

Grammar and Corpora in Historical-Contrastive Linguistics:  
a Hypothesis-Driven Approach to V1-Conditionals in English and German

In his seminal paper about the relationship of contrastive linguistics with, inter alia, historical-comparative linguistics, König (2012: 7) points out that “a contrastive analysis will [...] often resemble a description of contrasts between two consecutive stages in the historical development of [usually the same] two languages.” This is said to hold in particular when cognate constructions have been developing asynchronously in two related languages, i.e. along similar paths but at different speeds.

In my paper I will report on the methodology and intermediate results of a recently begun research project that uses data from the *Penn Parsed Corpora of Historical English* and the *Deutsch Diachron Digital* corpora in combination with insights from grammaticalisation theory to test asynchronicity-based hypotheses under an approach called Comparison of Diachronies (“Sprachwandelvergleich”, Fleischer/Simon, eds., 2013). The project is concerned with one of König’s own examples (2012: 8-10), i.e. verb-first (V1) conditionals in German (1) and English (2):

- (1) *Scheitert* der Euro, dann scheitert Europa. (A. Merkel)
- (2) *Should* the Euro fail, Europe will fail. (Google)

Whereas the V1-protasis may contain any verb form at all in German, V1-protases in English are restricted to *should*, *had* and *were (to)*, a phenomenon known as Conditional Inversion (Iatridou/Embick 1994). Evidence that this divergence is the result of an asynchronic development in the two languages comes inter alia from the observation that earlier English allowed main verbs in V1-protases exactly as in present-day German. We therefore find asynchronic pairs like (3)-(4):

- (3) *Kommst* du heute nicht, kommst du morgen. (*Gemeinplatz*/commonplace)  
‘If you don’t come today, you (can always) come tomorrow.’
- (4) *Come* ye not, it shal coste you your lyf. (Caxton, late 15th century)  
‘If you don’t come, it will cost you your life.’

A useful starting point for hypotheses concerning the likely historical development is the structural similarity of V1-protases with polar interrogatives in both languages. Assuming provisionally that the former arose from the latter (e.g. Jespersen 1940: 374, König 2012: 8), data from the above-named sets of corpora are manually coded and statistically analysed for two Hopper (1991)-style processes of grammaticalisation: divergence (of V1-conditional protases from interrogatives) and specialisation (of V1-conditionals for the typical functions of conditionals such as the expression of counterfactuality). Early results suggests an intriguing conclusion: although V1-conditionals have indeed been grammaticalising asynchronously in English and German, polar interrogatives are unlikely to be the source. An alternative scenario is suggested that de-emphasises the alleged rise of one construction from another and highlights instead the emergent nature of interrogative and conditional marking at the oldest attested stages of English and German. Insights from diachronic Construction Grammar (e.g. Diessel 2019: 215-222) are used to model the rise of V1-conditionals in their systemic context rather than in isolation. [465 words]

## References

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