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ARTICLE

On the Use of Pronominal Subjects in German Linguistic Islands in Northern Italy

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Abstract

We focus on the use of subject clitics and subject pronouns in speakers of linguistic islands in northern Italy, with an Upper German dialect as L1 and Italian as the surrounding majority language and L2. German requires an explicit subject pronoun or clitic, while in Italian the explicit subject is typically omitted. Further contact varieties such as Friulian, Piedmontese, and Francoprovençal display subject clitics. In contrast to previous studies, which were limited to one or two speech communities (of the same idiom) (see e.g. Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004, Kolmer 2012, Bidese & Tomaselli 2018), we compare three speech communities with two different idioms: Alemannic Walser varieties spoken in Gressoney and Issime and Zahre German, a Bavarian idiom spoken in Sauris. Our findings show that linguistic islands in northern Italy of both Bavarian as well as Alemannic origin develop in the same direction. Moreover, Issime and Gressoney differ notably from each other: Gressoney German indeed in some respects displays greater similarities to Zahre German, probably due to its different language contact situation as compared to Issime German. Finally, the grammaticalization status of the clitic is more advanced in Zahre German than in Walser German (at least than in Issime German).*

Keywords: German linguistic islands; Northern Italy; subject clitics; subject pronouns; (null) subject languages; contact-induced language change

1. Introduction

In northern Italy, we encounter the unique situation in which there are several territorially limited, historically grown linguistic islands with speakers of Upper

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German varieties. Until a few years ago, these small communities or speaker groups were still quite isolated in the mountains and over several centuries had little or no contact with the German-speaking area. In a way, the speakers of these linguistic islands are similar to the so-called "heritage speakers" in a broad sense as they are both "exposed naturalistically to the heritage language [. . . and] this language is by definition a nonhegemonic minority language within a majority-language environment" (Rothmann 2007:359). Furthermore, the societal majority language can be learned simultaneously or successively, and the heritage speaker does not need to be completely fluent in the heritage language (Rothmann 2007:359). However, the notion of heritage language/speakers is usually associated with migrant communities such as Italians and Spaniards in the United States, Poles in Norway, Germans in Australia, Friulians in Argentina and Brazil etc. In contrast, the linguistic islands under scrutiny differ from such communities sociolinguistically: These communities were established during the Middle Ages through migrations from neighboring Austria and Switzerland, and their settlements in mountainous or remote valleys enabled the German dialects to survive in a Romance-speaking environment for such a long time (see section 2.2 for details).

In our study, we focus on subject clitics and subject pronouns in speakers of Zahre German and Walser German, both with an Upper German dialect as L1 and with Italian as the surrounding majority language and L2. Note, however, that other varieties – especially in the past, less so today – have also had the status of being the dominant surrounding language(s): In the region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia the surrounding Romance varieties include Friulian, while in the Aosta Valley they comprise Franco-Provençal, Piedmontese, and French (the latter primarily in educational contexts; see Zürrer 1999: 83–99, Protto 2009, Costantini 2023, Moser 2025).[1] German – including spoken or dialectal varieties of German – requires an explicit subject, while in Italian it is typically omitted (null-subject language). The Romance contact varieties, on the other hand, usually display subject clitics (see sections 2.4 and 2.5 for details). In our study, we focus on (affirmative) declarative clauses and test the use of subject clitics in different persons and contexts. In contrast to previous studies, which were limited to one or two speech communities (of the same idiom) (cf. e.g. Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004, Kolmer 2012, Bidese & Tomaselli 2018), we compare three speech communities with two different idioms: (Highest) Alemannic Walser varieties spoken in Gressoney and Issime and Zahre German, a Bavarian idiom spoken in Sauris. The comparison of different but typologically closely related idioms allows us to refine previous statements about the extent of dialectal variation and language attrition. The three communities are indeed very similar in terms of their sociolinguistic history and background, but they had and have no (or very limited) contact with each other. In this respect, they represent an ideal laboratory for demonstrating the range and limits of dialectal variation and morphosyntactic change in a context of language shift. Comparing three different yet very similar groups of speakers enables us to draw conclusions about the direction of language change. Rothmann (2007:359) in fact points out that "heritage speaker grammars are a good source for testing dialectal variation and language change proposals." Heritage speakers, and of course our speakers in the linguistic islands, can also serve as valuable test cases for evaluating

[1] French because Aosta Valley is officially bilingual (Italian and French).

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the predictions of linguistic theory (Rothmann 2007:360). For instance, they can reveal areas of grammar that are particularly susceptible to change or to cross-linguistic influence (Lohndal et al. 2019:4). This aspect is also dealt with in language acquisition research as bilingual speakers of language islands or heritage speakers acquire language "under reduced input conditions or under pressure from another language in a bilingual environment" (Benmamoun et al. 2013:131). Furthermore, data from such speakers can be used as a test case for questions related to language typology, such as the extent of contact-induced change in the linguistic structure of the minority language (cf. Abraham 2011; for a case study on this topic, see Moser 2025). Of course, these speakers may also help us to get a more comprehensive picture of (bilingual) grammars as they "are largely unaffected by any enforced prescriptive norms" (D'Alessandro et al. 2021:8). Last but not least, due to the restricted input those speakers may also provide us with new information about the poverty of stimulus argument (Lohndal et al. 2019:4).

In our article, we address the question of whether or not the different but comparable speech communities of Sauris, Gressoney, and Issime have developed in the same direction in a context of language shift. We are interested in the question of whether and to what extent language contact affects language structure and whether language change goes in the same direction in all three varieties independently of each other. The article is organized as follows: In section 2 we first discuss the background and purpose of the article. This includes a description of the sociolinguistic situation in the present and the past (sections 2.1 and 2.2, respectively), information on language contact and language attrition (section 2.3), and the theoretical (typological) background as regards form and function of pronominal subjects and subject clitics as well as word order in the varieties involved (sections 2.4–2.6). In section 3 we present the research questions, section 4 details the design and methodology of our study. Finally, in section 5 we present and discuss the results.

2. Background and purpose

2.1. Brief description of the current language situation

In our study, we concentrate on three German linguistic islands in northern Italy: Sauris as well as Gressoney and Issime. The speakers of Sauris and Gressoney/Issime have no contact with each other because of the geographical distance, the former located in the easternmost part of northern Italy and the latter in the westernmost part. In all three communities, an Upper German dialect is spoken: in Sauris this is a Bavarian one, while in Gressoney and Issime it is an Alemannic one (Walser German).

Sauris, or "Zahre" in the local dialect, is the highest municipality in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region (Province of Udine) (with Sauris di Sopra at 1,400 meters) and is situated in an isolated valley of the Carnic Alps (see e.g. Geyer 2018). Today, it is a very well-kept village, famous for its bacon and popular among hikers. Sauris nowadays has around 400 inhabitants, of whom about 200 speak and use Zahre German (see Rabanus et al. 2023–). According to a survey conducted in 2018, 77.8% of the inhabitants always speak Zahre German with their parents, 52.4% with their peers, 13% with their children, 41.4% with their neighbors, and 33.3% with their colleagues at work (Costantini 2023:79).

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Gressoney and Issime are in the Lys Valley, in Valle d'Aosta, close to Monte Rosa. Located at the end of the valley, Gressoney consists of two separate municipalities (though, in this case, one speech community), Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité, at an altitude of 1,385 meters and 1,630 meters respectively; Issime is lower at 953 meters (Zürrer 1999: 25). Today, Gressoney is a well-known ski resort, while Issime is largely unknown when it comes to winter tourism (Zürrer 1999:28). According to Zürrer (1999:386), there are about 500 active German speakers in Gressoney (56% of the total population of Gressoney-Saint-Jean and Gressoney-La-Trinité) and 240 in Issime (65% of the total population of Issime). However, this estimate dates back to 1992 and it can be assumed that the number of speakers has declined even further since then, especially in Gressoney, whose ski resort mainly attracts Italian visitors (see Vicquery 2006:127–129).

Today, the dialects of all three communities (Sauris, Gressoney, Issime) are on the verge of extinction (see Dal Negro 2004:42–45). Although efforts are being made to preserve their idioms (i.e. teaching the dialect in elementary school), current figures show that the dialect is hardly being passed on to the next generation (see Vicquery 2006:131–133, Costantini 2023:79).

2.2. *Historical bi- and multilingualism: a (short) overview*

Sauris, settled in the thirteenth century from neighboring, Bavarian-speaking Austria, has been bilingual with Friulian and the German idiom since at least the mid-nineteenth century (Geyer 2018:97–98, Moser 2025:47–50). Compulsory education was introduced in the nineteenth century, which meant that Italian was learnt as an official and standard language and was used in formal contexts (Protto 2009:280). In the first half of the twentieth century, Zahre German was spoken in the family and among the inhabitants of Sauris, while Friulian was used in contact with neighboring communities, and Italian was necessary in official and formal contexts (Denison 1979:28–29). In the twentieth century, Zahre German lost much of its prestige; however, since the 1970s, the dialect has regained prestige, and there are efforts to preserve the culture and the dialect (Protto 2009:269–271).

