

Sentence-internal capitalization in German, English, and Dutch: Historical parallels and divergent development

Sentence-internal capitalization is a distinctive feature of the German graphemic system: In present-day German orthography, all heads of noun phrases are written in uppercase (<das Haus> ‘the house’, <das große Aber> ‘the big but’). While the historical development of this system in German has been investigated quite extensively (e.g. Moulin 1990, Labs-Ehlert 1993, Bergmann & Nerius 1998, Barteld et al. 2016) – possibly because it is one of only two languages where it persisted, the other one being Luxemburgish – it is often overlooked that historically, numerous other languages had developed a very similar system (but see Osselton 1984 for an analysis of capitalization in historical English and Dollinger 2003 on capitalization in Early Canadian English). In this poster, we present a contrastive analysis of the historical development of sentence-internal capitalization in the “Germanic sandwich” languages English, Dutch, and German. We combine findings from both previous research and our own corpus-based investigations on the basis of Early New High German handwritten texts with a new study of sentence-internal capitalization in English and Dutch on the basis of the *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) corpus and the *Compilatiecorpus Historisch Nederlands* (Coussé 2008) as well as a selection of historical Bible translations from all three languages. The data from these corpora and from previous studies show that sentence-internal capitalization experiences a clear surge in German (between 1400 and 1600) and English (between 1400 and 1700). While the increase in frequency is quite steep in German, it is much slower in English and never spreads to all nouns. In Dutch, by contrast, the patterns are less clear and we see some ups and downs in the frequency data. In the present study, we investigate whether the cognitive-semantic and syntactic factors that have been identified as driving the use of sentence-internal capitalization in its earliest stages in German (especially pragmatic factors such as reverence and semantic ones such as animacy, but also e.g. syntactic functions) also hold for the use of uppercase letters in historical English and Dutch.

References

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