

How Come that English has such a Restricted Grammar?

A Comparison with German

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Abstract: Revisiting a common folk-linguistic prejudice – the idea that languages differ with regard to their grammatical complexity - we introduce grammar as global system of linguistic competence that is equally functional in every language. By comparing the historical development of English and German, two genetically close languages, we deconstruct the prejudice. On the one hand, the divergent evolution of word order constraints in the respective syntax-systems connected to a loss of inflections in English and in German explains the impression of an easy English grammar from a linguacentric German perspective. The emergence of natural gender in English, on the other hand, shows that the English grammar did not become less complex when compared to German but that it developed alternative coding constraints: formerly gender was a purely lexical marker but shifted to a semantic feature; this extended the grammatical system considerably.

1. Introducing a Prejudice

‘I hate French. All of those verb forms you have to learn – terrible! English, however, is easy. It has such an easy grammar – so you can just go ahead and speak.’ This is a common prejudice about English grammar often heard in Swiss German classrooms. Similarly, speakers of English often consider German an extremely difficult language to learn because it has so many inflections and cases. Given the stereotype, books like the following seem highly profitable:



Figure 1: Learning German

It is true that the inflectional system of English is restricted when compared to German. This is due to its historical transformation in the Middle Ages. However, from a scientific point of view, it is questionable whether the grammar of a language can only be defined in terms of conjugation and declination. Modern linguistics regards the grammars of different languages as being functionally equal. In other words, language A cannot be said to have more grammar than language B, but the two languages may be different in their formal realisation of grammatical rules. Prejudiced evaluations of grammatical systems therefore arise from a linguacentric evaluation of the less-known grammatical system relative to the native system.

In this paper, the long-standing prejudice about English is questioned by placing it under historical-linguistic scrutiny while proceeding along the following line of argumentation: First, a scientific definition of grammar is discussed against the more colloquial conception of this term. Second, by comparing the development of English and German grammar relative to the linguistic definition, the different distribution of grammatical patterns in the languages will be explained historically. The changes will be exemplified on the basis of the word order and grammatical gender systems of the two languages. On the basis of this comparison, the prejudice against English grammar should be deconstructed.

2. Grammar?

A common stereotypical everyday-view conceives grammar as ‘the rules you have to follow in order to speak a language correctly.’ This everyday concept of grammar is usually formed in the classroom where grammar is experienced in the form of a set of prescriptive rules. Learning these rules is to learn how to build correct sentences in the target language by consciously applying them to its wordstock.

The scientific definition of grammar differs from this experiential one. A GRAMMAR is a mentally-represented system of discursively-established social conventions of language usage that allows human beings to form and interpret the words and sentences of their language (see also O’Grady et al. 1997:4). This system consists of a largely unconscious linguistic competence in phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The definition of grammar in this sense implies a) GENERALITY: all languages have a grammar, and b) EQUALITY: all natural language grammars are equally functional and efficient.

When a language learner is confronted with a new, unfamiliar language, the grammatical systems underlying it may give the impression of deficiency – ‘well, this

system is so easy; it does not even have a grammar' - or complexity – 'this language is impossible to learn!'. Such evaluations emerge automatically when the second language is unconsciously compared with the native language, which acts as a default-case and thus establishes a psychological norm for grammatical judgements. Consider the following example, discussed in O'Grady et al. (1997:5), to exemplify this point.

In Walbiri, an Australian aboriginal language, word order is amazingly free when compared to English. Thus, the English sentence *The two dogs now see several kangaroos* could be grammatically expressed by the following alternative syntactic arrangements (word by word translations into English; all taken from O'Grady et al. 1997:5):

- (1a) *Dogs two now see kangaroos several*
- (1b) *See now dogs two kangaroos several*
- (1c) *See now kangaroos several dogs two*
- (1d) *Kangaroos several now dogs two see*
- (1e) *Kangaroos several now see dogs two*

From the perspective of a speaker accustomed to English syntax, these constructions seem to be void of any grammatical restrictions. This, of course, is not true. While word order does not play a prominent role in Walbiri, this language imposes different rules to code the conceptual (semantic) relationships conveyed by the sentence. For instance, Walbiri speakers must add the inflectional suffix *-lu* to their word for *dogs* to indicate that this word constitutes the subject/agent of the seeing-process.

Rather than not having a grammar, Walbiri has a grammar that is different from the English grammar. It is important to emphasise this point: although languages do not have the same grammar, all languages have a grammar. And the grammars of these languages are equally effective in communicating culturally relevant conceptual contents.¹ Language typologists have shown that different languages convey highly different grammatical systems that depend on distinctions established by alternative patterns of sound and tone, words and word forms, and word order.

