

Spoken data as a source for diachronic syntax

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Diachronic syntactic change is typically researched through studying changing distributions of syntactic patterns in historical corpora of written texts, as those often provide the only access to older stages of a language. But textual witnesses can be scarce for certain periods, and only a small selection of genres may have survived¹, besides the fact that written texts necessarily only offer partial access to language production at any given stage. In my talk, I discuss three case studies using spontaneously spoken data to

- (i) enlarge the empirical basis informing theories of language change,
- (ii) refine existing theoretical accounts of (well-studied) changes, and
- (iii) get a clearer picture of intermediate stages in change in progress.

The first two case studies are concerned with respectively the beginning and the end of Jespersen's Cycle (JC), in respectively Northern Italian and Southern Dutch dialects, while the third case study adduces evidence to confirm or reject the question of whether inversionless V3 after central adverbials in German is a case of diachronic continuity or change.

Case study I: Incipient JC in progress in Northern Italian dialects. The rich literature on JC has established that the renewal of the expression of sentential negation proceeds through the reanalysis of an element previously not associated with the expression of negation first as an (emphatic) adverbial reinforcer and then as a neutral negator. The stages of JC can be visualised as follows, using French *ne..pas* as an example.

stage I	stage IIa	stage IIb	stage IIc	stage III
<i>ne V</i>	<i>ne V (pas)</i>	<i>ne V pas</i>	<i>(ne) V pas</i>	<i>V pas</i>
<i>ne</i> = logical negation			<i>ne</i> = optional remnant	
	<i>pas</i> = (optional) reinforcer	<i>pas</i> = logical negation		

Research using historical corpora (e.g. Breitbarth et al. 2020: 47–48) has suggested that there is a tight connection between emphatic reinforcement and focus scope. In contrast to neutral sentential negators, newly arising adverbial reinforcers seem to be used initially in constructions where negation has narrow focus, that is, only scoping over smaller constituents of clauses, not whole clauses. In a language where different scope of focus is encoded prosodically, one would then expect a change in the prosodic encoding of negative clauses correlating with the reanalysis of an adverbial reinforcer as the new expression of sentential negation (i.e. the transition from stage IIa to IIb/c), and uncertainty regarding the prosodic encoding in both production and perception during the transition. Clearly, this hypothesis cannot be researched using historical corpora of written texts. One therefore needs to find languages where incipient JC is just about to turn into full-scale JC. In my talk, I will present joint work with Claudia Crocco and Giuseppe Magistro (Magistro et al. to app.) showing on the basis of spoken data that Venetan dialects indeed confirm this hypothesis.

Case study II. The long tail of JC in Southern Dutch dialects. While many languages that underwent JC in their history, passed through stage III rather quickly (e.g. German, English), others seem to remain in stage IIc with an apparently optional availability of

¹ For Gothic, for instance, the main surviving text is a Bible translation from Greek; for Old Saxon, the main textual witness is a Christian epic written in alliterative verse.

the original negative particle for extended periods of time (e.g. French, Dutch). While the Northern Dutch varieties, which also are the basis of the later standard language, eventually made the transition to stage III in the Early Modern period, the Southern Dutch dialects preserved the old preverbal negator for much longer. It is still found to some extent in dialects and colloquial regional languages. It is still only poorly understood what causes the rapid transition in some varieties, and the sustained stage II in others. A small number of studies (e.g. Breitbarth/Haegeman 2015) has suggested that the former preverbal negation particle has in fact evolved further, and assumed a new function, expressing that the proposition is unexpected in the context of the utterance. In this function, it is dependent on specific discourse conditions, which is why it is difficult to elicit using direct methods. Therefore, spontaneous production data are crucial to gain an understanding of the long tail of JC in the varieties concerned. The data for this case study come from the GCND-corpus currently under construction (Ghyselen et al. 2020).

Case study III. V>2 in spoken German. Also the final case study uses spontaneous data to study a change for which direct elicitation is not an option. Lack of inversion of subject and finite verb after central adverbials in German (1) seems to be an emerging construction, which still lies below the threshold of speaker awareness.

- (1) a. *Hm, okay, aber dennoch: [Auch in Afrika], die meisten Menschen sprechen*
 hm OK but still also in Africa the most people speak
Englisch.
 English (DLF, "Campus und Karriere", Thekla Jahn (Journalistin), 04.04.2019)
- b. *[als wir noch in Berlin gewohnt haben], ich hatte nicht das Gefühl, dass*
 when we still in Berlin lived have I had NEG the feeling that
ich da irgendwo andocken kann.
 I there anywhere connect can (DLF, "Gesichter Europas: Stadt – Land – Flucht", 12.11.2020)

It has been proposed in the literature that there may be diachronic continuity in the availability of these inversionless main clauses after central adverbials with similar V>2 orders in historical stages of German (e.g. Demske/Wiese 2016). In my talk, however, I will present both historical data and new data on spoken present-day German suggesting that cases as exemplified in (1) – showing (dis)similarities with comparable constructions in other old and new West Germanic varieties (e.g. Wiese/Rehbein 2016, Haegeman/Greco 2018) – are more likely to be an innovation, and representing a change in progress.

References

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