

## Speakers' doubts about prepositional case government in German

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Following Klein (2003: 7) we can define doubtful cases as linguistic units that are very similar to each other, equally acceptable in a given context and that lead to doubts regarding their correct usage among a large number of language users. For the research on doubtful cases (in contrast to variational linguistic studies), it is especially the speakers' perspective that is of interest. Still, until now this aspect has hardly been investigated. Therefore, the focus of this talk lies on the speakers' view on variation based on the example of German secondary prepositions. Numerous secondary prepositions like *wegen* ('because of'), *dank* ('thanks to') or *während* ('while') can govern either the dative or the genitive case (cf. Di Meola 2004). Although there are no semantic differences, the two variants have different indexical meanings (cf. Davies/Langer 2006). Speakers could hence be insecure whether to use for example *dank dem Beispiel* ('thanks to the-DAT.SG example[DAT.SG]') or *dank des Beispiels* ('thanks to the-GEN.SG example-GEN.SG').

The first question addressed in this talk is whether speakers actually doubt which case to use. Do all speakers feel insecure to a similar extent or can we identify certain groups that have doubts more frequently than others (cf. Labov 2006)? Second, the situations in which doubts can arise should be analyzed: are there certain communicational tasks, such as job applications, that predestine insecurity? What role does the medium and the degree of formality play?

To answer these questions, an online survey was conducted: Test persons were asked to participate in an online survey containing questions about language doubts in general, cases of doubts among secondary prepositions and about the test person's age, educational level and profession. The talk will present the results of this pilot study: the genitive case seems to be strongly associated with conceptual written contexts (cf. Koch/Oesterreicher 2007). In addition, the design of the questionnaire will be put up for discussion, since the method is a new approach to doubtful cases.

### References:

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