

V1-Conditionals in German and English
– an Historical-Contrastive Approach

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Among the most rewarding topics of crosslinguistic comparison are syntactic cognates in closely related languages like English and German. A case in point are V1-conditionals:

- (1) *Scheitert* der Euro, dann scheitert Europa. (Merkel)
- (2) *Should* the Euro fail, Europe will fail. (Google)

German V1-protases can contain any verb form at all, including main verbs like *scheitern* 'fail' in the present indicative. English V1-protases allow just *should*, *had* and *were*, which are all non-present (Leuschner/Van den Nest 2015).

After an introductory survey of V1-conditionals in German and English, I will successively adopt the synchronic and the diachronic perspectives. In the synchronic perspective, so-called Conditional Inversion (Iatridou/Embick 1994) in English has recently been the site of a (perhaps unexpected) meeting of generativist and constructionalist minds. What construction grammarians regard as the isolation of *should*-/*had*-/*were*-conditionals in an already fragmented V1 sub-constructicon (Kim 2011) has been regarded by some generativists as evidence of a lexically defined "nano"-level at the bottom of the head movement hierarchy (Biberauer/Roberts 2016). German V1-conditionals can in turn be modelled as a node in a well-structured V1 sub-constructicon (Diessel 2007) or as the result of movement to C as a structurally, rather than lexically, defined mesoparameter. From the constructionalist point of view, the routine occurrence in German of proverbs in the form of V1-conditionals, and of slogans derived from or alluding to such proverbs, can be treated as evidence of the schematisation of the V1-conditional as a constructional template (Leuschner 2020).

In the second part of my talk, attention will shift from synchronic contrasts to the comparison of diachronies ("Sprachwandelvergleich", cf. Fleischer/Simon, eds., 2013). Starting from the observation that V1-conditionals in German and English have been developing asynchronously, i.e. from similar origins but at different speeds (König 2012), I will highlight the advantages of a functionalist account centred on the historical processes of grammaticalization and constructionalization (Traugott/Trousdale 2013).

References

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