Variation in a second language as a methodological challenge: Knowledge and use of relative clauses

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1. Introduction

As if acquiring a second language were not difficult enough for language learners, acquiring knowledge of how to vary speech in different situations and contexts seems to make the task even more intricate. In a situation like that in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, variation is a pronounced characteristic of the everyday life of language learners. They are immersed in an environment featuring extensive use of local dialects but also use of the Standard German variety in formal instruction, written communication, and often in speech to people who are not native Swiss German speakers (Werlen 1998; Berthele 2004; Christen et al. 2010). How second language learners deal with the variation present in their everyday input and how this influences their language acquisition and use have yet not been the focus of much study. However, insights into the use and the knowledge of features that are subject to variation in the two co-occurring varieties are interesting for their implications for the cognitive and social dimension of language acquisition.

In the early days of second language acquisition (SLA) studies, variation was discussed mostly in terms of developmental patterns in the acquisition process over time. In recent years, the acquisition of variation, e.g. sociolinguistic or regional variation, has attracted increasing attention in second language studies (Dewaele and Mougeon 2004; Bailey and Regan 2004). This work has addressed diverse issues, including regionally or contextually marked phonetic realizations (Beebe 1980; Drummond 2010), the use of syntactic constructions in more or less formal situations (Regan 2004; Li 2010), and the use of forms of address (Dewaele 2004). Influenced by variationist studies and quantitative sociolinguistics as well as by traditional second language research, these studies mostly apply a group-study approach with different data-collection methods, such as conversations, sociolinguistic interviews, observation, questionnaires, and others.

Deciding on an appropriate method of data collection is often not straightforward in second language research. Along two dimensions, from
naturalistic to experimental and from learner speech productions to learner reflections (Chaudron 2003: 764), a wealth of methods based on natural speech, prompted speech, or non-linguistic experimental tasks can be distinguished (for comprehensive overviews see Mackey and Gass 2005, Gass and Mackey 2007). Furthermore, the design choice between longitudinal case studies and cross-sectional group studies has to be made (for examples, see Chaudron 2003: 774–776). Case studies provide an excellent ground for in-depth analysis of individual acquisition processes. But second language learners are often vastly different, and group studies are more apt to capture issues of acquisition and use across individuals.

This paper is based on an exploratory small-group study that combines free-speech analysis, elicited translations, and metalinguistic judgments, and aims at an investigation of how the acquisition of variation by adult immigrants to Switzerland can be described. In pursuit of this goal, the focus is the knowledge and use of one exemplary grammatical phenomenon that is formally different in the two varieties under study: relative clauses. German relative clauses in speech have been investigated from different point of views: grammar, semantics and information structure (Weinert 2004; Birkner 2008) and dialectal variation (Fleischer 2004, 2005), but also form the developmental perspective in first and instructed second language acquisition (Brandt et al. 2008; Byrnes and Sinicrope 2008, who, however, focus on written language). These studies establish a basis upon which to examine relative clauses as used by second language learners in a mostly untutored situation with variation in the input.

Data from different sources will be presented, and the methodological and interpretative challenges in second language research in general and in this particular acquisition situation will occupy an important place. First, the topic of acquisition of variation is introduced (Section 2) by explaining the notion of variation in the context of second language acquisition and its significance in the particular Swiss context. Section 3 highlights the variational aspect of the phenomenon under investigation – relativization in Standard German and in Swiss German dialects. The methodology of the study from which the data are extracted is presented in Section 4. Next, Section 5 discusses what these methods can show about one exemplary phenomenon subject to variation, namely relative clauses, in free speech and in a small translation and preference task completed by second language learners. Concluding remarks close the paper.
2. Acquisition of variation in a second language

2.1. The concept of variation in the context of second language acquisition

The term “variation” has two different meanings in the context of language acquisition. Rehner (2002: 15) distinguished between type 1 and type 2 variation. Whereas type 1 variation concerns alternations between target-like forms and target-deviant forms that are not part of native speech, type 2 variation “manifests itself via an alternation between forms that are each used by native speakers of the target language.” In language acquisition research, the study of type 1 variation in the form of the study of developmental patterns and continuous approximation of target forms has prevailed for a long time. With respect to language proficiency, the learner’s main aim is to reduce type 1 variation, manifest type 2 variation and be able to vary speech in a native-like manner. However, from a social or interactional point of view, native-like proficiency may not be the ultimate ambition, as non-target-like structures can be deployed strategically and in a very efficient way (Firth and Wagner 2007: 765).

