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Clitics in German patient letters from the 19th and 20th centuries

German article clitics with prepositional hosts (e.g. *im* ‘in the’) are subject to an ongoing grammaticalization process (Nübling 2005), while article clitics with other hosts or pronominal clitics (e.g. *wenn*’s ‘if it’) are primarily associated with non-standard varieties. Clitics are investigated in a number of studies (e.g. Christiansen 2016), which only rarely apply a ‘language history from below’ approach (Elspaß 2005) or a sociolinguistic perspective. However, this seems promising especially concerning non-standard forms and their use in written language. Therefore, this study uses a corpus of 192 letters written by patients in psychiatric hospitals in 19th- and early 20th-century Germany. Not only allows the corpus to compare the use of clitic forms in the two centuries and their use by writers with different regional backgrounds and writing experience. It also allows to analyse how individual writers vary in their use of clitic forms both in letters to different addressees and within texts. Applying quantitative and qualitative methods, I analyse the frequencies of clitics used by different writer groups and in different types of letters as well as the functions of clitic forms according to the contexts in which individual writers use them.

Regarding inter-writer variation, I find that non-standard clitic forms are more likely to be used by unexperienced writers, writers from Southern Germany, and by writers who lived in the 20th century. There is intra-writer variation too, as non-standard forms tend to occur more frequently in private letters than in official letters. Besides, it can be observed that the writers use clitics within texts selectively for various communicative purposes, such as constructing the writer’s relationship to the addressee (cf. Salomonsson 2011) or performing aspects of the writer’s identity. These functions could support the extension of non-standard clitic forms into the written language. Hence, investigating stylistic variation can help to improve our understanding of clitic forms.

References

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