

# Comparative Germanic Syntax

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## **Comparative Germanic Syntax: The state of the art**

**Edited by Peter Ackema, Rhona Alcorn, Caroline Heycock,  
Dany Jaspers, Jeroen van Craenenbroeck and Guido Vanden  
Wyngaerd**

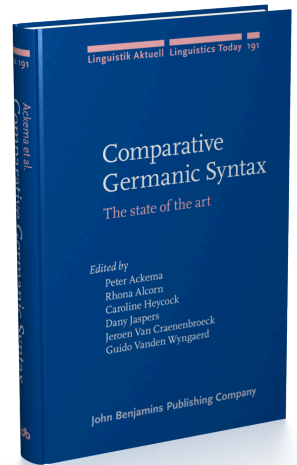
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## INTRODUCTION

# Comparative Germanic Syntax

## The State of the Art

Recent research in the comparative syntax of the Germanic languages has both been informed by, and has been informing, research into theoretical syntax generally. The papers in this volume, based on presentations given at two Comparative Germanic Syntax Workshops (CGSW 23 in Edinburgh 2008 and CGSW 24 in Brussels 2009) demonstrate this very clearly. They discuss a number of topics that are familiar from the tradition of syntactic research into the Germanic language family, as well as a number of perhaps less familiar issues, and show how recent developments in syntactic theory shed new light on these. Conversely, they show how the detailed study of Germanic syntax – of course, not excluding comparison with languages outside this family – can help decide theoretical issues. In this introduction we briefly discuss how the papers in this volume relate to this cross-fertilisation between detailed empirical study of Germanic and syntactic theory. In this introduction, we would like to single out five themes that we believe tie together the contributions to this volume. These themes are variation (both at the macro-level and the micro-level), diachronic change, null elements, cartography, and binding.

Let us begin with the issue of macro- and microvariation. The focus of comparative linguistic research, hence also of comparative research into Germanic syntax, is the question of how far language variation can go. Is there no limit to what kind of differences languages can show? Is there much more unity between languages than there may appear to be on the surface? Can a meaningful typology be based on such differences, and if so, why does the typology look the way it does?

Within the generative tradition, which all the papers in this volume very broadly subscribe to, an influential proposal for dealing with language variation has been the idea that Universal Grammar provides a set of principles on the basis of which all languages are learned, but which contain a number of ‘choice points’ that need to be filled in on the basis of the surrounding language data by the language learning child. These choice points are termed ‘parameters’. At least in the original conception of them, parameters were typically thought of as ‘macro-parameters’,

such that a single parameter controls a host of related language data (compare, for example, Chomsky 1981 and the papers in Roeper & Williams 1987). Different settings on such a parameter would hence yield two quite divergent data sets, hence two quite different languages. A good example is the so-called ‘pro drop parameter’. A positive setting for this parameter was thought to allow not only the dropping of pronominal subjects in a clause, but also subject-VP inversion and violations of the *that*-trace filter, for example see Rizzi (1982), whereas a negative setting would prohibit all of those.

More recently, some researchers have argued that more fine-grained distinctions are necessary to account for the actual language variation that is possible. With regards to the above example of pro drop, for instance, even without considering the other phenomena possibly linked to it, it is clear that a parameter that only determines whether pro drop is allowed or not in a language is too coarse, since languages can allow it in some sentence types but not others, or for some person features but not others (see for instance the papers in Ackema, Brandt, Schoorlemmer & Weerman 2006).

Both aspects of research into language variation, the possibly ‘big’ differences between languages that the language learner has to be able to account for, and the ‘small’ differences that can occur between language varieties, or even in different contexts within the same language variety, also show up in the present collection of papers looking into variation within and across Germanic.

The ‘macro’-aspect of variation is well represented by the papers of Aelbrecht, Cabredo Hofherr, Lundquist & Ramchand and Platzack. Aelbrecht discusses the difference between Dutch(-type languages) and English(-type languages) with respect to the phenomenon of VP-ellipsis. Although Dutch has traditionally been claimed to lack VP-ellipsis altogether, Aelbrecht argues that it in fact allows a limited form of this type of ellipsis in the complement to certain modal verbs. However, Dutch and English differ in whether they allow object extraction out of the ellipsis site, a difference that in Aelbrecht’s analysis ultimately reduces to a different choice in the two language types concerning the head in the clausal structure that licenses the ellipsis.