The nature of the constructions, elements, or features that are subject to type 2 variation differs considerably. In human languages, most variation is consistent and therefore predictable. Variation can be conditioned by the linguistic context, e.g. determiner agreement in gender or case with the noun, or it can be determined by social and other external factors, e.g. the use of a certain form of address or a certain form of speech. This means that learners have to acquire a set of variables as well as the appropriate contexts of usage. The evidence regarding whether and to what extent adults regularize or adopt variation in the input originates from different contexts, including acquisition of “miniature languages” in experimental contexts (Hudson Kam and Newport 2005, 2009), classroom-based second language acquisition (Dewaele 2004; Li 2010) and studies on untutored language acquisition (Beebe 1980; Klein and Perdue 1993; Drummond 2010). The studies indicate that learners reproduce the variation present in the input depending on different factors, with the most important ones being complexity and access to variation. This ties in with the definition of complexity as “synonymous with the difficulty of the acquisition of a language, or a subsystem of a language, for adolescent or adult learners” (Trudgill 2009: 98–99).²

The variation in relative clauses across two different dialects that is examined in this paper is interesting with respect to complexity and access.
As explained in more detail in Section 3, relativization is not equally complex in both varieties in terms of its formal means. The different patterns are accessible as a result of being embedded in the two respective varieties. These two varieties each constitute a complete system, and native speakers vary in their use of relative-clause pattern depending on the overall choice of variety at the moment of speech. The factors that influence the choice of one or the other variety must therefore first be described in more detail.

2.2. The language-learning situation

Language variation is present in many acquisition contexts, but clearly stands out in a diglossic situation like that in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, where two varieties coexist in everyday spoken and written communication (Berthele 2004; Werlen 1988, 1998; Christen et al. 2010). The local dialects dominate everyday spoken forms of communication between autochthonous speakers in all contexts, but also on Swiss TV and radio broadcasts (except newscasts). The Standard German variety is used almost exclusively in institutional forms of communication (e.g. in an academic environment) and when communicating with people from abroad or from other German-speaking countries who do not understand the local dialect. Standard German is usually also the language of instruction. The main aim of courses in the local dialect is commonly to help learners who have at least a basic knowledge of German as a foreign or even as a first language to understand and then eventually also produce the local dialect.

The local dialects serve as the medium of spoken communication among all social classes, and the citizens of the German-speaking part of Switzerland use them to express their local identity (Werlen 2005: 26). With respect to the “in-group” value of the dialect, the social implications of the choice to use one variety or the other when speaking to immigrants cannot be neglected. Choosing the local dialect can indicate the willingness to integrate someone and consider him or her as belonging to the community, or it can indicate lack of willingness to make the effort to accommodate to a form of speech that is easier for some immigrants to understand (Christen et al. 2010: 61). Studies on the use of local dialects and the standard variety have shown that Swiss people use the local dialect in communication with non-native speakers, although only to a limited extent (Ender and Kaiser 2009; Christen et al. 2010). Christen et al. (2010) looked at language choice on the police hotline and discovered instances of “foreigner talk”, or language use that runs counter to a strict separation of the two varieties by
native speakers. All in all, these results underline the fact that speech addressed to non-native speakers is subject to considerable dialectal variation (and that is ignoring for the moment that the surrounding dialects are also different from each other).

The dialect and the standard-like speech that learners are exposed to are very similar but nevertheless distinct varieties that differ in many respects (Rash 1998): besides major differences in lexis and phonology, there are dissimilarities at the morphological and syntactical levels, such as the connection of relative clauses and infinitive phrases (see Bucheli Berger, Gla-\text{ser}, and Seiler, this volume), different word order in modal past constructions, verb doubling in motion-verb constructions, the collapse of nominative–accusative marking in masculine noun phrases in the dialect, and the imperfect–perfect difference. Most of the morphological and syntactic differences are not highly frequent in speech, which makes their examination in learner speech a challenging, though very interesting, methodological undertaking.

3. Variation in relative-clause patterns in Standard German and Alemannic varieties

The basic type of German relative clause is generally defined as a subordinate clause that serves as an attribute to a nominal element. It usually immediately follows the nominal element and starts with a relative marker (Lehmann 1984: 45; Eisenberg 1999: 263). Besides prototypical relative-clause constructions, there are a number of constructions on the borderline between relative clauses and indirect questions, subject/object complement clauses, or other attributive clause types (Birkner 2008: 13–31).

In the basic type of relative clause – characterized by the reference to a nominal element with a phoric element – the form of this phoric element is the crucial distinction between relative clauses in different German varieties: Standard German mostly uses relative pronouns that agree in number and gender with the preceding nominal element (i.e. der, die, das – forms equivalent to the articles\(^5\)) and are case-marked according to their syntactic role in the subordinate phrase. Furthermore, the pronoun \textit{wer} (agreeing in case and not in gender) can connect preposed relative clauses; the particle \textit{was} can be used to refer to indefinite neuter pronouns like \textit{das, etwas, alles}, etc. (‘the thing(s)’, ‘something’, ‘everything’). Uninflected particles such as \textit{wo, als, woher, womit}, etc., can mostly be replaced with a combination of
preposition + relative pronoun and are used for adverbial or prepositional object relatives. The particle *wo* is the most common of these connectors and is used for local and temporal deixis in a very broad sense (Birkner 2008: 261–263). With regard to the fact that in spoken language *wo* is used in many semantically imprecise conditions where a substitution with preposition + relative pronoun would be possible, Birkner (2008: 263) hypothesizes that this choice could reflect speakers' avoidance of case inflected complex junction.

