Morphological Productivity in Learner German: Complex Verbs

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In my talk I show how a flexible multi-layer architecture is helpful in studying interface phenomena in learner language. My use case is complex verbs in German – a phenomenon that has syntactic, morphological and semantic aspects. If the analysis is to be transparent and reproducible it is necessary to annotate this data on several independent levels and it is also necessary to have an architecture that permits the addition of new layers at any point during the research.

With respect to syntax, it has often been argued that native speakers of a language use a mix of lexicalized complex chunks and productively formed structures and that even advanced learners of a foreign language often do not get this mix right (see Pawley/Syder 1983, Handwerker 2002, and many others). Most of this research does not use syntactic annotation but collocation statistics on lexical data – the analysis is not coded into the corpus. With respect to word formation morphology in interlanguages, there has been much less research. In principle, the same issues apply: native speakers know when to use a lexicalized complex word and when to use productive morphology. Baayen (e.g. 2009) and others have shown that the knowledge of (the degree of) productivity of a word formation rule depends on linguistic experience (this can be modelled using type-token statistics). If learners have less linguistic experience than native speakers: How do they deal with morphological productivity?

I study the question of morphological productivity in learner language by looking at different patterns of complex verbs (prefix verbs and particle verbs) in the German learner corpus Falko (Lüdeling et al. 2008; Falko contains written texts by advanced learners of German; it also has a native speaker control corpus). The Falko corpus is stored in a multi-layer corpus architecture (searchable with ANNIS2, Zeldes et al. 2009).

Both types of complex verbs have many lexicalized instances and also productive patterns – it is necessary for advanced learners to learn (from natural input, as this is usually not taught) which patterns are productive and when it is appropriate to form a new complex verb. Complex verbs are also interesting because they cannot be easily categorized structurally. Prefix verbs are clear morphological objects while particle verbs are separable and are sometimes considered to be syntactic. If – as it can be shown – learners use particle verbs differently from prefix verbs it is then necessary to look at other clearly syntactic patterns involving verbs.

References

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