

The field of perceptual dialectology has become increasingly important. There have been many attempts to explore the perception of certain (most often phonetic) features. Many experiments use somewhat unnatural stimuli and measure only isolated non-standard features (e.g. Kiesewalter 2014; Hettler 2014). For this experiment we attempted to measure a situation of natural language contact with respect to all language levels (lexis, phonology, morphology, syntax). The research questions were as follows:

- > What do people do when they imitate dialects and closely related languages?
- > Is there a hierarchy of phenomena that tend to be imitated?
- > Is that hierarchy comparable to the borrowing scale (e.g. Thomason/Kaufman 1988)?
- > Do languages differ from dialects when they are imitated?
- > How do speakers recognize and imitate syntactic structures?
- > What does this tell us about the perception (salience) of certain features?

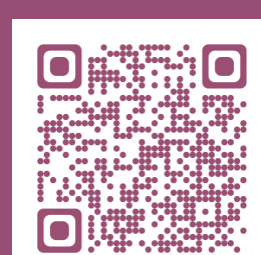


We used an online survey in which short oral narrative were presented to the participants. Their task consisted of imitating excerpts of this story in the form of test sentences with several linguistic variables. The story was translated and recorded by female native speakers of five West Germanic varieties:

- > Belgian Dutch [BD]
- > Low German (Westphalian) [WP]
- > Central German (Central Hessian) [CH]
- > Upper German (Alemannic) [AL]
- > Central Eastern Yiddish [YI]

The recordings were integrated into an online survey which was taken by German-speaking informants who listened to one random recording with a transliteration (written according to standard German orthography). The informants were then given standard German sentences and asked to translate them by imitating the language heard before. The given sentences were structured as follows:

- > five of the sentences were identical to the story heard
- > five showed lexical similarity to the story heard
- > five showed syntactic similarity, but differed lexically
- > three showed no relation to the story heard



link to the online survey

In addition, the informants were asked to judge their comprehension of the language heard in the recording (cf. chart 1), identify the language (cf. figure 1–5), and answer comprehension questions.



The outcome of the informants' self-evaluation concerning their own comprehension of the story did not vary between the more comprehensible German dialects [CH, AL, WP] but showed large standard deviations with the less comprehensible languages [YI, BD] (cf. chart 1).

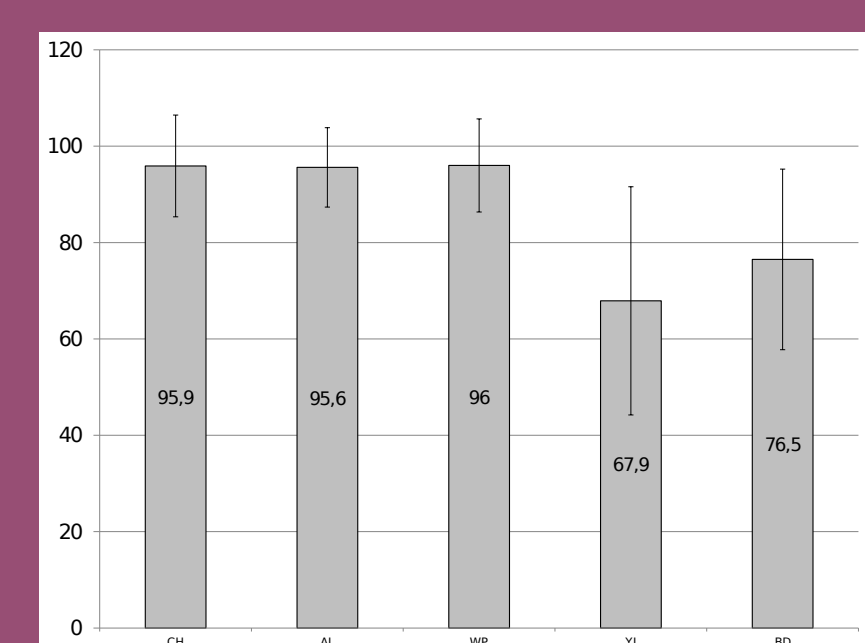


Chart 1: Self-assessment of the informants' understanding (min. 0; max. 105)

The informants had little trouble identifying the languages, as indicated by the word clouds below (cf. figures 1–5). This result demonstrates that most of the informants recognized the lects and had knowledge of them beforehand.



