

Complex perfects in Germanic

Complex perfects are fascinating constructions in the Germanic languages. The examples below illustrate how the perfect auxiliary *have* may combine with a modal and a lexical verb in Dutch and German respectively.

- (1) *Ik heb kunnen komen.* (Dutch)
I have can.INF come.INF
- (2) *Ich habe kommen können.* (German)
I have come.INF can.INF

Complex perfects in Dutch and German are first and foremost known for their intricate patterns of word order variation in the subordinate clause, especially in regional and historical varieties (e.g. Coupé 2015). Another prominent issue, studied since at least Grimm (1837), is the unexpected coding of the auxiliary directly embedded under *have*. This auxiliary appears as a bare infinitive instead of the expected past participle, a phenomenon known as *Erzatsinfinitiv* or *infinitivus pro participio*.

A similar but perhaps less well-known case of unexpected coding may be found in complex perfects in Swedish. Some regional varieties code the lexical verb as a supine, as in (4), instead of an infinitive, as in the case in the Standard Swedish example (3), giving rise to a so-called *double supine* (Larsson 2014).

- (3) *Jag har kunnat komma.* (Swedish)
I have can.SUP come.INF
- (4) *Jag har kunnat kommit.* (regional Swedish)
I have can.SUP come.SUP

These examples only scratch the surface of the cross-linguistic variation found in complex perfects in Germanic. This paper wants to further flesh out the divergent coding of complex perfects in Dutch, German and English (aka the ‘Germanic sandwich’) and Swedish (adding a northern perspective) and analyze it from a diachronic construction grammar perspective (e.g. Coussé et al. 2018).

The central idea of the analysis is that complex perfects result from the innovative integration of two periphrastic verb constructions. In the examples above this is the simple *have* perfect and a modal construction. These multiple source constructions may impose conflicting selectional restrictions and formal coding on the new more complex construction (cf. ‘form-function friction’ in De Smet & Van de Velde 2013). It will be argued that the languages under investigation have solved these conflicts in diverging ways in the course of their history giving rise to synchronic cross-linguistic variation.

References

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