

Complexity differences in the inflectional systems of closely related varieties

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Introduction: The operationalisation of structural complexity has become a focus of interest in recent typological work. Moreover, it has been claimed that languages spoken by small, isolated communities tend to show greater degrees of complexity, which I will call the “Isolation Hypothesis” (Braunmüller 1984, Nichols 2009, Trudgill 2011). If this is correct, the tendency should be observable not only on the basis of large-scale comparison of genetically distant languages, but also in clusters of closely related varieties exhibiting different degrees of isolation. The present paper first establishes an operational complexity metric suitable for microvariation, and then puts to test the following hypotheses, examining highly inflecting varieties of German from both a diachronic and comparative perspective.

Hypotheses: First, I expect a diachronic tendency toward simplification. If there are instances of complexification, we will find them only in isolated varieties. Second, codified varieties might show higher complexity than non-codified varieties due to conserving effects of codification. Third, if the isolation hypothesis is correct, isolated varieties display a higher complexity than non-isolated varieties. Fourth, contact varieties tend to show a higher complexity than non-contact varieties do, because complexification is expected in pre-threshold bilingualism (Trudgill 2011), which is the case in the two contact varieties under analysis.

I have determined complexity indices for noun, adjective, pronoun and article inflection in ten varieties: Old High German (OHG), Middle High German (MHG), New High German (=Standard German, NHG), the Alemannic dialects of Kaiserstuhl, Alsace, Bern, Zurich, Jaun, Visperterminen, and Issime. Whereas only the latter three are topographically isolated, only the dialects of Issime and Alsace (enclaves in Romance-speaking surroundings) are subject to intensive language contact.

Method: Existing proposals for complexity metrics in the typological literature allow for operationalisation but are too coarse in order to account for differences between closely related varieties (Nichols 2006, Shosted 2006). On the other hand, studies which go more deeply into morphological detail refrain from a rigorous and crosslinguistically consistent quantification of complexity (Dammel/Kürschner 2008, Kusters 2003). Recent microcomparative work on the complexity of varieties of English (Szmrecsanyi/Kortmann 2009) is clearly quantificational but only marginally addresses the specific problems posed by highly inflecting languages. Therefore, I developed a complexity metric which is quantificational, crosslinguistically applicable to inflecting languages and of sufficient granularity for the purposes of morphological microvariation. The metric is situated in the LFG framework.

Results: Comparing OHG with the other varieties, we can observe a diachronic simplification. This is also the case for the comparison MHG vs. present-day varieties, apart from the isolated varieties, which are more complex than MHG (= complexification). NHG shows a lower complexity than all the other present-day varieties (excepting Alsace Alemannic), i.e. codification leads to simplification. Isolated varieties are more complex than non-isolated varieties, thus the isolation hypothesis can be verified for this sample. However, we cannot conclude anything about the

possible influence of language contact: Issime Alemannic (with contact) is more complex than Visperterminen Alemannic (without contact), but Alsace Alemannic (with contact) is less complex than Kaiserstuhl Alemannic (without contact).

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