In contrast, in the Alemannic dialects the uninflected particle *wo* serves as the main relative marker. It is used for relativization on subjects and (direct) objects and in some Alemannic dialects also on indirect objects (Fleischer 2004: 227, using the terminology of Keenan and Comrie 1977). Indirect, genitive, and oblique object relative clauses mostly require additional elements (prepositions, pronouns), but their use is very limited in speech. Furthermore, *wo* is used in all the local and temporal contexts that conform to Standard German in the widest sense. At the same time, it has to be mentioned that the use of relative pronouns is not completely excluded from dialectal speech. “The relative clause introduced by *dä* (SHG *der*) instead of *wo* is the most obvious and most often criticised case of syntactic shifting” (Werlen 1988: 104). This kind of syntactic shifting could also happen in the other direction and manifest itself as the overuse of *wo*. Even if such uses are to be considered outliers, the possibility cannot be excluded that learners have been exposed not only to consistent variation between the varieties, but to a small extent to inconsistent variation.

In the context of acquisition, relativization is generally considered to be a feature of advancedness (Odlin 1989: 97). On the basis of a longitudinal L1 case study, Brandt et al. (2008) argued that German relative clauses evolve (via V2-relatives) from simple non-embedded sentences. Byrnes and Sinicrope (2008) examined relative clauses in a longitudinal study of instructed learning of German by English-speaking students. They showed that the full range of relative clauses was already used in written production at lower course levels and that relativization progressed in terms of overall frequency (up to a proportion of 13%) in these written texts.

Relative clauses are fairly infrequent but constituent parts of spoken language. The numbers given for instance of relative clauses in spoken German depend on the choice of procedure for counting and defining relative clauses. Weinert (2004) calculated the number of relative clauses relative to the number of words in a passage: in her spoken corpora, covering a range of formality contexts from academic to casual conversation, relative
clauses appeared from approximately every 230 words to approximately every 620 words.\(^8\) Other researchers counted attributive subordinate clauses – of which only some are relative clauses – and put their frequency at about 8% of total utterances (Patocka 2000: 303, cited in Fleischer 2005: 172) or at just above 11% (Höhne-Leska 1975: 59).\(^9\) In spoken language, relativization shows characteristics including prevalence of specific constructions and use of mostly subject- and object-relative clauses (Weinert 2004; Birkner 2008).

In the subsequent explications, relative clauses serve as an example of learners’ knowledge and use of a grammatical phenomenon which features dialectal variation in their learning environment. A major concern is to show what conditions of use and elicitation have to be created so that an insight into use and knowledge of variable patterns can be gained.

4. Collecting data on use and knowledge of variation

4.1. Participants

Data from 20 second language learners of German (10 female and 10 male) with four different first languages (Albanian, English, Portuguese, and Turkish) is presented. Average age of participants was 40 years (range: 27 to 65) and average time of residence in Switzerland 17 years (range: 1.5 to 33). The group was heterogeneous with regard to educational and professional background, including manual workers with a minimal level of compulsory schooling as well as university graduates.\(^{10}\) The participants took part in the study voluntarily and without noteworthy compensation.

4.2. Data collection

As explained in the preceding sections, learners are exposed to dialectal variation in their everyday life, which leads to variable contact with different structural phenomena. To examine which patterns dominate in their linguistic representations and how they make use of them, a combination of data seems necessary. Free speech can give insights into use and allow inferences about the knowledge of speakers. However, as most of the structural differences with which we are concerned are not highly frequent in speech and as there is no mandatory choice of one of the two varieties, observations of short conversations are limited as a tool and demand sup-
porting evidence. A translation task and a preference task, as completed for the present study, can provide additional information on the knowledge of participants (that otherwise might not be evident) and on their awareness of the differences between the varieties.

4.2.1. Structured interviews

Structured interviews were used to gather free speech together with biographic information and participants’ accounts of their experiences with second language learning and use. To provide a context in which both varieties under study were acceptable and appreciated, there were two interviewers, one speaking Standard German and one speaking vernacular Swiss German (Bernese German). Although this led to an asymmetry of interlocutors, it was the most practicable way of gathering data from the learners in conversation with speakers of both varieties. In order to keep some consistency over the course of the interviews, the two interviewers had thematically organized blocks of questions and alternated as the “main” interlocutor. The conversations mainly followed a framework of questions on topics as follows: country of origin and immigration to Switzerland, education in general and language education in particular, language use in everyday life, perception of differences between Standard German and Swiss German, personal experiences with the two varieties, etc. Due to the different amount of spontaneous narratives produced, the actual sequencing and the total lengths of the interviews (including the two tasks mentioned below) varied from about 35 to almost 90 minutes among participants, but mostly lasted about 45 to 60 minutes.