Cabredo Hofherr compares the behaviour of preposition-determiner amalgams such as *zum* (from *zu dem* ‘to the<sub>DATIVE</sub>’) in German with counterparts from outside Germanic, namely French cases like *du* (from *de le* ‘of the<sub>MASCULINE</sub>’). She shows that there are various differences between the two languages with respect to the behaviour of these amalgams in coordinations. She provides an interesting twist on what the source of such a macro-parametric difference can be: rather than these being ascribable to a parameter regulating the syntax or the morphology of German versus French, the difference lies in the place in grammar where the determiner and preposition are contracted. In German, P and D are separate

elements in the syntax, but are realised as one item post-syntactically; in French P+D occupies a single position already in the syntax.

Lundquist & Ramchand explore the differences between English on the one hand and Swedish (and German) on the other with respect to how the direct object of verbs of contact (e.g. 'kick') is realised. Whereas English allows inanimate NP objects with such verbs, Swedish must use a construction where this object is embedded within a PP. In Lundquist & Ramchand's analysis, this difference reduces to a difference in the lexical inventory of the languages, in particular whether a null particle  $AT_{loc}$  is available (English) or not (Swedish/German). In a nice illustration of 'macro-variational' reasoning, they argue that a range of other, apparently unrelated, differences between the languages follow from this single point of variation as well.

Finally, Platzack looks at the variation in the use of 'do-support' in contexts of VP-topicalization, VP-ellipsis and VP-pronominalisation across Germanic, concentrating in particular on differences between English and Swedish. He argues that variation in this respect reduces to variation in the position in which the support verb is first merged. In English, it is merged in little *v*, in Swedish it is merged in the head of the complement of little *v*. Again, a number of surface differences between the languages in the use of 'do' follow from this single fundamental point of difference.

Microvariation is somewhat less well represented in the current volume, with only two contributions, which differ also in the extent to which microvariation is the focus of attention. Brandner & Salzmann discuss an interesting case of microvariation which involves an identical *go/gi* particle found in both Swiss German and some southwestern German dialects, but with empirical differences between them. They argue that the microvariation reflects two different stages in the diachronic development of these dialect groups. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir contrast the use of the new impersonal construction in Inner Reykjavik and the rest of Iceland, but this microvariation does not play a crucial role in their analysis of the phenomenon.

Clearly, there is a certain tension between the macro-variational and the micro-variational approaches. The macro-variational approach is ultimately driven by the desire for 'explanatory adequacy'. It becomes easier to understand that children can acquire any language out of a large number of possible languages if the apparently possible wild variation between those languages reduces to a much more limited number of more fundamental choice points. At the same time, the micro-variational approach holds that the data sets to be accounted for contain a large number of small differences even within what would be just a single data point for a macro-parameter.

The second theme in this volume is diachronic change. This area shows a very similar kind of tension from the one just mentioned. Again, from an acquisitional

point of view it is desirable if the hypothesis space that an L1 learner has to consider when learning a language is restricted. That would mean that small variations in the language data should not have drastic consequences for the grammar learning process. From a diachronic perspective, that leads to a paradox however, since one of the oldest observations in linguistics is that languages do change. A good test of a theoretical account of some syntactic phenomenon therefore is to consider if it is flexible enough to allow for observed diachronic alterations, while not being so open-ended as to make the easy L1 acquisition of synchronic stages of the language inexplicable.

Diachronic change is a recurring topic in many of the papers in this volume. For some of them, providing an account of a particular diachronic syntactic change in the history of a Germanic language/languages is the central issue of the paper. This holds in particular for Jäger & Penka's, and Pysz & Wiland's contributions. The diachronic development may be approached from different angles as well, however. Struckmeyer uses it as a testing ground, much as described above, for his synchronic analysis of relative constructions. Maling & Sigurjonsdottir focus on ongoing diachronic change as it may be observed in the language today, applying Labov's concept of "apparent time." Brandner & Salzmann analyse synchronic variation between dialects as instantiating different stages in an underlying identical diachronic process. Let us expand on these descriptions a little.

Jäger and Penka discuss changes in the syntax of sentential negation in the history of German. Their article is a nice illustration of how a detailed syntactic analysis can provide illumination of the paradox of language change as described above. At first sight, German has undergone rather radical changes in the syntax of negation. In particular, whereas the historical stages of German all show the phenomenon known as Negative Concord (where multiple syntactic markers of negation semantically yield just a single negation), this possibility has been lost in the modern standard language at least. Jäger and Penka show that, given recent developments in syntactic theory, it is possible to provide an analysis for all stages such that the changes between them are actually relatively minor and there is a large amount of continuity between these stages, thereby resolving the tension between the desirability of a restrictive synchronic analysis and the possibility for the changes in grammar actually observed in the history of the language.

