Relative clauses across and within languages: connecting linguistic typology and variationist sociolinguistics

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1. Description of the topic and research questions (between 900 and 1.100 words).

1.1. *Linguistic typology and variationist sociolinguistics: bridging approaches to variation*

Variation is a fundamental characteristic of natural languages that occurs across languages, within speech communities, and in the linguistic behaviour of individual speakers. It can be simultaneously diachronic, diatopic, and diastratic, manifesting across difference levels of the linguistic architecture. Broadly defined, linguistic variation refers to the coexistence of formally distinct linguistic forms or structures that convey the same meaning (Labov 1972). Importantly, the nature of variation remains consistent, regardless of where it manifests. As Croft (2022: 27) points out, "the patterns of variation and change found in [...] a particular language are in many cases simply instances of patterns of variation and change found across languages." The two main branches of linguistics that deal with language variation, although from different perspectives and different aims, are linguistic typology and variationist sociolinguistics. Typology focuses on cross-linguistic variation with the goal of investigating the limits and borders of linguistic varieties. By examining which linguistic structures are attested across the world's languages and which are not, typologists seek to categorise different linguistic varieties and uncover the universal properties of human language. In contrast, variationist sociolinguistics is concerned with linguistic phenomena that carry social meaning, aiming to reveal "the mechanisms which link extra-linguistic phenomena (the social and cultural) with patterned linguistic heterogeneity (the internal, variable, system of language)" (Tagliamonte 2012: xiv). What both fields share is the aim to demonstrate that language variation, in all its forms, is not random but occurs systematically within well-defined boundaries. Over time, variationist sociolinguistics and linguistic typology have developed theoretical models and analytical tools that show striking similarities (see Inglese & Ballarè 2023 for a discussion). Still, despite some recent studies that have addressed the relationship between the two fields (e.g. Kortmann 2004, Trudgill 2011), a comprehensive and systematic discussion on how these disciplines can interact has yet to be fully developed.

1.2 *The case of relative clauses: a 360-degree view on variation*

In this workshop, we aim to explore the relationship between typology and variation crosslinguistically, using relative clauses as a case study. Relative clauses have been extensively examined in the literature from a variety of perspectives (see e.g., Alexiadou et al. 2000; Beaman 2021; Kidd 2011; Henderey 2012; Ackerman & Nikolaeva 2013; Comrie & Kuteva, 2013; Cinque 2020). From a typological perspective, relative clauses: (i) represent a well-suited 'comparative

concept' (in the sense of Haspelmath 2010, 2018), as they can be relatively straightforwardly recognised across languages (cfr. Comrie & Kuteva 2013); (ii) they exhibit cross-linguistic distributional patterns that can be explained by resorting to specific functional and cognitive factors (see, e.g., the well-known accessibility hierarchy of relativisation; Keenan & Comrie 1977); (iii) they can also be analysed with quantitative methods using a 'corpus-based' (cf. Levshina 2022; Schnell & Schiborr 2022) or 'token-based' (cf. Levshina 2019; see also Haspelmath 2018) approach; and, (iv) they display a wide range of morphosyntactic variants with well-documented diachronic relations, such that variants follow along a clear evolutionary path (e.g., from demonstratives to relativisers, from parataxis to subordination, etc.; cf. Kuteva et al. 2019).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, relative clauses (i) can be studied within the framework of the "(socio)linguistic variable" (as defined by Labov 1972) by virtue of their functional comparability among different morphosyntactic variants (see, e.g., Tagliamonte 2022); (ii) have been shown to be sensitive to internal linguistic, external linguistic (i.e., contact-induced), and extra-linguistic (i.e., socio-stylistic) and cognitive factors (see, e.g., Guy & Bayley 1995; Tagliamonte & Smith 2005; D'Arcy & Tagliamonte 2010; Hinrichs, Szmrecsanyi & Bohmann 2014); (iii) are frequent enough to be investigated with quantitative methods in relatively small corpora (as shown, for instance, by recent studies on small-sized spoken Italian (e.g., Ballarè 2024) and Swabian German (Beaman 2021) corpora); and, (iv) have been the subject of considerable research on how sociolinguistic variation is often the outcome of diachronic processes and can, at the same time, foreshadow future changes (see, e.g., Cheshire, Adger & Fox 2013).

2. Call for papers

The workshop welcomes contributions that combine the investigation of cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic variation. In particular, this workshop focuses on the interplay of typological and sociolinguistic perspectives to model the effect of "multiple causes" (in the sense of Bayley 2013), i.e., internal linguistic, external linguistic (Jones & Esch 2002; Braunmüller, Hoder & Kühl 2014), as well as cognitive conditioning (more generally, physiological and psychological, cf. Tamminga, MacKenzie & Embick 2016), and the effect such factors have on both the cross-linguistic and intra-linguistic distribution of different relativisation strategies.

Relevant questions this workshop will address include the following:
- Which relativisation strategies identified cross-linguistically (relative pronoun, pronoun retention, gap, etc.) occur in the standard/written usage of a language? And which ones occur in its nonstandard/spoken varieties?
- To what extent do the relativisation patterns identified cross-linguistically (e.g., [-Case] strategies tend to relativise higher syntactic positions, while [+Case] strategies tend to encode lower ones) hold true across the different varieties within a single language?
- To what extent do the relativisation patterns attested in a single language (e.g., relativisation strategies exacting lower processing costs tend to occur in nonstandard varieties) hold true across languages?

- Can the investigation of relativisation strategies across the varieties of a language contribute to broadening and improving the typology of relativisation strategies identified cross-linguistically?
- Can the investigation of relativisation strategies using a 'token-based' approach contribute to broadening/improving the typology of relativisation strategies identified through a 'type-based' approach?
- Are there other contextual parameters (e.g., of a discursive nature) that may trigger the selection of a certain relativisation strategy?

- Is it possible to identify other functional types of relative clauses (in addition to those previously described in the literature)?
- What other strategies are available within a single language and/or across languages to perform functions similar to relativisation?

Important dates (first stage):

- **As soon as possible**: informal e-mail with manifestation of interest;
- **31 October 2025**: abstract submission (see format below);
- **30 October 2025:** notification of acceptance.

Important dates (second stage; the convenors will be looking after the finalisation of the proposal):

- **20 November 2025**: submission of the theme session proposal to the SLE committee
- **15 December 2025:** notification of acceptance from the SLE committee

Format of abstracts:

The selection of abstracts will be made on the basis of quality and relatedness to the topic and objectives of the theme session. The submitted abstracts (in PDF) should be anonymous and max 300-words long. The authors are expected to provide an overview of the goal, methodology, and data of their research. Abstracts should be sent to all convenors to the following e-mail addresses:

silvia.ballare@unibo.it;   karenbeamanvslx@gmail.com;   massimosimone.cerruti@unito.it; caterina.mauri@unibo.it

All the abstracts will be anonymously reviewed by the program committee of the theme session (see below) before finalising the proposal. More information about the theme session (list of selected papers, invited speakers, etc.) will be circulated amongst the prospective participants right before the submission of the proposal to the SLE committee.

Please include the following data in the body of the mail: (i) Author(s); (ii) Title; (iii) Affiliation; (iv) Contacts.

Publication: if the theme session is accepted it is our intention to publish a selection of the papers with an international publisher.

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