

Concessive Conditionals as a Family of Constructions

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This squib sketches an approach to concessive conditionals (CCs) from the perspective of Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001). It brings earlier functional-typological work on CCs to bear on language-particular constructionist analyses of CCs, using the notions of ‘family (of constructions)’ and ‘prototype’ as a bridge. After suggesting how these notions can be applied to CCs under a functional-typological approach, the structure of the CC sub-constructicon in German is discussed, and directions for future research are offered to round the squib off.

Keywords: concessive conditional; Radical Construction Grammar; family of constructions; family resemblances; prototype; sentence type

1. Introduction

This squib sketches a constructionist approach to concessive conditionals (CCs) from the perspective of Radical Construction Grammar (Croft 2001). Its functionalist and typological outlook continues and expands earlier crosslinguistic, panchronic work on CCs (Haspelmath and König 1998; cf. references there and below), unifying this tradition with language-particular constructionist analyses of CCs as represented specifically by the study of d’Avis (2016) on CCs in German. After suggesting how the notions of ‘family (of constructions)’ and ‘prototype’ can be brought to bear on CCs (sections 2 and 3, respectively), the structure

of the CC sub-constructicon in German is discussed (section 4), and directions for future research are offered to round the squib off (section 5).

2. Concessive Conditionals: ‘Family’ and Family Resemblances

In recent years, ‘family’ has established itself in Construction Grammar as a label for sets of constructions with a similar meaning or function, often despite striking differences of form (de Mendoza Ibáñez, Luzondo Oyón, and Pérez Sobrino, 2017; Diessel 2019, 199-222). Its success is in part a corollary of the (radical-)constructionist contention that constructions are the primitives of syntactic representation (Croft 2001, 45-47): calling constructions a ‘family’ avoids the essentialist/universalist associations of ‘category’, instead highlighting form-function correspondences as the real primitives of syntactic description (Croft 2001, 51, 96). On the other hand, ‘family’ benefits from its associations with the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘family resemblances’ and the related concept of ‘prototype’ (Taylor 2003, 102-122; Geeraerts 2010, 183-203): families of constructions form networks around prototypical instantiations, with more marginal members related to the core, to one another and to members of neighbouring categories by family resemblances (Taylor 2003, 222-246; Croft and Cruse 2004, 236-247).

A group of constructions which can usefully be described as a family in this sense are concessive conditionals (CCs). CCs are basically conditionals with quantification whose protasis p contains a partially ordered set of antecedent values: ‘if $\{p_1, p_2, p_3, \dots\}$, then q ’ (Leuschner 2006 and references therein). They are typically used to assert the truth of the consequent q regardless of circumstance, and show a striking diversity of form in many languages, especially SAE languages like German and English (Haspelmath and König 1998 on 40 European languages; Bossuyt subm. on a smaller, but global sample).

Part of the reason why CCs have posed a challenge to language-particular and crosslinguistic description is that they employ different strategies of quantification to evoke the set of antecedent values. This is shown in (1)-(3), using examples from the German DeReKo reference corpus (Kupietz, et al. 2018; also cited in Vander Haegen, Bossuyt, and Leuschner subm.) with English paraphrases:

- (1) *Selbst wenn sich Hunderte von Radfahrern auf den Fähren*
 even if themselves hundreds of cyclists on the ferries
drängen, bleiben die Mitarbeiter freundlich und hilfsbereit [...].
 crowd stay the employees friendly and helpful
 ‘Even if the ferries are crowded with hundreds of cyclists, the employees stay friendly and helpful.’
 (Rhein-Zeitung, 02/08/2019)

- (2) *Ob die Männer von einer unglücklichen Liebe sangen oder*
 whether the men of an unhappy love sang or
vom Wasser [...], dem Publikum ging es kalt den Rücken
 of-the water the audience went it cold the spine
hinunter.
 downward
 ‘Whether the men were singing about an unrequited love or about water, the public had shivers going down their spines.’
 (St. Galler Tagblatt, 16/12/1997)

- (3) *Was immer die Regierung macht, sie schafft sich Feinde.*
 what ever the government does it creates itself enemies
 ‘Whatever the government does, it makes enemies.’
 (Salzburger Nachrichten, 24/11/1998)

In (1), a single antecedent value is marked as a contextually extreme or particularly informative condition among others; in (2), the disjunction characterises the set through two extreme values p_1 and p_2 , with p_2 potentially $\sim p_1$, i.e. the negation of p_1 ; and in (3), the protasis expresses an open proposition p_x in which the variability of values is evoked by a WH-word expressing the variable x in combination with a free-choice adverb (in this case *immer*, which in this construction retains its residual reading ‘ever’, Leuschner 2006, 115) or a focus particle (*auch* ‘also’). CCs using these methods of quantification are respectively called ‘scalar’, ‘alternative’ and (somewhat misleadingly, cf. below in section 3) ‘universal’ concessive conditionals – or SCCs, ACCs and UCCs for short (Haspelmath and König 1998).

