THE ORIGIN OF SEMANTIC CHANGE IN DISCOURSE TRADITION: A CASE STUDY

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a case study of semantic change that starts out in a particular discourse tradition. It discusses the semantic development of the German verb *gehören* and shows that in a construction with the passive perfect participle the verb has developed a deontic meaning in present-day German. This meaning of obligation or necessity preserves traces of the discourse tradition where the semantic development started, administrative and legal contexts. In order to describe this phenomenon, the notion of persistence (Hopper, 1991) will be elaborated.

The literal meaning of *gehören* is ‘belong, pertain’. The construction under consideration is illustrated in (1a) and (1b):

(1)  

a. *Sportler, die des Dopings überführt worden sind, gehören gesperrt.*  
   (Frankfurter Rundschau 04.03.1998)  
   ‘Athletes who have been accused of doping, should be/deserve to be barred.’

b. ‘Das Ladenschlußgesetz gehört abgeschafft’ hieß es am Montag in einer  
   Pressemitteilung des Wirtschaftsministeriums.  
   (Frankfurter Allgemeine 26.10.1993)  
   ‘The law determining the closing of shops should be abolished”; this was stated  
   in a press release of the ministry of economics on Monday.’
In (1), gehören occurs in a construction with a passive perfect participle (participle II) – gesperrt ‘barred’ and abgeschafft ‘abolished’ – and expresses necessity. This sense is also expressed in (2):

(2) a. Die Kinder gehören um sieben Uhr ins Bett.
   ‘The children should be (belong) in bed by seven o’clock.’
   b. Er gehört hinter Schloss und Riegel.
   ‘He should be/deserves to be under lock and key.’

The verb gehören thus expresses necessity in two constructions:

1. gehören + participle II (cf. (1))
2. gehören + local expression, usually a Prepositional Phrase (cf. (2))

In constructions like (1), gehören is considered to be grammaticalized to a modal passive auxiliary. The various treatments proposed with regard to its status as (semi-)auxiliary will not be considered here (cf. Reis, 1976; Askedal 1984, 2005; Engel, 1996; Zifonun et al., 1997; Eroms, 2000; Hentschel and Weydt, 2003). Instead, we will trace the diachronic semantic development of this verb in Section 2 and present a synchronic corpus-based study of the use of the construction gehören + participle II in contemporary German in Section 3. Section 4 provides a discussion of the findings in relation to the notion of persistence (Hopper, 1991) and Section 5 concludes.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF GEHÖREN

In this section the semantic development of gehören is traced on the basis of the evidence presented in the Deutsches Wörterbuch (DWB, 2004).

The verb gehören is attested from the eighth century when it had the meaning ‘hear forcefully’.1 Used with the dative the verb developed the sense ‘listen, obey’.2 By metonymy, the meaning ‘be a part/member of a clan, family etc.’ arose: When people were asked whom they obeyed, the inference arose that they were part of that family. The verb is then expanded to refer to (i) membership in communities of all sorts (not only kin) and the relations of a member to the whole in general, and by extension, (ii) possession of all sorts.

According to the DWB, the verb developed a special sense in legal and administrative contexts, as shown in (3); it then passed with this nuance to general use.

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1 This meaning is preserved in Gehör ‘hearing, ear’.
2 This meaning is preserved in Gehorsam ‘obedience’.