4.2.2. Prompted language data: Translation task

Following the open questions on the main differences between the two varieties, the participants were asked to engage in a two-part translation task which could reveal more about how they perceive and distinguish the varieties. They were confronted with 10 audiorecorded sentences, five in each variety. First, they were asked by the speaker of Standard German to translate the following five sentences from the local dialect to Standard German as they would if the interviewer herself could not understand the dialect. Furthermore, they were asked to translate each sentence to their first language. Then, the speaker of the Bernese dialect gave the same instructions for the second set of sentences, with Swiss German as the tar-
get variety. There was no time pressure applied during the translation, and the audiorecorded sentences were replayed if desired by the participant.

The two sets of sentences covered several structural differences between the two varieties, as explained above, and relative clauses are only one of several potentially interesting aspects that were covered. By observing which forms or constructions learners produce in translation, findings on what they perceive as typical or salient in the two varieties arise (a very similar procedure was used in Werlen et al. 2002 for an assessment of second dialect acquisition by native speakers). More generally, performance in the translation task can also give hints regarding the question of which variety participants are more familiar with or more at ease in producing.

In the present paper, we focus on the two sentences containing relative clauses. Example (1) is a Swiss German sentence with the uninflected particle wo used as a relative marker (for the dialect examples, an orthography following Dieth 1986 is used). Example (2) is a Standard German sentence using the relative pronoun die.

(1) **Kenn-sch du vilech öpper, wo hüt zyt het.**

know-2SG you maybe somebody REL today time have.3SG

‘Do you know somebody who might have time today?’

(2) **Wir kennen vielleicht nicht alle Leute, die mit uns im Haus wohnen.**

we know maybe not all people REL with us in.3DAT

house live

‘We might not know all the people who are living in our house.’

Both sentences exhibit subject-relativization (Keenan and Comrie 1977), which is a very basic type of relativization that is often supposed to be learned earlier than other types.

4.2.3. Metalinguistic judgment data: Preference task

In this task, the participants were confronted with eight sentence pairs. Every pair consisted of sentences that were constructed with a morphosyntactic element in a standard-conform and in a dialect-conform (Bernese German) manner. In the focus of the present investigation are the four sentence pairs on relativization, i.e. subject-relativization in each case. There was always one relative clause introduced with the particle *wo* and another one with a relative pronoun. The purpose of this task is to identify the kind of repre-
sentation learners have about relative clauses – even if they do not produce relative clauses – through their judgments about different constructions. Examples (3) to (6) represent the four sentence pairs that were audiorecorded and played to the participants:

**Dialect**

(3) I gsee d frou, *die/wo näb dir steit.

‘I see the woman who is standing next to you.’

(4) Du kennsch der maa, wo/*dä verbi geit.

‘You know the man who is passing by.’

**Standard German**

(5) Ich kenne den Mann, *wo/der vorbeigeht.

‘I know the man who is passing by.’

(6) Du siehst die Frau, die/*wo neben mir steht.

‘You see the woman who is standing next to me.’

The learners were asked to tell which alternative sounded better to them and to give a reason, if possible. This might at first seem like an imprecise way of eliciting grammaticality judgments, but resulted from the intentional avoidance of the terms ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. If a more detailed instruction was requested, it was added that participants should choose the alternative that most native speakers of the variety in question would choose.

5. Relative clauses in speech and prompted data

There are considerable differences between speakers regarding the use of relative clauses in 15-minute extracts of free speech (see Table 1). The number of relative clauses used in a single extract ranges from 0 to 33 (for 181 relative clauses in total). Given the fact that the general number of utterances in the observed period varies significantly, the proportion of utterances containing relative clauses was calculated.\(^{13}\) It varies from 0% to 11% of the participants’ utterances. As relative clauses are variably used in free speech by native speakers (Höhne-Leska 1975, Weinert 2004, Fleischer 2005), the broad picture of very divergent use in quantitative terms is not very surprising. It is the nature of the relative markers in combination with the frequency of use that gives some interesting insights.

The standard and dialectal patterns of relative-clause construction are not used equally. Only three participants (Eng2, Eng3, and Turk4) use the Standard German pattern of relative-pronoun agreement exclusively (one
additional person, Turk1, uses it most frequently). Three participants (Alb3, Eng5, and Port6) connect relative clauses exclusively with the predominantly dialectal form wo, and seven participants (Alb1, Alb2, Alb4, Eng6, Port1, Port5, and Turk2) mostly use this dialectal form. In addition to these, some other results are worthy of note: Eng1, who uses only one relative clause, uses wo (in a construction where it is accepted in both varieties); Port2 does not make use of relative clauses; and three participants (Port3, Port4, and Turk3) utter only very few relative clauses, most of them without any connector; finally, Eng4 uses a variety of connectors and shows the highest variability in her use of relativization.

