
German *so*-relatives: Lost in grammatical, typological, and sociolinguistic change

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This paper analyzes the loss of the German relativizer *so* (*Der Captain/so ein wachsamere Mann* ‘the captain, who was a vigilant man’). Once fairly frequent, it fell out of use in Early Modern German. A number of papers address this construction (e.g. Ágel 2010), but no comprehensive empirical study of its decline has been carried out yet. The present study seeks to determine the rate and frequency of the decrease as well as the contributing factors. In a subcorpus of the GerManC (1650–1800) composed of six different genres, all relevant relative clauses are analyzed. The results reveal striking differences between genres: Legal texts display the highest rate of *so* while sermons tend to avoid it. Narrative prose texts show strong variation, depending on stylistic purposes: the construction is favored in highly elaborated texts and avoided in texts that aim for spoken-like style. All genres witness the loss of the construction around 1800.

The extinction can be ascribed to multiple factors: In its history, German has developed towards the “overt complexity” type (Bisang 2015). This development was reinforced by the increased use of written language, where concise and unequivocal constructions are favored. The relativizer *so* belonged to elaborate written style, but was less adapted to this “ecological niche” (Lindsay & Aronoff 2013) than its competitors: relative pronouns (e.g. *welche*- ‘which’) are more distinct, as they mark the referential identity by number and gender agreement and the syntactic function by case. The study shows that a theory of obsolescence needs to encompass grammatical, typological, and sociolinguistic factors.

References: • Ágel, Vilmos (2010): +/- Wandel. Am Beispiel der Relativpartikeln *so* und *wo*. In: Kodierungstechniken im Wandel, 199-222. • Bisang, Walter (2015): Hidden complexity – the neglected side of complexity and its implications. *Linguistics Vanguard* 1: 177-187. • Lindsay, Mark & Aronoff, Mark (2013): Natural selection in self-organizing morphological systems. In: *Morphology in Toulouse*, 133-153.