These quantificational strategies are not only quite diverse but also in part reminiscent of other, non-conditional constructions. In (1) we have a straightforward *wenn*-conditional whose protasis is prefaced by the scalar-additive focus particle *selbst* ‘even’, but in (2) the protasis is identical to an embedded alternative interrogative (‘whether ... or’) as in (4), and in (3) the protasis looks just like the free relative clause (‘wh-ever’) in (5):

- (4) *Ob es den Dörfern gut oder schlecht geht, hat mit*
 whether it the villages good or bad goes has with
Parteipolitik nur ansatzweise etwas zu tun.
 partypolitics only marginally something to do
 ‘Whether the villages are well or badly off has very little to do with party politics.’

(*Rhein-Zeitung*, 12/10/2019)

(5) *Doch was immer er sich überlegt, hat einen Haken.*

but what ever he himself considers has a hook

‘But whatever he comes up with is beset with problems.’

(*St. Galler Tagblatt*, 26/10/1999)

The relationship of ‘wh-ever’ UCCs with free relatives is more tricky, however, than mere surface structure suggests. ‘Wh-ever’ UCCs and free relatives only became differentiated gradually over recent centuries, and their shared history still shows in the gradient that holds in present-day German between the loose adjunction of UCC protases to their apodoses, on the one hand, and the relatively tight integration of free relatives into their matrix clauses, on the other hand (Leuschner 2006, 125-146). Although unrelated historically to embedded constituent (‘wh’-)interrogatives, ‘wh-ever’ UCCs on balance behave more like embedded constituent interrogatives than like free relatives in subtle ways, and are *sui generis* among CCs in this respect (ibid., 109-112, with references).

Given the surface-structure similarities between CC subtypes, grammars have tended to list different subtypes of CCs alongside other clause types in different chapters, if at all, thus obscuring the underlying functional unity of CCs (cf. Leuschner 2006 for a survey). While this situation continues to apply in the grammars of many non-European languages (cf. Bossuyt subm. for a survey), it has begun to change with regard to some European languages due to work by König (Haspelmath and König 1998 with references to earlier work by König) and other authors working in the functional-typological, panchronic tradition (Fujii 1994; Leuschner 2006; Bossuyt 2016; Bossuyt, De Cuypere, and Leuschner 2018; Vander Haegen 2019; Vander Haegen, Bossuyt, and Leuschner subm.; Bossuyt subm.). By contrast, the

purely synchronic, English-focused school started by Rawlins (2008) is of lesser importance for our purposes here, not least due to its restrictive, less systematic coverage of CC subtypes.

A telling indication of the divergent treatment of CCs by the two schools are their terminological differences. The fact that q in CCs is ‘deconditionalised’ with respect to the protasis, and that CCs are often uttered in order to hyperbolically assert the unconditional truth of q (Leuschner 2006), has led Rawlins (2008) to call CCs ‘unconditionals’. The label ‘concessive conditionals’, on the other hand, is designed precisely to highlight the basically conditional nature of the relationship, partly in a crosslinguistic and/or panchronic perspective. The epithet ‘concessive’ is informed by the observation that the set of antecedent values may include at least one condition under which q would not normally be expected to hold, and by the typically factual nature of the apodosis. These features are reminiscent of concessives, and indeed CCs tend to develop into concessives historically in many languages (Haspelmath and König 1998, 568 with references).

The middle ground between ‘unconditional’ and ‘concessive conditional’ is occupied by ‘irrelevance conditional’ (‘Irrelevanzkonditional’; Zifonun, Hoffmann, and Strecker 1997, 2319-2322; Waßner 2006; d’Avis 2016). This seems a particularly suitable label given recent corpus-based work arguing that concessive presuppositions are largely absent in UCCs in actual usage (Duffley and Larrivée 2020 on English). Results like these suggest that the different subtypes of CCs, despite their underlying conditional semantics and their synchronic and diachronic overlap with concessives, are associated with slightly different ‘speech-act scenarios’ (Panther and Köpcke 2008, 84 *et passim*) insofar as the concessive presupposition is consistently present with SCCs only, but a matter of context with UCCs and possibly ACCs.