Table 1. The amount and nature of relative clauses (RCs) in learners’ speech (in order of prevalence); percentages are rounded to nearest half-percent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>participant</th>
<th>number of RCs</th>
<th>connecting elements</th>
<th>number of utterances</th>
<th>% of RCs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Port2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 no marker</td>
<td>222</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 wo (temporal)</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turk3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 no marker, 1 was</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 das, 1 prep + pronoun (an denen)</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5 wo (1 thereof local)</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2 no marker, 1 die</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 die, 1 der, 1 wo (local)</td>
<td>209</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alb3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 wo (1 temporal)</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turk1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6 die, 1 wo, 1 wo (local)</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turk4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4 der, 3 die, 1 wo (local)</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6 wo (1 local), 2 was</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11 wo (1 local)</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5 wä (‘wer’), 3 dä (‘der’), 3 das, 1 wo, 1 was</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turk2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14 wo (3 local, 2 temporal), 1 no marker</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alb1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14 wo (3 temporal), 2 was</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alb4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>15 wo (4 temporal), 1 was</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eng6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10 wo, 2 was</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13 wo (1 temporal), 2 das, 1 no marker</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alb2</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>31 wo (2 temporal, 2 local), 1 das, 1 de (‘die’)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variable use of relative connectors by Eng4 is an interesting example of type 1 variation (Rehner 2002). Other instances of non-target-like variation – neither conforming with the standard nor with the dialectal pattern –
can be observed, for example, in the use of the connector *was*. This relative marker should in Standard German only be used to refer to a neuter indefinite pronoun, but three of nine instances in the data conflict with such a use, as in example (7). Furthermore, only one of the eight instances (among four speakers) of *das* is used in a target-like manner; in the other instances it does not correspond in gender, as in (8), and/or in number. Finally, other instances of type 1 variation are exhibited, for example, in all the cases where a relative marker is missing, as in (9):

(7) *de deutsch was i kann* (Eng6)
    ‘the German that I know’

(8) *wegen war eine gute kollegin im kuchi das mir immer ufschrybe wenn ich eppis nicht verstend* (Port1)
    ‘because there was a good friend in the kitchen who always wrote it down for me if I didn’t understand’

(9) *ich bin geboren worden in eine stadt Ø heisst (Ortsname)* (Turk3)
    ‘I was born in a town [that is] named (name of the town)’

Besides these formal criteria, it is also worthwhile to consider the frequency of relative clauses in speech. As relative clauses are generally considered to be a form of complex syntax and their frequent use to be a characteristic of advancedness (Odlin 1989: 97f., Byrnes and Sinicrope 2008: 112, 132), a brief additional look at length of residence as it relates to frequency of use of relative clauses might be revealing. Interestingly, length of residence does not correlate with use of relative clauses. The learners who use very few relative clauses, some of them without relative markers, or exhibit very variable use of relative clauses (Eng1, Eng4, Port2, Port3, Port4, and Turk3) are with one exception also the ones who have been living in German-speaking areas for a shorter period. At the same time, we also have learners who have had medium- or long-term exposure to German (Alb3, Eng2, Eng3, Port6, Turk1, Turk4), but do not produce more than 2.5% of relative clauses in their extracts. Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that neither education nor influence of a specific first language seem in our sample to be indicative of more or less frequent use of relativization.

With respect to type 2 variation, we have to examine whether the participants use the different patterns according to speech variety used (embedding context). As there are two interviewees, the participants might change their speech according to which person they address. We might assume that codeswitching happens and that the use of specific relative markers correlates with changes on the phonological and morphological levels. However,
in the participant data showing a predominant use of either the standard-like or the dialectal pattern, it is not the case that instances that deviate from the predominant use co-occur with codeswitching. In fact, besides the instances of relativization where the choice of relative pattern is in accordance with the embedding context, sentences similar to (10) are not rare. In addition, the contrast that example (11) exhibits between the choice of relative marker and the surrounding context calls for a more detailed look.

(10) *aber mini sohn isch au eine grund wo hilft in die schweiz zu blybe* (Port5)
    ‘but my son is also a reason that helps [me want] to stay in Switzerland’

(11) *und ich habe schöne kleider mitgenommen wo ich nähen lasse* (Turk2)
    ‘and I took nice clothes with [me] that I get sewn [for me]’

In (10), the participant produces elements of both varieties on the morphophonological level: the elements *eine, in die schweiz, and zu* can be considered as standard, whereas *mini, isch, au, and blybe* are clearly dialectal, as well as the choice of the uninflected particle *wo*. In contrast, in (11) everything except the choice of the particle *wo* can be considered spoken Standard German. Given such sentences, it seems interesting to have a look at how the use of the uninflected particle or pronominal relative markers corresponds to the overall use of the two varieties in learners’ speech.

