

## **COMP-trace effects in German and the role of processing**

English, German and Dutch differ in the severity of COMP-trace violation: in English, they lead to ungrammaticality, in German to relative degradedness (but not outright ungrammaticality), whereas Dutch doesn't appear to have a COMP-trace effect. One possible explanation for this is that the languages differ in the relative ease of detecting a COMP-trace violation. In English, subject and object questions are distinguished by word order (preverbal vs. postverbal gap), whereas German and Dutch have to use morphosyntactic or semantic/pragmatic cues. German uses case-marking as an important cue, which is lacking in Dutch, resulting in more potential subject/object ambiguity. Assuming word order is a more prominent cue than case-marking, a possible explanation for the difference between the languages is that English has the strongest cues to distinguish subject from object questions (word order), Dutch the weakest (no word order cues, no case-marking cues), whereas German has an in-between status (case-marking cues, but no word order cues).

We present experiments in German where we tested the effects of case-marking on the comprehension, processing and grammaticality of long-distance subject and object questions. We manipulated case-marking on the *wh*-phrase and the second DP (ambiguous vs. case-unambiguous). Case-ambiguity on the *wh*-phrase had little effect on comprehension accuracy. However, case-ambiguity on the second DP resulted in a huge drop in comprehension accuracy for subject questions, which were frequently misinterpreted as object questions. Participants appeared to disregard nominative case-marking on the *wh*-phrase and incorrectly interpreted the case-ambiguous second argument as the subject, avoiding a COMP-trace violation. Grammaticality judgment scores showed a significantly weaker subject/object asymmetry in this case. However, statistical analyses suggest that comprehension accuracy played only a minor role in predicting grammaticality judgements. Therefore, it is unlikely that processing alone can explain the reduced subject/object asymmetry in German. Time permitting, we will discuss implications for Dutch.