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Shedding new light on the wohl muddle: The particle schier in Austrian German*

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1. Introduction: well-type modal particles in Germanic and beyond

In Standard German, wohl (lit. ‘well’), which originated as the adverbial counterpart of gut ‘good’, has a well-documented use as a so-called modal particle (or discourse particle); see Thurmair 1989, 139-145 and Zimmermann 2008 for representative analyses. As a modal particle, illustrated in (1), wohl roughly amounts to a quasi-synonym of probably / apparently / certainly (or parenthetical I guess / I suppose).

(1) Damit hatte wohl niemand in Mattersburg gerechnet. German there.with had wohl nobody in M. reckoned
‘Apparently (= wohl) nobody in Mattersburg had expected this.’
(DeReKo: Burgenländische Volkszeitung, 18.10.2012)

This is not an isolated fact. Several Germanic languages have developed a reading of a ‘well’-type lexeme that has a similar function. This is well-established for Scandinavian languages, as illustrated for Swedish väl ‘well’ in (2) (from the English-Swedish Parallel Corpus; quoted from Aijmer 2015, 179).

(2) Det är väl så man gör. Swedish this is väl how one does
‘That’s probably what you do.’

Sudhoff (2012, 109) discusses several readings of the Dutch cognate wel ‘well’, one of which also corresponds to the expression of ‘uncertainty or doubt’, as in his example (3).

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(3) Komt dat wel weer GOED?  
comes that wel again good  
‘Could this possibly get better again?’ (lit. ‘Will this [WEL] get better again?’)

Moreover, even non-Germanic languages display related developments, as in the case of French bien (lit. ‘well’), see Detges & Waltereit (2009). As shown in (4), bien can be used as a modal particle in questions, where it conveys ‘bewildment’; a suitable context for (4) would be one in which we did not expect the subject referent to speak to anyone.¹

(4) À qui est-ce qu’il a bien pu parler?  
who is-it that’he has bien been.a.ble to speak  
‘Who on earth could he have spoken to?’ (Corréard et al. 2007, 1893, adapted)

While some of these particles have received more attention than others (e.g. German wohl in the works of M. Zimmermann and Swedish väl in the works of K. Aijmer), we are far from an explanation of how wohl-type elements acquire modal particle readings and how the range of modal particle interpretations is constrained cross-linguistically. To shed new light on the diachronic preconditions for the emergence of such modal particles, this paper pursues the following strategy. In Section 2, I investigate a lexeme that has developed a wohl-type reading even though its source lexeme is not a wohl-type element: the lexeme schier (lit. ‘almost, downright’) in East Austrian German. I compare the diachronic development of schier (which originates in Middle High German schiere ‘soon’) to that of wohl and conclude, in Section 3, that the common denominator is a notion of scalarity. For concreteness’ sake, I sketch a formalization for wohl in Section 4. The objective of this little study is to show how case studies of dialectal phenomena can contribute to our understanding of more general patterns and developments.

2. When almost means well – introducing schier in East Austrian German

The diachronic origin of the South German² lexeme schier ‘almost, downright’, illustrated in (5), has previously been discussed in Eckardt 2011. Its original meaning was that of the temporal adverb soon, and Eckardt analyzes the development from Middle High German schiere ‘soon’ to Modern German schier ‘almost’.³ In the remainder of this paper, I write schier₀ for the variant that means ‘almost, downright’.

¹I am grateful to Alexandre Cremers and Valentine Hacquard for commenting on this example and related examples. The term ‘bewildernent’ is due to V. Hacquard; the context description to A. Cremers.

²Note that schier has a North German homophone (illustrated by schieres Hechtfleisch ‘pure pike meat’) that has a different diachronic trajectory (related to Middle High German schir ‘pure’); while it is unclear if their diachronic origin is distinct, I will adopt the standard view (e.g. in the DWB of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm) of treating them as separate lexemes and focus exclusively on the South German version.

³The synchronic meaning of schier in Standard German is puzzling in the sense that schier is a quasi-synonym of fast ‘almost’ as well as geradezu ‘downright/virtually/positively’, which are not equivalent in their meaning. To illustrate the difference, native speakers’ intuitions and corpus examples indicate that fast verdoppelt ‘almost doubled’ entails that the reference value has not yet doubled (e.g. from 6 to 12), whereas geradezu verdoppelt ‘downright/virtually/positively doubled’ lacks this entailment. As a concrete example, geradezu verdoppelt is judged acceptable when a value has risen from 6 to 12.5 (and corpus examples can be found that corroborate this point). For present purposes, I gloss over this complication.
(5) Der Beifall wollte schier nicht enden.
   ‘The applause almost (= schier) was not going to end.’
   (DeReKo: Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, 26.11.2008)

The Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm (DWB) observes that schier acquired an additional reading as a wohl-type modal particle (schierM), which derived from its ‘almost’ reading (schier0). The description of how schierM emerged from schier0 is quoted in (6) (from a DWB section completed in 1894), my translation added.

