

Attributional praxis and linguistic stability

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Introduction

If language variation or stability is socio-cognitively induced, then explanations for variation and stability have to factor in aspects of social cognition. Consider the following situation: You borrowed several glasses from a friend for a family celebration. During the party one of the glasses gets broken by your father Willi who is sick with the flu. If this event were to be described, (1) and (2) would be the most likely formulations, exemplified in their standard German forms.

1. Der Willi hat eins von deinen Gläsern heruntergeworfen.
DET.NOM Willi has.3 one.ACC of your.DAT glasses.DAT down-throw.PTCP
‘Willi knocked over one of your glasses.’
2. Dem Willi ist eins von deinen Gläsern heruntergefallen.
DET.NOM Willi is.3 one.NOM of your.DAT glasses.DAT down-fall.PTCP
‘(It happened to Willi that) one of your glasses broke.’

Roughly and pre-theoretically spoken, speakers of German would utter (or accept) the version in (1) if they were ready to ascribe the responsibility for the breaking of the glass to the involved person, Willi. In doing so, they impart the agentive involvement of Willi in the above event. In contrast, by uttering (or accepting) the version in (2), speakers would refrain from ascribing responsibility to Willi, construing him as patient in the event. The formal syntactic differences between (1) and (2) lie in the morphological case in which the causer is encoded (dative vs. nominative), the choice of the auxiliary (*be* vs. *have*), the case in which the affected entity appears (nominative vs. accusative), and in the lexical form of the motion (*fall* vs. *throw*).

In what follows, explanations for this variation are sought in perceptual, conceptual, and communicative requirements. The following section outlines theoretical assumptions concerning grammar, social cognition, and how they systematically interact in the form of predictions. I then introduce the method of data collection, and discuss how predictions worked out. I argue that the consistency of speaker response behaviors across German dialects is socio-cognitively induced and independent of areal factors. I conclude with a brief reflection on the method and the nature of the variation being discussed.

Theoretical assumptions

Perception, conceptualization, and symbolization

First, I take verbal communication to consist mainly in the encoding and decoding of conceptual structures by means of linguistic structures for the purpose of organizing shared experiences (what one can call ‘praxis’).¹ When linguistic structures symbolize conceptual contents, a linguistic utterance like (1) does not refer to an event in the world or some possible world, but rather to an event in the world as conceptualized by the speaker and/or hearer of that utterance.

Second, conceptualization is treated as simulated perception (Hartmann 1998). If it is a (complex) concept of the event which underlies (1), then it is the simulation of the actual perceptual experience of Willi knocking over a glass which constitutes this conceptualization. This means that the interpreter’s evocation of the concept upon hearing (1) is as though s/he actually perceived the event. The rationale behind this assumption can be found in evidence from cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience.²

When these two assumption are taken together, (1) and (2) can be conceived as a speaker’s instruction to a hearer to simulate perception of the event. However, imagine one actually perceives the event described above involving Willi and the glass. We know that these objects, taking the form of light waves, hit the retina and provide the cognizer with something akin to an image map of the stimuli in the visual field (Bruce, Green, & Georgeson 2003). The result can be called ‘percept’. In particular, if we perceive such an event visually and auditorily, we do not know, amongst other things, whether the breaking of the glass happened by Willi’s intention or accidentally, whether it constitutes an accomplishment or a misaccomplishment, and whether it was forces of the situation which made him break the glass (for instance, his sickness) or some stable disposition (he might be an incautious person). The social significance of this information finds expression in sentences (1) and (2) above. Notably, (1) allows or suggests an agentive reading, while (2) disallows such a reading. Pulling these facts together with the cognitive psychological considerations makes the crucial point: Both symbolizations may refer to a single event, and both symbolizations

1 These assumptions are discussed in full detail in Kasper (2013).

2 We can not only manipulate ‘mental images’ of what we perceive in our working memory but also concepts evoked ‘out of nothing’ (i.e., independent of any present stimuli; Kosslyn & Thompson 2003). The similarity between perceiving and conceptualizing extends to the neural level (i.e., they cause neural activity in brain regions which overlap considerably; Damasio 1989). The main difference between the two lies in the fact that conceptualization lacks the stimuli which are present in perception.

may be appropriate descriptions of this event, but the symbolizations designate conceptual content which is not present in the percept (i.e., the agentivity or patientivity of Willi). The sentences differ in how the speaker/hearer assesses the situation with respect to the considerations mentioned above.