Therefore, participants are classified into three groups depending on whether their speech is – according to the present sample – very standard-like, very dialectal, or mixed. Participant use of relativization is then categorized in three ways: 1) exclusive or predominant use of *wo*; 2) exclusive or predominant use of the standard-like relative-pronoun pattern; and 3) no apparent predominance or no relative markers. Each symbol in Figure 1 represents one participant’s use of relativization according to the criteria just mentioned as well as to frequency of use (marked on the y-axis).

The participants who mix elements of both varieties on the lexical, phonological and morphological levels mostly use the uninflected particle as their relativizer. It therefore seems as if the group of participants that mix the varieties is highly biased toward using the less complex pattern with the uninflected particle, in which neither the distinction between gender and number of the heading noun phrase nor the distinction between subject-, object- and oblique relatives is relevant. On the contrary, the standard-like pattern of relativization is only used by participants also using very standard-like speech in terms of lexis, phonology, and morphology. The persons who do not show any predominance in relativization strategy fall into the
“rather standard” and “mixing” groups with regard to their general language use.

Furthermore, the use of *wo* is not necessarily tied to dialectal or mixed speech. There is one learner (Turk2) who makes almost exclusive use of the uninflected particle to connect relative clauses, even though her speech is very standard-like from both a phonological and morphological perspective. She uses the particle to connect subject-, object- and adverbial/oblique relative clauses, and overuses it also to connect a genitive relative clause, as in (12)

(12) *und dann war ein haus leer im dorf wo besitzer im deutschland war* (Turk2)

‘and then a house in the village was empty the owner of which was in Germany’

The recurring use of the uninflected particle *wo* could be considered as an example of the kind of syntactic shifting mentioned by Werlen (1988). From an acquisitional perspective, it can be considered a form of crosslinguistic influence between the two varieties present in the learning environment (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008). This interpretation is probably more adequate than any attempt to apply the term “switching”, which presupposes
that the other variety is accessible but temporarily overrun – there is no
evidence that the learner has knowledge of the pronominal use. Therefore,
the findings about what is used in an elicited production and in a metalin-
guistic judgment task can give interesting supplementary evidence, as in the
cases of Turk2 and many other participants. Tables 2 and 3 display the
choices of different speakers in translating a sentence from each variety to
the other.

Continuing the analysis of the relative-clause use of Turk2, we can ob-
serve that she retains the uninflected particle also in translating a dialect
sentence to Standard German (Table 2), while in translation from standard
to dialect (Table 3) she adds *wo* to the pronoun *die*. This corroborates
the assumption about the generalized status of the uninflected particle in her
knowledge. The same seems to be true for another three participants (Alb1,
Alb4, and Eng6), who maintain the particle in the translation to Standard
German and use it in the translation to Swiss German.

**Table 2. Choices for the relative marker in the translation to Standard German**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Numbers</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>wer</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Eng4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wer/wo/Ø</em></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Port5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Ø</em></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Eng1, Turk3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>der</em></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Eng2, Eng3, Eng5, Turk1, Turk4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>wo</em> (= no change)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Alb1, Alb2, Alb4, Eng6, Port1, Turk2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no translation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Alb3, Port2, Port3, Port4, Port6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A speaker with a lot of variation in relative markers (Eng4) chooses *wer*,
which is also her most frequent marker in free speech, in both contexts.
Another person (Port5) makes three different attempts for the translation to
Standard German, but adequately translates to the dialect on first try. Two
of the learners who are at a fairly beginning level of German (Eng1, Turk3)
and who produce very few relative clauses in free speech translate without
a relative marker to the standard variety. Into the other direction, Turk3
does not translate the sentence due to what he identifies as his lack of
knowledge about the dialect; Eng1 uses *wer*. The five participants who
translate into the standard-like form with *der* are with one exception speak-
ers who predominantly use relative pronouns in their free speech (Eng2,
Eng3, Turk1, and Turk4). These four speakers also do not exchange the
pronoun with the uninflected particle in the translation to Swiss German.
This indicates that they are biased toward the Standard German pattern.
Finally, five learners cannot translate the Standard German sentence, and
four learners cannot translate the dialectal sentence. The members of these
groups only partly overlap, but some learners seem in fact to have difficul-
ties understanding or processing the German relative clauses, as they did
not use any kind of relative clause in translation to their first language.

