

Clitic subject pronouns and gender agreement: the balance between complexification and simplification in the fast shifting Walser language minorities in Italy

Marco Angster

The Walser minorities in Italy are what remains of a migratory movement, dating back to the XIII-XIV century, of German-speaking settlers coming from the upper part of Rhone valley (Zanzi/Rizzi 2002). In these communities High Alemannic dialects (Russ 1990) are still nowadays spoken, but are facing a dramatic shift leading to obsolescence and eventually to language death (Dal Negro 2004).

The inventory of pronouns of such varieties is structured similarly to that of Standard German: there are distinct forms for three persons and two numbers and a tripartite gender distinction (masculine, feminine, neuter) is available for 3s pronouns. Moreover a further formal distinction is present opposing tonic forms preceding the verb from atonic enclitic ones (Bohnenberg 1913).

Partly due to an ongoing syntactic development by which the rule of verb second is progressively losing ground, enclitic forms are reanalysed as verb endings opening the way to 3s verb forms inflected for gender. This would lead to a complexification of verb paradigms unknown to Standard German and to its varieties.

In the Walser variety of Gressoney (Aosta Valley; Zürrer 1982), peculiar gender agreement conditions violating to some extent the Agreement Hierarchy for gender proposed by Corbett (1991) favour the use of neutral forms of pronouns. On this direction, a newly achieved simplification of the pattern described above might take place if younger (semi-)speakers, who show completely reanalysed enclitics as 3s verb inflection, generalised the use of neutral forms.

References

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