Change or non-Change: Morphological Complexity across Germanic languages

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Languages vary in their morphological structure and complexity, both being subject to change over time. Substantial linguistic evidence indicates that language contact involving short- or long-term bilingualism is a significant factor that determines the nature of the change in morphological structure, leading to morphological simplification or complexification (e.g. van Coetsem 1988; Dahl 2004; Trudgill 2011). Linguistic complexity is not an easy concept to define and various attempts have recently been made at defining and measuring it (e.g. Szmrecsanyi and Kortmann 2009; Sampson and Trudgill 2012; Baechler and Seiler 2016). Most descriptions agree on distinguishing an intrinsic formal (structural) aspect and a more functional aspect that can be understood as *transparency* (Hengeveld and Leufkens 2018).

Germanic languages attest to a diachronic trend towards reduction of morphological complexity, which is manifested, for instance, in simplification of the nominal system (e.g. Baechler and Seiler 2011, Baechler 2015) and verbal inflectional system (e.g. Carroll, Svare and Salmons 2012). English with its intense contact history with Celtic, Norse and (Norman) French bears heavy traces of language contact, even if it does not align with creoles in typological studies (Bakker et al. 2011: 32; McWhorter 2001). Its transition from a predominantly inflectional language (Old English) to a strongly analytical one (present-day English), with very limited inflectional morphology is commonly given as a prototypical example of morphological simplification through contact. Languages such as Danish - interacting with Low and High German - or North Frisian - influenced by Danish, Low, High German and Dutch - experienced histories similar to English, with a clearly parallel direction of morphological change (e.g. Dahl 2015 on Jutland Danish). For Germanic languages which do not testify to extensive morphological simplification, such as Icelandic or Wallis High German, geographical isolation of relatively small language communities has been the evident factor responsible for their *non-change* (e.g. Nichols 1992).

But possible instances of *non-change* through language contact can also be found in Germanic languages which did experience more or less intense contact in their history. Two such areas that can be adduced here are the gender system and nominal inflection in varieties of Frisian. While West Frisian, which has stayed in close contact with Dutch, lost the contrast between masculine and feminine (aligning thus with the Dutch pattern), East and North Frisian dialects, staying under considerable influence of German, preserved a three-gender system. An identical pattern involves the *-r* plural marker (originally *-er-* formative present in historical *s*-stems) which is not productive in West Frisian, in compliance with the Dutch pattern, but is well preserved in the East and North Frisian dialects, enhanced by the influence of High and Low German.

In this study, we compare more than ten Germanic varieties, from early mediaeval to modern ones, covering languages with both extensive and limited language contact. Two major questions stay in the focus of the analysis. Firstly: is change or *non-change* (in terms of level of complexity) an areal feature for interacting languages in that they share the same level of complexity? Or is one of them rather strongly simplified due to contact-induced change? In order to investigate this aspect, we will control for the amount and intensity of contact, as well as the size and nature of the speech community (*close-knit, loose-knit*). Secondly, in the case of lack of change in individual linguistic features: can we see the same borrowability/stability hierarchy (as defined by Thomason and Kaufman 1988) as in borrowing/contact-induced changes?

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