Table 3. Choices for the relative connector in translation to Swiss German

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>numbers</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>als</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Port2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die wo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Turk3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Turk2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Eng1, Eng4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wo</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Alb1, Alb4, Eng5, Eng6, Port5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die (= no change)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Alb2, Eng2, Eng3, Port3, Turk1, Turk4,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no translation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Alb3, Port1, Port4, Turk3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, Eng5 is the only speaker who correctly changes the relative marker
in both contexts and who therefore best and uniquely masters type 2 varia-
tion in relativization. He seems to have a knowledge of relative clauses
comprising correct usage in both varieties. This assumption is underlined
by the fact that he is also one of two speakers who opts for all target-like
items in the preference task. This leads us to the presentation of the results
of the preference tasks and what they can add to the discussion so far.

Overall, the preference task confronted the speakers with more difficul-
ties than expected. As displayed in Table 4, in all four instances a varying
number of learners (from three to seven) did not perceive a difference be-
tween the presented sentences.

Table 4. The numbers and percentages for dialect-conforming, standard-conform-
ing, or no decision on the sentence pairs in the preference task

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>dialect-conforming</th>
<th>standard-conforming</th>
<th>no decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dialect: relative clause 1</td>
<td>8 (40%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialect: relative clause 2</td>
<td>13 (65%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard: rel. clause 1</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard: rel. clause 2</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More than half of the learners had at least one instance of “no decision”
which means that they did not hear a difference between the two sentences
and/or said both sentences sounded either good or odd. The eight learners
who exhibited two or more instances of “no decision” were mostly those
struggling with the translations as well. These findings corroborate the assumption that some participants with very low and/or unsystematic use of relative clauses, like Port2, Port3, Port4 and Turk3, have not yet sorted out the structure of relativization. For other participants, this task adds some confusion to the evidence presented before. For example, Alb3 uses relative clauses in free speech quite regularly and consequently with the uninflected particle. At the same time, he shows great difficulty in translating and expressing a preference. It may be hypothesized that his relative clauses are unanalyzed or only partly analyzed chunks.

Furthermore, the judgments in the preference task can give hints regarding additional knowledge that was not revealed in the free speech and translation tasks. Eng1, who is a beginning learner speaking a very standard-like variety, uses only one relative clause and does not show the variety-adequate relative markers in the translations, but chooses adequately in three out of four pairs in the preference task. This does not necessarily mean that the amount of relative clauses in his speech will dramatically increase with further exposure to the language, as for example Eng2, Engl3, Turk1 and Turk4 – learners speaking a very standard-like variety and using predominantly pronouns – also produce very few relative clauses. Given the results from the preference task (75 to 100% accuracy and additional adequate explanations), it seems that Eng2, Eng3 and Turk4 are aware of the dialectal relativization pattern, while Turk1 is biased towards the standard-like pattern in the preference task as well.

Uniting these results and considering Figure 1 once again leads to an interesting observation. In fact, it seems as if the participants who stick to the more complex standard-like pattern of relativization do not use relative clauses very frequently – or to put it more dramatically, avoid relative clauses, as the necessary agreement in number, gender, and case poses pitfalls. In fact, a Kruskal-Wallis rank-sum test revealed a significant effect of type of relativizer on frequency of use ($\chi^2(2) = 9.4405, p < 0.01$). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons with Bonferroni-Holm correction showed a significant difference between the participants using $\textit{wo}$ and those using no markers or showing no predominant use of a relative marker ($p < 0.02$) and a difference just beyond the level of significance between the participants using $\textit{wo}$ and those using the pronouns ($p = 0.072$). The participants using the pronoun pattern and showing knowledge about relativization in the prompted data task, however, did not exhibit more frequent use than those participants who – according to the prompted data tasks – mostly seem to lack knowledge about the differences in relativization between the two varieties and have difficulties with this grammatical feature.
Andrea Ender (1989: 99) mentions avoidance or underproduction of relative clauses due to language transfer. In the present data, we seem to observe avoidance or underproduction as a result of the structural variant that the learners choose and its inherent complexity. A higher frequency of use of relative clauses seems to depend on the condition that learners opt for relativization with the uninflected particle. For those using the personal pronouns, it seems as though relativization is significantly more complex and therefore avoided. This is in line with assumptions about the learnability of complex features (e.g. Hudson Kam and Newport 2009; Trudgill 2009), but very interestingly conforms with Birkner’s observation (2008: 263) that in the speech of native speakers the particle wo is emerging as a highly frequent substitute for more complex preposition–pronoun combinations, with a very broad semantic range.

It is tricky to present evidence for something that is avoided, i.e. not produced. Compensatory constructions, as in (13) and (14), only add likelihood to the assumption that these participants may prefer to concatenate information that otherwise could be subject to relativization:

(13) ich konnte diese unterschiede nicht machen und die sind hilfreich (Engl2)
‘I could not make these distinctions and they are helpful’

(14) das sind halt alles ausländer gewesen und sie haben auch nicht besonders gut deutsch geredet überhaupt (Turk4)
‘those [people] were all foreigners and they did not speak generally very good German’

These sparse references can add only little support to the assumption that relative clauses may in fact be avoided by these learners; an extended analysis on a bigger sample of speech from these learners may give important additional evidence.

