The relationship between case, word order and referential scales in German dialects

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Languages are tools for communicating all kinds of eventualities. However, they pursue different strategies for accomplishing this task as regards the employment of formal and functional/semantic mechanisms, even on the level of dialectal variation within a single language. Morphology and syntax (word order) are two important formal means of overtly indicating "who does what to whom". Formal underspecification on the systems level due to syncretism or (relatively) free word order requires covert inferences about these relations by an interpreter on functional/semantic grounds. In the presentation I will outline the organization and application possibilities of a newly developed corpus-linguistic tool ("ReffMech") for analyzing the relationship between these overt formal and covert functional/semantic mechanisms in the identification of "who does what to whom". The comprehensive database was developed in the context of the LOEWE Research Focus "Exploring Fundamental Linguistic Categories" and allows the syntactic and semantic annotation of spoken and written linguistic data from synchronic and diachronic Standard and Nonstandard varieties. Corpora in ReffMech can be segmented and classified on text, sentence, clause, phrase, and word/morpheme levels. The classification system includes voice, syntactic functions, syntactic categories, morphological case, agreement (among others) on the formal side, and Proto-Roles, animacy, causal information, and accessibility (among others) on the functional/semantic side. Importantly, the classification system allows capturing syncretisms and structural ambiguities. Using syntactic data from recent High Alemannic and North Saxon dialects - two varieties of the same language (German) - I will demonstrate how systems of differing formal explicitness due to syncretism may lead to different strategies in identifying "who does what to whom". In this way it is possible to shed some light on the traditionally puzzling relationship between the degree of overt morphology, the degree of syntactic (word order) restrictiveness, and the role of covert functional/semantic information in German dialects and beyond.