3. CCs and Prototypes: a Typological Perspective

Although the studies listed above are all predicated on the basic functional unity of CCs in a crosslinguistic and/or language-particular perspective, they do not usually use family-related terminology. The sole exception is Fujii's study (1994, 194, 202) of CCs as a 'family of constructions' in Japanese. In this language, CCs all carry the 'even if'-equivalent marker *-te-mo*, which involves the additive particle *-mo* 'also, too' being added to the conditional converb in *-te*. English 'even if *p*' is thus expressed in Japanese as '*p*-CONV-also', 'whether *p*₁ or *p*₂/not-*p*₁' is expressed as '*p*₁-CONV-even *p*₂-CONV-also/*p*₁-NEG-CONV-also', 'WH-ever *p*_x' is expressed as 'WH-*p*-CONV-also' (adapted from Fujii 1994, 196-203; cf. Haspelmath and König 1998, 571, 629 with reference to the semantic/syntactic analysis of Japanese UCCs by Nishigauchi 1991). The saliency of CCs as a family of constructions in Japanese is clearly due to their uniform marking combining conditionality and quantification, and the same pattern is shown by some languages at the Eastern margin of Europe such as Lezgian and others (Haspelmath and König 1998, 627-629). Like Japanese, these languages are verb-final and show the heavily desententialised subordination patterns typical of verb-final languages, with clause-final converbs, marking by suffixation, and WH-in-situ (ibid., 627). In English and generally in SAE, by contrast, prototypical subordinate clauses are more like fully-fledged main clauses, with finite verb forms, separate clause-initial subordinators and WH-fronting (ibid., 625-627; König 1992; cf. Lehmann 1988 on the typology of desententialisation). In such languages, at least some SCCs are usually based on conditionals, but ACCs/UCCs often display more salient family resemblances with other clause types, especially interrogative or interrogative-related ones such as free relatives, as demonstrated above in examples (1)-(3).

Given these circumstances, the notion of ‘prototype’ can support the language-particular analysis of CCs in two ways. First, it can help model the network structure of the CC sub-construction in a given language. Thus, conditionals-based SCCs are arguably the most prototypical instantiation of CCs on semantic grounds in languages where other subtypes of CCs are formally more similar to non-conditional constructions. The different instantiations of CCs can in turn be seen as prototypes clustering around the three strategies of quantification. This perspective is missing in the account by d’Avis (2016) of CCs in German, one of only two in-depth surveys of CCs in this language beside Waßner (2006) and the only one so far from a constructionist perspective (cf. below on this aspect). Barely engaging with the functional-typological literature on CCs listed above, d’Avis is concerned mainly to contribute to the debate over sentence types (*Satztypen*) in German by establishing CCs as a sentence type. He therefore highlights the diversity of CCs and the formal overlap of different subtypes with more general sentence types such as *ob*-, *wenn*- and *w*-clauses and with verb-first and verb-second clauses (d’Avis 2016, 285, cf. below for examples). This enables him to show that the CC *Satztyp* is constituted by a unique mix of different forms well beyond those listed above in (1)-(3) (cf. next section). What gets lost in this form-based perspective, on the other hand, is the prototype-like structuring of variation within the family of CC constructions around the three strategies of SCC-, ACC- and UCC-style quantification. Not only can this alternative approach highlight semantically based convergences among divergent forms, it can also ensure the crosslinguistic comparability of the mix.

Second, the notion of ‘prototype’ is relevant with regard to the position of the CC family collectively among other constructions in a given language. As d’Avis (2016, 286) points out, German CCs do in fact share a structural feature regardless of the shape of their protasis: the overwhelming preference for the protasis (if sentence-initial) to be placed outside the apodosis rather than inside the apodosis in the prefield of the verb, as is the prototypical

case in verb-second languages like German. This lack of clause-integration is consistent in ACCs and UCCs but not in SCCs, which after all are based on conditionals, a clause-type that does tend to integrate (see Haspelmath and König 1998, 571, on semantic factors favouring integration in SCCs). In standard cases, on the other hand, such as represented by the ACC in (2) and the UCC in (3) above, disintegration is well motivated by iconicity (König and van der Auwera 1988, 128), marking out CCs as peripheral with reference to the prototype of complex sentence constructions in German.