Pysz & Wiland focus on a diachronic change in English, the famous word order shift leading to strict VO order. Their paper equally relates to the discussion on macro-variation mentioned above, since they ascribe differences between OV languages and VO languages to a new version of a classical macro-parameter, often known as the 'head parameter'. In Pysz & Wiland's analysis, only languages without morphological case are subject to the requirements that lie behind this parameter (compare Neeleman & Weerman 1999), so that the word order change in English is

linked to loss of inflectional morphology in general. Differences between English on the one hand and Dutch/German on the other (which remained OV languages when losing some or all of their morphological case) are also ascribed to the head parameter, but this time as applied to the functional structure in the clause, in combination with the effects of Holmberg's (2000) Final-over-Final-Constraint.

Struckmeyer argues in favour of a 'matching' analysis of attributive and relative constructions in German (in which the relativized argument or the attributive adjective/participle must match an external noun) as opposed to a 'raising' analysis (cf. Kayne 1994) (in which the modified noun is merged internally to the relative clause or to a Small Clause headed by the attributive adjective and then raises). Amongst the various arguments he provides for this analysis is one that resembles Jäger & Penka's reasoning just mentioned: according to Struckmeyer, the diachronic changes observed in the syntax of attributive constructions in German can be reduced to a single process of lexical re-analysis, thereby making it unnecessary to assume very radical changes in grammar, a desirable result for reasons outlined above.

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir investigate the emergence in present-day Icelandic of a new impersonal construction, arguing for an on-going diachronic change on the basis of recent survey results that show a significantly higher acceptance rate with younger speakers than with older ones. They suggest an explanation for this change in terms of a number of independent grammatical features of Icelandic that set it apart from the other Scandinavian languages, which might have served as a 'model' for the new construction. They consider a number of possible 'model' constructions, settling finally on the impersonal reflexive construction.

Brandner & Salzmann attribute the empirical differences between the *gi/go* particle such as it is found in Swiss German and south-western German dialects to the fact that they belong to different syntactic categories. This fact in turn reduces, they argue, to different stages in the diachronic development of these particles in both dialect groups. In both groups, the particle has a prepositional ancestry, but in south-western German this lexical head has grammaticalised, i.e. become a functional head taking a verbal complement. This has resulted in the loss of the prepositional (directional) meaning. In Swiss German, this functional head has made the opposite development and has been reanalysed as a verb doubler, i.e. a (verbal) lexical head.

The third theme is the one of 'null' elements or structure. This issue has been of central importance to syntactic theorising in the past decades, and is still a focal point of attention today. Thus, we have already seen that both Aelbrecht and Platzack explore variation within Germanic in the licensing of empty VP-complements to certain functional verbs, whereas Lundquist & Ramchand hypothesize variation in the lexical availability of a null locational particle. It is

probably fair to say that theories of syntax that roughly fall in the ‘principles and parameters’ – ‘minimalist’ line of theorising have had less problems with positing null elements and null structure than some other models. However, it has always been recognised that such null elements do not come for free, but should be ‘licensed’; there may be stricter constraints on their occurrence than on that of their visible counterparts. Consequently, in addition to being subject to whatever constraints on the distribution of syntactic categories a language may have, null elements are allowed to occur only in particular contexts. The exact definition of these contexts can vary somewhat from language to language, as again well illustrated by Aelbrecht’s and Platzack’s contribution described above. Special restrictions are often invoked to account for the distribution of those empty elements, known in the earlier literature as ‘traces’. The assumption here is that any form of movement/displacement leaves behind an unpronounced counterpart (perhaps an unpronounced full copy) of the moved/displaced element. Movement dependencies cannot be established across certain types of constituent barriers (compare the classical ‘islands’), hence there must be conditions regulating the occurrence of traces. One such condition is the Coordinate Structure Constraint (CSC), which forbids moving an element out of one coordinate without there being parallel movement out of the other coordinate, so-called ‘across-the-board’ (ATB) movement. In his contribution, Salzmann develops an ellipsis account of ATB-movement. In his analysis, regular (CSC-violating) extraction takes place only from the first conjunct, whereas the gap in the second conjunct is created by ellipsis. In this way he accounts for the observation that reconstruction of the moved constituent into the first conjunct is possible, but the same full reconstruction effects do not obtain in the second conjunct. Under this approach, the CSC cannot be a constraint on movement, but must be a constraint on representations. Independent evidence for this assumption comes from Zurich German ATB extractions, where one gap may result from movement and another be filled by a resumptive pronoun.

