Using Sermons to Investigate Grammatical Change in German

Research Questions

Grammatical Change in General
• How do grammatical forms or rules change, if all factors except time are controlled for?
• What mechanisms govern the development of grammatical change?

Grammatical Change in the History of German
• What is the impact of societal and sociolinguistic factors (such as the Reformation or standardisation)?
• What are the concrete dynamics of grammatical change in the history of German, and how was it influenced by geographical, linguistic and other factors?

Design and Structure of the Corpus

| Manuscripts | Time periods of 50 years each from 800 to 1900 | Number of texts | %
|-------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|---
| 1050–1150   | 80%                                         | 40%             |
| 1150–1250   | 20%                                         | 60%             |
| 1250–1350   | 40%                                         | 60%             |
| 1350–1450   | 20%                                         | 80%             |
| 1450–1550   | 0%                                          | 100%            |

| Prints | Subcorpus | Number of texts | %
|--------|-----------|-----------------|---
| 1050–1150 | 80% | 40% |
| 1150–1250 | 20% | 60% |
| 1250–1350 | 40% | 60% |
| 1350–1450 | 20% | 80% |
| 1450–1550 | 0% | 100% |

Case Study: The Development of Negation in Upper German (Pickl 2017)

The Research Context

Textbook Knowledge
Three main types of sentential negation ...
• Type I: general negative particle
  e.g. ar = old medieval Latin, ar = “not”
  May not occur in certain (e.g. scriptural) contexts
• Type II: bipartite negation ne + nicht
  e.g. we are not on our right side
• Type III: negative particle nicht
  e.g. he cannot do anything

Recent Study by Jäger (2008)

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<th>OV clauses</th>
<th>ne + nicht</th>
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Study Design

Research Questions
• How has sentential negation developed chronologically?
• What linguistic and extra-linguistic predictors can be identified?

Subcorpus
• Focus on MHG (manuscripts from 1050–1350 plus 50 years)
• Almost exclusively Upper German sources available
• 45 texts (1050–1400) with a total of 974 instances of sentential negation
• Overall distribution of types:

Results

Development in Middle High German
• Shift from ne and ne + nicht to not much quicker than expected
• Not most common form throughout MHS, not ne + nicht

By Word Order
• Distinctly different development in VO and OV clauses
• General replacement of ne and ne + nicht by in VO clauses
• Rapid shift from ne + nicht to not in OV clauses

By Area
• No East Upper German data from before 1150
• Slightly more advanced development in West Upper German by 1150
• Shift to not + word order in East Upper German lags behind initially but gains momentum

The Case for a Single-Genre Corpus: Why Sermons?

With a single-genre corpus, only a glimpse of the vast mass of language production in the past is possible. Why (exclusively) sermons?

I. Uniformity and Continuity
• Sermons are one of the earliest documented (prose) genres in German (from the early 9th century)
• They had to be in the vernacular to be understood by the congregation in an oral communicative setting
• Sermons have a relatively uniform and consistent tradition of transmission

II. Conceptual Orality
• Sermons represent a specific type of historical orality, even in their written form
• Even reading sermons, which were never ‘performed’ orally, imitate oral presentation
• Sermons are – in some respects – “conceptually oral”

Sermons have a relatively uniform and consistent tradition of transmission and presentation. They are essentially orally based genres. Even in their written form, they resemble oral presentation in some respects. They are not only an example of a semantically oral genre, but also of a conceptually oral genre.

References

Culpeper, Jonathan / Merja Kytö (2010): “What are the concrete dynamics of grammatical change, if all factors except time are controlled for?”

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