

Between derivation and multifunctionality: In search of evidence for conversion

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Abstract

Conversion is related to and even presupposes the identification of word-classes, i.e. whether and to what extent a language displays well curtailed lexical classes to which derivational conversion is applied, or whether a widespread lexical multifunctionality has to be assumed. Typically, isolating languages which display poor morphology offer less clues for the identification of word-classes. On the other hand, in fusional languages like for instance Latin, where a certain solidarity between word-class membership and morphology occurs, it is also not trivial to understand where to assign certain phenomena. One important piece of evidence to unravel this puzzle comes from those languages where massive processes of simplification due to language contact have taken place. In particular, the paper will focus on two Alemannic varieties spoken in linguistic islands in Italy which display clear differences in terms of the impact of the contact environment and provide empirical evidence in support of the idea that simplification leads to lexical multifunctionality.

Keywords: word class, conversion, multifunctionality, language contact, simplification

1 Introduction

Conversion is generally connected with word-class change albeit strictly speaking this is not a necessary precondition for it (see Gaeta 2017 for a discussion). In its turn, this directly calls into play the issue of the substantial status of word classes and of its relevance within the lexico-grammar of a language and of the criteria for word-class membership. In particular, it has to be established whether and to what extent a language displays well curtailed lexical classes to which derivational conversion is applied, or whether a widespread lexical multifunctionality has to be assumed (see Gaeta 2014). Typically, isolating languages which display poor morphology offer less clues for the identification of word-classes. On the other hand, in fusional languages like for instance Latin, where a certain solidarity between word-class membership and morphology occurs, it is also not trivial to understand where to assign certain phenomena. At any rate, the occurrence of morphology alone is not a reliable cue for identifying word classes either, insofar as rigid vs. flexible languages have been identified where shifting from one word-class to the other is more or less possible independently of the morphological type (Hengeveld 1992: 63).

One important piece of evidence to unravel this puzzle might come from those languages where massive processes of change due to language contact have taken place. In this regard, it has traditionally been suggested that the widespread diffusion of verbal conversion in English is due to massive reductive changes (Jespersen 1912: 165; Vogel 2000), resulting from the overwhelming processes of contact which have characterized its history (McWhorter 2005). In this light, an interesting scenario can be depicted for two Alemannic varieties spoken in linguistic islands in Italy which display clear differences in terms of the impact of the contact environment. In one variety where contact can be argued to have led to a creoloidization scenario (Trudgill 2011), verbal abstracts are nowadays generally possible only via conversion while in the other variety where no creoloidization can be assumed suffixation is highly productive. Thus, creoloidization might be argued to favor (morphological) simplification

which in its turn enhances lexical multifunctionality – beside conversion – and the loss of affixal derivation. The paper is structured as follows: after a short introduction of questions relating to conversion and word-class membership in Section 2, in Section 3 the role of language contact for conversion will be discussed. In Section 4 the focus will shift to the discussion of two Walser German varieties spoken in linguistic islands in Italy, while in Section 5 the difference between the two varieties will be accounted for in terms of different historical and sociolinguistic scenarios. The final Section 6 draws the conclusion.

2 Conversion and word-class membership

Conversion is often put strictly in connection with the identification of word-classes, i.e. whether and to what extent a language displays well-tailored word-classes. In this respect, isolating languages which display poor morphology offer less clues for the identification of word-classes. In these languages, the morphosyntactic environment provides cues for grouping single words in homogeneous categories like in Chinese (cf. Li & Thompson 2009: 717):

- (1) a. *tā hěn cōngmíng*
s/he very intelligent
‘S/he is very intelligent.’
- b. *tā bú kǎixīn*
s/he not happy
‘S/he is not happy.’
- c. *tā bú chī dōngxī*
s/he not eat thing
‘S/he does not eat (anything).’
- d. *kǎixīn-de rén*
happy-NOMN person
‘people who are happy’
- e. *chī ròu de rén*
eat meat NOMN person
‘people who eat meat’

A lexeme referring to a property like *cōngmíng* ‘intelligent’ in (1a) might be considered on a par with verbs because it occurs in constructions where no copula is required which can take over the predicative function, although copula-less constructions are also common in Indo-European languages like Russian: *Ona umnaya* ‘She (is) intelligent’. Moreover, it shares with verbs like *chī* ‘to eat’ the modification by the negation *bú* in (1b, c) as well as by the nominalizing particle *de* in (1d, e). In other words, the syntactic environment in which the lexemes occur profiles a corresponding categorial label. Should we then conclude that Chinese verbs convert into adjectives in a negative construction like (1c) – something like ‘S/he is not thing-eating’ – or vice versa that an adjective converts into a verb – something like ‘S/he doesn’t happy’ – when it enters the construction in (1b)? In the absence of any overt feature favoring one interpretation over the other, another possible conclusion is to assume the multifunctionality of the lexemes *kǎixīn* and *chī* which are then left unspecified for the word category adjective or verb. Apparently, conversions do not appear to be compatible with a language like Chinese.

In contrast to this, fusional languages like Latin display a clear relation of solidarity between word-class membership and morphology. A lexical root like *imper-* is clearly labeled as a verb insofar it must be combined with a specific Thematic Vowel (= ThV) which also fixes its inflectional behavior:

- (2) a. $[[[imper]_V -\bar{a}]_{ThV} -re]_{V:Inf}$
 ‘to order’
 b. $[[[imper]_V -\bar{a}]_{ThV} -t\bar{o}r]_N -em]_{N:ACC.SG}$
 ‘emperor-ACC.SG’

In order to appear as a noun, it must undergo an overt suffixation like in (2b) in which the suffix *-tōr-* is also specified for a certain inflectional class for nouns.¹ In other words, roots are specified for word class and/or receives a further specification for their inflectional class which is also specific for a certain word class. Thus, word class is extensively marked in Latin lexemes. As expected, this is also reflected in clear processes of conversion changing the lexically specified affiliation to a word category:

- (3) a. $[[coqu]_V -e]_{ThV} -re]_{V:Inf}$
 ‘to cook’
 b. $[[coqu]_{V\rightarrow N} -um]_{N:ACC.SG}$
 ‘cook-ACC.SG’
 c. $[[coqu]_V -\emptyset]_N -um]_{N:ACC.SG}$
 ‘cook-ACC.SG’

The effects of the conversion are manifested by the addition of a specific inflectional suffix *-um* which only characterizes nouns. The occurrence of a different inflectional behavior overtly manifests the occurrence of a conversion: in this sense, conversion as a derivational procedure is distinct of and logically precedes the appearance of inflection. Note that it is possible to represent this word-class change in two different ways, namely as a re-categorization (3b) which profiles a peculiar non-concatenative word-formation pattern consisting in a mere relabeling, or as a zero derivation paralleling the suffixation example (2b) but containing a phonological empty suffix. As is well known, there has been a hot debate on what the correct interpretation of conversion should be and both theoretical stances have good arguments to offer (see Bauer & Valera 2005 for a more detailed discussion). In previous work, I argued that we might also opt for a language-specific solution whereby the preference for a non-concatenative procedure like relabeling over the concatenative operation of zero derivation depends on the general morphological properties of a language (cf. Gaeta 2013 on German and Italian).

