

The role of ambiguity at different stages of diachronic change

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This paper addresses the question of the relationship between ambiguity and reanalysis in syntactic change: Is ambiguity the prerequisite or the result of reanalysis (cf. De Smet 2009; De Smet & Markey 2021). It will be argued that there is no established chronological order between the two phenomena, and that ambiguity may both trigger change as well as result from change. Furthermore, attention will be paid to the notion of the (bridging) context. It will be shown that ambiguous interpretations often arise from paradigmatic analogical relations, and not from contextually induced pragmatic implicatures, as frequently assumed in the literature.

In Smirnova et al. (2019), we argued that ambiguity is crucial for the initiation of change. Using the grammaticalization of the German passive auxiliary *werden* 'become', we demonstrated how atypical and infrequent combinations triggered change due to their inherent ambiguity. At the same time, the initial reinterpretation of ambiguous combinations of *werden* with past participles of activity verbs resulted in a cascade of semantic reinterpretation processes that affected first combinations with accomplishment verbs and then with achievement verbs, the process we called diffusion. Importantly, those combinations had existed before and they only became ambiguous after the reinterpretation of *werden* and activity verbs had taken place. That is, we observe a "chain" of ambiguous contexts, where the resolution of one ambiguous interpretation triggers the next ambiguous context.

The present study will focus on German deictic adverbial elements *hin-/her-P* such as *heraus*, *hinaus* etc. In present-day German, they display multiple structural ambiguities and may be considered as adverbs, as verb particles as well as parts of circumpositions, see (1) – (3):

- ambiguous between adverb & verb particle
(1) *Plötzlich kam er **heraus**.*
Suddenly he came out.

- ambiguous between adverb, part of the circumposition, & verb particle
(2) *Plötzlich kam er **aus dem Wald heraus**.*
Suddenly he came out of the forest.

- non-ambiguous verb particle
(3) *Das Buch kommt mit einer Startauflage von 30 Tausend Exemplaren **heraus**.*
The book gets out with an initial print run of 30 thousand copies.

Though speakers of present-day German do not seem to face interpretation problems, as the structural ambiguity is not always tied with semantic ambiguity, alternative spelling variants in the corpus (e.g. *heraus gekommen* vs. *herausgekommen*) suggest that some speakers/writers are unsure as to the categorial status of these elements.

The present corpus study is based on the data from 1600 to present-day German (DTA-Kernkorpus & DWDS-Kernkorpus). Five pairs of *hin-/her*-adverbs (*hinaus–heraus*, *hinein–herein*, *hinauf–herauf*, *hinab–herab*, *hinunter–herunter*) will be analyzed with respect to their combinatorial potential. It will be shown that diachronically, ambiguity resides in local contexts of individual elements and only sometimes leads to reanalysis, which may but not need to be coupled with semantic reinterpretation. When the reanalysis takes place in one context, it is likely that ambiguity will arise in one or several other related contexts. That is, ambiguous contexts trigger further ambiguous contexts. Similar to the grammaticalization case of *werden* mentioned above, the ambiguity "chain"

relies heavily on paradigmatic analogical relations.

Methodologically, the paper will discuss some problems that arise when dealing with diachronic corpus data, namely the problem of detecting ambiguous contexts in the data.

References

De Smet, Hendrik. 2009. Analysing reanalysis. *Lingua* 119: 1728-1755.

De Smet, Hendrik & Marie-Anne Markey. 2021. The spark or the fuel? On the role of ambiguity in language change. *Journal of Historical Syntax* 5: 1-24.

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