This leads to the third assumption: The percept of an event is fundamentally underspecified with respect to certain conceptual content. Perception does not provide all information which is present in linguistic symbolization. The types of information perception lacks must have another origin. The revised characterization of conceptualization is thus ‘conceptualization is simulated perception plus something else’.

Attribution

Percepts are underspecified. However, our concepts of events and situations, whether memorized or evoked freely, are specified with respect to the above-mentioned matters. The crucial question concerns how these concepts, which can be summarized as socio-cognitive, are acquired. Janich (2001:28-29) argues that it is the sanctioning commentaries of caretakers on what a child does (corrections, praise, reprimand, encouragement) that teach the child that for which it is, and is not, attributed credit and fault by others. An attribution is the linguistically mediated result of categorizing and explaining an observed event in order to arrive at the identification of the reason or cause for that event and to estimate its (social) significance and consequences. By getting praise and reprimand for much of what they do, children learn under what conditions they are attributed credit or blame and for what they will deserve credit and blame in the future.³ Thus, children grow into attributional praxis which encompasses the habits of making attributions about deeds of others and oneself, and the knowledge about which attributions are appropriate or acceptable in which situations. This means that socio-cognitive conceptual contents, acquired by participating in an attributional praxis, must supplement the conceptual contents gained through perception. The socio-cognitive contents encoded in (1) and (2) —which are superficially the agentivity or patientivity of the involved persons— must therefore be imposed on the spatial core of the underlying events by means of criteria used for making attributions.

Research in social cognition and sociology has uncovered crucial mechanisms and factors which govern our attribution performance. They are presented here as the constituents of our socially grounded knowledge, which supplements

3 Whether some activity constitutes an accomplishment or a misaccomplishment is not only a feature of the activity itself but also of the situation in which it is executed.

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the knowledge gained through perception. There are three main factors which determine what kind of attribution will be made. The first is the actor/observer difference (Jones & Nisbett 1972). When an event is assessed by someone, the assessor is either identical to the person in the event (actor) or not (observer). Jones and Nisbett (1972) found out that people assess events/situations differently depending on whether they are involved as actors, or whether some other person is involved. The second factor is the accomplishment/misaccomplishment difference. As mentioned above, it is not inherent to an event or its outcome whether it constitutes an accomplishment or a misaccomplishment.⁴ Zuckerman (1979) has shown that people assess events/situations differently, depending on whether the action or behavior in question constitutes an accomplishment or a misaccomplishment. The third factor concerns the attitude of the assessing person towards the person in the situation/event and can be termed the sympathy/antipathy difference. Since people are not neutral, objective judges of what goes on around them, their assessments of situations/events also depend on whether they feel sympathy or antipathy (or high or low empathy) toward the involved person (Gould & Sigall 1977).

Every 'assessable' event with human participants has some value for each of these three parameters. The setting of these parameters is determinative of three other factors which bear great socio-cognitive significance, since they are relevant for organizing our living together. In particular, the setting determines whether cognizers attribute intentional action or accidental behaviors. It also determines whether stable dispositions or forces of the situation are involved. Finally, the setting determines whether someone is assessed to deserve credit or blame. There is no straightforward mapping between the three factors. Rather, the setting of the parameters as a whole determines the values of the determined factors. The possible combinations are therefore eight, following from a 2x2x2 multiplication. Three of the eight possible attribution scenarios are given in Table 1.

The middle column shows the abbreviated setting of the identified determinants. In the first line one finds 'actor/accomplishment/sympathy—disposition/intention/credit'. The first three notions correspond to the determining factors. The last three notions correspond to the determined factors just mentioned. The right column shows the relationship between the determining and the determined factors as a rule. It must be strongly emphasized, however, that an outline

4 What governs the status of an event is norms and encyclopedic knowledge. Whereas smashing glasses in restaurants would be a misaccomplishment, smashing dishes in a wedding-eve party would not.

of the complete mechanisms in attribution is illusory, of course. The present attempt should therefore be conceived of as an approximation.