It is not trivial where to assign certain phenomena even in a language with bona fide conversion like Latin. This depends among others on the distinction between inflection and derivation hinted at above. For instance, one might wonder whether adverb formation represents an instance of word-formation (4b) – and accordingly falls under suffixation – or whether it should be treated under the label of inflection (4c):

¹ As an alternative, it is also possible to further segment the suffix *-em* as *-e-m* in which *-e-* is analysed as a thematic vowel dropped in the nominative singular and alternating with *-i-* in the oblique cases genitive, dative and ablative. Although this analysis corresponds to the etymological history of *-em* (the same also applies to the suffix *-um* of *coquum* below), for brevity I will not pursue this issue below.

- (4) a. [pulchr]_{ADJ} -um]_{ADJ:ACC.SG}
 ‘beautiful-ACC.SG’
 b. [pulchr]_{ADJ} -ē]_{ADV}
 ‘beautifully’
 c. [pulchr]_{ADJ}→_{ADV} -ē]_{ADJ:ADV}
 ‘beautifully’

The latter might be interpreted as a case of multifunctionality of the adjective used in adverb function with the suffix representing the overt signal of its conversion, quite similarly to what is normally assumed for participles (cf. Haspelmath 1996 for a discussion):

- (5) a. [[coqu]_V -e]_{ThV} -re]_{V:INF}
 ‘to cook’
 b. [[coqu]_V -e]_{ThV} -nt]_{V→ADJ} -em]_{V:ADJ:ACC.SG}
 ‘cooking-ACC.SG’

Thus, in a richly inflecting language like Latin the multifunctionality observed for the Chinese data seen in (1) above can be mapped onto different slots of the lexical paradigm. Accordingly, we might assume a specific slot for adverbs within the paradigm of an adjective paralleling the inflectional slot assumed for participles within verbal paradigms. It should not be forgotten, however, that inflectional morphology in Latin is also category-specific, fixing in this way word-class membership.

The category-fixing role of morphology, however, cannot serve as a water-tight cue for identifying word-classes. In this regard, Hengeveld (1992: 63) distinguishes between flexible vs. rigid languages. For instance, Turkish is a flexible language because no strict connection is held to exist between inflectional morphology and lexical roots. Accordingly, the same lexical item can be used as a noun (6a), an adjective (6b), and an adverb (6c) (cf. Hengeveld & van Lier 2010):

- (6) a. güzel-im
 beauty-1POSS
 ‘my beauty’
 b. güzel bir köpek
 beauty INDEF dog
 ‘a beautiful dog’
 c. Güzel konuştu.
 beauty s/he.spoke
 ‘S/he spoke well.’

On the other hand, Chinese is rigid because a word cannot be freely used as an adjective unless it is introduced by the nominalizing particle *de* which is normally employed to form a relative clause, as shown in (1d, e) above. In other words, flexibility points to a scarce degree of conventionalization between inflectional morphology and lexical roots, while rigidity refers to restrictions on the occurrence of the morphosyntactic environment. In this regard, Broschart (1997) emphasizes the cases of extreme flexibility and scarce conventionalization displayed by the so-called type/token-languages in contrast to the noun/verb-languages where word-categories are less flexible and largely conventionalized. One example of a type/token-language is given by Tongan:

- (7) a. *na'e lele e kau fefiné.*
 PST run DET PL.HUM woman.DEF
 'The women were running.'
- b. *na'e fefine kotoa e kau lelé.*
 PST woman all DET PL.HUM run.DEF
 'The ones running were all female.'
- c. **na'e e fefiné.*
 PST DET woman.DEF
 int. 'It was a woman.'

As shown by (7b) the lexeme *fefine* 'woman' is employed as a noun in a nominal morphosyntactic environment as well as in predicative function in a verbal morphosyntactic environment, similar to the Chinese examples seen in (1). The only restriction results from mixing the nominal and the verbal environment as in (7c) in which the lexeme is marked for tense and definiteness at the same time. Broschart considers the lexical multifunctionality of Tongan as due to the fact that lexemes behave like unsaturated predicates (in predicate logic: "types") which are freely available for any syntactic slot, provided that they are instantiated by means of a reference-binding operation. Accordingly, they can appear as "thing-tokens" if the lexemes are marked for definiteness (7a), in which case the construction refers to an individual non-event, or to "event-tokens", if they are tense-marked (7b), in which case it usually refers to a specific situation located in time.

It must be stressed that flexibility and rigidity are independent of the traditional Humboldtian morphological types, i.e. isolating, agglutinating or fusional. For instance, while Chinese is rigid and isolating, Krongo is rigid because a lexeme cannot be freely used as an adjective and requires to be introduced by the prefix *n-* (8a) which is also employed to form relative clauses (8b), albeit its morphology is largely fusional (cf. Hengeveld & van Lier 2010):

- (8) a. *bìtì η-álímì*
 water CONN-M.IPFV.be.cold
 'cold water (lit. water that is cold)'
- b. *N-úllà àʔàη kí-ñt-àndiη*
 1/2SG-IPFV.love 1SG LOC-SG-clothes
 [*n-úufō-η kò-nìimò kàti*]
 CONN.N-IPFV.sew-TR POSS-mother 1POSS
 'I love the dress that my mother is sewing.'

To sum up this brief review, we have three possible clues for word-class categorization. First, we need to consider the inflectional behavior, especially when it fixes the word class of a certain lexeme. This brings us to the traditional Humboldtian morphological types, distinguishing isolating (Chinese, Tongan), agglutinating (Turkish) and fusional (Latin, Krongo) languages. Second, we need to look at the degree of conventionalization which is responsible for the rigidity or flexibility of the syntactic employment of the lexemes. Accordingly, we can distinguish between rigid (Chinese, Krongo, Latin) and flexible (Tongan, Turkish) languages. Third, we need to look at the morphological and/or syntactic operations which are necessary for using the lexemes in different syntactic environments. In this regard, we can distinguish the employment of morphological (including word-formation) means (Latin, Krongo, Tongan) or a syntactic operation (Chinese, Turkish). Combining these

perspectives, we observe two distinct phenomena of word-class change: conversion as a morphological operation of relabeling, i.e. word-formation, which is particularly common in rigid fusional languages, and lexical multifunctionality, which is distinct from word-formation and can be invoked especially for flexible languages, independently of the morphological type, but also for rigid languages, especially of the isolating type like Chinese.

