

A Nanosyntactic Look at the Dental Suffix Spread in the West Frisian 2SG Past

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In West Frisian, the dental suffix (*-te/-de*) has gradually spread in the paradigm of the 2SG past tense. This development is documented in detail by Merkuur (2021, 2023), building on Hoekstra (2013), who shows that the expansion proceeds in a stepwise fashion. In this paper, building on Merkuur's findings, we examine why the spread of the dental suffix proceeds at different rates across verb classes, and why some classes have not yet participated in the change.

Before 1950, only weak class I verbs show a dental suffix in the 2SG past, as in (1).

- (1) do bak-te-st
you bake-PST-2SG

After 1950, the dental suffix spreads to strong and irregular class I verbs that display homophony between the 2SG present and past, as in *do sei-st* 'you say/said'. This configuration arises due to stem alternations in both present and past (Wechselflexion) combined with the absence of a past tense suffix. The addition of *-de* (*do sei-de-st* 'you said') resolves the ambiguity, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. do sei-st
 you say-2SG (present)
 b. do sei-st
 you say.PST-2SG (past, old form)
 c. do sei-de-st
 you say-PST-2SG (past, new form)

In a next step, the pattern extends analogically to other strong and irregular verbs that are phonologically similar to this initial group, even where no homophony is present. This results in double past marking, as shown in (3).

- (3) a. do sil-st
 you will-2SG (present)
 b. do soe-st
 you will.PST-2SG (past, old form)
 c. do soe-de-st
 you will.PST-PST-2SG (past, new form)

More recently, the change spreads further to two other groups. The first group is the rest of the strong and irregular verbs, as reported in Hoekstra (2013), an example of which is shown in (4).

- (4) a. do sjoch-st
 you see-2SG (present)
 b. do seach-st
 you see.PST-2SG (past, old form)
 c. do seach-de-st
 you see.PST-PST-2SG (past, new form)

The second recent change is reported in Merkuur (2021, 2023): the dental suffix seems to be spreading to class II weak verbs, which are characterized by a schwa suffix, and which show homophony in the 2SG present and past (as strong and irregular class I verbs did), as in *do wurk-e-st* 'you work/worked'. This homophony is again resolved by the addition of a dental suffix (*do wurk-te-st* 'you worked'), shown in (5).

- (5) a. do wurk-e-st
you work-CLII-2SG(present)
b. do wurk-e-st
you work-PST.CLII-2SG (past, old form)
c. do wurk-te-st
you work-PST-2SG (past, new form)

Strikingly, the only forms that have not (yet) undergone this change are irregular class II verbs that exhibit Wechselflexion. These verbs also display past-present homophony but differ from both the other strong/irregular verbs and regular class II verbs in that they combine an irregular paradigm with a “regular” class II-type inflection in the 2SG past, due to their Wechselflexion pattern, as shown in (6).

- (6) a. do makk-e-st
you make-CLII-2SG (present)
b. do makk-e-st
you make-PST.CLII-2SG (past, old form)

Merkuur (2021) argues that the spreading results from successive productive reanalyses by new generations of speakers. In this process, learners reinterpret the morphological structure of specific forms and extend this analysis to new contexts. She shows that, while factors such as homophony avoidance and productive reanalyses correlate with parts of this pattern, they do not in all cases predict why certain verb classes are targeted earlier than others, nor why some forms, most notably Wechselflexion class II verbs, do not (yet) seem to participate in the change. A central question, therefore, is why some structures are more readily available for reanalysis than others, and how this asymmetry gives rise to the observed pattern of spread.

In this paper, we propose that a nanosyntactic perspective can contribute to the account given in Merkuur (2021). Starke (2014) argues that variation arises from differences in how lexical trees are structured, a view that has been further developed in Nanosyntax. Subsequent work (e.g. De Clercq 2020 on French negation, Caha et al. 2023 on deadjectival verbs, Dikmen & Demirok 2025 on aspect, Natvig et al. 2025 on plural allomorphy, and Cassina & De Clercq (2025) on register variation in Palestinian Arabic) shows that languages share the same underlying features but differ in how these features are grouped into lexical items.

We take this nanosyntactic perspective and apply it to the spread of the Frisian 2SG past tense. We argue that the relative timing of the changes corresponds to differences in structural complexity: more complex lexical trees, e.g. due to bimorphemicity (in class II weak verbs) or stem alternations (in class II Wechselflexion verbs), reduce the availability of alternative analyses which in turn makes these forms less open to reanalysis and therefore slower to change. On this view, the observed order of spread reflects how structural complexity may constrain the space of possible reanalyses, and thus limit possibilities for diachronic change.

References

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