Figure 1: Word-cloud of language naming for the Belgian Dutch record



Figure 2: Word-cloud of language naming for the Central Hessian record



Figure 3: Word-cloud of language naming for the Central Eastern Yiddish record



Figure 4: Word-cloud of language naming for the Westphalian record



Figure 5: Word-cloud of language naming for the Alemannic record

References

Hettler, Yvonne (2014): Salienz, Bewertung und Realisierung regionaler Merkmale in Norddeutschland. In: Christen, Helen/Ziegler, Evelyn (Ed.): Die Vermessung der Salienzforschung. Linguistik Online 66 (4/14), 71–90.
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 Mayer, Thomas / Cysouw, Michael (2012): Language comparison through sparse multilingual word alignment. Proceedings of the EAFL 2012 Joint Workshop of LINGVIS & UNCLH, 54–62.
 Thomason, Sarah Grey / Kaufman, Terrence (1988): Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Linguistics. Los Angeles, London: Berkeley.



link to this poster



Data processing was done with the aid of an alignment tool (Mayer/Cysouw 2012). This tool divides the relevant structures (e.g. segments or bigger units, like orthographic words) into different columns so that they can be compared with one another. We aligned four levels (for the onset of five sentences):

b | a | ck | - | t
 b | u | ck | e | t
 b | a | ch | a | -
 b | ei | gg | - | dd

Example of orthographic alignment for '(she) bakes'

- (1) Syntax
- (2) Lexis
- (3) Morphology
- (4) Phonology (i.e. its orthographic representation)

For the data analysis we used a TRUE/FALSE-matrix representing the following four possible imitation strategies:

matrix language (standard German)	target language (given dialect)	
×	×	= fantasized form
×	✓	= followed/correct imitation
✓	×	= ignored/no imitation
✓	✓	= default form