Although the dialect of both Gressoney and Issime is called "Walser German" and although the two communities are located in the same valley, it is important to note that they differ from each other in terms of their (historical) language contact situation (see below). This difference has also had consequences for the linguistic structure today: The dialects of Gressoney and Issime are quite distant – Gressoney is indeed more similar to Formazza or to other Walser dialects than to Issime – and people from Gressoney speak Italian with people from Issime.[2] For this reason, they are also treated as two different speech communities in this article.

The population of Gressoney was, from 1400 until the twentieth century, monolingual in the German idiom; there was no permanent settlement when the first settlers from the Valais in Switzerland arrived in the Middle Ages (cf. Zürrer

[2] We are indebted to an anonymous reviewer for this information. There are also indirect references to this in the literature: See, for instance, Giacalone Ramat (1986:320–321; 1992), who discusses the similarities between Formazza and Gressoney, and Zürrer (1991:380–381), who deals with differences in verbal inflection between Gressoney and Issime.

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2009:87–91, 97; see also Giacalone Ramat 1979). Issime, however, was a mixed group of settlers, with two coexisting groups speaking different idioms: Walser German and Francoprovençal (cf. Zürrer 2009:86–92). In contrast to Gressoney, Issime was settled before the arrival of German settlers. Thus, since the colonialization of this area, Issime has consisted of two different groups of speakers; it was not until the eighteenth century that the Francoprovençal part of the population joined with the German-speaking part (Zürrer 2009:96). In the nineteenth century, in formal contexts, written (Standard) German was used in Gressoney and written (Standard) French in Issime (Zürrer 2009:88). From the 1920s onwards, however, written German and written French were gradually replaced by (written) Italian (Zürrer 2009:99-100). Furthermore, since the end of the nineteenth century, Piedmontese has also been used as a *lingua franca* (e.g. in contact with local traders) (Zürrer 2009:98–99). Italian, on the other hand, has become an everyday language in Gressoney for the first time among speakers born in the early 1950s (Zürrer 1999:33, Dal Negro 2004:55).

2.3. Language contact and language attrition

We define language contact as "a bilingual practice reflecting the processing/use of language in a bilingual speaker's repertoire" (Riehl 2019:314). The contact situation in Gressoney, Issime, and Sauris is characterized by a long-standing bi- or multilingualism for generations: the speakers use the German dialect side by side with Italian, the official language, which is present in education, the media, and in administration. The dialect is used in the domestic context and, depending on the language skills of the interlocutor, in further oral interactions as well (e.g. with friends or with colleagues at work) (see Zürrer 2009:100–117, Costantini 2023). In the past, many speakers also spoke a local Romance variety (Friulian, Piedmontese, or Francoprovençal), but our survey indicates that this is hardly the case today or for our speakers (see section 4.1). In terms of language structure, the Romance contact varieties require a lexical subject pronoun (in contrast to standard Italian); they differ from each other with regard to the degree of obligatoriness/optionality of the subject clitic and in relation to the grammatical person in which the subject clitic is used.

The bi- or multilingualism attested in both Zahre German and Walser German has grown historically, that is, the speakers have been in close contact with the surrounding Romance varieties for several generations. It is therefore likely that these varieties are susceptible to contact-induced language change: "intense contact is more likely than casual contact to result in typological restructuring of the receiving language" (Thomason 2001:1640). It is also possible that the typological proximity or distance of the languages in contact play a role. If the languages/varieties are too similar, typological change cannot occur: "Clearly, not all contact-induced changes alter the typology of the receiving language. Some of them are typologically inert: either they fit neatly into the typological patterns of the receiving language, or they are too minor to constitute a significant typological change" (Thomason 2001:1640). Note that while the Germanic varieties under scrutiny and Standard Italian are typologically distant (null-subject language vs. subject language), other Romance contact varieties are somewhere in between, as they do have subject clitics (see sections 2.4 and 2.5). Instead of using the term of contact-induced

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typological change (which entails the difficulty of defining when precisely typological change has taken place), Matras & Sakel (2007) prefer to speak of "grammatical borrowing" to describe language contact phenomena. Part of this is the borrowing of words and morphemes as well as the change of structures on the morphological and syntactic level. Grammatical borrowing is triggered by "the need to reduce the cognitive load when handling a complex linguistic repertoire" (Matras 2007:67). As far as changes in syntax are concerned, it is particularly important to ascertain whether the change is contact-induced or if internal factors may have played a role (see Bidese 2023:1–68). Word order changes, for instance, are susceptible to language contact (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2001:395–396 for African languages; see also section 2.5). Conversely, there are (morpho)syntactic phenomena that are more resistant to language change. An illustrative example is that of subject clitics in speakers of linguistic islands in northern Italy (see Poletto & Tomaselli 2018, Rabanus & Tomaselli 2017).

The language attrition approach is closely linked to research in language contact: Both "investigate the impact of a second language (L2) on the first (L1)" and "the linguistic features found in individual attrition and typical language contact settings are similar" (Riehl 2019:315). The two usually differ in terms of the speaker populations: "Whereas typical attrition research analyses first generation migrants in an L2 environment, language contact research focuses more on the use of languages in multilingual speech communities" (Riehl 2019:315).

Changes taking place in small communities like those mentioned above can be triggered not only by mechanisms linked to language contact and language attrition but also by second language acquisition strategies (see Kolmer 2010:148). The interface hypothesis is known from second language acquisition research (see Sorace 2011). According to Sorace (2011), phenomena at the syntax–pragmatics interface (so-called phenomena with interpretable features) are more prone to language change than other, for example, purely syntactic, phenomena. In their study, Tsimpli et al. (2004) examined subject pronouns in multilingual speakers of languages that differ in the pro-drop parameter: The study encompassed Italian and Greek speakers (L1) and near-native speakers of English (L2) and yielded evidence for attrition in L1 in interpretable features of subjects, among others in topic continuation vs. topic shift. No attrition was observed in noninterpretable, syntactic features, such as pro-drop and non-pro-drop. In the context of L1 attrition, the interface hypothesis predicts that after processes of generational transmission "there may be changes that concern the whole pronominal system and/or structures that involve different interface conditions" (Sorace 2011:26). Studies in the field of language acquisition (L2) but also in the field of language contact and diachronic change indicate that overt subject pronouns, in contrast to null subjects, enjoy an "unmarked default status" (Sorace 2011:20).

2.4. *Pronominal subjects*

Standard Italian and German (with its varieties) differ in the way they express pronominal subjects. German is a language "in which simple sentences with pronominal subjects normally if not obligatorily contain a pronoun in subject position. . . . [S]ubject position is defined as the position in the sentence in which nominal subjects appear" (Dryer 2013). In the following examples from Standard

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German, the pronoun is obligatory. Moreover, in both (1a) and (1b) the subject is in the first position because it is a topic. Note that the structural position of the subject (i.e. the position in which it gets the agreement with the finite verb) is the postverbal one for both the nominal and the pronominal subject:

(1) German

a. Der Junge singt ein Lied.
DEF.M.NOM.SG boy.NOM.SG sing.3SG.PRS INDF.M.ACC.SG song.ACC.SG
'The child sings/is singing a song.'

b. **Er** singt ein Lied.
he.3SG.NOM sing.3SG.PRS INDF.M.ACC.SG song.ACC.SG
'He sings/is singing a song.'

In certain registers of German (e.g. computer-assisted communication) and under certain extra-linguistic contextual conditions (familiarity of the interlocutors, informal context), sentences without a subject are grammatical as well: The subject can thus be omitted if it can be reconstructed from the conversational/discourse context (see Helmer 2016). Note, however, that this type of V1 sentence (with a null subject in initial position) does not represent the phenomenon of Topic-drop (at least for V2 varieties).

Italian, on the other hand, is a language "in which the normal expression of pronominal subjects is by means of affixes on the verb" (Dryer 2013). In theoretical terms, Italian is a null-subject language (cf. e.g. Dryer 2013) or a pro-drop language (cf. Chomsky 1981:240–242). Example (2b) illustrates the dropping of the pronominal subject ("pro" refers to the null subject); as in example (1), the structural position of the subject is the postverbal one for both the nominal and the pronominal subject:

(2) Italian

a. Il ragazzo canta una canzone.
DEF.M.SG boy(M) sing.3SG.PRS INDF.F.SG song(F)
'The boy sings/is singing a song.'

b. **pro** canta una canzone.
pro sing.3SG.PRS INDF.F.SG song(F)
'He sings/is singing a song.'

