Article use in Upper German – a 'radical' stage of grammaticalization? New findings from Austria

The use of articles in Upper German dialects is quite unique within the Germanic language family. In particular, Bavarian dialects have sometimes been labelled as "radikale Artikelsprache[n]" ('radical article language[s]') (Eroms 1989: 307). This 'radicalism' has been declared since articles in these varieties display a systematical usage considered incorrect, or even ungrammatical, in the German standard language (see e.g. Duden 2016: 299, 331). This applies, for instance, to the general use of indefinite articles before mass nouns (see (1)), the use of definite articles before proper nouns (see (2)) as well as to the existence of an indefinite article in the plural (see (3), all examples were taken from our corpus, see below for details).

Despite an increasing interest in dialect syntax over the last decades, only few empirical investigations focus on the syntax of articles in Upper German, e.g. Scheutz (1988), Kollmer (1999) and Breuer (2017) for Bavarian, Glaser (2008) and Brandner (2015) for Alemannic. As a consequence, little is known about respective variation and change in article use, let alone theoretical implications.

We will address these desiderata by using fresh evidence from the research project "variation and change of dialect varieties in Austria (in real-time and apparent-time) (F 6002-G23)" (part of the FWF-funded special research programme "German in Austria", FWF F060, www.dioe.at). Here, a dialect survey was conducted covering dialect translations of 163 speakers from 40 villages throughout Austria. The sample includes two generations of speakers, hereby allowing us not only to analyse language variation but also language change in apparent-time.

Firstly, we aim at a valid description of variation and change in the use of articles in the Upper German dialects of Austria. We will investigate the variation of articles precisely in the afore-mentioned 'ungrammatical' contexts and consider its lexical, semantical and syntactical factors (e.g. the use of articles in combination with quantifiers). In a second step, we will also examine the extra-linguistic factors in variation, in particular their spatial co-occurrence.

Finally, we will discuss if our empirical findings on Upper German dialects can be viewed as evidence for a 'radical', well-advanced stage of grammaticalization (see e.g. Szczepaniak & Flick 2020). In doing so, we will also reconsider the supposed typological shift of German towards a more analytical type of language (Roelcke 2011).

(1) Bavarian Dialect   I   brauch no   a   geid
       Standard German   * Ich   brauche noch ein   Geld

$I_{Sg.Nom}$ $need_{V.fin}$ PTCL $Det._{Sg.Acc}$ $money._{Sg.Acc}$

lit. 'I need even more a money'

(2) Bavarian Dialect   I   hob   an   Fritz   kemma gheat
       Standard German   * Ich   habe   den   Fritz   kommen gehört

$I_{Sg.Nom}$ $have_{V.fin}$ $Det._{Sg.Acc}$ $Fritz._{Sg.Acc}$ $coming_{V.inf}$ $heard_{V.inf}$

lit. 'I heard the Fritz coming'

(3) Bavarian Dialect   Wüst   ane   Kiaschn?
       Standard German   * Willst du   eine   Kirschen?

$want_{V.fin}$ $you_{Sg.Nom}$ $Det._{Pl.Acc}$ $cherries_{Pl.Acc}$

lit. 'Do you want a cherries?'

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