

LINGUIST List 24.620: Review: Historical Ling.; Morphology: Buchwald-Wargenau (2012)

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Sun Feb 03 2013

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Editor for this issue: Joseph Salmons <jsalmonslinguistlist.org>

Date: 10-Jan-2013

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Subject: Die doppelten Perfektbildungen im Deutschen

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Book announced at <http://linguistlist.org/issues/23/23-3606.html>

AUTHOR: Isabel Buchwald-Wargenau
TITLE: Die doppelten Perfektbildungen im Deutschen
SUBTITLE: Eine diachrone Untersuchung [Double Forms of the Perfect Tense]
SERIES TITLE: De Gruyter Studia Linguistica Germanica 115
PUBLISHER: De Gruyter Mouton
YEAR: 2012

REVIEWER: Sonja Zeman, University of Munich

SUMMARY Double Perfect Forms (also termed “supercompound/surcomposé past tense forms”; henceforth “DPFs”) are forms composed of an inflected auxiliary, a past participle, and an additional past participle auxiliary. These have often been considered peripheral, but more recently DPFs have attracted increasing crosslinguistic attention (cf. Litvinov/Radčenko 1998; Thieroff 2004; Ammann 2007; Poletto 2009; Saussure/Sthioul 2012). Furthermore, DPFs are regarded as closely related to the crosslinguistic rise of perfect forms and the ‘decay of preterit’ (cf. Abraham 1999), and are thus linked to broader, yet unsolved diachronic questions.

Because DPFs are infrequent in texts, the major methodological problem in previous studies has been a lack of data, especially historically. This research gap takes center stage in Buchwald-Wargenau's diachronic investigation of German DPFs. The study is based on a specifically compiled corpus -- outlined in Chapter 1 -- covering texts from 1350 to contemporary German, including texts from the so far unpublished “Szeged-Kassel-Corpus” (1650-2000) collected by Vilmos Ágel and Mathilde Hennig. This is noteworthy since those texts are classified with respect to their affinity to the medial opposition of “language of proximity” vs. “language of distance” (“Nähesprache” vs. “Distanzsprache”, cf. Koch/Oesterreicher 1985; Ágel/Hennig (eds.) 2006) and provide a foundation for addressing register variation in DPFs. Based on this new data, the study focuses on three issues: i) the diachronic development of DPFs, ii) the meaning of DPFs, and iii) the textual use of DPFs with a particular eye on “language of proximity” (p. 3).

With respect to the meaning of DPFs, two main hypotheses are taken as a point of departure. Based on general considerations on aspectuality and temporality, which rely mainly on

functional accounts by Comrie, Bybee et al., and Leiss, Chapter 2 contrasts temporal and aspectual approaches of DPFs. The former represents the predominant view within the descriptive tradition on German DPFs and assumes the temporal meaning of “past perfect” and “past past perfect” (“Vorvorvergangenheit”) as the main function of DPFs. After a critical evaluation of this view, Buchwald-Wargenau discusses the aspect-hypothesis, which, in contrast, regards an additional aspectual feature as the main characteristic of DPFs (cf. Rödel 2007; Topalović 2010). Buchwald-Wargenau abandons the “either (tense) or (aspect) question” (“Entweder (Tempus)-Oder (Aspekt)-Frage”; p. 214) and supports her main thesis that DPFs have to be captured by interaction of aspectual and temporal meanings.

This thesis results from an empirical diachronic analysis outlined in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 discusses the factors triggering the rise of DPFs. It revises the hypothesis that the development of DPFs is directly linked to 'decay of preterit in Upper German' (“Oberdeutscher Präteritumschwund”). In this respect, DPFs are considered to replace the pluperfect which is also seen as being lost due to its preterit auxiliary. However, Buchwald-Wargenau's empirical findings contradict the description of the rise of DPFs as a consequence of a causal 'pull-chain' (p. 76). In order to show that the diachronic development of DPFs does not match the course of preterit decay, the following arguments are advanced:

> Double PLUPERFECT forms are already documented in 15th century texts. This contradicts the thesis that DPFs are the consequence of a presumed 'decay of pluperfect' (p. 64).

> The pluperfect is documented in 17th and 19th century texts alongside Double Pluperfect Forms; given also the latter's low frequency, this has to be taken as evidence that a systematic compensation of the pluperfect is out of the question (p. 68).

> Early examples of DPFs (14th and 16th century) are also documented in Middle German. This can be interpreted as evidence that the DPFs were not restricted to Upper German (p. 70).

The empirical results thus favor Rödel's 2007 hypothesis (p. 83f.) that the rise of DPFs is not directly linked to the 'decay of preterit' but results from the instability of the German perfect and the general reorganization of the verbal categories as the older system of verbal aspect dissolves (cf. Leiss 1992). In order to test this hypothesis, Chapter 4 offers a detailed corpus analysis of the textual distribution of DPFs, focusing on the following parameters: opposition main clause vs. subordinate clause, serialization within the verbal complex, lexical aspect of the full verb. The results are classified according to time period (15th to 21st century) and auxiliary ('have' vs. 'be'). While for the early centuries only a small range of examples (5 to 13 DPFs) is presented, more evidence is found in the 17th century (90 DPFs, 18 within the dimension of proximity) and the 20/21st century (200 DPFs). The latter is also systematically investigated with respect to the dimension of “proximity” and “distance” (106). The analysis leads Buchwald-Wargenau to draw the following conclusions:

> In contrast to the general development of perfect constructions, early DPFs show no formal restrictions with respect to embedding under modal verbs and lexical aspect (p. 161).

