German '(it is) no matter what' as an Emerging Subordinator

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The subordinator inventories of modern European languages mostly came into being during the late medieval to early modern period (Kortmann 1997), and German is no exception. Yet even today new subordinators do occasionally emerge. In our contribution we will highlight one such case, viz. concessive-conditional subordinators based on expressions of indifference like *es ist egal/gleich/gleichgültig/einerlei* (all: 'it is equal, i.e. no matter') in combination with interrogatives introduced by WH-pronouns like *was* 'what'. The following are examples from DeReKo, the 40+ billion reference corpus of standard written German:

(1)   Es ist mir doch vollkommen *egal*, *was* bei dir und ein paar anderen verpönt ist.
       'It doesn't matter to me at all what's frowned upon by you and a few others.'

(2)   Eigentlich *egal*, *was* Altvater war oder ist.
       'No matter, really, what Altvater was or is.'

(3)   Diese Familie hält zusammen, *egal was* kommt.
       'This family sticks together, no matter what (alternatively: whatever) comes.'

The result of the grammaticalisation, as suggested by (3), is a paradigm corresponding to the well-known set of *WH-ever* compounds in English and their German *W immer/auch* counter-parts. The fact that new subordinators arise while a synonymous paradigm is already in place testifies to the functional motivation of the grammaticalisation process – which starts from a copula construction expressing indifference as to the choice implied by the interrogative, cf. (1), and proceeds through the elision of the copula, along with any optional material such as dative phrases and adverbs (cf. *mir* 'to me' and *vollkommen* 'at all' above) – as a strategy of communicative backgrounding, cf. (2) (Leuschner 2006). This enables *egal* (etc.) + *W* to be reanalysed as a complex subordinator, cf. (3), and, in a step of secondary grammaticalisation, as a free-choice indefinite pronoun, cf. (4):

(4)   Diese Datenkombination darf nicht einmal der Ausweishersteller oder das Meldeamt erheben geschweige denn speichern und für *egal was* nutzen!
       'Not even the manufacturer of the ID-card or the registration office are allowed to collect this combination of data, let alone store or use it for anything (lit.: for no matter what).'

In our paper we provide an interim report on on-going research into the patterns of variation linking expressions of indifference to concessive-conditional subordinators and indefinite pronouns in DeReKo. At the present stage nearly 20,000 tokens of combinations of *egal* etc. with *was* are being annotated and statistically analysed for ten parameters, complementing a

parallel study into the emergence of *W immer/auch* subordinators (Bossuyt/De Cuypere/ Leuschner 2018). The results form a stepping-stone towards a fine-grained, dynamic picture of concessive conditionals in constructional terms (cf. d'Avis 2016) which will contribute significantly to our understanding of the interplay of functional motivation and constructional schematisation on the one hand and to a contrastive and typological view of expressions of indifference on the other hand. For example, the impersonal expressions at issue here from German (*es ist egal* etc.) display a wide range of variation (*piepe, schnurz, schnuppe, wurscht*) which includes the productive use of compounding (*egal > piepegal > schnurzpie-pegal*). English, by contrast, shows strong effects of layering thanks to the conversion of *matter* from noun to verb, as the older phrase *(it is) no matter* is now used almost exclusively with ellipsis (*no matter who he is*), while the newer version *it doesn't matter* is unavailable for ellipsis (*it doesn't matter who he is*). Expressions of indifference are thus tied up more closely with fundamental differences between German, English and potentially other languages than suggested in the literature so far (e.g. Haspelmath/König 1998).

References

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