Reconstructing Asynchronous Change in Syntactic Cognates: A Hypothesis-Driven Approach to V1-Conditionals in German and English

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A recent 'hot topic' in historical linguistics has been the comparison of processes of change ('Sprachwandelvergleich', cf. Fleischer/Simon, eds., 2013). An often-cited scenario involves cognate structures which appear to represent consecutive stages along a shared grammaticalization path, e.g. V1-conditionals in modern German (1) and English (2):

(1)   Scheitert der Euro, dann scheitert Europa. (Merkel)

(2)   Should the Euro fail, Europe will fail. (Google)

German V1-protases can be formed with any verb in any tense and mood, including main verbs like scheitern 'fail' in the present indicative. By contrast, English V1-protases allow just three verb forms, should, had and were, which are all non-present (Leuschner/Van den Nest 2015). This stark difference in (potential) lexical and morphological productivity has been taken to suggest 'asynchronous' grammaticalization along the same path in the two languages, with English V1-conditionals moving faster towards an ever more restrictive functional niche in conditionality (König 2012). Given the time-honored assumption that V1-conditionals arose from an 'A$_{(V1-interrog./p)}$ – (B) – A$_{(q)}$' discourse pattern involving polar interrogatives as seen in (3),

(3)   A: Will you come? (B: Yes.) A: Then we can start at once. (after Jespersen 1940: 374)

V1-conditionals seem to have moved much further away from their alleged interrogative origins in English than in German.

In my paper, I revisit this 'asynchronicity' scenario with reference to two corresponding parameters of change, viz. divergence from interrogatives and specialization for non-realis conditionality. Based on over 10,000 V1-conditionals from the IDS's Tagged-TEI-archive and the BNC for present-day usage and from the York and Penn-Helsinki corpora of historical English and various historical German corpora or texts for the period up to ca. 1650, and on statistical tests used to trace changes in productivity and frequency in each language (Van den Nest 2010), the following picture emerges:

(i) The historical development of V1-conditionals does indeed show clear similarities in both languages, as demonstrated inter alia by their increasing use in non-real contexts and the fact that V1-conditionals were lexically productive in earlier stages of English (4) in ways which resemble both present-day and historical German (5):

(4)   Deceyueth me the foxe / so haue I ylle lerned my casus. (Caxton, 1481)

(5)   Kumet aber die spis inden lib si tuot dem lib vil wol. (attr. Berthold v. Regensburg, 13c.)
        'Come.SUBJ the food into the belly, it does the body a lot of good.'

(ii) Yet, despite their greater (type) productivity in earlier stages, English V1-conditionals do not seem to have been significantly more (token-)frequent in older English than today. In fact, they already occupied a minor functional niche in Old English (6) in which they could express realis conditionality while their protasis was consistently marked by the present subjunctive:

(6)   Fulga nu se mete ðære wambe willan, & sio wamb ðæs metes, ðonne towyrpð God ægðer. (Cura Pastoralis, late 9th century)
        'Follow.SUBJ the food now the will of the belly and the belly that of the food, God annihilates both.'

English V1-conditionals were thus never like modern German V1-conditionals in their attes-ted history, nor indeed is their early niche-like behaviour suggestive of dialogical origins.

(iii)   Nevertheless, it is possible to maintain the shared origins of V1-conditionals in English and German assuming that they arose from V1-declaratives, not interrogatives (Leuschner 2016, adopting a proposal from Hopper 1975: 51 and others). Their discursive origins probably involved 'thetic' V1-declaratives introducing new narrative episodes etc. (Petrova/ Solf 2008, inter alia) in a monological '$A_{(V1\text{-}decl./p)} - A_{(q)}$' pattern. This led to the V1-clause being reanalyzed as stating a condition for the subsequent clause(s) in hypothetical contexts, as suggested by examples like (7) from North Germanic:

(7)   hængir klocka i kirkiu, faldær i hovod mannæ, böti sopn firi (Old Swedish land laws; Hopper 1975: 50)
'Hangs (a) bell in (a) church, [and] falls (it) on someone's head, may the parish pay.'

In line with other adverbial clause types, the hypotheticality of the emerging V1-conditional was routinely marked by the (present) subjunctive in Old English as in (6) but not in German. Wider systemic developments such as the shift to SVO in English (as opposed to the generalization of V2 in German, Hawkins 1986: 211), which undermined any emergent V1/ V2 opposition, then coincided with the decline of inflectional morphology (including the present subjunctive) to bring about the niche-like, non-realis nature of V1-conditionals in modern English vis-à-vis their much less constrained modern German cousins.

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