Crossing the boundary
Converging tendencies in Mennonite Low German complement and relative clauses

Many languages use the same element (or homophonous elements) to introduce complement and relative clauses; in Spanish and Portuguese, this element is que, but even English has a similar element at its disposal, namely that. The reasons for this coincidence seem to be formal and cognitive similarities between the two clause types. A formal similarity can be seen in the fact that both relative clauses and that-clauses can be used attributively (cf., e.g., the fact that bothers me [...] and the fact that he is always coming late [...]). Besides this, one can find nominal correlates like es (‘it’) or das (‘that’) in German matrix clauses which either mark the original position of or are attributively linked to extraposed complement clauses. Cognitive similarities are analyzed by ARSENJEVIĆ (2009), who argues that complement clauses should be considered a special type of relative clauses. In view of such similarities, it does not come as a surprise that a non-standard variety like Mennonite Low German (MLG) exhibits converging tendencies in the two clause types. MLG is a European-based variety nowadays predominantly spoken in North and South America. Especially Mennonites from Mexico produce sentences like (1):

(1) Kos’d nich sehen **waut** ik de Lich anmeak
    can-you not see what I the light on-make
    ‘Can’t you see that I am switching on the light?’

In example (1), expected daut (‘that’) is replaced by waut, the relative particle (waut appears 61 times in roughly 3,000 complement clauses). The usual context of waut is represented by example (2), a relative clause also produced in Mexico:

(2) *is det de Film** waut** dü aul dine Frend wiesen willst*
    is that the film what you all your friends show want
    ‘Is this the film you want to show to all your friends?’

Some US-American Mennonites go the opposite way using the complementizer daut (‘that’) in relative clauses (cf. example (3)):

(3) **die Geschichten daut** der den Mann vertahlt sind sehr trürig
    the stories that he the man tells are very sad
    ‘The stories that he is telling the man are very sad.’

Since the reference-NP die Geschichten (‘the stories’) is feminine and plural, daut (etymologically a neuter singular pronoun) can’t possibly be interpreted as a relative pronoun; it must be a relative particle. Interestingly, the same process can be found in Pennsylvania German, another German variety spoken in the United States. In this variety, the complementizer as (‘that’) is also used in relative clauses (cf. LOUDEN 1994: 86). As Pennsylvania German and MLG are unrelated to each other (abstracting away from the fact that both are spoken by Anabaptist groups), one explanation for these coinciding syntactic
innovations could be influence from English. After all, all tokens used in this study are the result of translations from Spanish, Portuguese, and English stimulus sentences into MLG. As Spanish would be an even better raw model, the same argument could hold for example (1). A more thorough analysis, however, reveals strong inter-dependencies with other linguistic characteristics like the type of verb cluster in the dependent clause (cf. KAUFMANN 2007) or the question of factivity in complement clauses. Therefore, contact-induced change can only be part of the story. Besides this, idiosyncratic tendencies or task-related problems can also be ruled out, firstly because the innovations are found in the translations of several speakers (e.g., 16 out of 313 informants produced the 61 tokens with waut as a complementizer) and secondly because at least in the English stimulus clauses direct priming of daut as a relative particle by that is unlikely (only 2 of the 10 relative clauses use that in the stimulus version).

We thus have strong evidence for the claim that we are indeed dealing with a case of internal syntactic change. What makes this change particularly interesting is the fact that we can describe it in its incipient stages. Due to this, we can expect a strong sensitivity to contextual features, a fact which may tell us more about the influence of these very features and about syntactic change in general.

References

