The Increasing Polyfunctionality of Wh-Elements in the Diachrony of German: Constraints from the Wh-Hierarchy

Wh-words are well-known examples of highly polyfunctional lexical items. Often, one and the same wh-element can be employed in very different types of constructions: in addition to their "canonical" interrogative use, they may function as (attributive, free or co-) relative pronouns or participate in the morphological make-up of indefinites or of subordinators introducing complement or adjunct clauses. However, the degree of syncretism that wh-words might show is not unconstrained. It has been noted that some implicational relations hold among the syntactico-semantic features that these elements lexicalize cross-linguistically. Similar relations are liable to a treatment in terms of *ABA restrictions.

The issue of the polyfunctionality of wh-elements finds a particularly interesting and complex instantiation in German, as it intersects with the broader issue of the division of labor between two distinct series of relative elements, those that have a demonstrative-based (*der, die*, etc.) and those that are wh-based (*welch-, wo*, etc.). The division of labor between the two series is synchronically very rigid, but has undergone change in diachrony. In old phases of German, the use of wh-words was restricted to interrogatives, whereas d-elements had a much wider versatility than they have in the present-day language. Over the centuries, wh-elements gradually took over some of the functions previously belonging to the d-series. The order in which such change unfolded seems to be the following: wh-words first develop an (un)conditional use, secondly, they expand to free relative clauses. I'll show that the change that wh-elements have undergone in the diachrony of German can be interpreted in harmony with the synchronic patterns that characterize the polyfunctionality of wh-elements cross-linguistically.

Šimik (to appear) has recently claimed that the constraints on the degree of syncretism of wh-elements follow from the hierarchical organization of the syntactico-semantic features that are responsible for the relevant (interrogative, correlative, free and attributive relative) functions: in combination with a conception of the architecture of grammar similar to the nanosynatctic one (Starke 2009) – allowing superset-based spell-out of syntactic phrases – such a hierarchy predicts that discontinuous (i.e. ABA) patterns of syncretism are impossible. A similar logic might also give principled explanation to the diachronic trajectory of wh-elements in the history of German, as the latter respects the same hierarchy that constrains synchronic syncretisms.