3 Contact-induced enhancement of conversion?

A language in which the distinction between conversion and lexical multifunctionality has often been debated is English suggesting that the widespread diffusion of verbal conversion in English is likely to be due to massive reductive changes (Vogel 2000), which resulted from the overwhelming processes of contact which have characterized its history (McWhorter 2005; Trudgill 2011). This idea is already present in Jespersen's (1912: 164–5) mind who observes:

As a great many native nouns and verbs had thus come to be identical in form ... and as the same thing happened with numerous originally French words ... it was quite natural that the speech-instinct should take it as a matter of course that whenever the need of a verb arose, the corresponding noun might be used unchanged, and vice versa.

In other words, internal – cf. the homonymy between nouns and verbs due to the loss of the infinitive ending – and external – cf. the big bunch of French borrowings – factors are likely to have pushed the English system towards lexical multifunctionality. Accordingly, one might be tempted to speak of widespread lexical multifunctionality instead of conversion in English. On the other hand, English has not given up rigid word-class membership entirely, as is shown by the occurrence of specific morphological markers which can only partially be generalized showing restrictions typical of word-formation. Thus, one cannot freely employ the adverbializing suffix *-ly* with nouns (see **hoodly*, **spoonly*, **tably*, etc., see the Turkish example in (6c) above) and even conversions display typical lexical restrictions insofar as it is apparently not possible to convert into verbs prepositions like *above* or *from* (but see *to up / down*), and the same for some peculiar set of nouns in which *to summer / winter* is fine, but **to spring / autumn* is not (Bauer et al. 2013: 278).

While the massive impact of contact on its history is undeniable, English stands also – and pour cause – apart from the rest of the (West-)Germanic family for a number of features (see McWhorter 2005: 270–292 for a more detailed discussion and more features):

- i. loss of verb prefixes / rise of phrasal verbs:² e.g. *toberstan* > *to break apart*, *inlædan* > *to bring in*
- ii. loss of the infinitive marker *-en*, and generalization of the markers *to* and *-ing* for signaling verbal non-finiteness
- iii. loss of verb-marking suffixes that served derivationally as word-forming devices³
- iv. loss of the sentence bracket / verb-final position typical of Old English and West-Germanic

² “However, this only happened where the prefix either coexisted with a free preposition (e.g., *in*) or was of semantics robust and discrete enough to be readily substituted by an equivalent free word: *down* for *niper-*, *around* for *yimb-*, *up* and *out* for the intensificational uses of *for-*, as in *forbærnan* > *to burn up*.” (McWhorter 2005: 280).

³ “[...] *-sian*, *-ettan*, and *-læcan* [which] served to make nouns and adjectives into verbs (*ricsian* ‘to reign’, *licettan* ‘to pretend’, *geanlæcan* ‘to unite’ [...]) [...] were flushed away” (McWhorter 2005: 281–282).

In this regard, McWhorter (2005: 297) stresses “the relative prevalence of contact in English’s history” as the main reason for this peculiarity. This array of simplifications is likely to be due to a “creoloid” status (Trudgill 2011: 67–68) reached in a period of time when the English society displayed a high degree of adult bilingualism due to a strong immigration resulting from different waves of settlements. For our purposes, it is important to stress McWhorter’s (2005: 297) observation that “[i]t is unlikely that English’s departure from the Germanic template was a function of its isolation on an island; generally, this kind of isolation is associated with relative conservatism, Icelandic and Faroese being the obviously pertinent cases here.” Thus, the English case is important for the issue of conversion vs. lexical multifunctionality because its dramatic expansion can be analyzed as due to simplification processes resulting from massive language contact. This is particularly true for the loss of the overt infinitive marking as well as the contextual recruitment of the allative preposition *to* and of the abstract suffix *-ing* to signal verbal non-finiteness and the loss of overt verb-forming suffixes, mentioned among the properties listed above. This expansion raises also the question whether we should analyze this process in terms of lexical multifunctionality typical of flexible languages like Tongan. Moreover, the English case is peculiar within the (West-)Germanic family because of the impressive array of simplification processes accompanying the massive expansion of conversion. Finally, it is important to stress that isolation alone cannot be simplistically adopted as a viable motivation to account for the simplification processes. In the next paragraphs we will move to a far corner of the Continental West-Germanic area in order to investigate the role of conversion in two linguistic islands in which varieties of Walser German are still spoken nowadays.

4 The Walser colonies in Aosta Valley

The Walser German islands found in the North-Western Italian Alps result from late Middle-Age migrations of settlers speaking a Highest Alemannic (*Höchstalemannisch*) variety who moved from the Swiss Valais towards South/South-East in search of better life conditions (cf. Bohnenberger 1913; Zinsli 2002). In particular, in Aosta Valley two colonies survive nowadays which are placed in different points of the Lys valley, namely Issime and Gressoney (which in its turn is divided in the two villages of Saint-Jean and La Trinité). Since it lies at the very northern end of the valley while Issime is placed further below after the village of Gaby, Gressoney might qualify as a border minority (*Grenzminderheit*) if it weren’t separated from the direct access to Switzerland by the massif of Monte Rosa. Despite this, Gressoney is characterized by constant historical contacts and commercial exchanges with the German-speaking areas of Switzerland and of southwestern Germany, at least until the Italian unification in 1861. Subsequently, the contacts decreased and were finally interrupted with World War I. After WWI the nationalist policy of the fascist regime completely repressed any usage of the local variety which was only spoken in family contexts for twenty years. After WW II, the Italian republic introduced in the constitutional law articles to safeguard and support the minority languages favoring a widespread multilingualism. In particular, in Aosta Valley both Italian and French are recognized as co-official languages and taught in school, while the repertoire also includes the local variety of Piedmontese, of Walser German and – in Issime – of Franco-Provençal. In spite of the dramatic decrease of the speakers of Walser German in the last decades (cf. Dal Negro 2004), both in Gressoney and in Issime the speakers of the local variety of Walser German, called respectively Titsch and Töitschu, are still very

active and promote activities and language course for children and adults. However, the absence of the roofing role of Standard German (cf. Ammon 2004) and the large diffusion of mixed marriages hastens the decay of the Walser varieties insofar as they are no more transmitted in the families still living in the villages (cf. Zürrer 2009, for some discussion; see also Angster & Gaeta 2021). Although located in the same valley and only 15 km apart, Gressoney and Issime are characterized by a different historical and sociolinguistic profile. While in both communities the local Walser German constituted the so-called L(ow)-Code, in Gressoney, as is typical of a true border minority, German traditionally served as roofing variety (*Dachsprache*) and belonged – together with Italian – to the H(igh)-Code. On the other hand, Issime traditionally displayed a strict connection with Francophony with French serving as H-Code. Moreover, the territorial continuity between the communities is interrupted by the Franco-Provençal community of Gaby which stands in strict contact with Issime and used to be partially settled by Walser speakers in the past. At any rate, parallel processes are observed nowadays in both communities with the prevailing role of Italian and Piedmontese respectively as the H- and the L-Code, while German completely faded away and French is taught in school and occasionally spoken especially in official contexts.

