German present perfect auxiliary selection

An experimental approach using non-words

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The German present perfect tense (Perfekt) uses either haben (to have) or sein (to be) as auxiliary verb, as do other languages (e.g. Dutch, Italian). Which verb takes which auxiliary has long been the subject of debate: Is it determined by syntax, semantics or both?

Existing theories argue based on the Unaccusativity Hypothesis, semantic verb classes or establish prototypical sein- and haben-verbs. However, the exact nature of auxiliary choice in German Perfekt has not been widely explored experimentally. When experiments were performed, only a subset of German verbs (intransitive verbs) was tested [1] or it was not auxiliary choice that was tested but acquisition of tense [2].

Therefore, I propose a set of experiments using non-words to investigate the factors influencing auxiliary choice in German present perfect. Non-words are particularly suited to exploring syntactic influence because they can be modified to fit any syntactic property. In this manner, three conditions will be tested: transitivity/intransitivity, ergativity/unergativity, and the influence of derivational morphology in transitive verbs. Non-words can also be freely enriched with semantic content which is employed in a further experiment to measure semantic influence.

References


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