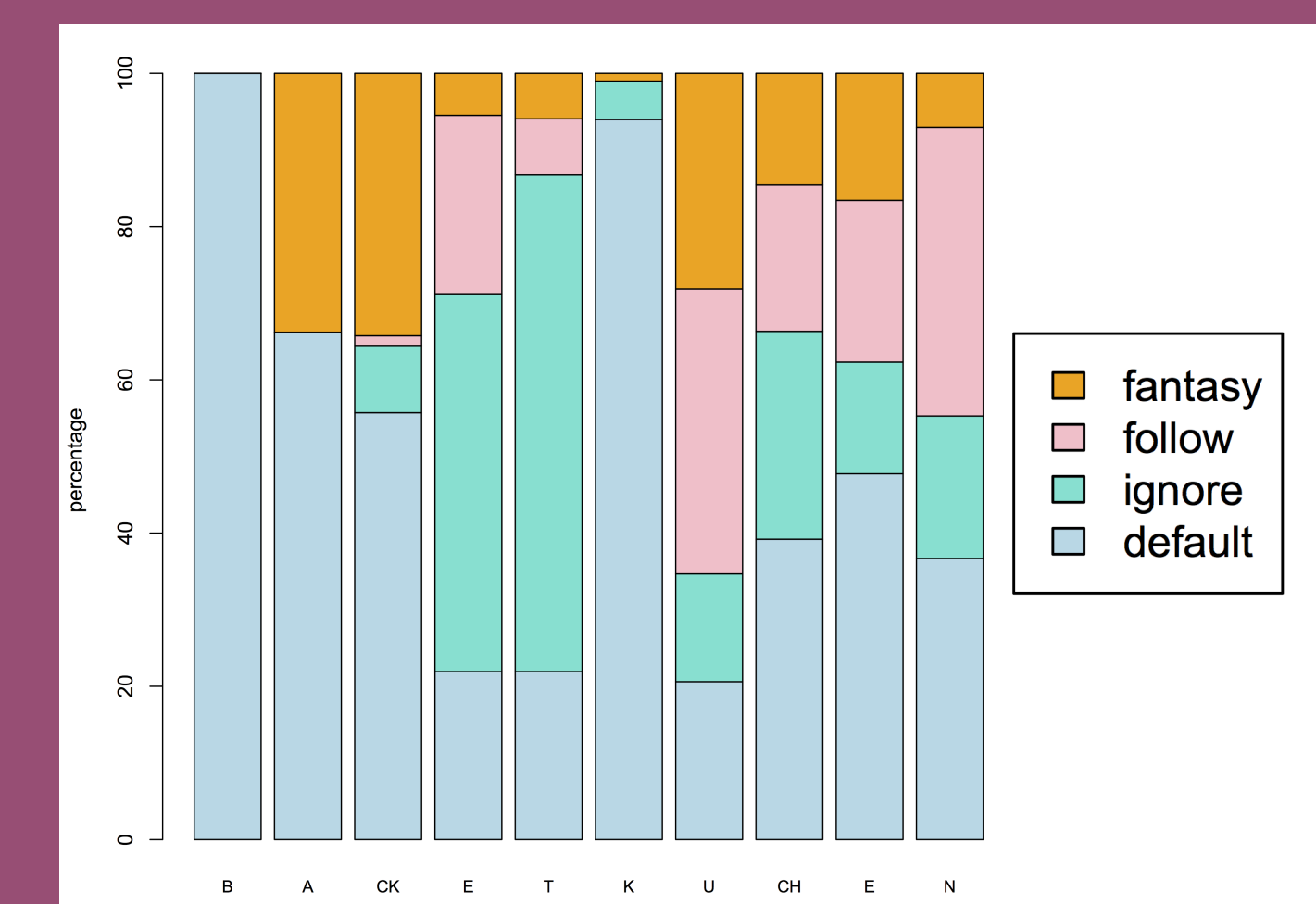


Chart 2: Example analysis for the alignment of '(she) bakes cake'



We compared the aligned data from all of the lects with the four imitation strategies (cf. chart 2–3). As our preliminary results show, the imitations were predominately (80%) correct. The distribution of the aligned features highlights category groups which are more easily accessed by certain strategies than others. In chart 3, the phonological analysis of one sentence reveals that there is more variation in vowels than in consonants, affricates are more often manipulated than other consonants, and the onset is more stable than the nucleus and the coda.

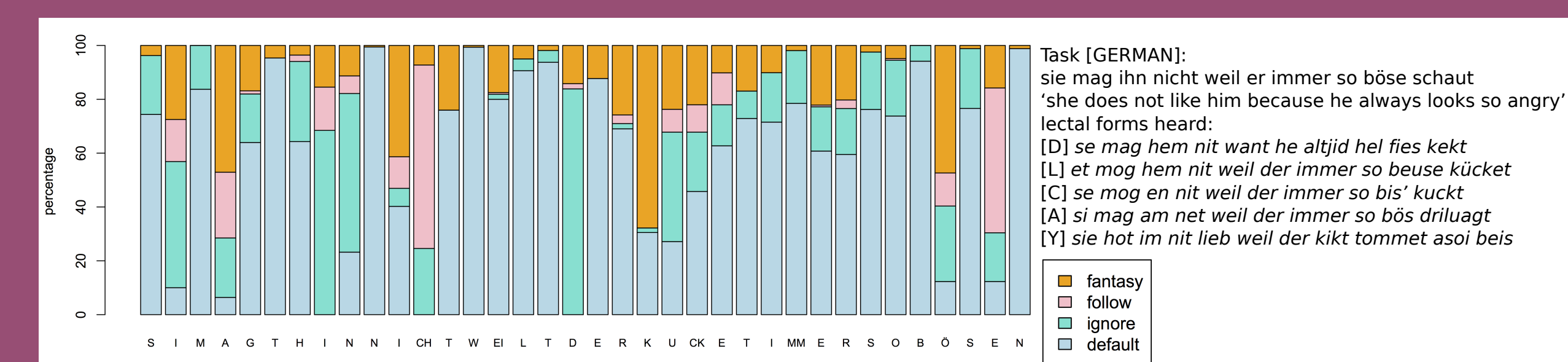


Chart 3: Orthographic/phonological alignment for one sentence (all varieties)

An analysis of the imitation of syntactic structures indicates that some structures can be more easily imitated than others. Pronominal adverb constructions are an example of this. The short pronoun doubling construction in CH was reproduced by 42% of the informants, while the stranding construction in WP and BD occurred in only 6% resp. 3% (cf. chart 4). This could be an indication that the doubling construction is more salient than the stranding construction. In most cases, the informants chose to follow the standard German structure; however, numerous fantasy forms were also produced. In contrast, correct target language constructions were rarely reproduced (cf. charts 5–6). One possible explanation could be that these imitations do not reflect the informants' impression of the target language but rather their concept of spoken language and dialectality.