Put simply, the subject can be omitted in Italian if it can be inferred from the context, whereas "[t]he pronoun is more likely to be overtly expressed in sentences where there is a shift in topic with respect to the previous discourse" (Frasson et al. 2021: 6). This difference is illustrated by Frasson et al. (2021:6–7) with the following examples from Spanish (which has pro-drop as well). Example (3) shows topic continuation: "the topic of the second sentence is the same as in the first sentence, which makes a null subject the most felicitous option"; by contrast, example (4) shows topic shift: "the subject changes from the 1st person to a 3rd person, thus requiring an overt pronoun (or a full DP)" (Frasson et al. 2021:6–7):

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(3) Spanish
Pepe no vino hoy a trabajar. ***Pepe / ?Él / pro**
Pepe NEG come.3SG.PRET today to work Pepe / 3SG.M / pro
estará enfermo.
be-3SG.FUT sick.SG.M.
'Pepe did not come to work today. He must be sick.'

(4) Spanish
Hoy no fui a trabajar. **Pepe / Él /* pro**
Today NEG go.1SG.PRET to work Pepe / 3SG.M / pro
pensó que estaba enferma.
think.3SG.PRET that be-1.SG.FUT sick.SG.F
'Today I did not go to work. Pepe/he thought I was sick.'

In Upper German dialects – including our linguistic islands in northern Italy – as well as in spoken German the subject pronoun can be realized in the form of a clitic. This is possible in a context of subject–verb inversion where the subject clitic sticks to the finite verb (see e.g. Lessiak 1963, Merkle 1993, Zürrer 1999, Cattarin 2020). The subject–verb inversion is found in interrogative sentences (see example (5)) and in sentences with an XVS word order (with SCL for "subject clitic"):

(5) Bavarian
Trink**mr** ans?
drink.1PL.SCL one.ACC.SG
'Do we drink one (=a beer)?'
(Lessiak 1963:194)

(6) Bavarian
Jezan wer.**mä** esn
now want.1PL.SCL eat.INF
'Let's eat now'
(Wratil 2013:206)

Unstressed pronominal forms in German (and in general in Germanic varieties) are realized in the so-called *Wackernagelposition*, which is on the top of the so-called *Mittelfeld*. *Wackernagelposition* is "right-adjacent to the finite verb in main clauses and to the complementizer in embedded clauses" (Bidese 2011: 363). Germanic varieties (and all Germanic linguistic islands) have not developed proclisis at all, that is, a subject clitic is expected just in the inversion context X Vfin+clitic.[3] Object clitics cannot appear as proclitic to the finite verb either (see Bidese 2011). Furthermore, the linguistic islands in northern Italy all have structural V2 (see Bidese et al. 2020),

[3] The pattern SVO with a subject clitic is not expected unless the V1 pattern is allowed. V1, however, is extremely rare in Germanic varieties that have maintained structural V2, i.e. varieties in which subject–verb inversion is still possible even if the linear restriction is lost (linear restriction means that only one XP can precede the finite verb in main declarative clauses, see e.g. Grewendorf 2010:72).

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i.e. subject–verb inversion is still possible even if the linear restriction is lost.[4] In order to obtain a declarative clause, at least one position before the finite verb must be realized (see, e.g., Tomaselli & Bidese 2019:52–53). In the following example from Cimbrian, we have a context of subject–verb inversion, and the position before the finite verb is filled (X Vfin+clitic):

(7) Cimbrian
Dena gea.**bar** ka Tria
then go.1PL.SCL to Trento
'Then we go to Trento'
(Tomaselli & Bidese 2019:48)

On the other hand, the Romance contact varieties of interest – Friulian, Piedmontese, and Francoprovençal – are characterized by (optional) subject clitics occurring in proclisis to the finite verb in declarative clauses (not so, however, in certain other contexts such as interrogative clauses, where they appear in enclisis; for a comprehensive account of Romance subject clitics in general see, e.g., Poletto & Tortora 2016).

Friulian displays a complete paradigm of subject clitics that occur in all syntactic contexts, in addition to the inflected verb (Benincà 2014:44–45; for (a few) exceptions, see Benincà & Vanelli 2016; see also Hack & Gaglia 2009:157). According to Benincà (2014:43), Friulian "has evolved more than any other [northern Italian] dialect and has removed practically all restrictions to the appearance of subject clitics." For instance, in Friulian a subject clitic is almost always *obligatory* in main clauses, even when the sentence already has a lexical subject (see (9c); Benincà 2014:43–44; Benincà & Vanelli 2016:150). In this case, one could also speak of subject doubling (see section 2.4). The following examples illustrate the obligatory use of the subject clitic (here third person singular) in main clauses in Friulian:

(8) Friulian
a. **Rive
arrive.3SG.PRS
'Arrives'
b. **Al** rive
3SG.M.SCL arrive.3SG.PRS
'He arrives'
c. Toni **al** rive
Toni 3SG.M.SCL arrive.3SG.PRS
'Toni arrives'
(Benincà 2014:44)

[4] If the word order is XP FullPron Vfin, this corresponds normally to the sequence XP NPSub Vfin, as the full pronominal subject behaves like a NP. The interpretation is usually focal: *Gestarn er hatt gesekk in has (i nèt)* 'Yesterday, he saw the hare (I did not)' or 'It was him who saw the hare', that is very similar to the requirements of Italian (*ieri lui ha visto una lepre (io no)*). We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this piece of information.

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Also in Piedmontese subject clitics usually precede the finite verb in declarative sentences (see example (9)): they are "mandatory in the written language (except perhaps in poetry for prosodic reasons) and in many varieties in main clauses . . . and tensed dependent clauses" (Tosco et al. 2023:177). However, first-person subject clitics in particular may be absent in local varieties and are often omitted in allegro speech (Tosco et al. 2023:177–80; see also Parry 1993 for a diachronic account of subject clitics in Piedmontese).

(9) Piedmontese

a. **it** lo vëdde
2SG.SCL OBJ.3SG.M see.2SG.PRS
'You see it'

b. **i** andoma
1PL.SCL go.1PL.PRS
'we go/are going'
(Tosco et al. 2023:178–9)

As for Francoprovençal, the usage of subject clitics varies considerably from one variety to another (Kristol 2016; see also Kristol 2009). In Val d'Aosta, subject clitics are always obligatory for the second person singular but may be optional or absent in the remainder (cf. Diémoz 2008).

Note, in conclusion, that in all these varieties subject clitics for the second person singular are always compulsory; see, in this respect, the generalizations on the different systems of subject clitics in Romance varieties formulated by Renzi & Vanelli (1983).

2.5. *Pleonastic occurrence of subject clitic and subject pronoun*

Standard Italian shows no subject doubling because of the lack of a subject clitic paradigm (Tomaselli & Bidese 2019:49). In Germanic and Northern Italo-Romance varieties, however, a clitic subject can also appear in a declarative sentence, together with a full subject pronoun. If the co-presence of a subject clitic and overt subject (either in the form of a personal pronoun or a lexical NP) is not pragmatically motivated, one can speak of "pleonastic occurrence." Consider, for instance, the following example from Walser German:

(11) Walser German

Wir tie**ber** tringe as beer.
we.1PL.NOM do.1PL.SCL drink.INF DEF.N.ACC.SG beer.NOM.SG
'We drink beer.'
(Wratil 2013:215)

This pattern is not restricted to German linguistic islands in northern Italy but is possible also in other Germanic varieties such as Bavarian (see e.g. Bayer 1984) or Dutch dialects (e.g. West Flemish or the dialect of Wambeek, cf. Haegeman 1991; van Craenenbroeck & van Koppen 2002):

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(12) Bavarian

Heit	blei**ma**	**(mia)**	daham.
today	stay.1PL.SCL	(we.1PL.NOM)	at home

'Today we stay at home.'
(Fuss & Wratil 2013:183)

(13) Wambeek

Mergen	kom**de**	**gou**.
tomorrow	come.2SG.SCL	you.2SG.NOM

'Tomorrow you will come.'
(van Craenenbroeck & van Koppen 2002:58)

The pleonastic occurrence of two subjects in Zahre German is briefly mentioned by Denison (1988:29–30), who ascribes it to the influence of Friulian (but see Moser 2025:71–73, who argues in favor of a convergence process). In Zahre German, the pleonastic occurrence is almost exclusively attested in context of subject–verb inversion, mainly in interrogative sentences and not in declarative sentences with XVO:

(14) Zahre German

Tues**te**	**du**	a	reidn	de	zahrar	sproche?
do.2SG.SCL	you.2SG.NOM	too	speak.INF	DEF.F.ACC.SG	zahre	language.ACC.SG