> DPFs are prototypically used to denote the textual relation “event --consequence/result” or the temporal sequence of individual events (i.e. “relative” use in Buchwald-Wargenau's term) (p. 162).

> An “absolute reading” (i.e. without a past reference point given in the context) is already attested for the early occurrences of the DPFs (p. 163).

> There is no striking difference with respect to the opposition of auxiliary 'be' vs. 'have' (p. 184f.).

Contrasting the overall analysis to those DPFs documented in texts which show an affinity to the language of “proximity”, Buchwald-Wargenau draws attention to two striking differences: DPFs within the dimension of “proximity” tend to be used in main clauses (p. 159) and occur more frequently with present auxiliaries (158). All other investigated parameters, by contrast, seem to remain unaffected by the opposition “language of proximity” vs. “language of distance”.

The question of the original basic meaning of the DPFs is addressed in Chapter 5. Based on a differentiation between “relative” and “absolute” uses, the individual occurrences of the DPFs in the corpus are examined with respect to their temporal and aspectual values. The analysis suggests that aspectual and temporal meanings of the DPFs have to be regarded as semantic components intricately intertwined. In contrast to Rödel 2007 and Topalović 2010, who assume a process of grammaticalization from a predominantly aspectual verbal category to a tense form, Buchwald-Wargenau argues that primary temporal meanings can be attested already for the very early DPFs (pp. 194f., 203). Rejecting a general “Grundbedeutung” (‘basic meaning’, p. 203), she thus favors a two-component-analysis whereby the actual meaning of the form has to be derived from the particular context.

EVALUATION This volume’s great merit indisputably lies in the new empirical data, taking also into account the historical dimension and diastatic variation, i.e. the regional distribution of DPFs and the distinction between “language of proximity” and “language of distance”. Most notably, the appendix containing the whole audit trail will be of great value for subsequent studies. In this respect, the volume speaks to the interests of linguists concerned with grammaticalization and language change as well as sociolinguistics. Concerning the theoretical aims set at the beginning of the investigation, some critical remarks are still in order, addressing the three main aspects of the study:

First, with respect to the diachronic development of DPFs, the empirical analysis shows convincingly that the rise of DPFs is only indirectly linked to the ‘decay of preterite’. The attested coexistence of pluperfect and DPFs within the same sentences show in this respect that DPFs cannot be assumed to compensate for the pluperfect. The question of what distinguishes the semantic structures of the pluperfect and DPFs, however, is left open. In order to examine to what extent DPFs may be analyzed as a strategy to compensate the loss of aspectual markers (p. 94f.), the degree of grammaticalization of the perfect construction and the aspectual value of the ‘ge’-prefix in the 15th century are taken into account, however without leading to clear conclusions (p. 104). This seems unsurprising given that the aspect system is only a relict system in Middle High German. Instead, the earlier restructuring processes in the temporal domain are neglected. A look at the diachronic development of perfect constructions and their oscillation between temporal and aspectual values, however, would have been necessary background for integrating the rise of DPFs in the general reorganization of the verbal system, as well as for the evaluation of the grammaticalization of complex tense forms.

Second, rejecting a unified “Grundbedeutung”, Buchwald-Wargenau argues for a two-component-analysis which integrates aspectual and temporal values whereby the particular meaning has to be derived from the actual context. Regarding the biphasicness of perfect constructions, semantic ambiguity between aspectual and temporal values seems unsurprising (cf. also Saussure/Sthioul 2012: 592). This is also pointed out by Rödel 2007, who claims that DPFs -- in his analysis an extension mechanism which operates upon a perfect construction -- has to be seen as a “combination of temporal and aspectual meaning” (Rödel 2007: 178). A similar proposal is put forward by Poletto 2009 (not cited in Buchwald-Wargenau), who sees the characteristic meaning of the DPFs in an “additional aspectual feature” (Poletto 2009: 48). Since similar ambiguity holds for the pluperfect in the older stages of German (cf. Zeman 2010), the assumption of a linear grammaticalization process from aspect to tense seems unlikely for complex tense forms.

Third, concerning register variation of DPFs, the methodological approach (i.e. taking all tense forms as “proximate” which are documented in texts validated as “language of proximity”) seems questionable as it does not explain the most striking result, namely the complementary distribution of Double Perfect Forms vs. Double Pluperfect Forms in 20th/21st century texts (146f.). This result is conspicuously analogous to the empirical findings in Zeman 2010, showing that the main factor triggering the textual distribution in Middle High German is not linked to the multi-factor dimension of “oral” vs. “written” resp. “language of proximity” vs. “language of distance”, but to different discourse modes (cf. Smith 2003). A short glance at DPFs in the appendix reveals that the same explanation also seems to hold for the distribution of early DPFs in the 15th century: the Double PLUPERFECT Forms are used in narrative, the Double PERFECT Forms in reportive discourse mode, where the latter has a natural affinity to the “dimension of proximity” but is not linked to it directly (cf. Zeman 2010). In this respect, the short glance at the appendix also reveals that Buchwald-Wargenau’s data can be of great value for further investigations of DPFs.

Overall, the book fills an important research gap as DPFs have not been empirically investigated diachronically until now. As the main methodological difficulty has been the rarity of examples of DPFs, the supply of empirical data is not to be underestimated for its value to further studies. In sum, the volume thus cannot solve the general puzzles linked with DPFs, but it offers a wide range of material for addressing them in subsequent investigations.

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Page Updated: 03-Feb-2013