

Swabian relatives: variation in the use of the *wo*-relativiser

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Because syntactic variables, such as relative clauses, lie outside the range of the sociolinguistic monitor, some sociolinguists have maintained that they are not as socially stratified as phonological and morphological ones (Lavandera 1978; Labov et al. 2011; Scherre & Naro 1992). However, Cheshire (2003:245) contends that syntactic variation is merely “different” from phonological or morphological variation and, indeed, is often “intricately involved in the construction of social meaning.” Moreover, Kroch and Small (1978:47) contend that grammatical ideology is “perhaps universal in stratified societies with standard language,” which ensures that variation between standard/conservative and non-standard/innovative forms always show some level of social and stylistic stratification. Hence, the aim of this paper is to explore the linguistic and social constraints with one type of innovative grammatical variation common in the Swabian dialect spoken in southwestern Germany: the variation between conservative relative pronoun usage prescribed by standard German (e.g., *der, die, das, dem, den, dessen, deren*) (henceforth referred to as *dxx*-relatives) and the use of the innovative *wo*-relative pronoun (meaning ‘where’, ‘that’, ‘which’, ‘who’) typical in the spoken language. It has generally been assumed that *wo*-relatives in German are used to signal some abstract notion of place and that their usage has spread to other contexts (Brandner and Bräuning 2013:133). However, this assumption is contested; in fact, not much is known about what factors and contexts affect the choice of *wo*-relatives and whether this variable is stable or changing. Hence, this paper seeks to answer three questions: (1) what are the internal and external factors influencing the usage of *wo* as a relative marker in Swabian German, (2) is the usage of the *wo*-relativiser stable or changing and, if changing, (3) what are the drivers and/or inhibitors of the change?

To investigate this phenomenon, *dxx*- and *wo*-relative clauses were extracted from a corpus of 80 sociolinguistic interviews conducted with native Swabian speakers, stratified for age, education and gender, across two points in time (1982 and 2017). Preliminary findings from this investigation of *wo*-relative markers in both real-time and apparent-time highlight the intricate interaction between intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic factors and the role they play in syntactic change. In response to the three research questions, the results of this study show that (1) *wo*-relatives are favoured with definite, animate referents in the dative case, highly influenced by community belonging and level of education; (2) the use of *wo* as a relativiser is changing, potentially going through a process of semantic bleaching and decategorisation; and, (3) a counter-force appears to be at play in the movement away from *wo*-relatives in Stuttgart, a change that is likely driven by growing regionalisation and pervasive prescriptivism.

PREDICTORS	values	estimate	probability	p-value	sig
Model intercept		-0.370	40.8%	0.436	
<i>INTERNAL:</i>					
Place	abstract	2.013	88.2%	0.001	***
Relativizer case	dative	2.817	94.4%	0.000	***
Definiteness	definite	0.593	64.4%	0.001	***
Antecedent distance	less	-0.454	38.8%	0.000	***
Animacy	animate	-0.302	42.5%	0.236	
<i>EXTERNAL:</i>					
Education level	university	-1.357	20.5%	0.000	***
Recording Year	2017	0.066	51.7%	0.862	
Community	Stuttgart	0.088	52.2%	0.903	
<i>INTERACTION EFFECTS:</i>					
Animate + Relative Case	nominative	-1.582	17.1%	0.000	***
2017 + Relative Case	dative	2.170	89.8%	0.000	***
2017 + Place	abstract	-1.954	14.0%	0.015	*
2017 + Community	Stuttgart	-0.160	46.0%	0.722	
2017 + Animate	Gmünd	-0.308	42.4%	0.451	
2017 + Animate	Stuttgart	-1.288	21.6%	0.008	**
<i>RANDOM EFFECTS:</i>					
Speaker		2.049	88.6%		
<i>SUMMARY STATISTICS:</i>					
# of relatives (n)	1204				
# of speakers	20				
% correctly predicted	83.5%				
baseline %	64.0%				
concordance index	0.899				

Figure 3. Multivariate analysis of relative pronoun usage in 20 Swabian panel speakers across two points in time (1982 and 2017). Positive estimates (high probabilities) favour and negative estimates (low probabilities) disfavour the use of *wo*-relatives; significance levels: *** 0.001, ** 0.01, * 0.05.

References

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