'Do you also speak Zahre German?'
(Cattarin 2020: 54)

In Bavarian, as well as in Cimbrian, a Bavarian-speaking linguistic island in northern Italy, a lexical subject or a subject pronoun that occurs to the left of the finite verb cannot be doubled (Tomaselli & Bidese 2019:50). Consider the following example:

(15) Cimbrian

***Dar**	**Gianni/Er**	singt**ar**
DEF.M.NOM.SG	John/ he.3SG.NOM	sing.3SG.SCL

'John sings/is singing'
(Tomaselli & Bidese 2019:50)

We speak of "subject doubling" provided the case that there are some pragmatics involved (pragmatic strengthening). In the example in (15) we find subject doubling as *endschandre* 'WE' is a stressed pronoun, which occurs together with a clitic subject pronoun *-wer* (see Bauen 1978: 69):

(16) Walser German

Und	**enschandre**	häw**er**	käst	bröd	und	cheesch
and	we.1PL.NOM	have.1PL.SCL	eat.INF	bread.ACC.SG	and	cheese.ACC.SG

'And WE ate bread and cheese'
(Bauen 1978:69)

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In northern Italian varieties, on the other hand, subject clitics occur in proclisis and may occur together with a subject pronoun/lexical NP that is left to the verb. In Friulian or Piedmontese, for instance, the occurrence of a subject clitic that agrees in number and person with the full subject is possible or, depending on the variety, even obligatory. The word order in declaratives is S + Sclitic + Vfin (D'Alessandro 2009:1).

(17) Friulian

Marie **e** rive
Mary 3SG.SCL arrive.3SG.PRS
'Mary arrives'
(D'Alessandro 2009:1)

(18) Piedmontese

Marta **a** riva
Mary 3SG.SCL come.3SG.PRS
'Marta comes'
(Tosco et al. 2023:495)

Full pronouns can be doubled as well, but only under certain pragmatic conditions: In the following example, the full subject pronoun *jo* 'I' is only placed under emphasis, and is otherwise omitted (cf. Haiman 1991:138):

(19) Friulian

Jo **o** feveli furlan.
1SG 1SG.SCL speak.INF friulian
'I speak Friulian.'
(Frasson et al. 2021:8)

In summary, our speakers could possibly realize the pleonastic occurrence of a subject and subject clitic in two different ways: (i) the Romance pattern with (S) + Sclitic + Vfin and/or (ii) the Germanic pattern with (X) + Vfin + Sclitic + (S). The results are discussed in section 5.

2.6. Theoretical status of subject clitics

In the literature, the status of subject clitics has been repeatedly discussed, as they are somewhere between (independent) words and morphologically bound affixes (see, e.g., Zwicky & Pullum 1983, Spencer 1991:350–392, Nübling 1992:56–86). Subject clitics in German dialects (including in German linguistic islands in northern Italy) are so-called "special clitics" as "the clitics do not have the same distribution as the corresponding full forms" (Zwicky & Pullum 1983:510). The clitics usually represent a phonologically reduced form of the full form, as exemplified in table 1 (for the sake of clarity, we have not included all the variants for each form, but have instead opted for one or a maximum of two variants per form; an overview of all variants can be found in Zürrer 1999:207–208 for Walser German and Cattarin 2020:50–51 for Zahre German).

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Table 1. Full forms and clitic forms of subject pronouns

		Walser German		Zahre German	
		full	clitic	full	clitic
sg.	1.ps.	iich	i	i	-i
	2.ps.	dou	de, t, ø	du	-te
	3.ps.m./f./n.	eer/dschii/ääs	er/dschi/äs	ar/si/is	-ar/-se/-is
pl.	1.ps.	wiir	wir, ber	bier	-ber
	2.ps.	iir	ir, der	ier	-er
	3.ps.	dschii	dsch	si	-se

Subject clitics in German dialects are usually regarded as subject clitics and not as verbal affixes (Kolmer 2012:74–79). The two types of clitics differ in their distribution (Kolmer 2012:74–79): subject clitics have a certain position in the sentence and are therefore syntactically distributed (*second-position clitics*); verbal affixes, on the other hand, are morphologically distributed, that is, bound to a certain part of speech (*verbal clitics*). Clitics in northern Italian dialects (and in Romance varieties in general) are referred to in this way (Kolmer 2012:74–79; certain subject clitics are even obligatory in some varieties, see Benincà et al. 2016:195–196). Word order changes from V2 to SVO in German linguistic islands in northern Italy have led to a discussion regarding the extent to which these clitics are still syntactically distributed or, conversely, whether their distribution is rather morphologically governed (Kolmer 2012:223). The pleonastic occurrence of subject pronouns is interpreted as an indication of the clitic element approaching the status of an inflectional affix, i.e. the clitic is getting more grammaticalized, fulfilling agreement functions rather than referential functions (see Giacalone Ramat 1986:324, 1989:42–43, 1990:88, 1992:327 for Walser German dialects; following Giacalone Ramat, see e.g. Dal Negro 2004:165, Kolmer 2012:79–80, 223–226). According to Kolmer (2012:203), the grammaticalization status of the clitic is more advanced in Walser German than in German linguistic islands of Bavarian origin (Cimbrian in particular). She therefore suggests that in Walser German, in contrast to Cimbrian, subject clitics will evolve into morphological markers (see Kolmer 2005, 2012: 203). This is evidenced by the obligatoriness of subject clitic pleonastic forms in contexts where the full pronoun is doubled by a subject clitic.

A similar, quantitative study on the grammaticalization of the enclitic subject pronoun in linguistic islands in northern Italy, namely in Walser German spoken in Formazza, has been carried out by Dal Negro (2004:159–180). Remember that, as mentioned in section 2.2 (note 2), Gressoney is more similar to Formazza or to other Walser dialects than to Issime. The study was based on freely structured interviews, with a total of 23 informants (see Dal Negro 2004:103–105). According to this study, third-person plural enclitic pronouns "present the highest percentage values of grammaticalized forms" (Dal Negro 2004:176). Three types of verb–subject clitic sequences were counted as grammaticalized forms: "verb initial utterances, cases of pleonastic subject pronouns and cases of inversion after a coordinative or

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subordinative conjunction" (Dal Negro 2004:172). Cases in which subject–verb inversion was syntactically motivated (see section 2.7) were not included, since they are "particularly ambiguous in that it is not possible to decide whether the inversion is triggered by the syntactic context of whether it conceals a reanalysis of the pronoun" (Dal Negro 2004:172). According to Dal Negro (2004:176), the high number of evidence in third-person plural enclitic pronouns can be attributed to the fact that third-person subjects can often be full nouns which helps "to mask the pronominal nature of grammaticalized clitics and to favour the occurrence of pleonastic forms." Dal Negro (2004:176–178) also observes that grammaticalized forms are used more frequently by less traditional dialect speakers (younger speakers born between 1970 and 1979) as well as in informal contexts with friends or at work.

Therefore, Dal Negro's (2004) study suggests that the entry point for the enclitic pronouns as grammaticalized affixes is the third person plural. By contrast, according to other authors such as Hotzenköcherle (1971:93), second-person plural pronouns can be seen as an entry point to the grammaticalization process, followed by first-person plural pronouns (note that this assumption is not based on a quantitative study).

2.7. *Word order*

German (including its dialects) is a strict V2-language, that is, the finite verb always appears in second position in a declarative clause. If a constituent other than the subject appears in the first position of the clause, German creates a XVS word order, with the verb appearing in second position. This subject–verb inversion avoids ungrammatical V3. Strictly speaking, German is an asymmetrical V2-language in that in subordinate clauses the verbal complex (including the finite verb) appears in last position (SOV).

