

Subjunctive 2 Usage in Relation to the Preterite in German

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Abstract

An investigation into the usage of the subjunctive 2 mood and the preterite verb in formal writing throughout Germany with a special focus on southern Germany, an area that has undergone a historic loss of the preterite. Research was conducted using newspaper corpus data. The resulting data did not show a relationship but did raise more questions about both subjunctive 2 and preterite usage.

Background

This research is based on a preliminary project completed in 2018 that focused on southern Germany. The motivation for both projects was the question: *Is there a relationship between the historic loss of the preterite verb form in southern German dialects and the use of the present Subjunctive 2 in these areas?* The preterite verb form is also known as the simple past and is used mainly in writing. It has become interchangeable with the past participle, the form mainly used for the past tense in speech. The subjunctive 2 mood has three primary uses in Standard German:

1. Used to express hypothetical situations
example: *I would go if I could*
2. Used in indirect/polite requests
example: *I would like a glass of water*
3. Used in the place of subjunctive 1 mood forms when the subjunctive 1 form is ambiguous

There are two subjunctive 2 verb forms: the periphrastic form (similar to the English “would do ___”) and the synthetic form, which is based on the preterite verb form, as illustrated by the following figures.

Kaufen:	To buy
Preterite	Present Subjunctive 2
kaufte	kaufte

Figure 1. Regular Verbs

Singen:	To sing
Preterite	Present Subjunctive 2
sang	sänge

Figure 2. Irregular Verbs

Because the southern German dialects spoken in Bayern (Bavaria) and Baden-Württemberg have undergone a historical loss of the preterite called the “Oberdeutscher Präteritumschwund” (Upper German Preterite Loss), I was interested to see if this had any effect on the frequency of use of the synthetic subjunctive 2 form. I was specifically interested in the standardized German spoken in the area, not the dialects, and I used newspapers to investigate my question. I looked at 13 newspapers from the two states previously mentioned and compared them to 4 nationally circulated papers. I found that the nationally circulated papers had a statistically significantly higher frequency of the synthetic subjunctive 2 form than the state-wide newspapers.

Motivation

I decided to expand my study to look at the whole country when it was suggested that it could be possible that local newspapers in general tend to use the synthetic subjunctive 2 form less, not just papers from the two southernmost- states. In addition to looking at more states, I also decided to look at the frequencies of the preterite forms of my chosen words. The motivation behind this choice was to see if there was any difference in the frequency of preterite use across the country, and if so, if this had any relationship to the subjunctive 2 frequencies.

Methodology

Using the COSMAS II corpus administrated by IDS Mannheim, I found the frequencies of both the synthetic subjunctive 2 and the preterite forms for 10 irregular verbs conjugated for 1st person singular relative to the 2016 total number of words in the publication. The chosen verbs were as follows:

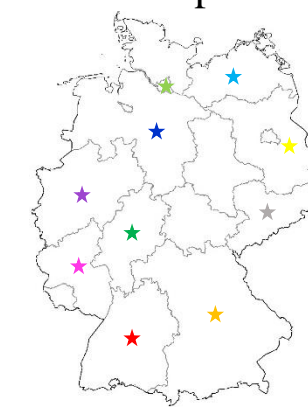
Word	Synthetic	Preterite	Gloss
kommen	käme	kam	To come
geben	gäbe	gab	To give
sprechen	spräche	sprach	To speak
gehen	ginge	ging	To go
wissen	wüsste	wusste	To know
fliegen	flöge	flog	To fly
lassen	ließe	ließ	To let
ziehen	zöge	zog	To pull
essen	äße	aß	To eat
denken	dächte	dachte	To think

Figure 3. Chosen Irregular Verbs and Relevant Verb Forms

Data was collected from 63 newspapers, including 4 widely circulated newspapers and up to 9 publications per state (except Berlin, Bremen, and Schleswig-Holstein, for which the corpus did not have any newspapers with 2016 data, and Thüringen, Saarland, and Sachsen-Anhalt, for which the corpus only had one newspaper each). The number of papers per state was limited to 9 for practical reasons.

State	Newspapers
1 Baden-Württemberg	7
2 Bayern	9
3 Brandenburg	4
4 Hamburg	2
5 Hessen	9
6 Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	2
7 Niedersachsen	9
8 Nordrhein-Westfalen	9
9 Rheinland-Pfalz	3
10 Sachsen	5
11 Big Papers	Der Spiegel
12	Die Zeit
13	Die Welt
14	Die Süddeutsche Zeitung
15	

Figures 4 and 5. Distribution of Papers per State



Results

The data was analyzed using a two-tailed z-test where the Big Paper information was the population data.