4. Concessive Conditionals in the Constructicon: the View from German

In keeping with the standard tenets of usage-based Construction Grammar (e.g. Goldberg 2006, similarly Croft 2001, Diessel 2019), we can identify ‘family of constructions’ as a shorthand for any part of the constructicon of a given language containing formally divergent constructions with convergent functions. The family members in question project onto the constructional network as nodes with different degrees of schematicity and lexical specification. Abstract constructions representing the scalar, alternative and universal strategies of quantification in CCs then form peers on the next lower level, just under the highest, most abstract/schematic level, as shown in Figure 1. The division of this level continues (not necessarily threefold, of course) on the next lower level in actual SCC, ACC and UCC constructions, each inheriting the respective quantificational strategy from the higher level.

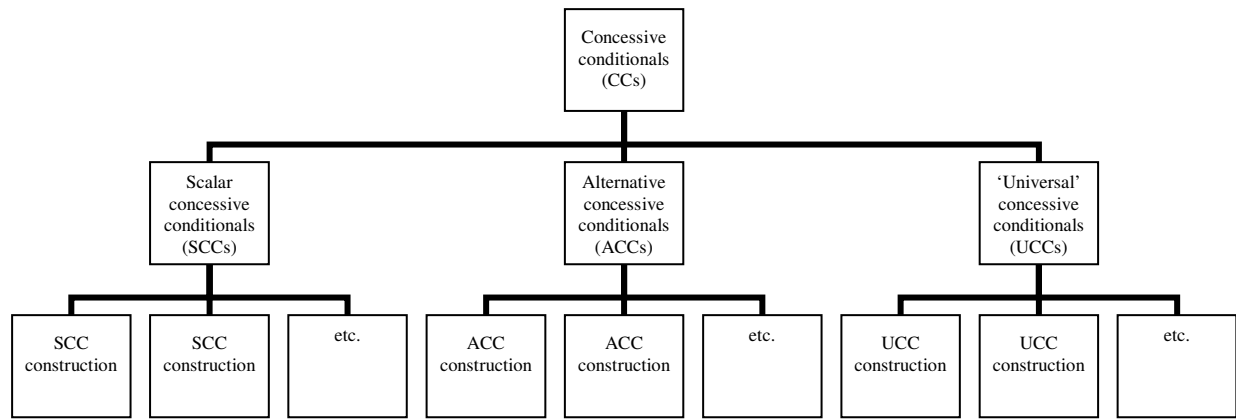


Figure 1: Three-level schema of the CC sub-constructicon

Two issues for language-particular analysis emerge from this approach: the definition of actual CC constructions on the basis of form-meaning relationships, and the micro-structure of the prototypes formed by individual constructions from the third level down in the language in question. A good starting-point is again d’Avis (2016), who seeks to demonstrate that CCs are amenable to an analysis in constructionist terms (ibid., 287-290). By making this case, d’Avis seeks to strengthen the conventionalist theory of *Satztyp*, which has recently been under pressure from generative approaches (ibid., 268-272). Given his interest in form, d’Avis does not discuss the function of individual CC subtypes and only identifies the functional side of the highest node in the CC sub-constructicon (ibid., 288f.). He prudently does so separately for semantics and pragmatics (ibid., cf. also Oppliger 2018 on English *wh-ever*), but we will focus on the semantics here.

According to d’Avis, it involves the universal quantifier \forall (d’Avis 2016, 288f.), but this is too specific, as the universal quantifier is better reserved to distinguish the constructional meaning of UCCs from that of ACCs and SCCs (e.g. Haspelmath and König 1998, 566). Instead, the general paraphrase given at the beginning of the present squib should be adopted as the highest-level representation of CCs semantics, and meanings should be specified on the

next lower level as shown in Figure 2 (with logical-semantic formulae adapted from Haspelmath and König 1998, 566). In the rightmost box on the second level, the inverted commas around ‘universal’ suggest that the universal quantifier \forall , though convenient, is in fact misleading because the meaning of ‘wh-ever’ expression is more akin to positive-polarity, free-choice *any* than to standard universal quantifiers like *every* or *all*. This is noted by Haspelmath and König (1998, 571f.), but not by Oppliger (2018), who talks about ‘the universal quantifier *ever*’ in her analysis of *wh-ever* in English (ibid., 266), apparently assuming that *ever* is synonymous with *always*. On the other hand, the quantificational effect of ‘wh-ever’ can be close to standard universal quantification in some contexts (see Duffley and Larrivé 2020 for discussion and references), so the universal quantifier will provisionally suffice.

