

Language change for the worst – a completely superfluous new infinitive in German

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Language Change
for the Worst
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OVERVIEW

- The phenomenon
- No optimization whatsoever
- Alternatives to optimization

PHENOMENON | NO OPTIMIZATION | ALTERNATIVES

Basis:

- [werden + INF], lit.: ‘become + INF’
- future or conditional meaning
- example:

(1) *Er* **wird** **schlafen.**
he becomes sleep.INF

‘He will be sleeping’

‘Probably, he is sleeping (right now)’

‘Probably, he will be sleeping’

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Phenomenon:

- [*werden*_{INF} + INF]
- does not exist according to most of the literature (e.g., Fabricius-Hansen 1986:148)
- examples (constructed):

(2) ...*dass er **schlafen werden** kann.*
that he sleep.INF become.INF can

possible meaning: ‘...that he is able [to sleep in the future]’

(3) *Er hofft, **schlafen zu werden.***
he hopes sleep.INF PARTICLE become.INF

possible meaning: ‘He hopes [to sleep in the future]’

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ALTERNATIVES

Some real examples...

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(4) *Es sind die letzten Musterbeispiele realsozialistischer
Trostlosigkeit, von denen man bald*

sag-en werden kann,
say-INF become.INF can

dass das China des Jangtse so einmal ausgesehen hat.

‘These are the last paradigm examples of real-socialistic
drabness, predestined to exemplify what Yangtze China used to
look like.’

(www.faz.net, 2001)

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(5) *Dem widersprachen die Spieler und betonten, auch ohne Geld für ihr Land*

spiel-en zu werden.
play-INF PARTICLE become-INF

‘The players objected to this and stressed that they would play for their country even without remuneration.’

(Nürnberger Zeitung, 2006)

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Robustness of the phenomenon:

bare infinitive

- corpus occurrence
 - similar in frequency to comparable structures with modals
 - much more frequent than comparable slips of the pen
- acceptance rates in questionnaire marginal

zu infinitive

- corpus occurrence close to zero
 - acceptance rates better than for the bare infinitive
- Possible interpretation: **ongoing language change!**

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Language change without optimization

4 kinds of non-optimization

1. **future/posterior meaning** in non-finite contexts **already covered** by the present infinitive (stem + -en)
[functional non-optimization]
2. **conditional meaning not conveyed** either
[functional non-optimization]
3. even **finite version mostly non-obligatory**
[functional non-optimization]
4. new form **much more complex** than old alternatives
[formal non-optimization]

In more detail...

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1. **Future/posterior meaning** in non-finite contexts **already covered** by the present infinitive (stem + -en)

sag-en **werden** *kann* \equiv **sag-en** *kann*
say-INF become-INF can say-INF can

spiel-en **zu** **werden** \equiv **zu** **spiel-en**
play-INF PARTICLE become-INF PARTICLE play-INF

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2. **Conditional meaning not conveyed** either

- “Epistemic non-finiteness gap” (Abraham 2001, Kiss 2005:118, see also Leiss 2012:43)
- no corpus examples of [*werden*_{INF} + INF] with an unambiguously epistemic meaning

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3. Even **finite version mostly non-obligatory**

- [*werden*_{FIN} + INF] only rarely obligatory
obligatory: absence of marking implies certain feature value
- [*werden*_{FIN} + INF] dispreferred in certain contexts
- [*werden*_{INF} + INF] in most corpus examples not needed to convey future/posterior meaning
- at least: [*werden*_{INF} + INF] does not invade the dispreferred contexts of [*werden*_{FIN} + INF]

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4. New form **much more complex** than old alternatives

cf. slide no. 10!

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So, are there no benefits at all?

3 kinds of illusory optimization

1. creating **analogy** between *werden* and the (other) temporal auxiliaries (*haben, sein*)
[formal & functional optimization]
2. adding **communicative weight** to a speaker's utterance
[functional optimization]
3. **hypercorrection**
[functional optimization]

However, these are illusory, as...

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1. creating **analogy** between *werden* and the (other) temporal auxiliaries (*haben, sein*)

illusory: analogy not complete without obligatoriness

2. adding **communicative weight** to a speaker's utterance

illusory: concept of extravagance (Haspelmath 1999a)
problematic

3. **hypercorrection**

illusory: also used in unofficial situations

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Motivating language change without recourse to optimization

- language **is** change, stability is in need of explanation (Hopper 1998:157)
 - cannot be correct taken literally
 - but in a weaker version?
- language change is functional adaptation (including **wrong tracks**), followed by formal **exploitation** (Haspelmath 1999b + Seiler 2015)

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Thank you
for your
attention!