In German dialects spoken in northern Italy, word order is more variable, most likely due to language contact: From a typological point of view, these dialects can be classified as standing between German (word order with V2 and non-null-subject language) and Italian (word order without V2 and null-subject language) (see Bidese & Tomaselli 2018). In these dialects, the first position in a declarative sentence can indeed be occupied by more than one constituent, and there is no V2-effect; this word order is known from the Romance contact varieties. In the following example, both an AP and a NP appear before the finite verb. It is also noteworthy that, as illustrated in this example, the German bracket construction is missing in these dialects: the finite verb *hatt* and the part participle *gisek* are not separated (i.e. they do not form a bracket), but appear next to each other:

(20) Cimbrian

[$_{AP}$ Gestarn]	[$_{NP}$ dar	pua]	hatt	gisek
yesterday	DEF.M.NOM.SG	boy	have.3SG.PRS	see.PST.PTCP
in	has.			
DEF.M.ACC.SG	hare.ACC.SG			

'Yesterday, the boy saw the hare.'
(Panieri et al. 2006: 310, cited in Bidese & Tomaselli 2018:54)

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3. Research questions

The overarching question is whether a comparison of these two dialects (Walser German and Zahre German), divided into three different speech communities (Gressoney, Issime, Zahre/Sauris), yields the same results or whether there are differences between these idioms. We would like to explore the range and the limits of dialectal variation and examine whether language change/language attrition is going in a certain direction. To this end, we look at the use of subject pronouns/subject clitics in declarative sentences. Specifically, we are interested in the following research questions:

1. How frequent is the use of subject clitics in declarative sentences and what are further attested forms? Are there differences in terms of person and context? We assume that the enclitic pronoun mainly occurs in contexts of subject–verb inversion (i.e. in a sequence XP/adverb V S). Other forms can be described as pleonastic, in that the enclitic pronoun is doubled with a full pronoun. As for grammatical persons, based on the literature we assume that in a context of pleonastic doubling the second- and third-person plural pronoun clitic is attested more frequently than other grammatical persons. One possible interpretation of these results would be that these persons are more susceptible to grammaticalization processes (in this case from a clitic with referential function to a verbal affix with agreement function) compared to other grammatical persons.
2. Are there similarities and/or differences between the speech communities and among the speakers of one community? As mentioned in section 2.1, the three speech communities have never really been in contact with each other – in the case of Gressoney and Issime there is only limited contact, occurring primarily in Italian – but are otherwise very similar in terms of their historical and sociolinguistic profile: They are linguistic islands, settled in the Middle Ages, had long-standing language contact with the surrounding Romance varieties, but not with the German-speaking area until recently, and are in stage of language shift/language death. Dal Negro (2004:180) suggests that, in the context of subject clitics in German linguistic islands in northern Italy, "[i]t appears, indeed, that German-speaking islands within an Italian surdomain tend to develop parallel features in a context of language shift, though these dialects have no kind of contact whatsoever with one another." Following Dal Negro, we assume that the speakers have developed similar features in their use of grammatical subjects. We also suggest that there is some variation among speakers of one community, namely, that younger speakers show more signs of language attrition than older speakers.
3. Can we draw conclusions about the range and limits of contact-induced language change or language attrition? Studies on subject clitics in German speakers of linguistic islands in northern Italy (Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004, Kolmer 2012, Rabanus & Tomaselli 2017, Poletto & Tomaselli 2018, Tomaselli & Bidese 2019) have shown that subject clitics and subject pronouns are more resistant to contact-induced language change than changes in word order. Approaches in the context of bilingual (L2) language acquisition predict that attrition effects in the L1 may be expected in the distribution of overt pronominal subjects in the syntactic structure, provided that the syntax–

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pragmatics interface puts some restrictions on the dropping of these subjects.[5] We thus assume that the domain of pronominal subjects is hardly susceptible to contact-induced change if these appear in a context which is governed by syntax only. Furthermore, it is assumed that overt subjects are the default (and the L1 of our speakers has overt subjects). That is, we expect that contexts with pleonastic doubling or contexts without a full subject pronoun hardly occur in a declarative sentence without an inversion context. It is possible that an additional subject clitic occurs more frequently in contexts at the syntax–pragmatics interface (continuation topic vs. topic shift).

4. Methodology

Previous research on linguistic islands in northern Italy was mostly based on a corpus of naturally occurring language, possibly supplemented by data gathered by some kind of experimental method (questionnaire) (see Bauen 1978, Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004, Rowley 2010); also, entire grammars or comprehensive linguistic descriptions were written (see Zürrer 1999, Rowley 2010). However, the creation and analysis of a corpus of naturally occurring language is very time-consuming, especially in the case of (morpho)syntactic variation (Milroy 1989:146–147). Furthermore, when analyzing syntactic variation, "it can never be guaranteed that a sufficient quantity of tokens of a given type of construction will ever appear in a piece of spontaneous discourse" (Milroy 1989:144). At the same time, the use of experimental methods requires a prior understanding of the structure in question, which may stem from observational methods such as spontaneous speech. In fact, Milroy (1989:149) points out that "basic information about syntactic structure cannot be derived from experimentation in the absence of prior knowledge derived from observational methods." Since we can already draw on results from spontaneous language data, we have opted for an experimental method ("experimental" in Milroy's sense). The data were collected *in loco* (Gressoney/Issime and Sauris) in September 2023, with a questionnaire consisting of a total of 38 tasks (see section 4.2 for examples) carried out by two interviewers. In the case of German linguistic islands in northern Italy, a further challenge regards the question of the language to be used by the interviewer. The researchers cited above (Bauen 1978, Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004, Rowley 2010) typically resided in the linguistic islands for an extended period of time and acquired the dialect. Another approach, however, adopted in more recent research, is to conduct the interviews in Italian (see Tomaselli et al. 2022). Since neither interviewer is a native speaker of one of the languages of the linguistic islands, we as well opted for Italian as the interview language. This allowed us to create the most natural context possible; moreover, using a local dialect could have led to accommodation effects of our informants (see Dal Negro 2004:105). Also the stimuli were presented in Italian (and not, for instance, in Standard German), not least based on the experiences described by Dal Negro (2004:106), who reports that attempts to translate from Standard German have been unsuccessful. Moreover, using Italian in all speech

[5] Speakers of German linguistic islands in Italian tend to overuse them, for instance, also with topic continuity, which is not necessary. We would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for this information.

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communities should ensure that the interview conditions – with regard to this specific contact language – were as comparable as possible. These stimuli in Italian were fully comprehensible and were accepted by the speakers without any objections. Further information was provided in Italian on request. In addition, all interviews have been recorded.

The questionnaire/structured interview was prepared beforehand in the form of a written question book. As already mentioned, the instructions and the stimuli were provided in Italian; the different options to be ticked off, on the other hand, were given in the respective German idiom (Zahre German and Walser German; in the latter case, also phonetic differences between Gressoney and Issime were taken into account). Some of the possible answers were drawn from the literature (especially in the case of Walser German), others were created by us (in particular for Zahre German, based on the grammar by Cattarin 2020 as well as on language data). Each task was embedded into a context (stimuli) from which the pragmatic status of the subject pronoun in the task (continuation topic, topic shift, strengthening context) clearly emerged. Note that the different options to select were rarely ticked by the informants themselves; on the contrary, most of them formulated their answer independently of the given option. The various options for ticking the boxes therefore mainly served as an orientation and comprehension aid for us interviewers.

To keep the atmosphere as relaxed as possible, the speakers could choose whether they wanted to answer the questions together with their friends (group discussion with us) or individually. In both constellations (group discussion or individual interview), spontaneous discussions arose on numerous occasions. At the beginning, we pointed out that the interviewees should imagine themselves in an everyday situation in which they would use the German dialect. They should take as much time as they needed for the answers. We emphasized that we had made suggestions for each question, and that they should select the answer that seemed most appropriate to them. In case none of our suggestions were deemed suitable, they were encouraged to propose an alternative. We also indicated that a word might be spelled incorrectly or that it might not sound natural. In such cases, respondents were invited to provide feedback, as they were the experts of their dialect and any advice, suggestions or corrections were welcome.

We are aware that these numerous, uncontrolled (and in some cases difficult to control) factors in data collection also influence our results. Nevertheless, we hope that our data are reliable, at least to a certain extent, and can serve as a first orientation. Of course, follow-up studies would be necessary to verify our results (provided that there are still enough speakers available).

4.1. Participants

Our study involves 32 speakers: 16 speakers for Sauris, 9 for Gressoney, and 7 for Issime (= 16 for Walser German in total). The speakers were provided by our local contacts (native dialect speakers who live there and know the community). Sauris nowadays has around 400 inhabitants, of which about 200 speak and use Zahre German (see Rabanus et al. 2023–). Our speakers thus represent 8 percent of the population. Unfortunately, there are no current figures for Walser German. Zürrer (1999:386) states that 740 people actively speak Walser German: 240 people speak the

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Table 2. Language acquisition

	Gressoney G.		Issime German		Zahre German	
	L1	L1 parents	L1	L1 parents	L1	L1 parents
dialect only	5		5		8	
dialect and Italian	4		2		8	
both parents native dialect speakers		8		7		11
one parent native dialect speaker		1		0		5

Table 3. Language use[a] (with I = Issime, G = Gressoney, S = Sauris)

	With the family			With friends		
	G	I	S	G	I	S
Walser/Zahre G.	2	3	8	0	1	4
Italian	2	0	2	1	0	1
Walser/Zahre G. and Italian	5	3	6	5	3	7
Walser/Zahre G., Italian, Francoprovençal/Friulian	0	1	0	0	1	2
Walser G., Italian, Piedmontese	0	0		0	2	
Walser G., Italian, German, English				1		
Walser G., Italian, French				1		
Italian, Friulian						1
NA				1		1

[a]We also asked about the language(s) used with colleagues at work. However, we received hardly any feedback in this respect (presumably because they were either already retired, self-employed in their own company, or only marginally employed).

dialect of Issime (65 percent of the population of Issime) and 500 the dialect of Gressoney (56 percent of the population of Gressoney). According to this, the number of speakers of our study would therefore represent 3.3 percent of the Walser German speaking population of Issime (with 240 speakers of Walser German in Issime as 100 percent) and 1.6 percent of the Walser German speaking population of Gressoney (with 500 speakers of Walser German in Gressoney as 100 percent) Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the number of speakers has continued to decline since that time: In fact, a study from 2006 on the active dialect competence of primary school children revealed that only three children out of a total of 53 spoke the German dialect (Vicquery 2006: 131–132). This is due to numerous mixed marriages in the 1970s and 1980s, in which the dialect was not passed on (Vicquery 2006:129). Thus, we suggest that 16 speakers of Walser German should represent about 8 percent of the population as well.

