

Form and Function of Modal Discourse Particles in Gothic and Old High German: What Modern German tells us about the past

This paper analyzes the diachronic and synchronic development of common modal discourse particles, particularly their use and function in Gothic and Old High German texts. While traditional reference works often only treat such particles grammatically and functionally as adverbs, adjectives, or conjunctions, a number of other studies highlight the metacommunicative function of particles – a line of thinking that often occurs in conjunction with Modern German (Diewald 2006, 2013, etc.), and is applied as such to older stages of German language/dialect history.

In light of both synchronic and diachronic usage and distribution, evidence has been presented (Wauchope 1991, 1992; Hentschel 1986, etc.) that shows the multi-modality of particles in Gothic and Old High German, for example. Similarly, modal particles are predominately not discussed as such in older language grammars (cf. Helbig 2001, Hentschel & Weydt 2003, and others), for example OHG *thoh*, *ia*, *thanne*, and Gothic correlates. Work has shown, however, that these particles often serve a threefold function – namely illocutive, assumptive, and intentional pragmatic functions (Wauchope 1991). In this manner, we can determine if the usage of a particle in a particular passage of a text fits the manner described above, and thus extends its usage beyond traditional grammatical descriptions, such as conjunctions and adverbs. Such examples, then, allow us to detail and examine the diachronic similarities of the function of particles in both older stages of Germanic as well as in Modern German

In accordance with Wauchope and others, Diewald (2006, 2013, etc.) also ascribes similar pragmatic functions to modal particles found in Modern German – a thesis that is found in, for examples, Hentschel's (1986) earlier work on particles in historical stages of Germanic languages. Similarly, Diewald's (2013) categorizations of particles, for example as 'heterosemes' provide a broader backdrop for assigning the contextual synchronic and diachronic functions of particles in historical varieties of German. By extending the work of these and other authors, the intersection of modern and historical usage and function of modal particles, particularly the ubiquity of particles through various stages of German can be established as a broad commonality likely present in both the domains of colloquial and written language usage historically.

Selected References

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