   (6) das mit schier verbundene [bezeichnet] eine steigerung gegenüber dem, was beschrieben werden soll. das mag der anlass gewesen sein zur herausbildung des gebrauchs im sinne von ‘gar, vollends’, von dem aus das wort dann zu der bedeutung ‘vol’ im weiteren sinne und zum bloszen füllwort herabsinkt.4
   ‘What is combined with schier conveys an increase with respect to what is being described. This may have been the reason for why schier acquired a reading in the sense of gar ‘even’ and vollends ‘completely’, from where schier developed a meaning equivalent to wohl in the broadest sense, and became a mere filler.’

This ‘wohl reading’ is documented by Hügel (1873, 136), who identifies the relevant meaning with that of wahrscheinlich ‘probably’ and provides the examples in (7).

   (7) a. Er wird schier heirat’n.
       he will SCHIERM get.married
       ‘He will probably (= schierM) get married.’

   b. Du wirst schier a Fiab’r kriag’n.
       you will SCHIERM a fever get
       ‘You will probably (= schierM) get a fever.’

The wohl reading of schier has largely disappeared from present-day German (including most varieties of Austrian German), but it is still available in Burgenland varieties of East Austrian German. (So far, I have been able to confirm this for the districts of Mattersburg, Neusiedl, and Oberpullendorf.) Corpus examples are sparse, but can be found; example (8) (where the spelling emulates dialectal speech) is from a public Facebook discussion, found via Google. Examples (9)-(10) are from a local newspaper.

   (8) na des wiad schia nix wean!
       well this will SCHIERM nothing become
       ‘Well, this probably (=schierM) won’t go well!’

   (9) Youngster Patrick Pasterniak hatte schier etwas dagegen.
       youngster P. P. had SCHIERM something against it
       ‘Apparently (=schierM), youngster P. Pasterniak was against it (his team losing).’
       (DeReKo: Burgenländische Volkszeitung, 11.06.2008)

4http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?bookref=15,19,29 (Section II.3, [Bd. 15, Sp. 26])
Evidence that schierM was more widely used in the 19th century stems from the writings of Peter Rosegger (*1843 / †1918 in Alpl/Krieglach, North Eastern Styria), (11), and Ludwig Anzengruber (*1839 / †1889 in Vienna), (12).

(11) Was, mein Hemd soll ich ausziehen? sagt der Franzel,
‘What, I shall take off my shirt?’, said Franzel,
das wird schier nicht geschehen.
that will SCHIERM not happen
‘it looks like (= schierM) that’s not gonna happen.’
(Rosegger, Peter. 1897. Das ewige Licht. via Google Books)5

(12) a. Toni: So, ’n Muckerl? Is das dein Schatz?
‘Oh, [you were accompanying] Muckerl? Is that your boyfriend?’
Helen: Ich wüßt nit, warum ich dich in dem Glauben irrmachen sollt;
‘I don’t know why I should deceive you with regards to your beliefs;’
er wird schier so was sein.
he will SCHIERM such something be
‘I guess (= schierM) he’s going to be something like that.’

b. D’ Matzner Sepherl tut schier was suchen,
the M. S. does SCHIERM something look for
‘Apparently (= schierM), Sepherl Matzner is looking for something,’
hat wohl ’n gestrigen Tag verloren.
has WOHL the of yesterday day lost
‘she must have lost her entire yesterday.’

(Anzengruber, Ludwig. 1884. Der Sternsteinhof, via COSMAS II / DeReKo)

We can now ask the following question: which property does the source lexeme of the modal particle schierM share with the source lexeme of the modal particle wohl?

3. A scalar hypothesis: wohl-type elements are built on scalarity

I propose, in (13), that wohl-type elements emerge from markers of scalar proximity.