Each speaker had to provide information on his/her sociolinguistic background; see tables 2–4 for an overview. All of them have acquired the dialect as L1 (with their

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Table 4. Level of education

	Gressoney	Issime	Sauris
Primary school	0	3	4
Secondary school	1	1	3
Further education	7	3	8
University	1	0	0
NA	0	0	1

parents being native dialect speakers) and learned Italian as a surrounding language (as L1 too), or at the latest as L2 at primary school (see table 2). One person from Sauris also indicated Friulian as L1 in addition to Zahre German and Italian.

The great majority of our speakers is older than 60 years and less than a third is younger than 60. Only three speakers (two from Sauris and one from Gressoney) are 40 years old or younger. On average, the speakers of Issime German are somewhat older than the speakers of Zahre German and of Gressoney German: the mean age is 72 years for speakers of Issime German, 68 years for those of Zahre German and 59 years for those of Gressoney German. In both populations we interviewed 13 female speakers and three male speakers. Among the speakers of Walser German, two men and seven women were interviewed in Gressoney, and one man and six women in Issime.

The German idiom is mainly spoken within the family, especially in the case of Zahre German (see table 3). In contact with friends, either the dialect or Italian is spoken, depending on the conversation partner; here, too, more speakers from Sauris claim to speak the dialect only. As far as the use of Romance varieties (Friulian, Piedmontese, and Francoprovençal) is concerned, the data show that very few speakers use them in everyday life (with the family or with friends). Note that one speaker from Gressoney and one speaker from Sauris did not answer the question about the language(s) used with friends.

As far as education/schooling in the three speech communities is concerned (see table 4), approximately one-fifth of the speakers only attended primary school (*elementari*); slightly fewer went on to secondary school (*scuola media*). More than half of the interviewees have completed further education, that is, practical training, apprenticeship or technical college (*istituto professionale, liceo*), while only one person from Gressoney attended university. Altogether, the educational level of the interviewees is highest in Gressoney, followed by Sauris and Issime. Note that one person from Sauris did not wish to provide any personal details in relation to this question ("NA" in table 4).

4.2. Experimental design

The goal of our experiment was to test the use of enclitic subject pronouns and full subject pronouns. Note that our elicitation method tends to elicit speakers' competence and their interiorized norm, while free speech, as analyzed by Dal Negro

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(see section 2.6), elicits performance. Possible differences in the results could therefore also be related to the design of our survey.

The questionnaire consisted of different text types. To begin with, we tested the presence/absence of subject clitics in affirmative declarative sentences (see examples (21)–(23)). Importantly, the stimuli were embedded in a context and the subject of the stimuli represented a continuation topic and not a topic shift: In (21), for instance, the friends in question are already introduced in the preceding sentence. The stimulus itself then contains the subject pronoun. For this type, we asked different grammatical persons (n = 7, with third person singular masculine and feminine). Four possible options are known from the literature (cf. Zürrer 1999, Dal Negro 2004), which in the following are called (i) "enclitic only," that is, the subject pronoun is realised in the form of an enclitic pronoun; (ii) "pleonastic," that is, there are both a full subject pronoun and an enclitic one; (iii) "full subject pronoun only"; (iv) "finite verb only". Remember that both (i) and (ii) are counted as grammaticalized forms.[6] As illustrated by the following examples, these options were tested with different verb types (auxiliary, modal verb, short verb), in order to determine whether the use of subject clitics is influenced by different verb types.

(21) with auxiliary verb *tun* + *trinken* 'to do + drink'
You are comfortably seated in a pub with friends. An acquaintance approaches the table and asks what you are doing. You reply: We are having/drinking a beer.[7]

☐ Tringje=wer as bier. [option i]
drink.1PL.SCL DEF.M.ACC.SG beer.SG.ACC

☐ Wir tie=ber tringjen as bier. [option ii]
we.1PL.NOM do.1PL.SCL drink.INF DEF.M.ACC.SG beer.SG.ACC

☐ Wir tien tringjen as bier. [option iii]
we.1PL.NOM do.1PL.PRS drink.INF DEF.M.ACC.SG beer.SG.ACC

☐ Tringje as bier. [option iv]
drink.1PL.PRS DEF.M.ACC.SG beer.SG.ACC

☐ _____

(22) with modal verb *können* 'to be able to'
You are talking with friends you met on the street about an upcoming party. Since you will also be going with your family, you say: We will come (lit. We can come).[8]

[6] The examples are drawn from the Walser German version. Note that the four options to tick primarily served as an aid for the interviewers and were thus mainly ticked by them rather than by the interviewees themselves.

[7] In the original Italian: "È seduto/-a in una locanda con degli amici. Un conoscente si avvicina al tavolo per chiederle cosa stiate facendo. Lei risponde: 'Beviamo una birra'."

[8] In the original Italian: "Sta parlando con dei conoscenti incontrati per strada di una festa in programma. Dal momento che ci andrà anche Lei con la sua famiglia, dice: 'Ci saremo (lit. possiamo venire)'."

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☐ Wir channe=ber/mia=wer/mei=ber chiemen. [option ii]
we.1PL.NOM can.1PL.SCL come.INF

☐ Channe=ber/mia=wer/mei=ber chiemen. [option i]
can.1PL.SCL come.INF

☐ Wir channe/mian/mein chiemen. [option iii]
we.1PL.NOM can.1PL.PRS come.INF

☐ Channe/mian/mein chiemen. [option iv]
can.1PL.PRS come.INF

☐ _____

(23) with short verb *gehen*
You are talking with friends about your upcoming vacation and say: I am going to Rome.[9]

☐ I gein z rom. [option iii]
I.1SG.NOM go.1SG.PRS to Rome

☐ I gein=i z rom. [option ii]
I.1SG.NOM go.1SG.SCL to Rome

☐ Gein z rom. [option iv]
go.1SG.PRS to Rome

☐ Gein=i z rom. [option i]
go.1SG.SCL to Rome

☐ _____

A further question type was designed to test whether a subject doubling form occurs more often in the context of topicalization and emphasis on the subject or not. This could then be interpreted as an indication that the pleonastic occurrence of two (pronominal) subjects has an emphasizing or reinforcing function. This sentence type was tested in two versions, both of which are documented in a very similar form in the literature (see Zürrer 1999:335, 341):

(24) subject doubling: full pronoun + enclitic pronoun
You are having dinner with your wife and some friends. Talking about your travel plans you realize that you are all going away at the same time: You and your wife are going to Rome with your family, while they are going to Milan with their family. The waiter at the restaurant, a friend of yours, has overheard your conversation. He approaches the table to ask who is going where and

[9] In the original Italian: "Sta parlando con degli amici della sua prossima vacanza e dice: «Vado a Roma»."

