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Case syncretism in personal pronouns in German dialects

The paper deals with morphological change in deictic plural pronouns (1st and 2nd person plural) in German dialects. In Old High German these pronouns had formally distinct nominative, dative, and accusative case forms (*wir* 'we' NOM, *uns* 'us' DAT, *unsih* 'us' ACC; *ir* 'you' NOM, *iu* 'you' DAT, *iuwih* 'you' ACC). Today's dialects mostly display syncretism of dative and accusative case, as does Standard German (*wir* 'we' NOM, *uns* 'us' DAT/ACC; *ihr* 'you' NOM, *euch* 'you' DAT/ACC). Generally, dialect change implies a progressive levelling of archaic features to the benefit of more prestigious and widespread features of the regional or the standard language. However, morphological change does not necessarily lead to standard-like systems. My paper studies the development of case syncretisms from 1887 (Georg Wenker's dialect survey for the "Linguistic Atlas of the German Empire") to the present in some Bavarian Swabian and North Bavarian dialects. In these dialects we can observe syncretisms which involve even the nominative case, a development which leads to a uniform pronoun with both subject and object function (e.g., *uns* 'we, us' NOM/DAT/ACC; *ui* 'you' NOM/DAT/ACC). The temporal and spatial extension of these syncretisms is independent of the standard system. It reflects locally and historically contingent hierarchies of linguistic and extralinguistic factors influencing morphological change, which often point in opposite directions. The most important linguistic factors seem to be, on the one hand, the tendency to reduce formal distinctions within the paradigm, and, on the other, the requirement to maintain a means of symbolizing different grammatical functions, such as subject and object, or semantic roles, such as agent and theme. The results are tentatively summarized in Optimality Theory tableaux.