4.1 *The Alpine minority projects in Turin*

In the attempt of counteracting the decay of these varieties, as well as of documenting and safeguarding their linguistic and cultural heritage, a number of projects have been carried out in the last decade in Turin and Aosta (see Gaeta et al. 2022). In particular, a digital platform was created in which both lexical material and text corpora have been uploaded and made freely accessible online at www.climalp.org. The platform is originally based on the lexical entries coming from the dictionaries resulting from the collective effort of the community in the Eighties of the last century – during the so-called Walser revival – and further enriched by new entries coming from the text corpus flanking the dictionary. It is important to stress that the dictionary entries are coindexed with the corpus so that it is possible to immediately get the total set of occurrences of a lexical entry attested through the corpus texts. In this way, both type- and token-based searches are possible. Especially for the two villages at stack the actual figures are reported in Table 1:

Table 1: Lexical consistence of the corpus of the Gressoney and Issime varieties in the platform CLiMAIp

	Types	Tokens	Texts
Gressoney	12,326	86,736	659
Issime	7,548	84,441	291

The data are slightly different for the two varieties, especially because the higher number of texts already acquired in the corpus has significantly increased the type number in Titsch. On the other hand, the lower number of texts of Töitschu acquired in the corpus displays a significantly high number of occurrences, while several more texts are still being classified. For these reasons, in the following sections we will be mainly concerned with the types number, leaving aside their occurrences in the corpus. On the basis of the discussion carried out in §3, we will focus on the critical properties listed in §3 above regarding English and see what the corresponding state-of-affairs is in the two varieties.

4.2 Particle verbs in Walser German

Particle verbs are a peculiar feature of the Germanic family (cf. Dehé et al. 2002; Los et al. 2012; Dehé 2015). For the sake of brevity, I will limit the discussion to the West-Germanic branch where the picture is quite clear. In particular, in German particle verbs (*Partikelverben*) are characterized by two main properties, respectively syntactic and morphological separation, as shown by the German verb pair *laden* ‘to load’ / *aufladen* ‘to load up’:

- (9) Syntactic separation:
- a. *Guido lädt den Wagen auf* / **auflädt den Wagen*.
‘Guido loads up the car.’
 - b. *Julia erzählt, dass Guido den Wagen auflädt*.
‘Julia reports that Guido loads up the car.’
- (10) Morphological separation:
- a. *Guido hat den Wagen aufgeladen* / **geaufladen* / **aufladen*.
‘Guido has loaded up the car.’
 - b. *Guido versucht, den Wagen aufzuladen* / **zu aufladen*.
‘Guido tries to load up the car.’

Following syntactic separation, in main clauses the particle *auf-* (which corresponds to the preposition *auf* ‘on’) appears at the end of the sentence, forming the typical West-Germanic sentence bracket (*Klammersatz*) based on the so-called distant position (*Distanzstellung*) of the parts of the verbal complex, while the finite verb occupies the second sentence position (9a). The prefix-like behavior is only found when the whole verb appears in sentence-final position as shown by the typical asymmetric behavior of subordinate clauses where the whole verbal complex appears at the end of the clause (9b). Moreover, when it appears in non-finite form, the verb displays morphological separation insofar as the prefix *ge-* constituting part of the participial circumfix *ge-V-en* is placed after the particle before the verbal stem (10a). The same holds when a verbal infinitive forms a subordinate clause: in this case, the particle *zu* ‘to’ canonically introducing the infinitive is placed after *auf-* and before the stem (10a).

In neat contrast to German particle verbs, in English no asymmetry holds between main and subordinate clauses: in the English glosses of the examples in (10) we observe the typical behavior of phrasal verbs like *to load up*, in which the particle immediately follows the verb. Note that when the particle *up* is used as a prefix it does not display morphological or syntactic separation:

- (11) *Mary uploaded the file on her computer.*

At any rate, this kind of prefixation is clearly marginal in English with regard to the highly productive pattern of the corresponding phrasal verbs (cf. Bauer et al. 2013: 344). In contrast to this, the pattern of particle verbs is massively productive in German giving rise to long lists of verbs formed with the same verbal base (cf. Barz 2016: 2399–2404).

If we now turn our attention to the Walser German varieties, we observe a clearly polarized picture. As shown in Table 2, the Titsch particle verbs behave exactly like in German and give rise to long list of verbs formed with the same verbal base:⁴

Table 2: Series of particle verbs in Titsch

Verbal basis	Particle verb					
<i>bräche</i> 'to break'	<i>abbräche</i> '– off'	<i>dòrchbräch</i> '– through'	<i>ébräche</i> 'hang ribbons'	<i>émbräche</i> '– open'		
	<i>ufbräche</i> '– down'	<i>usbräche</i> '– out, bust'	<i>userbräche</i> '– out'	<i>zémebräche</i> '– down'		
<i>chére</i> 'to turn'	<i>énchére</i> 'stop at an inn'	<i>òmchére</i> '– back'	<i>usschére</i> 'divert'	<i>wéderchére</i> 'oppose'		
<i>gä</i> 'to give'	<i>abgä</i> '– off'	<i>dezuegä</i> 'add'	<i>métgä</i> '– along with'	<i>nédergä</i> 'rain down'	<i>noagä</i> '– way'	
	<i>òbergä</i> 'hand over'	<i>òndergä</i> 'surrender'	<i>ufgä</i> '– up'	<i>usgä</i> '– out'	<i>zuegä</i> 'admit'	
<i>goa</i> 'to go'	<i>agoa</i> '– about, concern'	<i>abgoa</i> '– off'	<i>drabgoa</i> '– thereof'	<i>drufgoa</i> '– thereon, pass'	<i>dròbergoa</i> '– beyond'	
	<i>dòrchgoa</i> '– through'	<i>emufgoa</i> '– up again'	<i>engoa</i> '– in'	<i>fòrtgoa</i> '– away'	<i>héndergoa</i> '– back,	
	<i>deceive'</i>					
	<i>noagoa</i> '– after'	<i>òmgoa</i> '– round'	<i>usgoa</i> '– off'	<i>vorbigoa</i> '– by'	<i>vorwetzgoa</i> '– forward'	
	<i>zròckgoa</i> '– back'					
<i>lecke</i> 'to put'	<i>alecke</i> '– on'	<i>ablecke</i> '– off'	<i>derzuelecke</i> '– besides, add'	<i>drélecke</i> '– inside'	<i>dérlecke</i> '– away'	
	<i>embrélecke</i> '– down'	<i>néderlecke</i> '– down'	<i>òberlecke</i> '– over'	<i>ònderlecke</i> '– under'	<i>uflecke</i> '– on'	
	<i>usenandlecke</i> '– apart'	<i>uslecke</i> '– out'	<i>vorlecke</i> 'lay, exhibit'	<i>zéemelecke</i> '– together'		
<i>loa</i> 'to let'	<i>abloa</i> '– off'	<i>dezuloa</i> '– besides, add'	<i>draloa</i> '– at'	<i>embréloa</i> '– down'	<i>lòsloa</i> '– off',	
	<i>noaloa</i> '– after'	<i>òberloa</i> '– over'	<i>ufloa</i> '– on'	<i>usloa</i> '– out'	<i>zròckloa</i> '– back'	
	<i>zueloa</i> 'allow'					

