On the emergence of auxiliary selection in Germanic

Ida Larsson
University of Oslo

While the periphrastic perfect with the auxiliary HAVE appears early on in many of the Old Germanic languages, the perfect with BE is a later development. Unaccusative change of location verbs can occur in HAVE-perfects in Old High German, and this continues well into Early Modern High German. For instance, Paul (1902) gives examples with HAVE from texts up until as late as the 17th century, and in Danish, the BE-perfect is not fully established until around the 18th century (see e.g. Johannisson 1945). In this talk, we review the development of the BE-perfect. We argue that the establishment of the BE-perfect is a consequence of reanalysis of the auxiliary HAVE, where it loses its internal structure (cf. Larsson & Brandner 2014). We tie this development to other changes in the properties of the perfect in these languages, particularly to the extension of the present perfect to definite past time contexts. In German, there is a shift in the frequency of past adverbials in the present perfect at around the same time as the BE-perfect is established (see e.g. Sapp 2009).

On our account, the temporal auxiliaries HAVE and BE are structurally identical in languages like present-day German or Danish (contra Kayne 1993). We propose that the realization of the auxiliary as either HAVE or BE is a consequence of feature agreement between the subject and a predicational head; this accounts for the fact that it is the origin of the subject that determines the choice of auxiliary, and not the structure of the verb phrase, per se. An account that views auxiliary selection as an agreement phenomenon can also readily account for the fact that different factors (e.g. person features, tense) can play a role in some languages (see Bentley & Eythórrson 2003, McFadden 2007).

Following Larsson (2009), we assume a Kaynean decompositional account of auxiliary HAVE only in languages like English and Norwegian, which lack auxiliary selection, and which have a ban on positional past tense adverbials in the present perfect. In these languages BE + an active participle is categorically banned in certain contexts, e.g. in past counterfactuals (McFadden & Alexiadou 2010, Larsson 2015). As observed by e.g. Shannon (1995), the restrictions on BE are not as categorical in older German and Dutch. We argue that the reanalysis of have in these languages leads to a grammar with two structurally and semantically different perfect tenses, which compete with each other. This gives rise to the observed variability, but also to the gradual loss of the older system, and ultimately to a language with obligatory auxiliary selection.

References


