

## **Grammar, register, and language change: The two grammaticalization paths of the German pluperfect**

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“register always matters”  
(Douglas Biber in Gray 2013: 360)

**Keywords.** Tense, register, grammaticalization, language change.

**Research question.** It is a common view that language change is driven by oral conversation and then adopted into written language (see e.g. Gray & Biber 2018: 118 with further references). The pluperfect, however, seems to defy this general line of development: For German, it is argued that the pluperfect is (despite the parallel loss of the preterite) increasingly used in oral contexts (Hennig 2000) and seems to follow the cross-linguistic path “as evolving from an anaphoric function [...] to a deictic function, when it denotes past situations with respect to the speech time” (Squartini 1999: 56; also described as ‘r-weakening’ by Bertinetto 2013). Furthermore, recent studies have challenged the common view (oral > written) and argued for a more nuanced relationship between register and language change (e.g. Gray & Biber 2018). The paper will bring together these two perspectives: It investigates the development of the German pluperfect in order to address the question how its development is influenced by textual factors and what general implications can be drawn with respect to the relationship between register and language change.

**Method and data.** The analysis combines a quantitative and a qualitative approach and is based on a dataset of 6000 occurrences of the pluperfect from five different time frames of German (Old High to Present Modern German). In a first step, a multidimensional approach is used to analyze the impact of different textual parameters (i.e. ‘oral – written’, ‘conversational – literary’, text genre, and the distinction between the discourse modes ‘narrative’ vs. ‘report’ (in the sense of Smith 2003)). In a second step, the qualitative analysis aims at a detailed description of the semantic pathway of grammaticalization which is compared both to the development of the present perfect in German and the cross-linguistic development of pluperfect constructions.

**Results.** The analysis shows that the development of the pluperfect runs differently within the two discourse modes ‘narration’ and ‘report’. Within the narrative mode, already early occurrences display an aoristic use which is commonly considered to be a later grammaticalization stage of perfect constructions. Within the report mode, pluperfect forms are first extremely rare within the historical stages of German, but already display deictic functions and tend to ‘r-weakening’ (Bertinetto 2013), what seems to be the grammaticalization source for ‘non-conventional’ uses of the pluperfect in modern spoken language.

**Discussion.** The results call for a modification of previous context models (e.g. Diewald 2000; Heine 2000) which commonly regard the contextual distribution merely as an indicator of grammatical change. In contrast, the results let assume that it is the underlying discourse mode which can trigger grammaticalization and can lead to different pathways of the same source construction.

## References

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