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Restrictions on combinatorics as shapers of change: passive constructions in English and German

This paper investigates the diverging development of copula constructions with passive readings in English and German. It is proposed that different configurational settings of these constructions, especially concerning aktionsart and tense, are instrumental in explaining the different histories of passive constructions in English and German. A conclusion drawn from this is that sub-grammatical restrictions placed on the combinability of linguistic elements can pre-structure and potentially even predict language change to some degree, which in turn has pivotal ramifications for our understanding of language change.

Passive constructions in English and German start out from very similar constellations (copula + past participle) but develop in different directions in the choice of the auxiliary verb. While English eventually chose *be* and phased out ME *wurðen*, German practically did the opposite and promoted G *werden* at the expense of G *sein* (Maienborn 2007 shows that constructions with G *sein* + past participle are not passives in Modern German). This difference, and especially the loss of ME *wurðen*, are still unexplained.

Recent work (e.g. Petré 2010 *et passim*, Mailhammer & Smirnova 2013) has shown that investigating the interplay between lexical semantics and resulting restrictions in combinatorics can shed light on this problem. This concerns especially the aktionsart of the verb supplying the past participle as well as the aktionsart and tense of the copula. Based on Mailhammer & Smirnova 2013, it was hypothesized that English and German differ with respect to the aktionsart choice of the main verb in combination with certain copula verbs. For German the hypothesis was that 'become' (OHG *werdan*/MHG *werden*) increasingly also combined with atelic verb, which would strengthen a processural passive reading leading eventually to the Modern German *Vorgangspassiv*. By contrast, for English it was assumed that in passive constructions 'become' (OE *weorðan*/ME *wurðen*) mainly occurred in the past tense and in combination with telic verbs. Effectively this would have resulted in a functional overlap of passive constructions with *weorðan* and with *bēon*, which could have then led to the loss of ME *wurðen*.

A corpus investigation confirms these hypotheses. In late Old English *weorðan* occurs in copula constructions with passive readings almost exclusively in the past tense and in combination with telic verbs; this trend continues into Middle English until its disappearance as part of passive constructions altogether. What is more, this restriction appears to become more severe in Old English: early Old English didn't display it to that degree. In contrast to this, German shows no such restriction and during the Middle High German period even increases combinations with *werden* and atelic verbs.

These findings are interpreted from a broad construction and usage based perspective (e.g. Bybee 2006), as developments in the direction of more prototypical combinations, which occur more frequently and then develop constructional independence, leading to new grammatical structures. This implies that the way linguistic elements can be combined on a sub-grammatical level has a powerful influence on the evolution of linguistic structures, which in turn suggests that studying the synchronic compositional restrictions of a construction can help predicting possible pathways of development and thus guide historical reconstruction.