¹ Note that colonial contact with non-European languages was often accompanied by the prejudice that these languages are just a loose accumulation of words without any grammatical system. This linguacentric evaluation was regarded as a proof that the natives are primitive and evolutionary retarded. This opinion was falsified at the beginning of the 20th century, when anthropological linguistics such as Franz Boas or Edward Sapir put these languages (native Indian languages in particular) under closer scrutiny (for more details see Foley 1997: ch. 10).

Thus, the grammars of different languages and dialects differ in terms of their implicit CODING REQUIREMENTS. Put more simply, the grammatical systems of different languages provide alternative moulds to encode conceptual relationships in a symbolic, i.e. linguistic, form. English grammar, for instance, requires the verbal coding of ASPECT, i.e. whether a process is continuous or not: *He is running* vs. *He runs*. In Swiss German, this conceptual relationship can also be expressed. However, it does not depend on an adaptation of the verb form, but includes the use of adverbials: *Är rennt grad; är isch grad am renne* vs. *är rennt gärn/hüffig*, etc. Given this coding distinction in the two grammars, the English tense system appears relatively complex from a Swiss German point of view. Swiss German, on the other hand, conveys the impression of lacking any temporal distinctions.

The conscious and prescriptive approach to language learning that is established in the classroom enforces the impression of relative deficiency or complexity. Explicit rule-learning and application demand a great deal of active cognitive memorization and processing. Thus, language learning in the artificial school context turns second language acquisition into a conscious cognitive process. This process is usually based on a contrastive approach to language that stresses, highlights, and trains those areas of a second-language grammar which are most distinct from the learners native language. This contrastive approach mystifies the grammar of the target language to a considerable extent. Moreover, the prescriptive approach to grammar establishes explicit rules that are based on a regularised standard language. This approach often ignores that grammars of non-standard varieties of the given language offer more variable coding alternatives.

The prejudiced evaluation of English grammar relative to German grammar (and vice versa) offers an interesting point of attack for historical linguistic analysis. Historical linguistics shows that the grammars of all languages change over time. Thus, their systems of rules and patterns are subject to constant (but often not consciously recognisable) modifications. Given that English and German, genealogically speaking, originate from the same mother-language – West-Germanic – the biased comparison between the two grammars by language learners must have something to do with how the two languages transformed their coding requirements over time. With regard to the scientific definition of grammar listed above, the historical linguistic analysis can therefore be expected to reveal how the two languages have changed their moulds, i.e. the grammatical set of categories to code conceptual relationships, i.e. how the grammatical moulds of the two languages have developed alternative grammatical coding options.

Historically developed coding alternatives are ignored in the classroom. By focusing language training on one subpart of the language system only, e.g. the tense system, it is overseen that, for instance, a language that was subject to changes in verbal inflection may have developed other devices to code corresponding grammatical relationships that are not easier to learn than a system of verb conjugation.

3. The Historical Development of English and German Grammar

When trying to analyze grammatical conventions from the past, we are confronted with a couple of major difficulties. First, we do not possess any evidence on the speaker's linguistic competence (cf. definition of grammar given above). Often, all that we can rely on is a relatively small and thematically restricted corpus of written records. Second, even if rules on the correct use of a language are available, they mostly reflect erudite desire rather than actual language usage, i.e. historical (and often also contemporary) prescriptive grammars do only relate to and capture one stylistic variety. A native speaker may approve these rules in certain communicative contexts, while elsewhere, he completely disregards them.

However, by comparing texts from different historical periods, we may nevertheless establish some differences in the development of the underlying linguistic system. These deviations offer valuable clues on the historical changes that a grammar went through.

As English and German both genetically descend from a common ancestor (WGmc), we can illustrate some major grammatical developments of these two languages by contrasting two OE clauses with their ModE and ModG translations respectively. The subsequent comments assume that OE and its historical German counterpart, Old High German, bore almost identical grammatical features.

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|------|-------|--|
| (2a) | OE: | <i>þæt hie hine ofslægenne hæfdon</i> (Weimann 1995:128) |
| (2b) | ModE: | <i>that they had slain him</i> |
| (2c) | ModG: | <i>dass sie ihn erschlagen hatten</i> |
| (3a) | OE: | <i>þa Deniscan ahton sige</i> (Fennell 2001:74) |
| (3b) | ModE: | <i>the Danes gained victory</i> |
| (3c) | ModG: | <i>die Dänen erreichten den Sieg</i> |

Comparing the OE subordinate clause (2a) with its ModE (2b) and ModG (2c) equivalents we notice that OE and ModG offer an identical arrangement of the phrasal constituents: subject-object-predicate (SOV). ModE however is restricted to an ordering of subject-predicate-object (SVO) such that a phrase like *that they him*

slain had would undoubtedly be rated as incorrect by all English speakers. Besides, in OE and in ModG the object may also appear in clause-final position as illustrated by sentence (3a) and (3c), both of them main clauses. Consequently, the syntax of OE and ModG offers a much greater variation compared to ModE. The change from a SOV or even OVS structure in OE to a strict SVO word order was already introduced in the late OE period.