⁴ Note that in Titsch orthography the signs <é> and <ò> stand for the vowels [ɪ] and [ʊ], while <sch> stands for [ʃ] and <sch> as well as a pre-consonantal <s> for [ʃ]. The other signs reflect their actual realization, for instance *stei* 'stone', *acher* 'field' and *brueder* 'brother' are realized as [ʃteɪ], [ˈaxer] and [ˈbruɛdɛr]. On the other hand, in Töitschu orthography the signs <e> and <é> stand respectively for the vowels [ɛ] and [e], while <sch> stands for [ʃ] and <sch> as well as a pre-consonantal <s> for [ʃ]. The other signs reflect their actual realization, e.g., *chalb* 'calf', *breit* 'wide', *lénh* 'tall', *spiet* 'late', *reer* 'rare', *voald* 'valley' and *wuart* 'word' are realized as [xalb], [breɪt], [leŋ], [ʃpiɛt], [ræɪ], [vɔɔld] and [wuɔrt].

<i>machò</i> 'to make'	<i>amachò</i> '– up, excite' <i>énmachò</i> '– again' <i>vorwerzmachò</i> 'continue'	<i>abmachò</i> '– off' <i>métmachò</i> 'join in' <i>wédermachò</i> 'redo'	<i>amufmachò</i> 'open up again' <i>noamachò</i> 'imitate' <i>zuemachò</i> 'shut'	<i>dervomachò</i> '– off' <i>ufmachò</i> 'play music'	<i>dramachò</i> '– up, add' <i>usmachò</i> 'settle'
<i>schloa</i> 'to hit, strike'	<i>aschloa</i> 'bump into' <i>usschloa</i> 'beat'	<i>éschloa</i> 'stick' <i>vorschloa</i> 'propose'	<i>néderschloa</i> 'slaughter' <i>wéderschloa</i> '– back'	<i>noaschloa</i> 'resemble' <i>zéemeschloa</i> 'fix up'	<i>ufschloa</i> 'pile it on' <i>zueschloa</i> 'slam'
<i>zie</i> 'to pull'	<i>abzie</i> '– off' <i>druszie</i> '– outside' <i>òberzie</i> '– over, cover' <i>vorwertzie</i> '– forward'	<i>amufzie</i> '– up again' <i>énzie</i> '– in' <i>òmzie</i> 'overturn' <i>zéemezie</i> '– together'	<i>anzie</i> '– on, dress' <i>éngerzie</i> '– down' <i>ufzie</i> '– on' <i>zròckzie</i> '– back'	<i>dérzie</i> '– inside' <i>hénderzie</i> '– inside' <i>uszie</i> '– off'	<i>drézie</i> '– inside' <i>noazie</i> '– after, drag' <i>vorzie</i> 'prefer'

This property correlates with the occurrence of the sentence bracket typical of the West-Germanic syntax, as shown by the following examples drawn from the corpus, in which syntactic separation (12a) vs. syntactic cohesion in sentence-final position (12b) as well as morphological separation (12c, d) is observed:

- (12) a. *Wenn d'nässe wéreder z'heissé, leck bròt òn chésch dré*
if DEF=soup were.2SG.DAT to=hot put bread and cheese in
'if the soup were too hot, throw in bread and cheese.'
- b. *Wenn d'fòndògò éscht wie en glatte crem tuemò*
when DEF=fondue is like INDEF flat cream does.one
eis z'moaltsch d'eier drélecke,
one time DEF=eggs inside.put.INF
'When the fondue has become a smooth cream, one throws in the eggs all at once.'
- c. *Wenn z'wasser hät gsottet hämmò de gmalne*
when DEF=water has boiled has.one DEF ground
kaffé drégleit,
coffee inside.put.PST.PTCP
'When the water boils, one throws in the ground coffee.'
- d. *Far die Denge z'macho hämmo bsondre Kuzze*
for DEM things to=make.INF has.one particular pumpkin
brucht on häd'sche usgholod far z'Trengé dre z' legge
used and has=3FEM hollowed for DEF=drink.INF inside to=put
'To make those things one has used a particular pumpkin and one has hollowed it to throw the drink into it.'

In contrast to this, as can be seen in Table 3 below, Töitschu displays a radically different picture in which few and sparse cases of particle verbs are observed, while the dominant and expanding pattern is clearly represented by phrasal verbs in which the particle immediately follows the verb:

Table 3: Series of particle and phrasal verbs in Töitschu

Verbal basis	Particle / Phrasal verb				
<i>brechen</i> 'to break'	<i>ousbrechen</i>	<i>unnerbrechen</i>			
	'perforate'	'interrupt'			
	<i>brechen ab / i / ous</i> 'warn off / – open / – out'				
<i>chieren</i> 'to turn'	<i>hinnerchieren</i>	<i>umchieren</i>			
	'– over'	'overturn'			
	<i>chieren hinner / um</i> '– around / twirl'				
<i>geen</i> 'to give'	–				
	<i>geen awek / hinner / i / ouf / ous / zu</i> '– away / mirror / feed / grow / yield / supply'				
<i>goan</i> 'to go'	<i>widergoan</i> '– back'				
	<i>goan a / ab / ambri / awek / drab / hinner / i / unnen / zu</i> 'face, run out / – down / away / get off / back / inside / die / – along'				
<i>lécken</i> 'to put'	<i>alécken</i>	<i>unnerlécken</i>			
	'– on, dress'	'– to bed'			
	<i>lécken a / darbéi / dri / drum / i / nidder / ouf / ous / vür / zu / zseeme</i> '– on, dress / compare / insert / get set / install / lay down / impose / make known / – before / grow / – together'				
<i>loan</i> 'to let'	<i>nidderloan</i> 'prepare the udders for milking'				
	<i>loan ab / ambri / hinner / i / noa / ouf / ous / uber</i> 'desist / swallow / – aside / cede / found / except / rely on'				
<i>machun</i> 'to make'	<i>widermachun</i> 'redo'				
	<i>machun i / ouf / ous</i> 'creep in / build / destroy'				
<i>schloan</i> 'to hit, strike'	<i>abschloan</i>	<i>hinnerschloan</i>	<i>ousschloan</i>	<i>umschloan</i>	<i>widerschloan</i>
	'flow off'	'sewing seams'	'hit, thresh'	'thresh'	'beat, strike'
	<i>schloan ab / dra / dri / nidder / ous / zseeme</i> 'deduct / clash / bump into / tear down / have a skin rash / collide'				
<i>zin</i> 'to pull'	<i>abzin</i>	<i>uberzin</i>	<i>umzin</i>	<i>unnerzin</i>	<i>widerzin</i>
	'undress'	'clean up the litter'	'clean up the bundle of fodder'	'put underneath'	'clear the table'
	<i>zin a / ab / dri / hinner / i / ouf / ous / zseeme / zu</i> 'absorb / undress / make the best of bad luck / withdraw / involve / shorten / – out / – together / resemble'				

Accordingly, in the few cases where prefixation is observed, no syntactic separation is found:

- (13) *Wir* *beitun* *d'Ouaschtëri* *un* *widergrëifen* *stërji* *n-un* *mut*
 1PL wait.1PL DEF=Easter and again.grip.1PL force and courage
 'We are waiting for Easter and recovering force and courage.'