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with whom. You point first to yourself and your wife, then to your friends and say: We are going to Rome and you are going to Milan.[10]

☐ Wiir gein/goan z rom, und iir geit/gangit z meiland.
we.1PL.NOM go.1PL.PRS to Rome and you.2PL.NOM go.2PL.PRS to Milan

☐ Wiir gam=ber/goa=wer z rom, und iir
we.1PL.NOM go.1PL.SCL to Rome and you.2PL.NOM
geid=er/ganged=er z meiland. [+ subject doubling]
go.2PL.PRS to Milan

☐ _____

(25) subject doubling: lexical NP + enclitic pronoun
Your friends ask you if you will visit your cousin Giulia when you are in Rome. Actually, it is your cousin Francesco who is from Rome, not Giulia. Your friends are confused, so you say: No, Francesco is from Rome and not Giulia.[11]

☐ Nai, Francesco isch=ter van rom un nit Giulia. [+ subject doubling]
NEG Francesco is.3SG.SCL from Rome and NEG Giulia

☐ Nai, Francesco ischt van rom un nit Giulia.
NEG Francesco is.3SG.PRS from Rome and NEG Giulia

☐ _____

Finally, we wanted to test the participants' use of enclitic subject pronouns, depending on the word order. In all cases there was a continuation topic, that is, the subject was already known from the context (previous sentence). The test consisted of one sentence type, presented in two variants, each covering all grammatical persons. In variant 1, the sequence was S (pronoun) V O (see example (23) above), while in variant 2 the sequence was X V S (pronoun), as in the following example:

(26) with inversion (XVS word order) and short verb *gehen* 'to go'
You tell some friends about an old friend from the village who now lives in Milan and has returned to visit his parents. You say: Sunday evening he goes back to Milan.[12]

[10] In the original Italian: "Lei è a cena con sua moglie e alcuni amici. Parlando dei vostri progetti di viaggio vi rendete conto che andrete via proprio nello stesso periodo: Lei e sua moglie andrete a Roma con la vostra famiglia, mentre loro andranno a Milano con la loro famiglia. Il cameriere del ristorante, un vostro conoscente, ha orecchiato la vostra conversazione. Si avvicina al tavolo per chiedere chi va dove e con chi. Lei indica prima sé stesso e sua moglie, poi i vostri amici e dice: 'Noi andiamo a Roma e voi andate a Milano'."

[11] In the original Italian: "I suoi amici le chiedono se quando sarà a Roma andrà a trovare sua cugina Giulia. In realtà è suo cugino Francesco che è di Roma, non Giulia. I vostri amici hanno fatto confusione, per cui Lei dice: 'No, Francesco è di Roma, non Giulia'."

[12] In the original Italian: "Racconta a dei conoscenti di un vecchio amico del paese, ora residente a Milano, che è tornato per visitare i suoi genitori. Lei dice: 'Domenica sera torna a Milano'."

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☐ Sunta z nacht eer geit=er/goat=er zrugg z meiland. [option ii]
sunday to night he.3SG.NOM go.3SG.SCL back to Milan

☐ Sunta z nacht eer geit/goat zrugg z meiland. [option iii]
sunday to night he.3SG.NOM go.3SG.PRS back to Milan

☐ Sunta z nacht geit=er/goat=er zrugg z meiland. [option i]
sunday to night go.3SG.SCL back to Milan

☐ Sunta z nacht geit/goat zrugg z meiland. [option iv]
Sunday to night go.3SG.PRS back to Milan

☐ _____

5. Results and discussion

A comparison of the three speech communities reveals major similarities in the frequency of enclitic pronouns in declarative sentences (see table 5): The German structure with the full subject pronoun clearly dominates only in Walser German and Zahre German; Zahre German is always in the middle between Gressoney and Issime (except for the modal verb, where the German structure with the full subject pronoun is used somewhat less frequently only in Zahre German), and Issime has the highest percentage. This is followed by the pleonastic form in all three communities. Except for the modal verb, the values for Zahre German are always lower than those for Gressoney and Issime. As for variation among the three communities, it can be observed that Issime exhibits only two structures: "pleonastic" and "full subject pronoun only." Gressoney and Zahre, on the other hand, show more variation, as there is evidence also for "enclitic only" and "finite verb only." The percentages for "enclitic only" and "pleonastic" are very similar (except for the modal verb *können/mögen* 'can/may' in Zahre German).

As for contexts with/without inversion, there is a higher frequency of enclitic pronouns in contexts with inversion than in contexts without inversion, in both Walser German communities and in Zahre German (see table 6). In Zahre German, structural V2 (i.e. the movement of the finite verb in the left periphery without linear restriction; see section 2.4 and Bidese et al. 2020) is less respected than in Walser German, with Gressoney and Issime behaving in a similar way in this regard. This suggests that language attrition and the influence of the Italian language (regarding word order) is more advanced in Zahre German than in Walser German.

Table 7 illustrates the frequency of grammaticalized forms in relation to the grammatical person and its accessibility for enclitic pronouns. Only the results for grammaticalized forms occurring in declarative sentences (SVO only, excluding XVO) were counted: As mentioned above, by "grammaticalized forms" we refer to those forms that we classified as "enclitic only," that is, the subject pronoun is realized in the form of an enclitic pronoun or as "pleonastic," with both a full subject pronoun and an enclitic one.

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Table 5. Frequency of enclitic pronouns in declarative sentences in the three communities (with I = Issime German, G = Gressoney German, Z = Zahre German)

	to (do) drink			to go			can/may		
	Z	G	I	Z	G	I	Z	G	I
enclitic only	11 (9%)	11 (16%)	0	3 (3%)	6 (8%)	0	4 (4%)	5 (7%)	0
pleonastic	12 (10%)	9 (13%)	6 (13%)	5 (4%)	8 (11%)	4 (8%)	20 (18%)	7 (10%)	6 (12%)
full subject pronoun only	92 (78%)	48 (68%)	42 (87%)	102 (90%)	56 (77%)	45 (92%)	80 (73%)	55 (81%)	43 (88%)
finite verb only	3 (3%)	2 (3%)	0	3 (3%)	3 (4%)	0	5 (5%)	1 (2%)	0
total	118 (100%)	70 (100%)	48 (100%)	113 (100%)	73 (100%)	49 (100%)	109 (100%)	68 (100%)	49 (100%)

Table 6. Frequency of inversion with *to go* (with I = Issime German, G = Gressoney German, Z = Zahre German)

	to go (XVO)			to go (SVO)		
	Z	G	I	Z	G	I
enclitic only	31 (28%)	39 (57%)	32 (65%)	3 (3%)	6 (8%)	0
pleonastic	10 (9%)	3 (4%)	3 (6%)	5 (4%)	8 (11%)	4 (8%)
full subject pronoun only	64 (58%)	20 (30%)	12 (25%)	102 (90%)	56 (77%)	45 (92%)
finite verb only	6 (5%)	6 (9%)	2 (4%)	3 (3%)	3 (4%)	0
total	111 (100%)	68 (100%)	49 (100%)	113 (100%)	73 (100%)	49 (100%)

Table 7. Frequency of grammaticalized forms

	Zahre German	Gressoney German	Issime German
1.sg.	19 (35%)	9 (19%)	5 (31%)
2.sg.	8 (14%)	0	0
3.sg.m.	4 (7%)	5 (11%)	0
3.sg.f.	5 (9%)	6 (13%)	0
1.pl.	7 (13%)	12 (26%)	4 (25%)
2.pl.	6 (11%)	10 (22%)	6 (38%)
3.pl.	6 (11%)	4 (9%)	1 (6%)
	55 (100%)	46 (100%)	16 (100%)

Walser German of both Gressoney and Issime exhibits the highest values in the first and second person plural and first person singular. In Zahre German, the highest values are found in the first person singular, while the percentages for the second person singular and all persons in the plural are similar to each other. Interestingly, only in Zahre are German grammaticalized forms for the second person singular attested. Note, however, that the value of 0 percent in the second person singular in both Gressoney and Issime is due to the fact that the grammatical ending and the enclitic subject pronoun have the same form, so that forms with the full subject only (e.g. *du tuescht* 'you do') cannot be distinguished from pleonastic forms (e.g. *du tuescht=0*) (Zürrrer 1999:320). The results thus partly confirm the assumptions from the literature: They provide evidence in support of Hotzenköcherle's (1971:93) suggestion that second-person plural pronouns can be seen as an entry point to the grammaticalization process, followed by first-person plural pronouns (see section 2.6). On the contrary, Dal Negro's (2004) assumption that third person plural is the gateway to grammaticalization cannot be substantiated (see section 2.6). Note, however, that in free speech, as analyzed by Dal Negro, third-person verb forms are predominant in the majority of contexts; consequently, the potential for the occurrence of clitics is also greater. Thus, the discrepancy between Dal Negro's and

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our findings might well depend on the kind of data elicitation. What is more, the elicitation method employed in our study tends to elicit speakers' competence and their interiorized form, whereas free speech elicits performance. Furthermore, with regard to the use of pleonastic forms, our findings appear to challenge some conclusions of Kolmer (2012:203; see section 2.6), in so far as they do not confirm the assumption that the grammaticalization status of the clitic is more advanced in Walser German than in German linguistic islands of Bavarian origin. On the contrary, our results show that in Zahre German the pleonastic construction is attested in all persons, while it is not in Walser German (at least in Issime).

Moreover, our results are consistent with the animacy hierarchy as formulated, for instance, by Corbett (2000:56): The further to the left a noun is classified, the more "animated" the noun's referent is and the higher its rank in the hierarchy. According to the hierarchy in (27), thus, first-person pronouns are on the far left, followed by second-person pronouns, third-person pronouns, kinship, human, animate, and, finally, inanimate nouns.