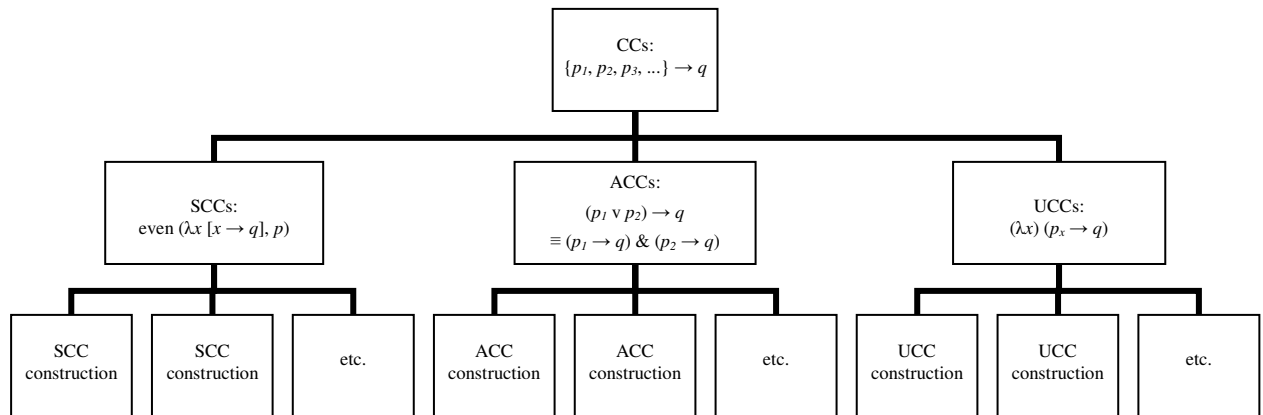


Figure 2: Three-level schema of the CC sub-constructicon with first- and second-level semantics specified

As to the third level of the CC sub-constructicon (i.e. the level marked by ‘XCC construction’ in Figures 1 and 2), and indeed any yet lower levels which are not shown, the first point to observe is that alternative means of expression seem to exist for all subtypes of CCs in the

languages investigated so far. SCCs may occur with *sogar* or *auch* instead of *selbst* and, as Bücken (2016) argues, only a subset of *wenn* ('if')-clauses with these particles qualify as CCs. ACCs may have *ob ... ob* instead of *ob ... oder*, and UCCs may have *auch* 'also' instead of or in combination with *immer* (Bossuyt 2016; Bossuyt, De Cuypere, and Leuschner 2018). There are also more distinct alternatives for ACCs and UCCs as in (6) and (7), respectively:

- (6) *Einen Blick ins Horoskop werfen viele, sei es*
a glance into-the horoscope throw many be it
aus amüsiertem Neugier oder aus ehrlichem Interesse.
out-of amused curiosity or out-of honest interest
'Many take a glance at the horoscope, be it out of amused curiosity or genuine interest.'
(*St. Galler Tagblatt*, 31/12/1997)

- (7) *Egal was passiert, es ist immer jemand für Dich da!*
irrelevant what happens it is always someone for you there
'No matter what happens, someone is always there for you!'
(*Braunschweiger Zeitung*, 27/11/2010)

Whereas the alternative formulations listed in the paragraph immediately above (4) are differentiated from (1)-(3) by small differences in lexical specification, the same quantificational strategies are instantiated in (6) and (7) by distinct constructional schemata. In (6), the disjunction is evoked by a verb-based quasi-subordinator specified syntactically (by subject-verb inversion), lexically (by *sein* 'be') and morphologically (by the subjunctive *sei* and 3rd person *es* 'it' – although the plural version *seien sie* also occurs). Since *ob*-ACCs

allow any verb and subject, this confirms *sei es*-ACCs as a more marginal instantiation of ACCs than the more prototypical *ob*-construction.

