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).

(3)   Komt   dat   **wel**   weer   GOED?   *Dutch*
        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 'bewilderment'; 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?   *French*
        to   who   is-it   that'he has   BIEN been.able.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 German[2] 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 $schier_0$ for the variant that means 'almost, downright'.

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

[2]Note that *schier* has a North German homophone (illustrated by **schier**es *Hechtfleisch* '**pure** pike meat') that has a different diachronic trajectory (related to Middle High German *schīr* '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.

[3]The 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 wanted SCHIER$_0$ not   to.end
       'The applause **almost** (= *schier$_0$*) 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 (*schier$_M$*), which derived from its 'almost' reading (*schier$_0$*). The description of how *schier$_M$* emerged from *schier$_0$* 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 anlasz gewesen sein zur herausbildung des
       gebrauchs im sinne von 'gar, vollends', von dem aus das wort dann zu der
       bedeutung 'wol' 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 SCHIER$_M$ get.married
             'He will **probably** (= *schier$_M$*) get married.'

       b.   Du   wirst **schier**   a Fiab'r kriag'n.
             you   will   SCHIER$_M$ a fever   get
             'You will **probably** (= *schier$_M$*) 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 SCHIER$_M$ nothing   become
       'Well, this **probably** (=*schier$_M$*) won't go well!'

(9)   Youngster Patrick Pasterniak hatte **schier**   etwas   dagegen.
       youngster P.   P.   had SCHIER$_M$ something against.it
       '**Apparently** (=*schier$_M$*), youngster P. Pasterniak was against it (*his team losing*).'
       (*DeReKo:* Burgenländische Volkszeitung, 11.06.2008)

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[4]http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?bookref=15,19,29 (Section II.3, [Bd. 15, Sp. 26])

(10)   Während der Saison den Klub zu wechseln,   ist **schier**   nicht das Einfachste.
        during   the season the club to   change   is   SCHIER$_M$ not   the easiest
        'To change one's club during the season is **probably** (=*schier*$_M$) not the easiest.'
        (*DeReKo:* Burgenländische Volkszeitung, 05.09.2013)

Evidence that *schier*$_M$ 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   SCHIER$_M$ not   happen
        '**it looks like** (= *schier*$_M$) 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 SCHIER$_M$ such something be
                     '**I guess** (= *schier*$_M$) he's going to be something like that.'

        b.   D'   Matzner Sepherl tut **schier**   was   suchen,
             the M.   S.   does SCHIER$_M$ something look.for
             '**Apparently** (= *schier*$_M$), 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 *schier*$_M$ 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)

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[5] https://books.google.de/books?id=vE4bCgAAQBAJ

We have already seen that $schier_M$ originates in an approximator $schier_0$ that means 'almost, downright'. The DWB proposes that the modal particle *wohl* (henceforth $wohl_M$) derived from an affirmative particle with the meaning 'truly, certainly, definitely, indeed'. As an example of the affirmative use of *wohl* (henceforth $wohl_0$), the DWB cites the Middle High German (14), from Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein* (approx. 1203 CE).[6,7] The quote (15) (from a DWB section that was completed later, in 1943) addresses the emergence of $wohl_M$ from the affirmative particle $wohl_0$.

(14)   sô   bistû   **wol**   ein   vrum   man:
        then are.you $WOHL_0$ a   valiant man
        'Then you are **truly** (= $wohl_0$) a valiant man.'

(15)   *aus bekräftigendem, beteuerndem wohl 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.*[8]
        'From an affirmative, assuring *wohl* [i.e. $wohl_0$], the meaning *vielleicht* 'maybe', *vermutlich* 'presumably' [i.e. $wohl_M$] 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 $wohl_0$ is particularly evident in combination with numerical phrases and measurements, where the DWB (quoting examples that date back to 1402) observes that affirmative $wohl_0$ means *annähernd* 'approximately', *ungefähr* 'roughly', or *reichlich* 'plentifully'.[9] Synchronically, this use of affirmative $wohl_0$ is still attested, as in (16), where *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 $wohl_0$ and $schier_0$ more visible by looking at a parallel example with *schier*, given in (17); again, the most natural translation of *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).

(16)   **Wohl** alle Kinder mögen es, wenn sie spannende Bücher vorgelesen bekommen.
        '**Pretty much** (= $wohl_0$) all kids like it if someone reads exciting books to them.'
        (*DeReKo:* Mannheimer Morgen, 22.11.2014)

(17)   **Schier** alle Objekte zeichnen sich durch sauberste handwerkliche Arbeit aus.
        '**Pretty much** (= $schier_0$) all of the objects exhibit the most precise manual work.'
        (*DeReKo:* Vorarlberger Nachrichten, 03.04.1997)

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[6]Note that Detges & Waltereit (2009) also demonstrate an affirmative use of French *bien* in declaratives (though they subsume affirmative *bien* under the 'modal particle use' of *bien*); this would suggest that *bien* has undergone a development parallel to that of German *wohl*.

[7]Note that the use in (14) seems to be archaic, and unacceptable in Present Day German.

[8]http://www.woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB?bookref=30,1025,1(Section II.B, [Bd. 30, Sp. 1062])

[9]See also the corresponding entry in the online version of the *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 θ. (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 θ_P. The sketch in (18) is inspired by Penka's (2006, 279) analysis of *almost*.[10]

(18) $wohl_0\ p$ ($\approx$ *approximately p*) 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 θ_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 θ_{prob}.[11] One open question concerns the *setting of the threshold value* in (19) (and (18)); while θ_{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) $wohl_M\ p$ ($\approx$ *surely p*) is felicitous in w iff
         $\forall w'[w' \in \text{Dox}_{speaker}(w) \rightarrow \text{PROB-CLOSENESS}_{w'}(P(p(w)),1) \geq \theta_{prob}]$
         where θ_{prob} is a high threshold of *closeness* between probabilities, $P(p(w))$ is the
         probability that p holds in the evaluation world w, and *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-

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[10]In line with Penka (2006), I take $wohl_0$ to take a propositional argument even though $wohl_0$ 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 *wahrscheinlich* 'probably', in (i.).

(i)   [**Wahrscheinlich** alle Schülerinnen und Schüler] haben sich […] den Tag herbeigesehnt […]
        '[Probably all pupils] were longing for the day […]' (*DeReKo:* Mannheimer Morgen, 23.06.2000)

[11]Note that (19) is a simplification that only captures $wohl_M$ in declaratives.

issueness. What stays the same is the reference to a high threshold (θ) on the respective scale, which is present in both *wohl_0* and *wohl_M* (and, by analogy, in *schier_0* 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).

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