(13) The scalar hypothesis of ‘wohl’-type elements
[i.] Modal particles like German wohl originate from approximators, i.e. from elements that function as scalar modifiers.
[ii.] Their grammaticalization involves a shift of the type of expression that they modify (before: a proposition, afterwards: the commitment to a proposition)

5https://books.google.de/books?id=vE4bCcAAQBAJ
We have already seen that \( \text{schier}_M \) originates in an approximator \( \text{schier}_0 \) that means ‘almost, downright’. The DWB proposes that the modal particle \( \text{wohl} \) (henceforth \( \text{wohl}_M \)) derived from an affirmative particle with the meaning ‘truly, certainly, definitely, indeed’.

As an example of the affirmative use of \( \text{wohl} \) (henceforth \( \text{wohl}_0 \)), the DWB cites the Middle High German (14), from Hartmann von Aue’s \( \text{Iwein} \) (approx. 1203 CE). The quote (15) (from a DWB section that was completed later, in 1943) addresses the emergence of \( \text{wohl}_M \) from the affirmative particle \( \text{wohl}_0 \).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(14)} & \quad \text{sô bistû \textbf{wol} ein vrum man:} \\
& \quad \text{then are you \textbf{wohl}_0 a valiant man} \\
& \quad \text{‘Then you are \textbf{truly} (=} \textbf{wohl}_0 \text{) a valiant man.’}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(15)} & \quad \text{\textit{aus bekräftigendem, beteuern dem woh l entwickelt sich die bedeutung ‘vielleicht, vermutlich’ bei bescheidenhöflicher, zustimmung heischender oder erwartung ausdrückender behauptung sowie in zweifelnder oder rhetorischer frage. in neuerer sprache in breiter verwendung.\textsuperscript{8}}}
\end{align*}
\]

‘From an affirmative, assuring \( \text{wohl} \) [i.e. \( \text{wohl}_0 \)], the meaning \( \text{vielleicht} \) ‘maybe’, \( \text{vermutlich} \) ‘presumably’ [i.e. \( \text{wohl}_M \)] emerges in statements that are modestly polite, fishing for approval, or expressing an expectation, as well as in doubtful or rhetorical questions, which is in broad use in the present day language.’

The scalarity of affirmative \( \text{wohl}_0 \) is particularly evident in combination with numerical phrases and measurements, where the DWB (quoting examples that date back to 1402) observes that affirmative \( \text{wohl}_0 \) means \textit{annähernd} ‘approximately’, \textit{ungefähr} ‘roughly’, or \textit{reichlich} ‘plentifully’.\textsuperscript{9} Synchronically, this use of affirmative \( \text{wohl}_0 \) is still attested, as in (16), where \( \text{wohl alle Kinder} \) corresponds to ‘approximately all children’ (or, more colloquially, ‘pretty much all kids’, as in the translation). We can make the parallels between \( \text{wohl}_0 \) and \( \text{schier}_0 \) more visible by looking at a parallel example with \( \text{schier} \), given in (17); again, the most natural translation of \( \text{schier alle Objekte} \) seems to be ‘pretty much all of the objects’, while a more literal translation would be ‘virtually all objects’ (or, possibly, ‘almost all objects’, but this does not seem to be the intended reading).

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(16)} & \quad \text{\textbf{Wohl} alle Kinder mögen es, wenn sie spannende Bücher vorgelesen bekommen.} \\
& \quad \text{‘Pretty much (= \textbf{wohl}_0) all kids like it if someone reads exciting books to them.’} \\
& \quad \text{(DeReKo: Mannheimer Morgen, 22.11.2014)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{(17)} & \quad \text{\textbf{Schier} alle Objekte zeichnen sich durch sauberste handwerkliche Arbeit aus.} \\
& \quad \text{‘Pretty much (= \textbf{schier}_0) all of the objects exhibit the most precise manual work.’} \\
& \quad \text{(DeReKo: Vorarlberger Nachrichten, 03.04.1997)}
\end{align*}
\]

\textsuperscript{6}Note that Detges & Waltereit (2009) also demonstrate an affirmative use of French \textit{bien} in declaratives (though they subsume affirmative \textit{bien} under the ‘modal particle use’ of \textit{bien}); this would suggest that \textit{bien} has undergone a development parallel to that of German \textit{wohl}.

\textsuperscript{7}Note that the use in (14) seems to be archaic, and unacceptable in Present Day German.