Moreover, the particles immediately follow the verbs (14a) and do not display *Distanzstellung* (14b) except for the placement of the negation (14c), similarly to English:

- (14) a. *un* *d'Schat* *llëis* *llëis* *müntrut* *ouf* *wider* *den* *Groat*
 And DET=shade slow slow climbs up against DEF mountain
 'and the shade slowly climbs up towards the mountain.'
- b. *Dische* *ma* *het* *gleit* *a* *d'leitirlljini* *an* *d'vüiss*
 DEM man has put.PST.PTCP on DEF=pole on DEF=feet
 'This man put snowshoes on his feet.'
- c. *das* *dar* *het* *nöit* *gleit* *ouf* *d'kiendi*
 CONJ DEM has NEG put.PST.PTCP up DEF=fence
 'that he hasn't put up the fence.'

It has to be added that this state-of-affairs, in which the typical West-Germanic sentence bracket consistently found in Titsch is completely lost, holds already true in the earlier attestations of Töitschu dating back to the mid-nineteenth century (cf. Gaeta & Angster 2020). Moreover, the development of phrasal verbs out of earlier particle verbs, accompanied by the loss of the sentence bracket, is also found in other contact situations characterizing Bavarian varieties in the North-Eastern Italian Alps, although in a partially reduced form with regard to Issime (see Bidese et al. 2016). Furthermore, phrasal verbs with locative particle are generally common in the Romance varieties found in the Alpine region (cf. Bernini 2021 for a survey).

4.3 Abstract nouns

Let us move to another feature already hinted at above with regard to the peculiar position of English within the West-Germanic family, namely the formation of deverbal abstract nouns. In this respect, as shown in Table 4, Titsch nicely reflects the typical pattern of a West-Germanic language in which the most productive device is the suffix *-ðng* (cf. German *-ung* and Dutch *-ing*) followed by ablaut alternations and conversions:

Table 4: Deverbal abstract nouns in Titsch

Deverbal abstract nouns	Frequency	%
[V-òng] _N <i>fieri</i> → <i>fieròng</i> 'to lead' → 'direction' <i>usstelle</i> → <i>usstellòng</i> 'to exhibit' → 'exhibition'	112	30%
Ablaut alternations <i>bisse</i> → <i>bés</i> 'to bite' → 'bite' <i>springe</i> → <i>spròng</i> 'to jump' → 'jump'	93	25%
Conversion V → N <i>loufe</i> → <i>louf</i> 'to run' → 'run' <i>redò</i> → <i>red</i> 'to talk' → 'talk'	72	20%
Semelfactive abstracts [V/N- <i>etò</i>] _N <i>ròtschò</i> → <i>ròtschetò</i> 'to slip' → 'slip' <i>oug</i> → <i>ougetò</i> 'eye' → 'glance'	56	15%
Other V+Suff <i>dienò</i> → <i>dientscht</i> 'to serve' → 'service' <i>toufe</i> → <i>toufé</i> 'to baptize' → 'baptism'	36	10%
Total	369	100%

Besides the usual rest category containing disparate formations selecting scarcely productive suffixes like *-tscht* or *-é*, there is a typical Walser German suffix, namely *-etò* (and in Töitschu *-etu*, see Table 5 below) which forms semelfactive abstracts from verbal and nominal bases and is generally found in Alemannic varieties. This suffix results from the borrowing of the Latin or Romance participle ending *-āta* or *-ēta* already found in OHG *scizzāta* 'dung', *miscellāta* 'mixture' (cf. Ti. *schissetò* 'snow slide', Tö. *mischletu* 'mixture', see Gaeta & Angster 2020 for more details). In neat contrast to this, in Töitschu the deverbal suffix *-unh* has substantially disappeared, as well as the ablaut alternations, while conversions are also reduced:

Table 5: Deverbal abstract nouns in Töitschu

Deverbal abstract nouns	Frequency	%
[V- <i>unh</i>] _N <i>housun</i> → <i>housunh</i> 'to edify' → 'apartment' <i>rechtnun</i> → <i>rechtnunh</i> 'to count' → 'count'	2	1%
Ablaut alternations <i>helfun</i> → <i>hilf</i> 'to help' → 'help' <i>sprinnhen</i> → <i>sprunh</i> 'to jump' → 'jump'	11	5%
Conversion V → N <i>chriegen</i> → <i>chrig</i> 'to fight' → 'fight' <i>trommun</i> → <i>trom</i> 'to cut' → 'cut'	28	13%
Semelfactive abstracts [V/N- <i>etu</i>] _N <i>lachen</i> → <i>lachetu</i> 'to laugh' → 'laugh' <i>reche</i> → <i>rechetu</i> 'rake' → 'raking'	139	67%
Other V+suff <i>gschwellen</i> → <i>gschwulscht</i> 'to blow' → 'bulge' <i>taufen</i> → <i>taufi</i> 'to baptize' → 'baptism'	29	14%
Total	209	100%

On the other hand, we record the explosion of the deverbal and denominal semelfactive abstracts in *-etu* which qualify as the only really productive pattern in Töitschu. However, given the semelfactive value and the possible selection of nominal and verbal bases, the suffix *-etu* cannot be said to have replaced the abstract suffix *-unh*. Notice that the latter is also found – as a sort of ending – in a bunch of nouns resulting from the integration of Romance borrowings like *reisunh* 'reason', *ruvesunh* 'rogation week', etc. Thus, Töitschu displays a radically different picture from Titsch insofar as it does not display any productive mean to form abstract nouns except for the semelfactive type which has significantly expanded.