6. Conclusion

This paper presented methodological challenges surrounding and findings on the acquisition of variation in untutored second language acquisition by focusing on relativization. The combination of three different methods provided insights and garnered results that none of the methods on its own would have discovered. Acquiring the patterns of relativization in both Standard German and (Alemannic) Swiss German varieties seems to be
very challenging for second-language learners, and if we assume that the focus of these learners is on effective communication might not even be the ultimate ambition. There are instances of type 1 variation in choice of relative markers in free speech, but also in the translation task. With respect to type 2 variation, most participants seem to be highly biased towards either the dialectal or the standard-like pattern in free speech. Only one participant showed native-like type 2 variation in the translation task, although the preference task showed awareness of the differences between the two varieties on the part of a few participants.

Furthermore, choice of relative markers is not totally in accordance with the more general observation of whether a learner speaks more dialectal or more standard-like speech. One participant consistently uses the uninflected particle even though her speech is standard-like in terms of lexis, phonology, and morphology. Those participants whose speech exhibits a lot of mixing mostly choose the dialectal pattern with the uninflected particle. And it seems as if learners who are open to the use of elements of both varieties then tend to choose the less complex one. The findings thus show an interesting interaction between complexity and access. Furthermore, there seems to be a correlation between the nature of the relative marker and the frequency of use. Learners who stick to the more complex standard-like use of relative markers in free speech rarely use relativization, seeming to exhibit avoidance or underproduction.

Using the sample case of relativization, the results have given interesting preliminary insights on the acquisition of variation in untutored second-language acquisition and raised issues to be investigated in the context of other linguistic features and more data. All in all, it has become clear that individual similarities and differences can be dependent on a variety of interacting linguistic, cognitive, and social factors that have to be considered carefully and thoroughly with a combination of promising methods.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Carla Hudson Kam for discussing the material, Molly Babel for “playing statistics” with me, and Bernhard Wälchli, Adrian Leemann and the anonymous reviewers for their comments on the paper. I am very grateful to the people who kindly participated in the study. This research was supported by a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation (PA00P1_129070).
2. In SLA studies, the multifaceted nature of complexity is often examined along with fluency and accuracy (an overview of recent studies is given in *Applied Linguistics* 30 (4); see also Housen and Kuiken 2009).

3. In this paper, the notion of “varieties” is adopted, although there have been vivid discussions about the status of the two varieties in question and the notions of diglossia and (asymmetric) bilingualism in the Alemannic-speaking part of Switzerland (e.g. Berthele 2004, Werlen 1998).

4. The extent to which these learners have been exposed to the two varieties and might find the standard or the dialectal variety easier to understand depends on a complex arrangement of different factors: amount of instruction, contact with the two varieties in the learner’s personal and professional environment, etc.

5. Forms of *welch*- are rare and highly uncommon in speech.

6. Besides, the additional use of a pronoun would not be considered ungrammatical in either the subject- or object-relative clauses in some Alemannic dialects.

7. Such an overuse seems unlikely due to generally high normative awareness of adult speakers towards the standard language, and it has not been reported in the comprehensive analysis of spoken Standard German in Switzerland by Christen et al. (2010). However, Häcki Buhofer and Burger (1998: 79) and Straßl and Ender (2009: 213) report an overuse of *wo* in children’s use of Standard German.

8. Regarding the length of sentences in spoken language, researchers indicate averages of 6 to 8 or 6 to 10 words (Höhne-Leska 1975; Schwitalla 2003). The given data about relative clauses per utterance could thus be translated very roughly into a proportion of about 1 to 3.5% of spoken utterances containing relative clauses.

9. In some recordings of dialectal data, relative clauses are completely missing.

10. This heterogeneity can be regarded as a strength and as a weakness at the same time. Not excluding some groups of immigrants, e.g. skilled persons who have entered Switzerland in the context of “love migration” (Riaño 2003), gives a more realistic holistic picture, but, given the smallness of the sample, reduces the chance of finding generalizabilities.

11. With native speakers, such a situation would most probably lead to addressee-dependent codeswitching, i.e., the use of the local dialect or Standard German would depend on the current interlocutor.

12. The translations to the first languages of participants achieved different purposes. On the one hand, they should reveal whether any failure in translation was due to miscomprehension of the sentence in question. On the other hand, the translation can also give insights into possible first language-based preferences for different structures.

13. For the quantitative appraisal of relative clauses in the speech of the participants, the term utterance refers to complete or elliptic main or subordinate clauses that are apportionable according to semantic and prosodic features. Segmenting free speech is already a challenging issue in native speech (Auer 2010), and the increasing amount of ellipses, break-offs, etc., in learner speech does not facilitate the undertaking.
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