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Grammaticalization, attrition and complexity in a Walser German linguistic island of Northern Italy

In Titsch, a Walser German variety spoken in the linguistic island of Gressoney in Aosta Valley and exposed to a strong process of language decay (Zürrer 2009), a number of changes are found which are unprecedented in the rest of the Germanic family. In particular, we will focus on two peculiar cases of grammaticalization.

First, we record the birth of a marker *tònz* [tʊnts] found in causative constructions in the present and in the past form, as shown respectively by (1) and (2) (the examples come from a written corpus containing about 76,000 tokens). While the marker *tònz* clearly goes back to the causative verb DO (TO) which used to be employed in earlier stages of German in causative constructions as shown for instance by the Early New High German example in (3), this is nowadays no longer the case and *lassen* 'to let' is normally used (cf. Zifonun et al. 1997: 1411, DUDEN[9]: 435). Moreover, while DO is widely used as a grammaticalized auxiliary in several functions through all West-Germanic varieties (Schwarz 2009), it is not normally found in causative constructions, with the exception of a certain number of usages as for instance in German *jemandem weh / Gutes tun* 'to harm / to do good to someone' where however *tun* cannot govern an infinitive. Notice that also in Titsch the verb *tue* 'to do' is only used as an auxiliary for carrying finiteness features in clauses as shown by the form *tuet* of (1). Thus, the particle *tònz* cannot be paired with its etymological cognate in synchrony. Moreover, in spite of its origin from the sequence *tun zu > tònz* preceding an infinitive, this is no longer the case and *tònz* can be placed in a distant position with regard to the governed infinitive as shown by (2).

Second, a progressive marker *eister* is found which goes back to an adverb only found in Swiss German with the meaning 'at once' (cf. *einst* 'once' + *-dar*, see German *immerdar* 'always'), as shown by (4). The progressive marker must always follow the finite verb and can also be employed in the past involving a perfect with a clearly imperfective value. In spite of the manifold expressions found for conveying progressive aspect found through the West-Germanic family (cf. Ebert 2000), Titsch stands alone showing a peculiar development which does not apparently reflect the patterns elaborated elsewhere.

More generally, far from testifying language attrition or decay eventually leading to simplification, the peculiar changes observed in this isolated variety witness a pronounced vitality which has led to peculiar innovations in a context of contact-induced replica grammaticalization as elaborated by Heine and Kuteva (2003), showing a clear increase of complexity (Baechler 2016). In particular, the two cases are likely to be influenced by the contact with Romance varieties displaying causative constructions employing the verb for DO as well as strongly entrenched progressive constructions.

(1) *Irene tuet de tälloré tònz wäsche von Luis.*
     Irene does DEF dishes CAUS wash.INF from Luis
     'Irene makes Luis wash the dishes'.

(2) *hät désche lérer de chénn tuenz de téscha*
     have.3SG DEM teacher DEF children CAUS DEF tables
     z'obroscht de stòtz troage.
     to=upper DEF slope carry.INF
     'this teacher has made the children carry the tables uphill'.

(3) *dz er im das nit zů wissen het gethon.*
     that 3M.SG 3M.DAT DEM NEG to know.INF has done
     'that he has not made him know this'.

(4) *"Gras ässe nid òn more geine amòm zem hus"*
     grass eat.1SG NEG and tomorrow go.1SG again to.DEF house
     woa hät-z gsét dass dschi häm-mo eister salad
     where has-3SG.N seen that 3PL have-3SG.N.DAT PROG salad
     òf z'tällor gleit.
     on DEF=dish put.PSTPTCP
     'I don't eat grass and tomorrow I return back home' [said the master] as soon as he saw that they were serving him salad'.

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