In (7), lastly, the protasis is introduced by a lexical expression of irrelevance (e.g. *egal* ‘irrelevant, no matter’) in combination with a *w*-pronoun such that the expression of irrelevance precedes the *w*-pronoun – unlike *immer* as in (3) and *auch*, which follow it. The combinations in question are synonymous with *w- immer/auch* and display a prototype structure of their own, as *egal* as in (7) is by far the most frequent expression of irrelevance in UCCs at 76.85% of tokens in DeReKo (Vander Haegen 2019, 122; intensified versions such as *scheißegal* are included). The expression of irrelevance is in turn often intensified by an adverb such as *ganz* or *völlig* ‘completely, totally’, and in the case of *gleich* (lit. ‘equally’) the combination with *ganz* has become all but exceptionless in usage (Vander Haegen 2019, 133-136). *(Ganz) gleich* only brings up 10.23% of tokens in DeReKo (ibid., 123), but the metric structure of *ganz gleich* is interesting, as it forms an iamb just like *egal* on its own. Not only is there therefore evidence that *ganz gleich w-* (‘no matter at all wh-’) has evolved into a lexically specified subconstruction in its own right, it also seems that the prototype of subordinators with lexical expressions of irrelevance for use in the subordinator slot in UCCs like (7) is at least in part phonologically conditioned.

5. Concluding Remarks

Squibs need to be short, so I will stop here and leave it to future research to fill in the details of the CC sub-constructicon in German or indeed any other language in a functional-typological perspective. An interesting issue is likely to be the potential status of the formal variants as ‘allostructions’, especially given recent calls to pay more attention to the functional aspect of constructional alternants at the semantics-pragmatics interface (see De

Vaere, Kolkmann and Belligh 2020, revisiting foundational work by Cappelle and others). Attention should be paid, too, to different concepts of ‘family’ in Construction Grammar. Formally diverse constructions like CCs invite a narrow, technical definition of ‘family’ which emphasises functional convergence. The resulting interest in lateral relations among constructions is reminiscent of Diessel’s psycholinguistically informed approach to “construction families” (2019, 199-222) with its focus on the basic parallelism between the network structure of grammar and the mental lexicon (ibid., 122). However, whereas the former approach refers naturally to the notion of ‘prototype’ to highlight patterns of convergence even among family members whose lateral relations seem mutually obscure, prototypes are not a significant ingredient in Diessel’s approach.

Given that this squib has so far referred to synchrony only, diachrony deserves a special mention. The family resemblances displayed particularly by ACCs and UCCs with interrogatives and other constructions in languages with predominantly finite subordination show up in actual variation patterns as intersective gradience (Vander Haegen, Bossuyt, and Leuschner subm.), and this may turn out to be a synchronic reflection of the on-going diachronic emergence of the constructions in question. There are many clear cases of such active, if extremely slow, processes of grammaticalisation among both ACCs and UCCs (Leuschner 2006). Good examples are the above-mentioned *egal* (etc.) *w-* CCs (Vander Haegen, Bossuyt, and Leuschner subm.), but also paratactical CCs with protases consisting only of a lexically marked main clause, often involving a modal verb. The example in (8) (from an e-mail to the author, 2004) contains a declarative antecedent amounting to SCC-style quantification:

- (8) [Die Studenten] schlafen mir immer beinahe ein, da kann
 [the students] sleep to.me always almost in there can

ich mich auf den Kopf stellen und jodeln.

I me on the head put and yodel

‘The students always fall asleep on me almost, I can (i.e. even if I were to) stand on my head and yodel.’

Similar, if more hearer-oriented, strategies may involve imperatives or declaratives, including ACC-style disjunctions (‘Do p_1 or p_2 , q ’) and UCC-style free choice (‘You can do what you like, q ’; see d’Avis 2016, 282-284; Leuschner 2006, 63-68; Haspelmath and König 1998, 579-581; König 1992). In order to become genuinely hypotactical CCs, emergent clause combinations need to undergo constructionalisation (Traugott and Trousdale 2013), i.e. to change from loose, complex-figure discourse patterns into subordinating figure-ground relationships (cf. Croft 2001, 328-346). Future research should investigate evidence of such processes in CCs a panchronic perspective, including transitions between CCs and neighbouring constructions (cf. Leuschner 2006, 134-162; Haspelmath and König 1998, 620-625 on the relevant issues of directionality), the emergence of prototypes through changes in pre-existing constructions (e.g. from the ancient Germanic *so/swa w-* *so/saw*-type UCCs to modern German *w-* *immer/auch* and English *wh-ever* UCCs), and the resulting dynamic of the allostructional mix, including the rise to relative predominance of the subordinator-introduced construction types from ca. 1800 as postulated by Baschewa (1983; cf. Leuschner 2006, 154 for discussion and more references).

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