Contact induced phenomena in Walser dialects (Northern Italy)

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Aims. The aims of the present study are: (i) describe the language situation of Walser varieties; (ii) analyse the contexts in which code-switching takes place in the speech of Walser speakers; (iii) evaluate the nature of these phenomena: socio-linguistically motivated or (also) syntactically constrained? (iv) detect the relevant syntactic conditions for code-switching.

Walser dialects in Northern Italy. Valais and Walser dialects connect the Valais (Switzerland) with its colonies, emerged in the 13th and 14th century. At that time, numerous mountain shepherds and peasants left Haut-Valais for other Alpine regions, causing the diffusion of these languages in other areas like Valle D'Aosta and Piemonte. Subsequently, other Walser ended up in the high Graubünden valleys (Davos region, Switzerland) and arrived in Austria and Lichtenstein. Nowadays, these varieties are still present in Switzerland (Valais / Wallis, Ticino), Northern Italy (Piemonte, Valle D'Aosta, Friuli and Südtirol) as well as in Austria (Vorarlberg and Tyrol) and Lichtenstein. Linguistically, they belong to the high Alemannic group, the highest one of the southern alpine borders of Alemannic (Zinsli 1986).

The presence of German-speaking communities in Italy creates a situation of tight language contact, which is of great scientific interest. Nevertheless, there are still very few studies specifically dedicated to these linguistic islands, although the attention has grown significantly in the last two decades. However, many of the "consultation" tools, such as dictionaries and grammars, are often made by willing locals and lack the necessary scientific rigor in data collection. As for scholarly studies, they have mainly focused on lexicon (cf. Antonietti, Valenti and Angster 2015 and Fazzini, E.-Cigni, C. 2004, a.o.), while in the area of syntactic description there is only the studies by Bauen (1978) and Dal Negro (2002, 2005, 2009).Therefore, this investigation has, as its first aim to cover this gap in the literature, describing and analysing this interesting language situation. This will make it possible to develop a comparative Italo-Romance-Germanic dialectology and to observe a range of phenomena present in these varieties of the Upper Alemannic group. According to Molino-Romano (2008), the differences between dialects are all subject to the influence exercised over time by the languages with which they are in contact, like Piemontese, French and Lombardo, especially in lexicon formation and in some phonetic characteristics. This statement has been tested by us through the analysis of our data to see whether socio-linguistic factors and the influence of border languages are enough to explain the phenomena related to contact.

The corpus. Rimella offers a special model of a diglossic phase, where Italo-Romance constitutes the high code and the *tittschu*, the low one. The changes of the sociolinguistic system have modified the condition at the point that the Valsesian dialect (North Piemonte), which in the past was in a minority position with respect to *tittschu,* has now taken over the latter and has become the code of greatest use (Di Paolo 2018: 41). According to a survey carried out in Rimella (2004) *Walsertittschu is* spoken by 81.4 % of the population, on a total of 147 inhabitants (Dal Negro-Iannaccaro-Dell'Aquila 2004).

We assembled our linguistic corpus of Rimellese with a sample of some active speakers across a wide age range. The informants (ca. 50% females and ca.50% males) were growers, housewives and bricklayers. The poor mobility and the geographical isolation meant a good conservation of the key elements of the Walser language and culture in this area (Di Paolo 2018: 26). However, our data collection reveals that the languages of older people are two: a Walser dialect and Piemontese. Interestingly, these two codes are often used simultaneously, so that it is possible to detect Italo-Romance elements within a speech in *tittschu*. Based on our corpus and on the syntactic studies by Bauen (1978), we would like to investigate some aspects

of code-switching in the spoken language of Rimella, in order to offer a possible overview of the mechanisms and categories involved in the code change within a mixed code.

Our results. Adopting Auer (1998), with code-switching (CS) we indicate a process, typical of bilinguals, whereby a speaker switches from one linguistic system to the other within the same speech act. Differently, borrowing is a 'result' (not a process), which is to say the presence of an imported element in the so-called recipient language (cf. also Myers-Scotton & Jake 2009). At a first look, CS seems to occur without a logic and that speakers introduce Romance elements without any apparent reasons. However, an extensive analysis of all the corpus has shown that this process does not take place randomly, but that it affects precise grammatical environments. More specifically, complementizers and clause connectors (f. i. *ma, perché, dopo, poi*, etc.) appear to be particularly sensitive to CS and tend to occur in Italo-Romance and not in Germanic. For instance, the declarative C 'that' generally occurs in Romance (*che*) (see (1), despite the presence of the Walser option *dass 'that'*:

(1) Che nu was asswer embri Casa Serena
    That now what eat-1sg at Casa Serena
    "that we eat something at Casa Serena"

The same holds for 'but'*,* generally expressed with the Romance term:

(2) ma noïch der manna
    but not even the men
    "But not even men"

Other elements which regularly undergo CS are negative polarity items (such as *no, mica*) and other pragmatic markers (like *allora, beh*, etc.). It is interesting that the occurrence of Italo-Romance in these contexts is present across speakers, independently from the sociolinguistic variable. The possibility to detect regular patterns in an apparently random 'switch' leads us to the conclusion that some syntactic constraints must be at work and that CS is active in specific syntactic domains. In particular, the *Walser* corpus suggests that this phenomenon mainly targets functional categories (in particular the CP), and involves, therefore, core grammatical information. In this sense, our linguistic data match with other cases in which the CP appears be predominantly affected, independently from the languages spoken by the informants. Consider, for instance, the *que/-enik/-ela* alternation in Bask/Spanish speakers (Lopes 2009), the occurrence of Spanish *que* in English/Spanish bilinguals (Galindo 1999, Callahan 2004),or the insertion of *pu* 'that' in English/Greek communities (Alvanoudi 2018). Conversely, our data show that lexical categories seem to be less involved. While some lexical items are clearly imported from the donor-language together with the concept they express (f. e. *lavatrice, pasta, pizza*), it is noticeable that common lexical borrowing is quite limited in our corpus. For lexical categories speakers unanimously prefer the Germanic option.

Conclusions. Beside documenting a number of endangered minority languages in Northern Italy, we were able to make observations about the functioning of code-switching in Walser speakers. Our results match with other cross-linguistic data, providing us with a new piece of information about how the faculty of language reacts in contact situations.

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