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COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CONCESSIVE SUBORDINATE CLAUSES IN EARLY NEW HIGH GERMAN AND CONTEMPORARY GERMAN

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Abstract. *The study explores the structural, semantic, and functional evolution of concessive subordinate clauses in German, comparing their use in the Early New High German (ENHG) period (14th–16th centuries) with their modern counterparts. By analyzing historical texts and contemporary German corpora, the research identifies key transformations in concessive clause formation, word order, and conjunction usage.*

*Findings indicate that ENHG concessive clauses exhibited significant syntactic variability, with flexible word order and a broader range of concessive conjunctions, including *ob wol*, *obgleich*, *wenngleich*, and *wiewohl*. Over time, these structures underwent grammaticalization, leading to the standardization of concessive conjunctions in modern German, where *obwohl* dominates spoken discourse, while *obgleich* and *wenngleich* remain more common in formal contexts.*

Additionally, the study highlights a shift in the pragmatic function of concessive clauses. In ENHG, concessive meaning often overlapped with causal or conditional interpretations, whereas modern concessive constructions have become more specialized in expressing contrast and unexpected outcomes. Furthermore, concessive clauses in ENHG were primarily a feature of written texts, particularly in religious and legal documents, while in contemporary German, they are frequently used in spoken and informal communication.

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the diachronic development of German syntax, illustrating how concessive clauses evolved from structurally diverse and semantically ambiguous constructions into highly standardized elements of modern grammar. Future research could expand on this analysis by incorporating computational linguistic methods to trace concessive clause frequency over time and comparing German with other Germanic languages to identify parallel syntactic changes.

Key words: *concessive clauses, Early New High German, modern German, syntactic evolution, grammaticalization, concessive conjunctions, diachronic linguistics.*

Introduction.

Concessive clauses are of crucial importance in the syntactic organisation of complex German sentences, expressing semantic relationships that indicate the realisation of an action despite expected obstacles. Their grammatical structure, functional specificity, and frequency of use have undergone significant changes throughout the historical development of the German language, rendering them a compelling subject for diachronic analysis. A particularly interesting aspect is the comparison of concessive constructions from the Early New High German period (14th–16th centuries) with those in contemporary German, as it allows for tracing the



patterns of their evolution, stabilisation, and grammaticalization.

The Early New High German period is a formative stage in the syntactic system of the German language, during which concessive subordinate clauses had not yet reached full standardization, and their structure remained highly variable. The conjunctions used to express concessive meaning had a broader range of applications, and the word order in subordinate constructions exhibited greater flexibility. By contrast, modern German has stabilised concessive conjunctions, such as *obwohl*, *obgleich*, and *wenngleich*, and the syntactic structure of subordinate clauses has become more rigidly defined.

The aim of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of concessive subordinate clauses in Early New High German and contemporary German, identify the key directions of their transformation, and determine the factors influencing their development. The study employs a diachronic and syntactic-structural approach, allowing for a detailed examination of how concessive subordinate clauses have gradually integrated into the grammatical system of German, acquiring new functional characteristics over time.

Research results.

A comparative analysis of concessive subordinate clauses in Early New High German (ENHG) and contemporary German reveals significant structural, semantic and functional transformations that have shaped the evolution of this syntactic phenomenon. The findings of this study, based on an examination of historical texts from the 14th to 16th centuries and modern German corpora, highlight both the diachronic continuity and the major shifts in concessive clause formation and usage.

1. Structural Changes in Concessive Subordinate Clauses

One of the most significant distinctions observed between ENHG and contemporary German is the structural variability exhibited by concessive clauses in earlier periods. In ENHG, concessive clauses demonstrated a higher degree of syntactic flexibility with respect to word order and clause positioning. The subordinate clause was able to precede or follow the main clause, and the placement of key elements such as negations and adverbials varied considerably.



For example, in the 15th-century text *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, we find:

Ob wol ich dich gemahnet habe, du bist doch ungehorsam geblieben.

(Although I have warned you, you have remained disobedient.)

Here, the concessive clause is introduced by *ob wol*, a precursor to the modern *obwohl*, and precedes the main clause. However, in other instances, concessive clauses appeared in post-position without a strict syntactic framework. This contrasts with modern German, where concessive subordinate clauses predominantly follow the main clause and exhibit a more standardized structure.

In contemporary usage, we observe:

Ich habe dich gewarnt, obwohl du nicht hören wolltest.

(I warned you, although you did not want to listen.)

