

The rise of complex verb constructions in Germanic

A project sketch

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Complex verb constructions (also known as ‘long verb clusters’) combine two or more auxiliary verbs with a lexical verb, as illustrated in (1) and (2) for English, Dutch, German and Swedish.

(1) [MODAL MODAL VERB] a.k.a. ‘double modal construction’

I must be able to come.
Ik moet kunnen komen.
Ich muss kommen können.
Jag måste kunna komma.

(2) [PERFECT MODAL VERB] a.k.a. ‘complex perfect construction’

I have been able to come.
Ik heb/ben kunnen komen.
Ich habe kommen können.
Jag har kunnat komma/kommit.

These examples show some of the cross-linguistic variation in the combinatory patterns and formal coding of long verb constructions in Germanic. The semantic and formal properties of complex verb constructions are rather well-studied in the present-day Germanic languages, especially in Dutch and German. However, little is known on why and how such complex verb constructions came into being.

The talks presents a new research project aiming to increase our factual knowledge of the rise of complex verb constructions in Germanic, with an empirical focus on English, Dutch, German and Swedish. The project also aims to enhance our understanding of the process of ‘constructional complexification’ which is hypothesized to lie behind the rise of complex verb constructions. It investigates both language internal and external motivations and mechanisms of complexification combining the frameworks of diachronic construction grammar and comparative linguistics. Methodologically, it introduces the use of parallel corpora in historical linguistics, compiling a multilingual parallel corpus of historical Bible translations.

The talk will be held in English or Dutch, depending on the audience.

In collaboration with Gerlof Bouma (University of Gothenburg) and Nicoline van der Sijs (Meertens Institute Amsterdam and Radboud University Nijmegen).

Read more on <https://complexverbconstructions.wordpress.com/>.