4.4 Verb-forming operations

Let us come now to the verb-forming operations which have been mentioned in §3 above as a crucial test-bed for possible lexical multifunctionality with regard to English. The picture displayed by the two varieties is multifaceted. First, it has to be stressed that verbal inflections – including different inflectional classes expressed by different thematic vowels – are well preserved in both varieties. One can only speculate to which extent this might be due to the therapeutic effect exerted by the surrounding Romance varieties in which unstressed vowels

are better preserved (cf. Moulton 1941: 46). Moreover, an overt suffix is found which forms denominal bases, although the latter shows a rather different profile in the two varieties. As Table 6 shows, in Titsch, we observe a clear effect of the lexical strata insofar as the stressed suffix *-iere* (corresponding to German *-ieren*, Dutch *-eren*, cf. *diktieren*, *dicteren* ‘to dictate’) is generally restricted to Romance bases, while the suffix *-rò* (corresponding to German *-ern*, cf. *Ei* ‘egg’ → *eiern* ‘to blow an egg’, *Glied* ‘member’ → *gliedern* ‘to arrange, articulate’) only selects Germanic bases. Moreover, two different patterns for conversion are found, in which the type formed with the thematic vowel *-ò* is largely based on nominal bases, while conversions with *-e* preferably select adjectives (see Gaeta 2020, ms for details on verbal inflection in Titsch):

Table 6: Denominal verbs in Titsch

Denominal verbs	Frequency	%
a. [...-iere] _v <i>dikt-iere</i> ‘to dictate’ <i>spion</i> → <i>spioniere</i> ‘spy’ → ‘to spy’	93	28%
b. [N/Adj-rò] _v <i>chälb</i> → <i>chälbrò</i> ‘calf’ → ‘to calve’ <i>chòrz</i> → <i>chòzrò</i> ‘short’ → ‘to shorten’	45	13%
c. Conversion N → V-ò <i>bluet</i> → <i>bluetò</i> ‘blood’ → ‘to bleed’ <i>flaschter</i> → <i>flaschrò</i> ‘plaster’ → ‘to plaster’	163	48%
d. Conversion Adj/N → V-e <i>top</i> → <i>toppe</i> ‘dark’ → ‘to darken’ <i>wässer</i> → <i>wässre</i> ‘water’ → ‘to water’	36	11%
Total	337	100%

Note that conversions are the normal way to form verbs from Germanic or nativized bases, while bases clearly belonging to the Romance stratum are normally combined with the verbalizer *-iere*. Accordingly, we can contrast two main verb-forming operations: the native pattern mainly based on *ò*-conversion and the *iere*-suffixation restricted to non-native lexicon. A similar state-of-affairs also holds for Standard German (see Gaeta 2013).

If we turn to Töitschu, the picture is essentially different. First and foremost, the stratal condition is lost, at least with regard to the most productive pattern consisting in the unstressed suffix *-urun*, which combines the first two types occurring in Titsch, as can be seen in Table 7:

Table 7: Denominal verbs in Töitschu

Denominal verbs	Frequency	%
a. [... -urun] _v <i>dickt-urun</i> ‘to dictate’ <i>part-urun</i> ‘to leave’ <i>packet</i> → <i>packaturun</i> ‘packet’ ‘to wrap’ <i>schlecht</i> → <i>schlechturun</i> ‘straight’ ‘to straighten’ <i>chalb</i> → <i>chalburun</i> ‘calf’ ‘to calve’	296	58%
b. Conversion N → V- <i>un</i> <i>dib</i> → <i>dibun</i> ‘thief’ ‘to steal’ <i>hous</i> → <i>housun</i> ‘house’ ‘to edify’	173	34%
c. Conversion Adj/N → V- <i>en</i> <i>tup</i> → <i>tuppen</i> ‘dark’ ‘to darken’ <i>nacht</i> → <i>nachten</i> ‘night’ ‘to get dark’	38	7%
Total	507	100%

Thus, we observe the collapse into the same derivational class of the two types corresponding to Titsch *-iere-* and *-rò-* suffixations seen in Table 6 above. Note that derivatives like *datturun* and *parturun* cannot be treated as hybrids in Haugen’s (1950: 214) sense according to which “only a part of the phonemic shape has been imported, while a native portion has been substituted for the rest”, i.e. as blended derivations in which a derivational element is attached to a foreign base. This is because the loss of the lexical strata is due to two phonological processes which affected both Titsch and Töitschu, namely stress retraction to the initial syllable (15a) and process of *u*-vowel harmony affecting unstressed vowels (15b):

- (15) a. It *sig*[‘re]t̩ta / Fr *cig*[‘re]rette > Ti [‘si]garettò / Tö [‘si]garetti
 ‘cigarette’
 It *bo*[‘t:i]glia / Fr *bou*[‘te]ille > Ti [‘bɔ]tellò / Tö [‘bu]ttullju
 ‘bottle’
 b. Ti *ankòtò* [‘aŋkoto] ~ *ankété* [‘aŋkɪti]
 ‘skirt(s)’
 Tö *bloasutu* [‘bloʌsutu] ~ *bloasiti* [‘bloʌsiti]
 ‘blow(s)’

In Töitschu, the sequence of these processes, in combination with the integration of the original loan suffix into the arguably default *u*-class instead of the far less productive *e*-class, gave rise to the suffix *-urun* in which we observe the convergence both of the loan pattern coming from *-ieren* and of the native pattern coming from *-irōn*, exemplified by Old High German (= OHG) verbs like *bezzirōn* ‘to better’, *hungirōn* ‘to hunger’ in (16c) (see Gaeta & Angster 2020 Gaeta forthcoming for details):

- (16) a. *u*-class change: *dicktieren* > °*dicktierun*
 b. stress retraction: °*dick*['ti:]*run* > °['dik]*tierun*
 c. *u*-harmony: °['dik]*tierun* > *dickturun*
 OHG *bezzirōn, hungirōn* > *arbéssurun, hunnhurun*

Thus, it is not the case that a native suffix *-urun* is combined with non-native bases like in classical hybrids. Rather, both the loan type and the native type merged into the same suffix *-urun*, whose productivity is extraordinarily enhanced as shown in Table 7 above. In this light, it has to be stressed that the verbalizer *-urun* serves to accommodate loan verbs like *goddurun* ‘to enjoy’, *zocklurun* ‘to walk in clogs’, etc. (see It. *godere, zoccolare*), namely for indirect insertion in the terms adopted by Wohlgemuth’s (2009) typology of verbal borrowings. Besides, conversions of two different types concur with the suffix *-urun*, which – similarly to Titsch – select respectively nominal and adjectival bases. Although they predominantly select native bases, conversions are also found with non-native bases like *frendŝchiu* ‘fringe’ → *frendŝchiun* ‘to fray’, *strillju* ‘curry comb’ → *strilljun* ‘to curry’, *zopp* ‘lame’ → *zoppun* ‘to limp’, etc. (cf. It. *frangia, striglia, zoppo*). In sum, we observe in Töitschu a significantly higher production of verbs employing conversions and the generalized verbalizer *-urun* than what is found in Titsch. This is even more striking if we consider that the current size of the lexicon of Titsch contained in the archive is clearly larger than for Töitschu, as was shown in Table 1.

