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Title: A formal and social dimension of complexity in a periphrastic construction

Abstract:
Complexity is a notoriously broad concept leaving space to address it from numerous angles. This paper approaches complexity on the formal level in terms of verb movement (and the avoidance thereof) as it relates to a specific construction (do-periphrasis) and on the social level i.e. through an inner-community comparison of heritage and minority speakers’ production of periphrastic do.

Like many West Germanic varieties the Low-Saxon variety Plautdietsch alternates between the use of periphrastic do + lexical verb and a synthetic variant. Previous research has shown that do insertion is driven by different factors on the (morpho)syntactic semantic and/or pragmatic level. One common cross-linguistic hypothesis is that the insertion is motivated by fewer movement operations of V° (Duinhoven 1994 as cited in Langer 2001). This preference is particularly salient with complex verbs i.e. verbs that form more than one syntactic head constituent (Vikner 2005) in order to avoid not only movement out of V° but also stranding a complement or particle (1a-b examples in Plautdietsch).

(1a) Ekj moak mien Äten reed. (particle stranding)
I make my food ready

(1b) Ekj do mien Äten reedmoaken. (do-insertion)
I do my food ready-make
'I am preparing food.'

While some researchers correlated this use of the periphrasis to acquisitional processes in classroom L2 leaners (Blom & de Korte 2011) others determined system-internal syntactic or semantic restrictions (Fischer 2001). To date the complexity hypothesis has not been systematically tested for heritage or minority speakers. This paper presents the results of a corpus-based variation analysis of simplex and complex verbs in Plautdietsch contrasting heritage and minority speakers in a bilingual Plautdietsch-English community. Preliminary results show that complex verbs have a significantly higher probability to occur with periphrastic do in both groups. Since Plautdietsch is an OV-language with verb-second order in main clauses the strong interaction of ‘verb complexity’ and ‘clause type’ confirms the syntax-driven hypothesis i.e. do-insertion has a significantly higher probability for main than subordinate clauses. The inner-community analysis reveals that heritage speakers have a higher probability than minority speakers to insert do with complex verbs (and generally in main clauses).

The corpus analysis presents conclusive evidence for the preference of Merge over Move across both speaker groups however with a stronger effect for heritage speakers. While previous studies saw the use of periphrastic verbs as an intermediate step in L2 grammars this analysis focusses on inner-community variation as a result of acquisitional differences.
References:


