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A micro-typological approach to the actuation problem: the case of relative *wo* 'where' in Early New High German and beyond

The most basic question in the context of variation and change is that of the causes of variation and change: Why does a new form suddenly appear, in a system that has (apparently) worked without problems up to now, and for a function for which one (or even more) forms already exist? If this structure or form persists (i.e. does not remain a slip of the tongue, a transcription error or a one-off event) and is integrated into the language system, then we speak of language change. We could then also go a step further and situate the above question in a comparative context: "Why do changes in a structural feature take place in a particular language at a particular time, but not in other languages with the same feature, or in the same language at other times?" (Weinreich et al. 1968: 102) The latter question, the so-called "actuation problem", will very probably continue to remain unanswered, but this talk is nevertheless intended as a step towards a better understanding of the question: why is this change occurring here and now? We assume that language change occurs when different factors interact at the right time in the right place with the right impact: in other words the actuation of change, i.e. speaker choices, can only be described and understood probabilistically.

To better understand this negotiation and weighting of different factors and to discover the particular constellation that sets a language change in motion or prevents it, we would like to take a closer look at a phenomenon that we believe is particularly suitable for this purpose: This is the relative clause marker *wo* 'where' and its (changing) role (locative, temporal, relative pronoun) in the relative clause marker system in the (historical) varieties of German. The relative marker first appears in the dialects of Early New High German (1350-1650/1800), never represents the dominant structure in neither of the attested varieties, (apparently) disappears again, but is the basic relative clause structure in Alemannic today, a dialect spoken among others in German-speaking Switzerland. Moreover, *wo* starts appearing in a system that is already perfectly functional, with two relative pronouns (*der/die/das* and *welcher/welche/welches*), the relative adverb *da* (locative function) and the relative particle *so* (being not locative in nature). Although relative clauses have always been of interest to linguists from various fields of research, no one has yet asked the "why" question posed at the beginning (but see Cheshire et al. 2013). What is more no one has yet looked at this phenomenon more closely from a comparative, diachronic and data-based perspective. Note that Early New High German is the first and only time period in German diachrony which allows us to consider diatopical variation (and other forms of variation) due to enough available data. In other words a micro-typological approach is not only possible, but also absolutely advantageous: This approach allows us to describe and discover change down to the smallest detail because changes will logically be minimal. Consequently, individual factors, and thus decisions of individual speakers, become more visible, and the relevance of individual factors with regard to the actuation of language change can be drawn more clearly and potentially also predicted more unambiguously. As far as we know, no one has yet taken a micro-typological approach with historical data to tackle the actuation problem.

We trace the development of the relative clause systems of four varieties: from West Upper German to Alemannic, from East Upper German to Bavarian, from West Central German to Hessian, and from East Central German to Thuringian. Finally, there is a fifth variety that has no direct predecessor: Standard German. The study is based on broad empirical evidence, with data from the Bonner Frühneuhochdeutsch-Corpus (80.000 tokens; not annotated with regard to our purposes; 40 texts with the first 2.000 tokens each) and the GerManC (144.000 tokens; each source has 2.000 tokens per se; 72 text extracts) for the historical data. The data is divided into six time periods, from four different regions each, and has been analyzed in terms of frequency, form and function of the relative clause marker, also taking into account the accessability hierarchy by Keenan/Comrie (1977). For Alemannic data from two corpora were analyzed (Archimob-Corpus and SwissWhatsApp-Corpus), with the first 20 instances of *wo* (as relative adverb, relative particle, or as subordinating conjunction) for approx. 40 persons each. As possible factors, to which a fictitious, changing weight is assigned for each period and region, are discussed: style/genre, standardization, coherence/information density, language contact, typological and structural prerequisites. Finally, the exact steps of the grammaticalization of *wo* (which are still unclear,

cf. Harris/Campbell 1995: 284–5; Heine/Kuteva 2006; Ballarè/Inglese 2021) are examined in more detail, and the respective status in the grammaticalization process is linked to the factors which promote or prevent the actuation of language change.

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Corpora

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SwissWhatsApp-Corpus: https://www.whatsup-switzerland.ch/index.php/en/corpus-en.