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Referential Null Subjects in German: Dialects and Diachronic Continuity

It is received knowledge that standard German (just like most modern Germanic languages) doesn't allow for referential null subjects, i.e. referential pronominal subjects must be overtly realized (Roberts 2007). However, non-standard German and German dialects do allow for null subjects in a number of cases. The licensing conditions are different, however. Non-standard German allows for diary drop and topic drop, and some dialects such as Bavarian even allow for pro-drop in second person whenever the subject is c-commanded by an inflected head (see Weiß 2005). The question that we wish to address in this talk is, how this discrepancy could be captured from a diachronic perspective.

In this talk we will – building upon Axel & Weiß (2010) and Volodina & Weiß (to appear 2014) – trace down the availability of referential (i.e. non-expletive) null subjects in some varieties of German to a diachronic continuity starting from early Old High German, for which we will provide extensive empirical evidence from Early New High German texts. We will show that in a number of non-high-register texts from the 14th-17th century there are lots of cases of null subjects that can be found either in dialects or even in non-standard contemporary German.

Axel, Katrin & Weiß, Helmut (2010): What changed where? A plea for the re-evaluation of dialectal evidence. In: Breitbarth, Anne, Christopher Lucas, Sheila Watts and David Willis (eds.), Continuity and Change in Grammar. 13–34.

Roberts, Ian (2007): Diachronic Syntax. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Volodina, Anna & Helmut Weiß (to appear 2014): Diachronic development of null subjects in German. In: Featherston, Sam & Versley, Yannick (eds). Firm Foundations: Quantitative Approaches to Grammar and Grammatical Change. ([Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs](#)). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter

Weiß, Helmut (2005): Inflected complementizers in Continental West Germanic dialects, in: ZDL 72, 148-166.