Weimann (1995:138) explains the shift by the fact that in OE the major constituents linked together were object and verb (-OV-) and formed a NUCLEUS. The sequence inside of the nucleus could alter, depending on the subject's position. The major possible constituent ordering in OE thus resulted in S-OV, S-VO and VO-S.² At the end of the OE period, however, the phrasal nucleus merged to subject and verb (-SV-). It now was the object that was attributed to this complex. From the possible combinations only SVO remained and eventually resulted in a fixed SVO scheme for main clauses.

If the subordinate clause in example (2c) is changed to a main clause then the verbal component in ModG is split and now frames the object: *sie hatten ihn erschlagen*. This VERBAL FRAMING (Satzrahmen) is neither common to OE and nor to ModE and it only started to become a rule in written German after the 16th c. (Wells 1990:277-278). Prior to this period framing and also verbal juxtaposition are well attested since the earliest stages of the German language, both as possibilities of stylistic variation. Even Martin Luther makes use of this variation in his translation of the Bible as can be shown by Joh 3,10: *Die weil du hast behalten das Wort meiner Geduld* (Wells 1990:280).

To summarize, English developed a much more restricted syntax in contrast to German. The major reason for this distinct development is found in the loss of inflections that already started at the end of the OE period (levelling). Grammatical function was thus transferred from the morphological system of inflections to the syntactic system. The meaning of a ModE phrase such as (3b) is only apparent through syntax. The inversed clause like *victory gained the danes* is dubious. But German also saw its inflection system reduced as may be illustrated by the paradigm for *Bote* (messenger). The singular in Old High German had three distinct forms, whereas in Middle High German the oblique case was reduced to a single form (Wells 1990:164):

² Nevertheless, under certain syntactic conditions the ordering V-S-O was possible in OE (Weimann 1995:135), e.g. *ond þa ongeat se cyning þæt* (and then realized the king this).

	Old High German	Middle High German
nom.	<i>bot-o</i>	<i>bot-e</i>
acc.	<i>bot-on</i>	<i>bot-en</i>
gen.	<i>bot-en</i>	<i>bot-en</i>
dat.	<i>bot-en</i>	<i>bot-en</i>

Table 1: German Inflections

However, the German language did not follow the development of English by restricting its syntax. Instead German introduced the article as an obligatory supplemental case marker (Wells 1990:247). In sentence (3c) the accusative case of *Sieg* is only expressed by its preceding article *den*. So ModG also features a more analytical structure compared to its synthetic predecessor Old High German. The major grammatical developments in both, German and English may thus be condensed in the following table:

	inflections	syntax
English	–	–
German	–	+

– loss of complexity
+ gain of complexity

Table 2: Historical Development of the Grammar in English and German

Certainly, the most interesting question concerning this distinct development is the search for its reasons: why did English not develop similar strategies to German in its shift from a synthetic to an analytical language? Unfortunately, we do not possess enough written records for the period when the change occurred in England. The majority of OE texts are written in the south-western quasi standard (Wessex dialect), a rather conservative variant concerning grammar development. Furthermore the impact of the Norman Conquest produced a lacuna of available records for the transitional period of these changes during the late 11th and the 13th century. So we can only recognise first traces in late OE and finally see the full impact in ME texts.

The socio-cultural conditions, however, differed considerably in English and German during this period. So it might be plausible to attribute the reduction of syntactic or constructional alternatives in English to either Scandinavian influence or to the impact of French after the Norman Conquest, or even to both. Personally, we would support the Scandinavian influence. Norman French, a Romance language, had a much greater syntactic flexibility than OE. Thus, it is difficult to argue that this language could have restricted the OE word ordering.

Whatever caused the diverging development in English and German, the result is obvious for second language learners. Topicalisation, for example, can be performed in ModG through simple syntactic inversion, as in sentence (3c): *den Sieg erreichten die Dänen*. In ModE, however, this kind of emphasis is much more complicated. In ModE a cleft-construction must be used for the same purpose: *it was victory that the Danes gained*.