5 What happened to Töitschu?

In spite of their closeness and of their status of linguistic island, the two Walser German varieties display very different features. With particular regard to the main issue of this contribution, it is particularly striking to observe the parallel between Töitschu and English insofar the former compared to the latter’s properties listed in §3 above displays:

- i. the loss of the sentence bracket
- ii. the loss of particle verbs and the development of phrasal verbs
- iii. the loss of abstract noun formation, reduction of V→N conversion
- iv. the generalized N→V conversion pointing to lexical multifunctionality
- v. the generalization of a marker for loan verb accommodation

Besides the first two properties (i, ii) which are clearly shared by English and Töitschu, with regard to the third property (iii) English has acquired a new way to form abstract nouns with the help of non-native suffixes like *-(at)ion, -ment*, etc., while Töitschu – on a par with Titsch – has developed a non-native suffix only to form semelfactive abstracts. Moreover, English displays a productive noun-forming conversion, especially – as a semelfactive abstract – in combination with a support verb like *take, give*, and the like (cf. *take a walk, give a cut*, etc. see Dixon 2005: 459), while in Töitschu noun-forming conversions are scarce. As for the fourth property (iv), we observe the generalized development of verb-forming conversions in the two languages, which points to lexical multifunctionality, although in Töitschu this is accompanied by the large employment of the verbalizer *-urun* for loan verb accommodation as shown by the fifth property (v).

This picture is challenging for at least two questions. First, it has to be explained why the situation in Issime is essentially different from what is observed in Gressoney, although the two varieties share common features like for instance the semelfactive abstracts and the widespread employment of verb-forming conversions. Second, we would like to understand to what extent English and Töitschu are really similar and which explanation can be invoked to account for the striking parallel observed between them.

As for the first aspect, it has to be stressed that Gressoney and Issime display two different histories. While in Gressoney we observe a long-lasting contact with the ancestral Swiss territory as well as a long tradition of exchanges with South-Western Germany, for Issime the contacts are essentially more oriented towards the western French-speaking part of the Aosta Valley. Accordingly, we already mentioned in §4 above that German served as *Dachsprache* in Gressoney at least until WW I, while in Issime such a role was attributed to French. This is likely to lie at the heart of structural changes favoring the re-shaping of the older Germanic pattern exhibited for instance by the sentence bracket according to the surrounding Romance model. Note that similar developments like the reduction of the sentence bracket, also partially found in Gressoney, are much more recent and likely to be influenced by the dominant role assumed by Italian and Piedmontese after WW II (cf. Angster & Gaeta 2021 for a more detailed discussion).

However, coming to the second aspect, the massive changes listed in this section which are strikingly paralleled by the English ones shown in §3 cannot simply be motivated by a stronger impact of the surrounding multilingual context, because of the small distance between the two islands and of the old age of their attestations, dating back to the early 19th century. To account for this, we have to look at the sociolinguistic history of Issime which provides evidence for a very different scenario with regard to Gressoney. The latter qualifies as a typical island, strongly isolated from the surrounding communities and insofar displaying a homogeneous internal monolingualism (with German used as *Dachsprache* for literacy and for the written registers and the Romance varieties learned and used only outside of the village). In contrast to this, there is evidence that since its early foundation Issime was always multilingual, resulting from the colonization of a territory characterized by the presence of earlier Franco-Provençal settlements, specifically found in the close village of Gaby separating Gressoney from Issime within the Lys valley (cf. Zürner 2009: 96). Accordingly, we can imagine a situation in which a significant number of adult bilingual speakers lived within the linguistic island and contracted mixed marriages with the pre-existing local Franco-Provençal settlers already in ancient times. This early intense contact especially with the Franco-Provençal variety might have led to the development in Issime of a “creoloid” variety (see Trudgill 2011: 67–68). An incipient “creoloidization” – i.e., a process consisting of admixture and simplification – generally results from the presence within a community of a high number of immigrated adults who acquires and uses the local variety as a lingua franca in trans-regional communication. In this regard, it has been suggested that “language contact involving widespread adult language learning leads to an increase in simplification including loss of morphological categories” (Trudgill 2009: 109). Notice that it is exactly this creoloid status that according to Trudgill accounts for the peculiar changes characterizing English within the rest of the West-Germanic family. In this light, it is straightforward to conclude that English and Töitschu share a common stage of creoloidization, which took place much earlier than what is observed in the typically isolated community of Gressoney (see Gaeta forthcoming for a more detailed discussion).

6 Conclusion

To sum up, the assumption of a morphological operation of conversion and/or of lexical multifunctionality can depend on several factors, namely whether a language (i) has rigid or flexible word-classes, or (ii) displays the occurrence of morphological and/or syntactic constructions fixing contextually word-class membership. In this light, language contact can provide substantial evidence to assess the status of word-formation patterns with regard to the general morpho-syntactic profile of a given language. In particular, we have seen that a contact situation profiling a creoloid stage in which a significant proportion of the population happened to consist in adult bilingual speakers led to processes of simplification which had an impact on class-categorical distinctions operating in a language. In particular, English and Töitschu are comparable to the extent that they display the reduction of abstract-forming word-formation including noun-forming conversion, and a significant enhancement of verb-forming conversions tending to lexical multifunctionality. Notice that in the absence of any overt strategy of nominalization Töitschu simply dispenses with the usage of nominalized verbs, normally employing verbal infinitives instead. This is clearly shown by the following example of a dialogue drawn from the corpus:

- (17) I: *Dé, spillun zan koartu un spillun zar botschu süscht*
 thus play.INF to.DEF card and play.INF to.DEF bowl else
ischt gsinh roddun tutscha ol nöit sua?
 is been play.INF hide-and-seek or not so
 V: *Eh, roddun tutscha.*
 eh play.INF hide-and-seek
 B: *Ah, z'pallunh un d'koarti ischt gsinh spillun...*
 ah DEF=ball and DEF=cards is been play.INF
 'I: Thus, there was playing cards and bowls, otherwise there was also playing hide-and-
 seek or something like that?
 V: Yes, playing hide-and-peek.
 B: Well, the football and the cards were the games...'

One might speculate whether the general scaffolding of this sentence reflects a direct contact with Italian or another Romance variety. At any rate, it clearly shows a dramatic simplification with regard to the typical West-Germanic sentence structure – still preserved in Titsch – in which the verbal infinitive is either canonically introduced by *zu* and follows its objects or is nominalized and reshaped after the canonical noun phrase. This simplification brings about the generalization of the usage of the verb in its infinitival form – accompanied by a contextual increase of verb-forming conversions, as well as the radical elimination of nominalized forms of the verb. Further research will tell us whether the distinction between noun- and verb-forming conversions as reflected in Töitschu (and partially in English) refers to deeper substantial distinctions between nouns and verbs as word classes, with special regard to the operation of lexical recategorization accomplished by conversions.

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