Adverbs of degree from Old to Early New High German

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This paper examines the usage of adverbs of degree in three periods in the history of High German: Old High German (750-1050), Middle High German (1050-1350), and Early New High German (1350-1650). Adverbs of degree are typically highly frequent words that serve a variety of different purposes including strengthening a statement (e.g. *very*) or weakening it (e.g. *somewhat*). They typically come with a set of restrictions that govern their usage and are highly prone to change over time. Example (1) shows that English *very* can modify adjectives and adverbs (1a, 1b), but not verbs (1c) (see Klein 1998: 8-14 for more details on syntactic restrictions).

(1)   a.   The work was very hard
        b.   John was working very hard
        c.   *John was very working hard

Research so far has primarily been concerned with modern periods (e.g. Claudi 2006 for Modern German), and less research exists for earlier periods.

Research on adverbs of degree in early West Germanic languages that does exist has revealed that great changes occurred during the medieval period. This is most evident in Low German, as the system of adverbs of degree in 9th century Old Saxon is comparable to Old English, while the one in Middle Low German (1250-1650) resembles Middle High German and 13th century Middle Dutch with little uniting the two (Visser, forthcoming). This applies to both the specific adverbs that are used as well as their usage patterns (Visser, forthcoming). It is possible that High German influence played a key role here, since it is in line with a broader retraction of North Sea Germanic features (Visser, forthcoming). Relative to other West Germanic languages, however, the historical periods of High German have received relatively little attention in recent years. One older study in this regard is Hicks (1902), which describes a selection of adverbs of high degree in Middle High German from 1150-1300. This study, while impressive in its scope and detail, is restricted to a select timeframe, and a study for the system of adverbs of degree the other two periods is still wanting. It is also mainly restricted to examining adjective and adverb modifiers, while certain adverbs in other languages occur more often with verbs, and example of which is the highly frequent Middle Low German adverb *sêre* 'very' (Visser, forthcoming). As such, is equivalent in Middle High German is only covered briefly. Therefore, in order to properly contextualise the High German system of adverbs of degree within the broader West Germanic family, a corpus analysis incorporating these elements was still necessary, which is what the present study focused on.

The data were collected from three corpora: the ReA (Donhauser, Gippert, & Lühr 2018) for Old High German, the ReM (Wegera, Wich-Reif, Dipper, & Klein 2016) for Middle High German, and the ReF (Wegera, Solms, Demske, & Dipper 2021) for Early New High German. These corpora were searched for instances of the different adverbs of degree, and relevant information was collected in a database. For Old High German, all information was collected manually. For the other two periods, a script was employed to extract the data, and a selection was manually checked and annotated.

Some of the most salient findings are as follows: 1) Relative to Low German, High German displays a much higher degree of stability between the two earlier periods. *Filu/vile* 'much, very' remains the dominant adverb in both Old and Middle High German, which sets it apart from all other early West Germanic languages. 2) However, by Early New High German, this adverb is taken over by *gar* 'very', which is a development not paralleled by Middle Low German, though it is common there as well, possibly because of High German influence (Visser, forthcoming). 3) One development shared by the Middle Germanic languages on the Continent is the increase in usage of *sêre* (Visser, forthcoming). While Middle High German displays this increase as well, it never becomes as dominant as in Middle Low German (Visser, forthcoming). By Early New High German, its usage frequency is still below that of *vile* and *gar*. 4) These results do not support a unidirectional influence of High German on Low German, but they are consistent with mutual influence.

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