\textsuperscript{8}http://www_woerterbuchnetz_de/DWB?bookref=30,1025,1(Section II.B, [Bd. 30, Sp. 1062])

\textsuperscript{9}See also the corresponding entry in the online version of the \textit{Duden} dictionary (last accessed on February 28, 2017): http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/wohl_gut_besser_durchaus#Bedeutung4
4. Sketch of a formalization

Informally, this is what we aim for: what the source lexemes *schier*$_0$ and *wohl*$_0$ share with the modal particles *schier*$_M$ and *wohl*$_M$ is a scalar component that conveys the exceedance of a high threshold $\theta$. (I treat the inference that the scalar maximum is not reached as a conversational implicature.) What changes in the course of their diachronic development is the type of scale that these elements operate on. Simplifying for present purposes, I assume that the source lexeme *wohl*$_0$ has the same meaning as *approximately*. I propose that *wohl*$_0$ conveys that the preciseness of a given proposition $p$ (modeled as its closeness/similarity to a contextually salient true proposition $q$) exceeds a context-dependent threshold $\theta_p$. The sketch in (18) is inspired by Penka’s (2006, 279) analysis of *almost*.$^{10}$

\[
(18) \quad \text{wohl}_0 \ p \ (\approx \text{approximately} \ p) \text{ is true in w, for any contextually restricted set of propositions C, iff } \exists q \ [q \in g(C) \& \text{Closeness}(p,q) \geq \theta_p \& q(w)]
\]

where $\theta_p$ is a high threshold of closeness between propositions, and the degree of closeness between $p$ and $q$ reflects the similarity between $p$-worlds and $q$-worlds.

Similarly, I assume that the German modal particle *wohl*$_M$ makes a contribution parallel to that of the English auxiliary *must* and adverb *surely*, with the non-trivial difference that *must* makes a truth-conditional contribution, while *wohl* operates at a non-truth-conditional level. We can then posit the analysis in (19), loosely based on Swanson’s (2006) scalar analysis of *must* (see Lassiter 2016, 150). In words, *wohl*$_M$ conveys (at the level of felicity conditions) that, according to the speaker’s beliefs, the probability $P$ that the modified proposition $p$ holds in the evaluation world $w$ is high, i.e. $P$’s closeness to 1 exceeds a high threshold $\theta_{prob}$.\n$^{11}$ One open question concerns the setting of the threshold value in (19) and (18)); while $\theta_{prob}$ in (19) plausibly reflects the current speaker’s notion of ’high likelihood’, Lassiter (2016, 159-160) discusses limitations on making probability thresholds more precise in current theorizing. My approach inherits these limitations.

\[
(19) \quad \text{wohl}_M \ p \ (\approx \text{surely} \ p) \text{ is felicitous in w iff }\]
\[
\forall w' [w' \in \text{Dox}_{\text{speaker}}(w) \rightarrow \text{Prob-closeness}_{w'}(P(p(w)),1) \geq \theta_{prob}]
\]

where $\theta_{prob}$ is a high threshold of closeness between probabilities, $P(p(w))$ is the probability that $p$ holds in the evaluation world $w$, and $\text{prob-closeness}_{w'}$ is a scalar ‘close by’ relation that compares, in $w'$, two probability values $n$ ($0 \leq n \leq 1$).

In line with Beltrama’s (2015) analysis of *totally*, the reanalysis from (18) to (19) minimally (but not exhaustively) involves a change in the relevant scale and a shift in at-

\[\text{In line with Penka (2006), I take wohl}_0 \text{ to take a propositional argument even though wohl}_0 \text{ seems to form syntactic constituents with phrases that have a non-propositional meaning, cf. (16). This is in line with the parallel behavior of uncontroversially propositional operators such as wahrsccheinlich ‘probably’, in (1).}\]

\[\text{[Wahrscheinlich alle Schülerinnen und Schüler] haben sich […] den Tag herbeigesehn […] ‘[Probably all pupils] were longing for the day […].’ (DeReKo: Mannheimer Morgen, 23.06.2000)}\]

\[\text{Note that (19) is a simplification that only captures wohl}_M \text{ in declaratives.}\]
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issueness. What stays the same is the reference to a high threshold (θ) on the respective scale, which is present in both wohl₀ and wohl_M (and, by analogy, in schier₀ and schier_M).

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued for a diachronic development from APPROXIMATELY/ALMOST type elements to CERTAINLY/SURELY type elements, which is instantiated by German wohl and Burgenland German schier. The analysis that I propose treats wohl-type elements as scalar modal operators. This sheds new light both on the semantic analysis of wohl itself and on its diachronic development from wohl ‘well’ (as the adverbial counterpart of gut ‘good’) via wohl ‘truly’, (14), and wohl ‘approximately’, (16).

References


DeReKo = The German Reference Corpus DeReKo, at the Institut für Deutsche Sprache, Mannheim, http://www.ids-mannheim.de/kl/projekte/korpora/


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