

## The layered complexity of the Germanic sandwich

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In this presentation, we discuss the assumption in language change studies that languages often change in a certain direction, specifically, from more to less complex. Nübling & Kempf (2020), for instance, in their excellent overview of grammaticalization in Germanic languages, present a scale of morphological complexity, and arrange the Germanic languages on it. English and Afrikaans are less complex, more innovative and deflecting than Dutch, which is again less complex, more deflecting than German. A perfect depiction of the Germanic Sandwich.

The intriguing question, for us, is: how can we define complexity, and hence, what can be seen as a reduction of complexity?

We will discuss this using the example of case morphology and deflection. The three languages went through similar language change processes that are most advanced in English and least in German: in English the case system has been completely dismantled, in Dutch there are still a few rests, and in German most case morphology is retained. This is perfectly in line with Sapir's „drifts of major importance“ in Indo-European languages, namely the dismantling of the case system, and the tendency towards a fixed word order in the sentence.

Hawkins (2014) argues that complexity can be measured for a certain domain, but, that “we do not yet have a method of assessing the simplicity or complexity of a whole construction, let alone of a whole grammar”. He argues that complexity needs to be related to efficiency of communication. Sometimes there may be a trade-off between complexity and efficiency, a more complex feature may be more efficient (e.g., more complex case marking helps access argument structure identification.)

To illustrate this complexity problem, we present data from a question production task with Dutch and German adults, and German children eliciting agent- and patient-first questions (see Fig 1 for a patient-first question). We used DPs with ambiguous (Dutch, German) and unambiguous (German) case morphology. Results show that for patient-first questions, in both languages passive questions like “Welche Ente wird von den Mäusen gewaschen?” were preferred. However, German adults and children realize more object questions like “Welche Ente waschen die Mäuse?” than Dutch adults and do so more often when clear case morphology is present. This raises the question: what is more complex, what is more efficient? Overt case morphology or a passive question?

We will use this small case study to illustrate some of the big issues related to the sandwich idea. Specifically, we will take a critical look at the concept of linguistic complexity, and question the role of this factor in language change processes. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the sandwich structure.

Introduction	Question elicitation
	
<p><i>Hier siehst du eine braune Ente, eine gelbe Ente und zwei Mäuse.</i>  'Here you see a brown duck, a yellow duck and two mice'</p>	<p><i>Hier geht es ums waschen. Stell mir die richtige Frage und ich zeige dir die Antwort.</i>  'Here you see washing. Ask me the right question and I'll show you the answer.'</p>

Figure 1. target-like responses: object question *Welche Ente waschen die Mäuse?* or passive question *Welche Ente wird von den Mäusen gewaschen?*

Hawkins, J. A. (2014). *Cross-linguistic variation and efficiency*. OUP.

Nübling, D. & L. Kempf (2020). Grammaticalization in the Germanic languages. In: Bisang & Malchukov (eds.), *Grammaticalization Scenarios from Europe and Asia*, 105–164. De Gruyter.