Table 1. Three possible attribution scenarios

<i>Scenario</i>	<i>Relationship between factors</i>	<i>Precise relationship</i>
A	actor accomplishment sympathy — disposition intention credit	Perceiver and causer are identical (high empathy, self-serving effort): Perceiver attributes accomplishments to own stable dispositions and overtakes responsibility for what s/he has caused, such that s/he deserves credit. The resulting state/process/activity is thus categorized as result of action.
D	observer misaccomplishment sympathy — situation accident no blame	Causer is the 3rd person relative to the perceiver and latter feels sympathy towards the former: Perceiver attributes misaccomplishments to situation such that causer cannot be attributed responsibility and cannot be blamed. The resulting state/process/activity is thus categorized as a result of behavior.
F	observer misaccomplishment antipathy — disposition intention blame	Causer is the 3rd person relative to the perceiver and latter feels antipathy towards the former: Perceiver attributes misaccomplishments to causer's stable dispositions such that the causer can be attributed responsibility and can be blamed. The resulting state/process/activity is thus categorized as a result of action.

Coding concepts

(1) and (2) are different strategies of externalizing internal attributions by means of verbal utterances. Whereas uttering or accepting (1) means attributing the responsibility for having broken the glass to Willi, (2) exonerates Willi. In the rightmost column in Table 1, the workings of attribution are explicated. On the basis of these mechanisms predictions can now be formulated:

- i. Given the perception of an event, a setting of socio-cognitive parameters —from which overtaking or attribution of responsibility follows— results in the preference for symbolization via an agentive construction.
- ii. Given the perception of an event, a setting of socio-cognitive parameters —from which overtaking or attribution of responsibility does not follow— results in the preference for symbolization via a patientive construction (or one in which reduced agentivity is implied).

Data and method

The data used here were collected as part of the *Syntax hessischer Dialekte* (SyHD) ‘Syntax of Hessian Dialects’ project.⁵ SyHD utilizes an indirect method of collecting syntactic data which has picked up many ideas from Glaser (2000) and developed them further (for discussion, see Fleischer, Kasper, & Lenz 2011). Figure 1 displays the type of question by which the present phenomenon is being tested in SyHD.

Sie haben sich von einer Freundin für eine Familienfeier mehrere Gläser geliehen. Durch Willi, Ihren von der Grippe geschwächten Vater, ist bei der Feier eines davon zu Bruch gegangen. Als Sie die Gläser Ihrer Freundin zurückgeben wollen, sagen Sie zu ihr:⁶
 → Please place a checkmark next to the sentences you can say in your dialect (multiple answers are permitted).

a. De Willi hot eens von deine Gleser rengergeschmisse.
 DET.NOM Willi has.3 one.ACC of your.DAT glasses.DAT down-throw.PTCP
 ‘Willi knocked over one of your glasses.’

b. Dem Willi es eens von deine Gleser rengergefallle.
 DET.DAT Willi is.3 one.NOM of your.DAT glasses.DAT down-fall.PTCP
 ‘(It happened to Willi that) one of your glasses broke.’

→ Would you usually say this sentence in a form that is not mentioned? If so, please write down the sentence as you would usually say it:

c).....

→ Which sentence is the most natural for you?

a. , b. , or c.

Figure 1. Judgment test about socio-cognitive parameters and grammatical constructions in SyHD (instructions given in German in the field; English is used here for illustrative purposes only)

After being given a hypothetical situation, informants are asked to mark those sentences which they can say in their dialects in response to the described event. Sentences (a) and (b) are given in lay notation (as there are no conventionalized graphic systems for dialects); these sentences correspond to the agentive and patientive constructions in (1) and (2) respectively. If informants want to

5 SyHD is funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG) and aims at the area-wide investigation, documentation, and analysis of the main features of Hessian dialect syntax in Germany.

6 ‘You borrowed several glasses from a friend for a family celebration. During the party one of the glasses gets broken by your father, Willi, who is sick with the flu. When you return the glasses to your friend, you say:’

give a response that does not conform to (a) or (b), they are offered the opportunity to insert it in (c). Finally, informants are asked to indicate which sentence would be the most natural one for them, given the hypothetical context.

The socio-cognitive parameters are built into the description: The actor/observer difference, in that it is *Willi* who causes the event and not the cognizer (who is an observer); the accomplishment/misaccomplishment difference, in that a glass *gets broken*, which in the unmarked case constitutes a misaccomplishment; and the sympathy/antipathy (or high/low empathy) difference, in that it is the *sick father* of the cognizer who caused the event, which provokes the cognizer's sympathy. In other words, this question depicts an instance of scenario D in Table 1. Under this parameter setting, the cognizer's attribution is that Willi's deed has happened accidentally, not intentionally, that Willi's deed is due to forces of the situation, not to stable dispositions, and that Willi is not to blame. As such, Willi cannot be made responsible. Therefore, the cognizer should choose or prefer a patientive construction as an appropriate response to the situation/event description (i.e., sentence (b)), which corresponds to prediction (ii). Construing the events for the other scenarios and building in the respective socio-cognitive parameters works analogously.

