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Futures of the past: A corpus study of competing future constructions in historical German

Abstract:

In historical stages of German, various ways of expressing future reference compete: Apart from werden ‘become’ + Infinitive, which is nowadays considered the future tense construction of German, modal verb constructions as well as werden + Participle could be used to express future reference in the Middle High German and Early New High German periods (see e.g. Saltveit 1960, 1962, Diewald 1999, Diewald & Habermann 2005, Zeman 2013). However, it is unclear how the different constructions relate to each other (e.g., how the older modal verb constructions as well as werden + Participle contribute to the emergence of the younger werden + Infinitive construction) and to what extent they are actually temporal rather than modal. This paper re-addresses these questions on the basis of newly available corpus data from the Reference Corpus of Middle High German (Klein & Dipper 2016). In particular, it focuses on the relationship between werden + Participle and werden + Infinitive. A quantitative, explorative approach is combined with a more qualitative analysis of sample data. For a quantitative exploration of the data, collostructional analysis is used (Stefanowitsch & Gries 2003). It can be shown that regarding the full verbs it combines with, werden + Participle behaves very similar to werden + Infinitive in later stages of German (as attested, for example, in the Bonn Early New High German corpus analyzed by Hilpert 2008, among others). This supports the hypothesis that werden + Participle is among the most important sources for werden + Infinitive and might even be the single most important analogical template. A more qualitative analysis reveals that diachronically, werden + Participle undergoes a fairly prototypical process of context expansion (Himmelmann 2004, Traugott & Trousdale 2013) in that it first combines with state verbs in the sense of Vendler (1957) and then extends its domain to activities and achievements. werden + Infinitive, by contrast, seems to combine with all those verb classes from its inception. As such, werden + Infinitive can plausibly be conceived of as the immediate “successor” of werden + Participle, although its development was probably influenced by the increasing use of other constructions involving the infinitive, such as modal verb constructions, as well.

References:


