THE GERMAN PERFECT AS AN EMERGENT STRUCTURE

The question of the meaning of the German *Perfekt* is still widely debated in the German linguistic field, with scholars such as Weinrich (1964-1993), Helbig/Busha (2001), Park (2003), Welke (2006), Schumacher (2006-2011), suggesting a pragmatic approach which underlines the importance of the speakers's role and their communicative intentions while using this tense in their written and spoken interactions in opposition to the *Präteritum*. However, although these scholars recognize the strict connection between the communicative intents of the speakers and their usage of *Perfekt*, historical studies which focuses on the particular cognitive process that lead to the development of the meaning and the functions of the perfect in Modern German is still not adequately addressed. My paper focus on this topic using a corpus of three texts from the Old and Middle High German eras, the epic poems *Das Hildenbrandslied*, *Das Ludwigslied* and *Das Nibelungenlied*.

I will apply a complexity-theory and usage-based perspective, in which human languages are viewed as complex adaptive systems and the linguistic patterns are considered as "epiphenomena of interaction" (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron:2008). This perspective also underlines the essential role of the agents (or speakers) and their key contribution to language change and evolution. I argue that the German *Perfekt*'s modern meaning and functions have to be considered also as emergent products of the interactions between speakers and insert that their development can be traced as far back as Old High German texts, when the *Perfekt* started to compete with the *Präteritum*. In conclusion, my paper, combining a diachronic approach with a complexity theory and agent-based perspective, such as described by scholars like Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008); Bybee (1994, 2007, 2010) and Slobin (1994), will contribute to the still lively discussion about the meaning and the evolution of the German *Perfekt*.