Fourthly, another constant thread in the field in recent years concerns cartography, the idea that all languages share the same clause structure, characterised by a large number of semantically motivated functional projections in a fixed order. The idea has passionate advocates and perhaps equally passionate detractors. The preceding CGSW-based volume in the *Linguistics Today’s* series (vol. 141) featured a number of anti-cartographic contributions, but in this volume the papers that deal with issues concerning cartography are generally supportive. At the same time, classical cartographic approaches (represented here principally by the papers by Danckaert & Haegeman and Alexiadou & Campanini) have been supplemented with new, nanosyntactic approaches, in which the cartographic idea is carried to its extreme (Lundquist & Ramchand).

Danckaert & Haegeman argue that conditional clauses are derived by movement of an empty (world) operator to Spec,CP or Spec,ForceP. They further propose that this operator originates in SpecMood<sub>irrealis</sub>. This explains the impossibility of topicalising arguments in conditionals, while initial adjuncts and Romance Cl[itic]L[eft]D[islocation] are possible. This “double asymmetry”, Daenckaert & Haegeman argue, is just that found in cases where there is overt *wh*-movement, and is to be explained in terms of intervention. The topicalised argument (but not an initial adjunct or CLLD topic, both argued to be *in situ*) acts as an intervener which blocks movement of the operator (the *wh*-phrase in an interrogative, the empty world operator in the case of a conditional). This much of the account relies on a feature-based theory of intervention, but not directly on cartographic assumptions. These come into play however in extending the analysis to explain the absence of speaker-oriented adverbs in conditionals; it is proposed that such adverbs sit higher in the left periphery than SpecMood<sub>irrealis</sub> – where the world operator is merged – and hence they give rise to an intervention effect blocking movement of this operator.

While Danckaert & Haegeman’s account thus depends in part on a fine-grained decomposition of the functional structure of the clause, Alexiadou & Campanini’s paper relies on the decomposition of the functional structure within the DP. Alexiadou & Campanini explore in their paper cross-linguistic differences in the availability of the Occasional Construction (OC) of the type *The/an occasional sailor strolled by*, under the reading in which *occasional* binds an event variable in the matrix, yielding a meaning essentially identical to *A sailor occasionally strolled by*. They take issue with Zimmermann’s (2003) generalization that the availability of the OC correlates cross-linguistically with the availability of QR. Instead, they argue that the correlation is with the possibility of generating determiners in the Pl[ural] head posited in Heycock & Zamparelli 2005 as the lowest of three functional heads within DP: D, Num, and Pl. This possibility is diagnosed by the availability of plural readings for determiners that are not formally plural, such as the English indefinite *a*. An example is the “split” reading for coordinations such as *[A man and woman] are in love* analysed by Heycock & Zamparelli. The OC is predicted to occur only in the languages that allow this reading. Providing new evidence on the distribution of the OC in Greek and Italian, and revisiting the empirical claims about German made in Zimmermann (2003), Alexiadou and Campanini argue for the correctness of their generalization. They also provide an analysis from which it derives, which depends crucially on the possibility of cross-linguistic variation in the merge position of what might seem to be equivalent “determiners.”

Finally, after a period somewhat out of the limelight, binding appears to be resuming an important position again in minimalist writing, both as a tool

for analysing constructions and hierarchical relations, and as a research topic in its own right. As an example of the first, the Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir paper already discussed uses binding as a diagnostic test for determining the status of the “new impersonal construction” (NC) in Icelandic as either an impersonal active construction (with a null subject binding the reflexive), or an impersonal passive one. The fact that in particular younger speakers tend to accept reflexives in this construction they take as evidence for the active analysis. As an example of the second – binding as an object of inquiry – Hicks’ paper develops a minimalist analysis for variation in Condition B effects in Germanic languages. Referential dependency can either be established through the application of Agree, or the introduction of identical variables on two DPs in the numeration. Condition B effects are derived by reference to a principle of Maximisation of Featural Economy, which favours referential dependency established by Agree in the domain of a phase over referential dependency not established by Agree. This derives the Condition B effect in the domain where Agree applies, i.e. the phase. In this manner, binding domains are reduced to phases.

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