

ON THE ELIMINATION OF FORMAL WORD ORDER
IN THE GERMAN SENTENCE

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Abstract

The word order (wo) in a sentence reflects both non-formal, fundamental elements and purely formal, surface-syntactic elements. Whereas the wo-modulations reflecting non-formal elements cannot simply be ignored in systems for the automatic processing of textual data, the formal wo-modulations in the German sentence should be eliminated as incidental and irrelevant to the further processing of textual information. It is proposed that the formal wo-modulations of the sentence should be eliminated by determining the modulations of a standard P-marker and distinguishing the semantically significant modulations from the merely formal.

The wo in the sentence reflects various factors of a non-formal nature, e.g. constructions determined by semantic factors (topic-comment), division into known and unknown (anaphoric linkage), the speaker's intentions (e.g. emphasis), as well as purely formal demands made by the surface syntax of a language (e.g. German).

If semantically significant wo-modulations cannot simply be ignored in automatic textual data processing systems, formal aspects or the wo in the German sentence corresponding only to the demands of surface syntax (e.g. the framework construction of the predicate; placing the grammatical subject third in the sentence when the first position in the sentence is occupied by, for example, an indirect object; placing the finite verb at the end of a subordinate clause introduced by a conjunction etc.) should be eliminated as incidental and irrelevant to the further processing of textual data.

In order to derive the 'standard' structure of a sentence in a generative description, one must distinguish between the following two different ways of representing the sentence schematically:

- a) a standard P-marker derived from categoric rules and
- b) a P-marker modified by various modulations.

The term 'modulations' refers both to changes in the structure of a P-marker which are not generally necessary and consequently alter the meaning of the sentence to a certain extent, and to changes which merely fulfil the demands of surface syntax and are therefore purely transformational in character. The latter category includes those modulations which make a German sentence 'look German'.

In order to eliminate the formal modulations of the wo in the sentence it is necessary to determine the way in which the P-marker has been modulated and to distinguish between the

semantically significant modulations, which are fundamental in character, and the formal modulations, i.e. those which merely fulfil the requirements of surface syntax.