Simplification, complexification, and microvariation:
Towards a quantification of inflectional complexity in closely related varieties

Introduction: The operationalization of structural (in particular inflectional) complexity has become a focus of interest in recent typological work. At the same time, it has been claimed that languages spoken by small, isolated communities tend to show greater degrees of complexity (Braunmüller 1984, Nichols 2009, Trudgill 2009). If this is right, 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 with different degrees of isolation. Furthermore, it should also appear as a diachronic tendency in languages with a well attested history: Complexification is expected to occur in varieties spoken by isolated communities whereas simplification is expected to occur in larger communities with extensive contact. The present paper first establishes an operational complexity metric suitable for microrvariation and then puts to test the isolation hypothesis, examining highly inflecting varieties of German from both a diachronic and comparative perspective.

Method: Proposals for complexity metrics in the typological literature are operationalizing but 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 English varieties (Szmrecsanyi/Kortmann 2009) is clearly quantificational but only marginally addresses the specific problems posed by highly inflecting languages. Therefore, we have developed a complexity metric which is at the same time quantificational, crosslinguistically applicable and of sufficient granularity for the purposes of morphological microvariation.

We have determined complexity indices for noun inflection (number, case) in five varieties: Old High German, New High German, the Alemannic dialects of Kaiserstuhl, Vispertermenen, and Issime. Whereas only the latter two are topographically isolated, only the dialect of Issime (an enclave in Romance-speaking surroundings) is under intensive language contact.

Hypotheses: We expect (starting from OHG) simplification in NHG and Kaiserstuhl Alemannic but complexification in Vispertermenen Alemannic. As for Issime Alemannic, the expectations are ambiguous: simplification due to intensive contact or complexification due to Issime's isolation from the West-Germanic dialect continuum?

Results: We observe simplification in both NHG and Kaiserstuhl Alemannic, whereby in the latter inflectional morphology is simplified more extensively. Complexification is observed in both Vispertermenen and Issime Alemannic, but it is more far-reaching in the latter.

Discussion: The predictions following from the isolation hypothesis are generally borne out even at the level of microcomparative and diachronic evidence. However, we also found a number of unpredicted differences between varieties which must be explained by means of other factors than isolation only: As for the contrast between NHG and Kaiserstuhl Alemannic, we assume that they are the result of conserving effects in the written standard variety NHG. As for the contrast between Vispertermenen and Issime Alemannic, we conclude that the lack of dialect contact has a greater complexifying effect than the lack of language contact in general.

References

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