Synthetic: The Big Paper data was statistically significantly larger than all other states' data

Preterite: The Big Paper data was statistically significantly smaller than the data from Bayern and Hessen but had no statistically significant difference with any of the other states.

1 Big Papers	Synthetic	0.000121664	1.99485E-05	1 Bayern	Preterite	0.001805656	0.000287314
2 Sachsen	Synthetic	6.41666E-05	5.43212E-06	2 Hessen	Preterite	0.001712912	0.000209845
3 Brandenburg	Synthetic	5.89205E-05	0.000010734	3 Rheinland-Pfalz	Preterite	0.001632312	0.000258965
4 Hamburg	Synthetic	5.62376E-05	1.31765E-05	4 Baden-Württemberg	Preterite	0.001609744	9.85523E-05
5 Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	Synthetic	0.000055951	1.40897E-05	5 Brandenburg	Preterite	0.001589338	0.000145021
6 Baden-Württemberg	Synthetic	5.54179E-05	4.29696E-06	6 Sachsen	Preterite	0.001583871	9.32874E-05
7 Hessen	Synthetic	4.70749E-05	3.31571E-06	7 Mecklenburg-Vorpommern	Preterite	0.00157397	9.38309E-05
8 Nordrhein-Westfalen	Synthetic	4.6963E-05	4.92356E-06	8 Nordrhein-Westfalen	Preterite	0.001520951	0.000103514
9 Bayern	Synthetic	4.67758E-05	7.06062E-06	9 Big Papers	Preterite	0.001520924	0.000142907
10 Rheinland-Pfalz	Synthetic	4.64067E-05	9.01511E-06	10 Niedersachsen	Preterite	0.001511107	0.000458685
11 Niedersachsen	Synthetic	3.52762E-05	9.57813E-06	11 Hamburg	Preterite	0.001366483	4.62059E-05

Figure 6. Data Averages for the Synthetic Form

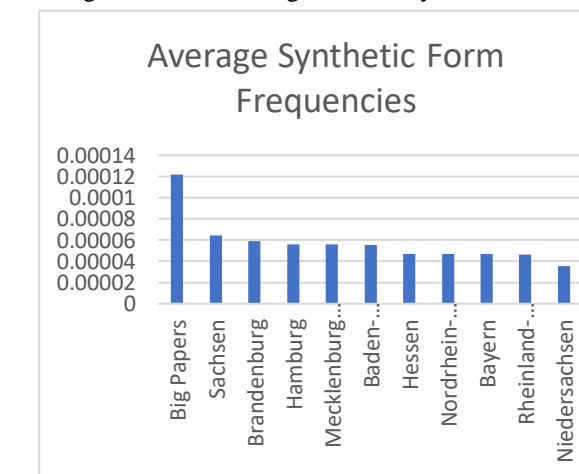


Figure 8. Graph of Averages for the Synthetic Form

Figure 7. Data Averages for the Synthetic Form

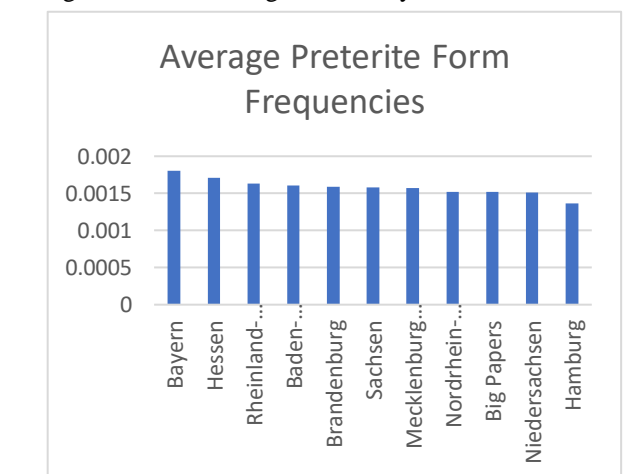


Figure 9. Graph of Averages for the Synthetic Form

Conclusions

The subjunctive 2 form is used less in general by local newspapers than nationally circulating papers, which is difficult to explain. It is possible that synthetic subjunctive 2 forms are a hallmark of a specific writing style used by the nationally circulated papers (perhaps a more prestigious form) and the local papers employ a different writing style (maybe more informal). The preterite form is used at relatively the same frequency (for the words chosen) across the board, with the surprising exception of it being used slightly more frequently in Bayern and Hessen, the first of which I would have expected a much lower frequency from because of the historic loss of the preterite form in the dialects of the region (parts of Hessen are reported to have preterite loss too). Overall, the loss of the preterite is not evident in formal writing. I would recommend further research into subjunctive 2 use and its distribution across different registers, as opposed to geographic distribution.

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