Cousins growing closer? Variation and change in American German and American English gapping

A striking and robust difference between most varieties of English and German is that the former permit multiple-gap constructions while the latter do not, as illustrated in (1) below.

English:  [Which book]$_1$ did you sell t$_1$ without reading it/pg$_1$?
German:  Welches Buch hast Du verkauft, ohne es/*pg gelesen zu haben/zu lesen?

Which book did you sell t$_1$, without it having read/reading

While ‘true’ parasitic gaps appear broadly ungrammatical in German (Kathol 2001), work Engdahl (1983) shows highly systematic patterns of variation with regard to such gaps in American English, in accordance with her accessibility hierarchy. Recent work on German varieties spoken in Wisconsin (Putnam et al. in review) indicates that many 3rd–5th generation American-born German–English bilinguals allow gaps at the most accessible end of the hierarchy in English-to-German translation tasks, while restructuring translations to avoid some more complex gaps. This change likely reflects a century and a half of intense contact with English. Limited evidence suggests that some of these speakers do not accept English sentences with gaps of the type illustrated above, pointing to change in English, though no research has examined regional variation or change in gapping.

We are about to deploy a computer-based grammaticality test of multiple gap constructions in English and German. This paper will report initial findings on English. We are running the experiment with at least 30 English speakers each in the area where bilinguals show gaps in German (Sheboygan County, Wisconsin and nearby areas), in a heavily Anglo-American area (Richland Center, in southwest Wisconsin), both part of the northern dialect area of American English. For a clear regional comparison, we will run the the experiment in central Pennsylvania and central Indiana, both regarded as part of the American Midlands region. At the same time, we expect to have initial findings from work with German speakers, which should be consistent with earlier findings. We predict that licensing of multiple gaps will follow Engdahl’s hierarchy for all groups, that gaps will be preferred at the most accessible end of the hierarchy.
We anticipate first that American English spoken in areas of heavy German immigration will tolerate fewer gaps than dialects spoken in non-German settlement areas. Second, we expect to find further support for the presence of multiple gaps among American-born German speakers, in this case based on grammaticality judgments rather than translation tasks. Beyond documenting the first regional variation with regard to multiple gap constructions in American English, such evidence would point to nuanced syntactic convergence between German and English in the wake of language contact. The development of limited gap licensing in Wisconsin German is consistent with Trudgill’s observation that certain types of language contact situations can lead to complexification (Trudgill 2010:17). If so, the results would show that dialects of two West Germanic cousins which have evolved away from each other in so many ways over two millennia are growing closer syntactically.

References