nominative, not the dative, is the syntactic subject, despite not being ranked as the first argument.

The contending constructional view, which is advocated in the current paper, is that these verbs are associated with alternating Dat-Nom/Nom-Dat constructions, and that subjecthood is constructionally determined, in the sense that the dative is the subject of the Dat-Nom construction and the nominative is the subject of the Nom-Dat construction (Barðdal 2001, Barðdal 2023, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2005, Barðdal, Eythórsson & Dewey 2019). As a consequence, either argument may take initial position in declarative clauses without either order being more marked than the other:

(1a) **Das Buch** gefällt **dem Mädchen**
the.NOM book is.to.liking **the.DAT girl**
'The book is to the girl's liking'

(1b) **Dem Mädchen** gefällt **das Buch**
the.DAT girl is.to.liking **the.NOM book**
'The girl likes the book'

Using lemmatised search queries for 76 potentially alternating verb types in the deTenTen13 corpus (Jakubíček et al. 2013; 16.5 billion words), we collected a data sample of 13,292 observations. For each verb type, we retained the first 200 randomised tokens (or fewer, in case of data sparsity) instantiating either the Nom-V-Dat or the Dat-V-Nom word order. As many as 7,773 observations (or 58%) occur in the nominative-first order, whereas the remaining 5,519 observations (or 42%) occur in the dative-first order. Thus, an exploratory analysis already reveals that both verbal arguments may be in initial position approximately equally often.

All tokens were annotated for the following ten variables: verb type, case, (pro)nominality, pronoun type (if applicable), referentiality, person, number, definiteness, animacy, and length. We subsequently evaluated the simultaneous effects of these variables on the order of constituents (i.e. Nom-Dat, or Dat-Nom) using a variety of complementary multivariate models (mixed-effects logistic regression, conditional inference tree, random forest, and predicting rules ensemble).

Our findings suggest that order is most strongly associated with i) verb type, ii) pronominality of the dative and the nominative, iii) definiteness and animacy of the nominative, iv) animacy of the dative, and v) the length difference between both arguments. Number and person are also significant, but do not yield a strong effect. The Dat-Nom order appears to be associated most strongly with two full NPs and with nominatives which are either indefinite or long.

The data presented in this study show that for the verbs under study, both the nominative and the dative may take clause-initial position, lending further support to the hypothesis that German Dat-Nom verbs are associated with two case frames. We thus maintain that subjecthood for these verbs is constructionally determined.

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