Results

For the question from the first SyHD questionnaire (cf. Figure 1), Table 2 reports the results according to dialect region.

When the results are averaged across the 14 dialect regions in Table 2 (three are not included: North-Hessian/Thuringian transition zone, Eastfalian, and Westfalian),⁷ 71% of informants chose the patientive construction as the most

7 The results from these regions did not fit in the overall pattern, showing a higher number of (a) responses than other regions. As it happens, these three dialect regions exhibit partial dative/accusative case syncretism. That means that in many of the villages in these regions, only the accusative case forms remain and no independent dative form is preserved. The (b) variant given in Figure 1 contains a dative complement in standard German, namely (*dem*) *Willi*. Informants in these regions were offered questionnaires in which this complement was translated either as an accusative (Eastfalian, '*N Willi*') or as a dative (North-Hessian/Thuringian transition zone and Westfalian, '*Dem Willi*'). As such, a considerable number of informants were offered a (b) variant containing case forms that do not exist in their dialects, forcing them to reject this option on formal syntactic grounds. Because the Hessian region was explored for the first time with the SyHD questionnaire, the case system of its 17 dialects were unknown beforehand (Wiesinger's (1983)) dialect classification makes use of phonological and (few) morphological criteria). For further information see Fleischer et al. (2011).

natural variant. Approximately one quarter of informants preferred the agentive construction (24%), and very few other responses were produced (5%) (see Table 3). Table 3 shows that there is a low standard deviation in the sample, that is, the average percentage of (a) and (b) responses differed in dependence on the dialect regions in question by just 5-7%. In other words, speakers from different dialect regions differ very little in their preferred construction type.

Table 2: Results from SyHD question concerning the relation between grammatical constructions and socio-cognitive parameters, %⁸

<i>Dialect region</i>	<i>Agentive</i>	<i>Patientive</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>N</i>
Rhine-Franconian a	24	68	8	50
Rhine-Franconian b	19	77	14	52
Central Hessian/Moselle-Franconian/Rhine-Franconian transition zone	25	60	15	40
Central Hessian/Moselle-Franconian tran. zone a	33	67	0	18
Central Hessian/Moselle-Franconian tran. zone b	23	68	9	22
Central Hessian/Rhine-Franconian tran. zone	26	67	7	27
Central-Hessian a	24	70	6	67
Central-Hessian b	15	81	4	79
Central Hessian/East Hessian/East Franconian transition zone	33	65	2	43
East-Hessian	26	72	2	57
North-Hessian/East Hessian transition zone	12	85	3	33
Central Hessian/North Hessian transition zone	26	74	0	38
North-Hessian a	29	71	0	70
North-Hessian b	30	67	3	40

Table 3: Averaged results and standard deviation in 14 of the Hessian dialect regions

<i>Construction type</i>	<i>Average, %</i>	<i>Standard deviation, %</i>
agentive	24.05	5.79
patientive	70.91	6.14
other	5.03	4.69

8 When informants marked their own variant (c) as the most natural and (c) could be classified as an instance of the (a) or (b) construction type, the response was counted as an instance of (a) or (b), respectively.

The results in Table 3 support that hypothesis that given setting D of socio-cognitive parameters (cf. Table 1), illustrated here by the context in Figure 1 from the SyHD-questionnaire, informants strongly prefer a patientive construction as verbalization of the respective event. This supports prediction (ii), and follows from the ways in which attribution works. Results concerning the other scenarios also seem to validate predictions (i) and (ii).

Conclusion

The study reported on here deals with a type of variation that is different from that which is traditionally investigated. It asks for the first time how aspects of social cognition are conventionalized and symbolized linguistically as part of sociocultural praxis. What we find in Hessian dialects in this respect is stability. Variation is to be expected where praxes of attribution differ. The present article should be seen as a first attempt to tackle this new field.⁹ It provides some theoretical devices for investigations of the ways in which cultures differ in their attribution performances, and how this is reflected in linguistic structure.

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9 The zenith of Attribution Theory was in the 1960s and 1970s, yet the critical concepts remain the same.

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