4. The Different Evolution of Gender in English and in German

So far, we only dealt with the morpho-syntactic and syntactic subsystems. An interesting case that involves morpho-syntactic as well as pragmatic aspects is the grammatical category of GENDER. Two types of gender must be distinguished (Wikipedia 2004a): a) GRAMMATICAL GENDER or noun classes: dependent on formal linguistic criteria, and b) NATURAL or LOGICAL GENDER: related to actual gender (sex). In most IE languages grammatical gender is realized with the categories male, female and neuter. In ModG we find all three genders: *Haus* is neuter, *Hammer* is masculine and *Treppe* is feminine. If, however, the noun is related to a human being, most often a gender contingent on sex is used, such as feminine for *Frau* and masculine for *Mann*. Nevertheless, neuter is also possible, such as in *Männlein* or *Frauenzimmer*. In short, we can still characterize German as having preserved grammatical gender.

The same categorical distinctions of grammatical gender hold for OE (Fennell 2001:64-66). Here we have *fisc* (*fish*) as a masculine, *duru* (*door*) as a feminine and *wif* (*wife*) as a neuter noun. Sexual distinction was not marked in OE. *wifmann* (*woman*), for example, was a masculine noun. Gender was connected to specific inflection classes, which furthermore were derived from distinct Gmc noun-stems. As an example we just mention the OE masculine a-stem paradigm³, which gave rise to the ModE regular inflections (Fennell 2001:65), and contrast it to ModG.

	Old English		Modern German	
	Sg.	Pl.	Sg.	Pl.
nom.	<i>fisc</i>	<i>fisc-as</i>	<i>Fisch</i>	<i>Fisch-e</i>
acc.	<i>fisc</i>	<i>fisc-as</i>	<i>Fisch</i>	<i>Fisch-e</i>
gen.	<i>fisc-es</i>	<i>fisc-a</i>	<i>Fisch-(e)s</i>	<i>Fisch-e</i>
dat.	<i>fisc-e</i>	<i>fisc-um</i>	<i>Fisch</i>	<i>Fisch-en</i>

Table 3: Inflections in Old English and in Modern German

³ PIE nouns were composed of a root, a stem (vowel, consonant or both) and an ending. The stem gave rise to different declensions (Weimann, 1995:77).

The OE plural endings *-as* resulted in the ModE plural marker *-s* and the gen. singular *-es* was the source for the ModE Saxon genitive (*- 's*).

During the transition from OE to ME a shift from grammatical to natural gender occurred. Barbara Fennell (2004:64) explains this development as a consequence of the inflectional reduction and discusses its cause with respect to creolization tendencies under Scandinavian influence (Fennell 2004:128-131). In ModE, eventually, gender is completely lost for nouns. But it survived in ModE pronouns, where the distinction is now based on a combination of the features [+ female] and [+/- human]. The possessive pronouns in ModE thus have the following distribution:

<i>his</i>	[+ human] <i>the passenger put on his scarf</i> (passenger can be a male or a female)
<i>her</i>	[+ human] [+female] <i>the passenger put on her scarf</i> (passenger is a female)
<i>its</i>	[- human] <i>the dog puts its tail between its legs</i> (no information about the dog's sex)

Table 4: Possessive Pronouns

In ModG no pronoun with the feature [+/- human] exists and possessive pronouns only depend on grammatical gender, such as *die Schraube löste sich aus IHRER Mutter*.

Again, second language learners must rely on their conceptual knowledge when using the correct ModE possessive pronouns, whereas in ModG only the pure linguistic categories of gender suffice. Interestingly enough that recent German language use connects grammatical gender to a (virtual) natural gender and produces rather awkward constructions such as *Jeder Passagier muss seinen/ihren Sicherheitsgurt anlegen*. From a purely linguistic perspective such a construction would be much more appropriate in English!

5. Conclusion – English Grammar Historically Re-compensated

The comparison between the development of the English and German grammatical subsystems of word order and gender has revealed that the two languages developed alternative coding requirements to mark grammatical relations and gender reference. Given the practical absence of inflectional morphology in ModE NPs, syntax has become the primary means to express ‘who-does-what-to-whom’ in this language. Historically, the decay resulted in a limiting SVO word order, which prevented

further constructional variation in declarative statements. Accordingly, the system of gender reference has been ‘naturalized’; the coding requirement now demanding to focus on the sex of the referent rather than expressing this category in terms of grammatical gender.

In German, the preservation of case distinctions in the article system has prevented its word order system from major constraints. Consequently, the system has remained more variable. In addition, verb framing has emerged as a further word order rule. The system of grammatical gender has also been preserved due to article marking. These developments show that English does not have less grammar than German but a different grammar. The impression of ‘a restricted English grammar’ stems from a superficial evaluation of the inflectional morphology and corresponding word order rules that are more straightforward than in German. The coding requirements for gender are not grammatical but natural. Nevertheless, English has a rule governed gender system.

In a nutshell, there is no such thing as an easy, restricted grammar, but a grammar can give the impression of relative simplicity or complexity when it is measured according to linguacentristic prejudices projected from one’s own language.

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