

Disentangling the constructional semantics of German future constructions

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This paper investigates the relationship of two competing future constructions in historical German, *werden* + Infinitive and *werden* + present participle. In present-day German, the latter is only in use in some dialects, usually with an inchoative meaning (e.g. *Regnad wirts* ‘It starts to rain’, see e.g. Schmid 2000). In earlier stages, however, both are attested as future markers, and *werden* + Participle is sometimes assumed to have played a major role in the development of *werden* + Infinitive as the default future marker (as a predecessor construction and/or an analogical template). A rare case in which both constructions are attested in the same sentence is exemplified in (1).

- (1) Hemmel vnde erde werden **vorgaen**_{INF} / sunder mine worde werden nicht **vorghande**_{PART} ‘Heaven and Earth will pass away but my words will not pass away’ (Lübecker Bibel, 1494)

It is a matter of debate to what extent both constructions were used as future markers, and to what extent they fulfilled different – mainly aspectual – functions (see e.g. Leiss 1992, Westvik 2000, Hilpert 2008, Hartmann 2021). In this paper, we present an in-depth corpus-based analysis of the two constructions based on data from reference corpora of Middle High German (c. 1050–1350, Klein et al. 2016) and Early New High German (c. 1350–1650, Wegera et al. 2021). In particular, we focus on the aspectual semantics of the verbs that the two constructions combine with. Starting from the assumption that changes in the functional profile of a construction are reflected in the lexical items the construction co-occurs with, we analyze the slot fillers of *werden* + Infinitive and *werden* + Participle, focusing on their aspectual characteristics, taking regional variation as well as intra- and inter-writer variability into account.

Our semantic analysis of the dependent verbs reveals that *werden* + Infinitive and *werden* + Present Participle undergo parallel developments that can be seen as context expansion (Himmelmann 2004) from the perspective of grammaticalization theory. Interestingly, we see a considerable degree of functional overlap between the constructions in both directions – just like *werden* + Participle can be used as a future marker, *werden* + Infinitive can sometimes be used as an inchoative marker. Following recent theoretical approaches from diachronic Construction Grammar, we therefore argue that the complex relationship between *werden* + Infinitive and *werden* + Participle can be modelled as “attraction” (De Smet et al. 2008) between different constructions.

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