

# On The Proper Object of Diachronic Syntax: A Plea for the Reevaluation of Dialectal Evidence

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In the field of generative diachronic syntax, it has often been disregarded at which level of the language (dialect or Standard) syntactic changes have taken place. If one compares, for instance, the syntax of modern Standard German (SG) to that of older stages of the German language, one gets the impression that there have occurred some rather drastic changes. Yet, as we will demonstrate in several case studies, if one takes into account the syntax of the modern German dialects, an entirely different picture emerges. Just as in the case of phonological developments, the syntax often (though not always) turns out to be more conservative at the dialectal level. Furthermore, we will argue that evidence from the modern dialects often suggests different analyses for the syntactic phenomena attested at older language stages than were originally proposed in historical studies. This is why we will plead for a reevaluation of the importance of research on dialect syntax in future studies on syntactic change. If first language acquisition is the place where internal language change primarily occurs, then dialects should be included in historical research since dialects are transmitted from generation to generation and are less strongly influenced by extra-linguistic forces than standard languages.

Our first case study is concerned with the development of null subjects. SG does not license (referential) null subjects. It is generally assumed that the diachronic loss of null subjects in German was a consequence of the weakening of verbal endings. However, what has often been disregarded is that at the dialectal level, the alleged loss of *pro*-drop has not occurred: In the modern German dialects (as, in fact, in all the major dialect groups within the Continental West-Germanic group) *pro*-drop is licensed under certain conditions. However, if one compares the null-subject properties of the modern dialects to those of 8th and 9th century Old High German, three major differences can be noted: (i) In OHG, *pro*-drop is confined to root sentences (1a), whereas in the modern dialects, it also occurs in embedded sentences introduced by inflected complementizers (1b); (ii) in the modern dialects *pro*-drop occurs primarily in the 2<sup>nd</sup> sg., whereas in OHG it was the 3<sup>rd</sup> person in which *pro*-drop was most frequent; (iii) the modern dialects exhibit complementizer agreement (1b) and OHG did not.

- a. [<sub>CP</sub> *Sume* [<sub>C</sub> [<sub>C</sub> *hahet<sub>i</sub>*] [*in* *cruc<sub>i</sub>* *t<sub>i</sub>*]]]  
 some-ACC hang-2.PL to cross  
 ‘some of them you will crucify’  
 (Monee Fragments XVIII (c. 800); Old High German: Bavarian)
- b. [<sub>CP</sub> *wennsd* *moang* *wieda* *gsund* *bisd*]  
 if-2.SG tomorrow again healthy are-2.SG  
 ‘if you are well again tomorrow’  
 (modern Bavarian)

The development at the dialectal level needs an explanation different to existing ones for (the inability of) SG (to license *pro*-drop) (e.g. Abraham 1993). We will argue that the seemingly different syntactic distribution of *pro* in OHG and in the modern dialects is primarily a surface phenomenon and that it is the result of rather minimal changes in the underlying grammar. The syntactic licensing conditions for *pro* are the same: Both in the historical and the current dialects, a postfiniteness restriction can be observed: *pro* is only licensed if c-commanded by Agr. In the modern dialects, the postfiniteness requirement still holds, but an independent change has taken place which has cancelled the restriction to root sentences so that *pro*-drop now can occur in embedded sentences as well (in contrast to OHG), i.e. the innovation of complementizer inflection. What has also changed, is that the requirement on Agr has become more specific: In the modern dialects only pronominal agreement is able to identify *pro*, while in the OHG dialects there was no such restriction. Both changes (i.e. complementizer agreement and pronominal Agr) followed the emergence of double agreement in OHG which was the original trigger for the subsequent changes.

In a further case study we will deal with the position of the finite verb in sentences introduced by complementizers. Starting from the observation that in OHG there were instances of surface verb-second order as in (1), Tomaselli (1995) and Schlachter (2004) argue that there was verb movement to a sentence-medial functional head (I or T) as is indicated in (2). Since in modern Standard German, the word order in (2) and other orders are no longer possible, Tomaselli argues that the sentence structure has undergone a profound change: The originally left-headed I projection has been replaced by a right-headed I-projection (SOIV > SVOI) and thus the medial landing site for verb movement was lost.

*dhazs* [*ir selbo gotes sunu*] *uuard<sub>i</sub>* *in liihhe chiboran t<sub>i</sub>*  
 that that same God's son became in body born  
 ‘that that same Son of God was born in the body’  
 (Isidor 381 (c. 790); Old High German: South-Rhine-Franconian)

Interestingly, some modern dialects (e.g. Zurich German) also allow such instances of ‘verb-second’ order in subordinate clauses. But rather than being analysed as instances of V-to-I movement, they are usually taken to be instances of so-called verb-projection raising (e.g. Haegeman & van Riemsdijk 1983), a phenomenon

which in modern SG, is only possible with tripartite verb forms (e.g. *dass ihn t<sub>i</sub> hätte [jemand besiegen können]<sub>i</sub>* ‘that him had somebody beat could’).

In the case of the modern dialects, we have access to a much larger amount of corpus data and also to introspective data. Therefore we know that a putative instance of ‘verb-second’ order parallel to (2) would only be a subcase of a whole range of grammatical orders for which the V-to-I-movement analysis is impossible.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the OHG dialects, however, we cannot really answer the question of which of the manifold orders possible in the modern dialects were grammatical or ungrammatical since we only have access to what scarce positive historical record there is available. Still the situation in the modern dialects suggests that the OHG subordinate clauses with surface verb-second order as in (2) might simply be an instance of verb-projection raising. If this hypothesis is correct, there has probably occurred no change at all at the dialectal level. Regarding the developments that have lead to the situation in modern SG, there must have occurred a syntactic change in the course of which verb-projection raising has become ungrammatical with bipartite verb forms. This change, however, would be much less drastic than, for example, the proposed development from SOIV-order to SOVI-order in Tomaselli’s (1995) account.

Further case studies will deal with verb-first declaratives, expletives, multiple negation, and the complementizer system. All these case studies are intended to show that taking into consideration dialectal evidence in historical syntax can lead to different and more appropriate results at the empirical as well as at the analytical level.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the ‘medial’ finite verb may be preceded by more than one constituents (COMP–XP–XP–V<sub>1</sub>–V<sub>2</sub>) and in the case of tripartite verb forms, both the finite verb (V<sub>1</sub>) and the verb governed by the finite verb (V<sub>2</sub>) may occur in a ‘medial’ position (= COMP–XP(...)-V<sub>1</sub>-V<sub>2</sub>-XP–V<sub>3</sub>).