(27) Animacy hierarchy (Corbett 2000:56)
speaker (1st person pronouns) > addressee (2nd person pronouns) > 3rd person > kin > human > animate > inanimate

Typological studies have shown that the animacy hierarchy (AH) exerts considerable influence on grammatical phenomena such as agreement, case, number, voice, or syntactic order (Corbett 2000, Aissen 2003, Comrie 1989, Jelinek & Demers 1983, Oshima 2007). The AH may be interpreted as strict rule or as "soft" preference, that is, the constraints of the AH "prevail in human languages as either grammatical rules or linguistic preferences (Bianchi, 2006, Bresnan et al. 2001, Rosenbach 2008)" (Ji & Liang 2018:71). We tested the effects of animacy in a simple SVO-type sentence, including three variants: In variant 1, the subject was a pronoun in the third person singular masculine, in variant 2 it was a masculine proper name, and in variant 3 an inanimate object. However, we were only able to detect minimal differences. In Zahre German, three speakers used a pleonastic construction in variant 1, while the remaining speakers in Zahre German and all speakers in Walser German opted for the form without an enclitic pronoun. In variants 2 and 3, no differences were observed between the speech communities, with nearly all speakers using the option that does not feature an enclitic pronoun.

Furthermore, we analyzed whether pleonastic doubling is employed more often in contexts of emphasis (see examples (24)–(25)). Our results do not provide clear evidence in favor of this hypothesis (see table 8). Compared to the use of pleonastic constructions in declarative sentences without pragmatic strengthening, however, the absolute frequency is higher in contexts of emphasis: In Zahre German, for instance, in the first person plural and third person singular masculine (with the verb *to drink*) we observe only a total of three instances of pleonastic forms (first person plural and third person singular masculine because we used these forms in the pleonastic context as well). Thus, the interface hypothesis would be supported.

Finally, we were interested in age-related variation: As mentioned in section 2.6, Dal Negro (2004:176–178) observed that in Walser German spoken in Formazza grammaticalized forms are more frequently used by younger speakers. In order to

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Table 8. Frequency of pleonastic doubling in contexts of emphasis

	Zahre German	Gressoney German	Issime German
with pleonastic doubling	5 (16%)	3 (17%)	3 (19%)
without pleonastic doubling	27 (84%)	15 (83%)	13 (81%)
	32 (100%)	18 (100%)	16 (100%)

Table 9. Number of interviewed speakers by age group

	Sauris	Gressoney	Issime
Gen. 1: born before 1953 (older than 70 years)	8	4	4
Gen. 2: born between 1953 and 1983 (between 40 and 70 years)	6	4	3
Gen. 3: born after 1983 (younger than 40 years)	2	1	0

assess whether similar tendencies can be identified in our varieties as well, the speakers were divided into three age groups (see table 9 for details). As far as Sauris is concerned, there are no remarkable and consistent differences across the various generations. However, as shown in table 10, younger speakers (especially Gen 2) tend to recur to grammaticalized forms a little more often than older speakers (Gen 3). Moreover, the use of finite verb forms only, without any subject pronoun or clitic, is confined to speakers born after 1953 (Gen 1 and 2). The two Walser German-speaking communities, on the other hand, yield more intriguing results. Here, indeed, the different age groups reveal major differences with regard to the use of grammaticalized forms. In both Gressoney and Issime, the eldest generation (born before 1953) proves to be the most conservative, as they show considerably fewer grammaticalized forms than younger speakers (see table 10; Gen. 1 has not been reported for Issime, since none of the interviewed speakers is younger than 40 years). As far as Gressoney is concerned, grammaticalized, that is enclitic only and pleonastic forms, are clearly more frequent in speakers under 70 years (Gen 1 and Gen 2), whereas those born before 1953 almost exclusively resort to the use of the full subject pronoun only (91 percent). Moreover, the segregation of the youngest speaker (Gen 1) shows a preference for pleonastic forms over those with an enclitic subject clitic only, while the opposite is the case for speakers belonging to Gen 2. As far as Issime is concerned, "enclitic only" forms are not attested in declarative sentences with SVO (see table 5 above); pleonastic forms, on the other hand, occur considerably more frequently in younger speakers and are mainly found in one person (born in 1953).[13] Interestingly, this person is the only speaker from Issime who works in Gressoney. We cannot exclude the possibility that the increased occurrence of pleonastic forms is due to contact with Walser German in Gressoney. In conclusion, in Walser German, in particular in Gressoney, we observe a tendency analogous to that observed by Dal Negro for Formazza whereby grammaticalized forms occur more frequently in younger speakers.

[13] Nine of the 16 items of pleonastic forms in Issime (excluding XVO) are from this speaker.

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Table 10. Variation across different age groups

	Sauris			Gressoney			Issime	
	Gen 1 (n=2)	Gen 2 (n=6)	Gen 3 (n=8)	Gen 1 (n=1)	Gen 2 (n=4)	Gen 3 (n=4)	Gen 2 (n=3)	Gen 3 (n=4)
enclitic only	1 (2.5%)	10 (8%)	7 (4%)	2 (10%)	18 (17.5%)	2 (2%)	0	0
pleonastic	3 (7.5%)	17 (13%)	17 (10%)	9 (42.5%)	11 (10.5%)	4 (5%)	12 (19%)	4 (5%)
full subject pronoun only	33 (82.5%)	95 (73%)	146 (86%)	10 (47.5%)	70 (68%)	79 (91%)	51 (81%)	80 (95%)
finite verb only	3 (7.5%)	8 (6%)	0	0	4 (4%)	2 (2%)	0	0
total	40 (100%)	130 (100%)	170 (100%)	21 (100%)	103 (100%)	87 (100%)	63 (100%)	84 (100%)

6. Summary

In our study, we focused on subject clitics and subject pronouns in speakers in German linguistic islands in northern Italy (Walser German in Gressoney and Issime as well as Zahre German), with an Upper German dialect as L1 and with Italian as the surrounding majority language and L2. Apart from Italian as the surrounding majority language, further contact varieties – especially in the last centuries up to the middle of the twentieth century – include Friulian in Friuli-Venezia Giulia region (for Zahre German) and Piedmontese, Francoprovençal and French (at school) in Aosta Valley (the Gallo-Romance varieties in particular for Walser German in Issime, Piedmontese for both Gressoney and Issime). German – including spoken or dialectal varieties of German – requires an explicit subject, while in Standard Italian the explicit subject is typically omitted (null-subject language). The other Romance contact varieties in question usually have an (obligatory) subject clitic. We concentrated on affirmative declarative clauses and tested the frequency of subject clitics in different persons and contexts. In contrast to previous studies that focused on only one linguistic island, we compared data from three different speech communities, with two varieties of Alemannic and one of Bavarian origin. The three communities are very similar in terms of their sociolinguistic history and background, but they had and have no (or very limited) contact with each other. This comparative approach allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the extent of dialectal variation and language attrition.

Our results show that speakers in all three communities prefer to use the full subject pronoun only in declarative sentences with SVO: most frequently in Issime German, followed by Zahre German and Gressoney German. Pleonastic occurrences are very rarely attested and occur more often in Walser German than in Zahre German (except for the modal verb *können*). Patterns with the enclitic pronoun are mainly found in constructions with XVO: In Zahre German, this pattern is attested less frequently than in Walser German. Enclitic pronouns are mainly used in the first person singular and plural, which is consistent with the predictions of the animacy hierarchy. According to our data, the grammaticalization status of the clitic is more advanced in Zahre German than in Walser German (at least than in Issime German) as grammaticalized patterns (enclitic and pleonastic) are attested in all grammatical persons. Unsurprisingly, the oldest generation of speakers proves to be more conservative in language use than the younger generations, in so far as the former, especially in Walser German, show considerably fewer grammaticalized forms than the latter.

In summary, our study confirms assumptions for which to date there was no direct evidence. The findings show that both linguistic islands in northern Italy of Bavarian and of Alemannic origin develop in the same direction, independently of each other. As expected, the analysis revealed notable differences between Issime and Gressoney – even though both are Walser German language islands. Gressoney German in some respects behaves indeed more similarly to Zahre German, due to its different language contact situation (long-standing contact with Italian) as compared to Issime German. In general, however, as regards grammatical subjects, all three speech communities have shown to be quite resistant to contact-induced change. In other words, even in typologically distant languages and even in a situation of language shift and intensive language contact with the surrounding majority variety,

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language change does not necessarily take place (thus challenging Thomason's 2001 approach). This might be attributed to the fact that not every phenomenon is susceptible to contact-induced change. Alternatively, it could be due to the fact that all other surrounding varieties (Francoprovençal, Friulian, Piedmontese) display grammatical subjects – and at least in the past the linguistic islands analyzed in the present article have been in close contact with them.

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