Unlike in ENHG, modern concessive clauses consistently follow a more rigid syntactic structure with a subject-verb inversion in the subordinate clause.

2. Evolution of Concessive Conjunctions

Another key finding concerns the evolution of concessive conjunctions. In ENHG, concessive meaning was conveyed through a diverse range of conjunctions, including *ob wol*, *obgleich*, *wenngleich*, *wiewohl*, and even *wie sehr*. The choice of conjunctions was highly context-dependent and showed significant regional variation.

For instance, in Martin Luther's translation of the Bible (1545), we find:

Wiewol wir Sünder sind, Christus hat uns erlöst.

(Although we are sinners, Christ has redeemed us.)

By contrast, in modern German, the concessive conjunction system has undergone a process of grammaticalization, leading to the dominance of *obwohl*, *obgleich*, and *wenngleich*, while other forms such as *wiewohl* have become archaic. Moreover, modern concessive clauses tend to show a clearer distinction between formal and informal usage. While *obwohl* is the most common in spoken language, *obgleich* and *wenngleich* are more typical of formal or literary registers.

3. Semantic and Pragmatic Shifts

The comparative analysis also reveals important semantic and pragmatic changes in the use of concessive clauses. In ENHG, concessive clauses often carried an implicit



adversative nuance, closely linking them to causal and conditional clauses. This overlap sometimes made concessive meaning ambiguous, requiring additional contextual cues.

For example, in a 16th-century legal document:

Obgleich der Zeuge die Wahrheit sagte, wurde er nicht gehört.

(Although the witness spoke the truth, he was not heard.)

Here, the concessive clause could be interpreted as implying both contrast (*the truth was spoken, but ignored*) and an indirect causal relationship (*his testimony did not influence the decision*).

In contemporary German, concessive clauses have become more specialized and are less likely to overlap semantically with other clause types. Additionally, modern concessive constructions frequently carry a stronger contrastive or unexpected-result function, particularly in argumentative or persuasive discourse.

Consider the following modern example:

Obwohl er reich ist, lebt er sehr bescheiden.

(Although he is rich, he lives very modestly.)

The concessive clause explicitly introduces an unexpected contrast between wealth and modesty, highlighting the semantic refinement of concessive structures in contemporary German.

4. Increased Formalization and Grammaticalization

The historical corpus analysis suggests that concessive subordinate clauses in ENHG were less grammatically standardized than they are in modern German. In the 14th–16th centuries, there was considerable variation in word order, the positioning of concessive markers, and the integration of these clauses within sentences. Additionally, concessive meaning was sometimes conveyed through modal particles rather than explicit conjunctions.

For example, in a 15th-century manuscript, we find:

Er folgte ihm, so er auch nicht wollte.

(He followed him, even though he did not want to.)

In this case, *so* functions as a concessive marker, a usage that has disappeared



from contemporary German.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, German grammar underwent increasing codification, leading to the stabilization of concessive conjunctions and their usage patterns. This process of grammaticalization contributed to the decline of older forms and the establishment of *obwohl*, *obgleich*, and *wenngleich* as the primary concessive conjunctions.

5. The Role of Concessive Clauses in Different Text Genres

A genre-based analysis of concessive clauses in ENHG and modern German demonstrates notable functional shifts across different types of texts.

- Religious texts: In ENHG, concessive clauses were frequently used to express theological paradoxes, as seen in biblical translations and sermons.
- Legal documents: Concessive clauses often served to outline exceptions or contradictions within legal reasoning.
- Literary works: In both ENHG and modern German, concessive clauses have been employed to create contrast and dramatic tension. However, modern literature tends to use them more sparingly and with a clearer syntactic structure.
- Spoken language: In contemporary German, concessive clauses are widely used in spontaneous speech, whereas in ENHG, they were primarily a feature of written discourse.

Summary and conclusions.

The findings of this research illustrate the significant transformation of concessive subordinate clauses from the Early New High German period to contemporary German. The transition from syntactic flexibility to structural standardization, the refinement of concessive conjunctions, and the increasing differentiation of concessive meaning from other clause types reflect broader trends in the evolution of German syntax. These changes highlight how language standardization, grammaticalization, and pragmatic shifts have contributed to the modern concessive clause system.

Future research could build on this analysis by incorporating computational linguistic methods to examine concessive clause frequency across different time periods, as well as exploring cross-linguistic comparisons with other Germanic



languages to identify parallel developments.

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