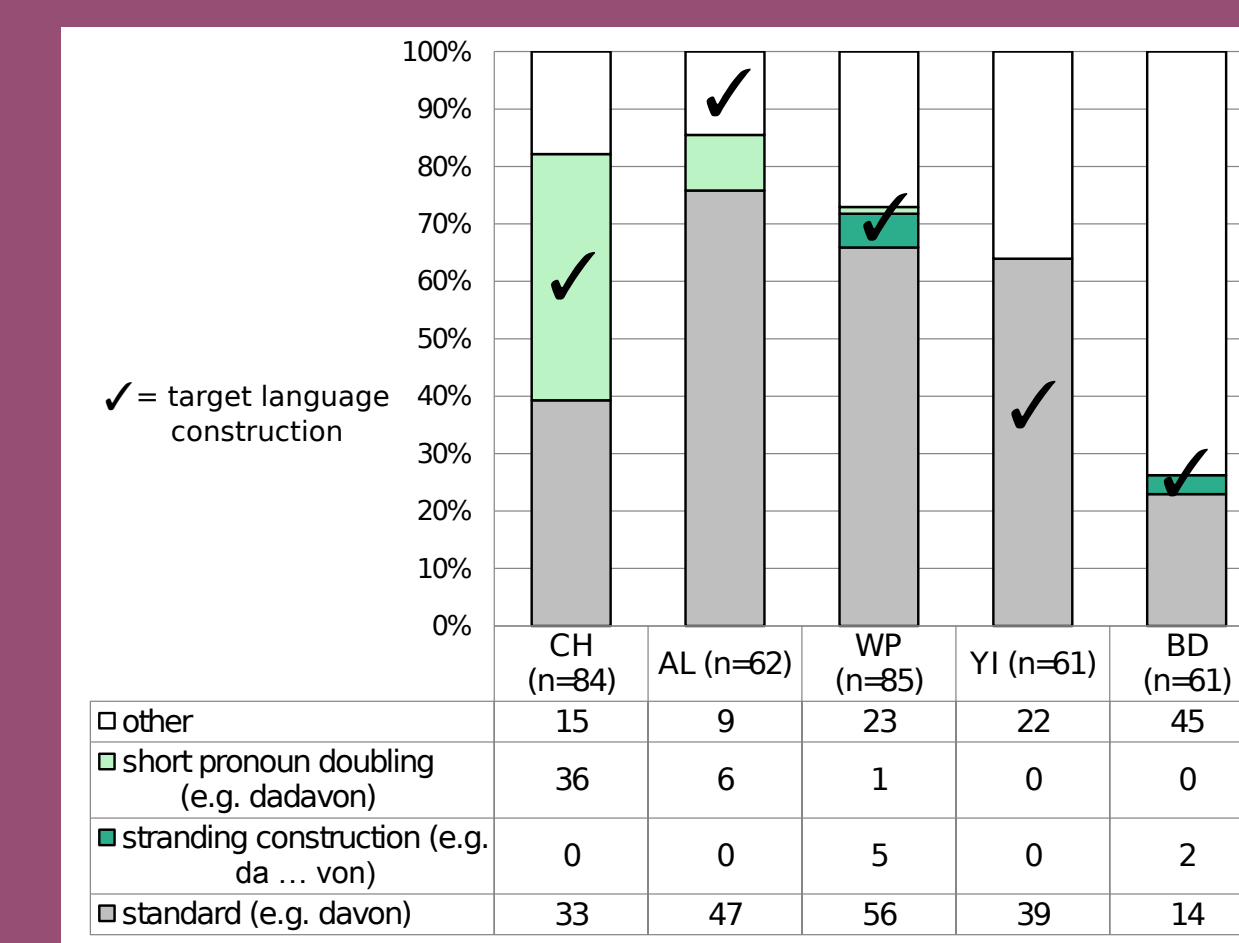


Chart 4: Imitated pronominal adverbs

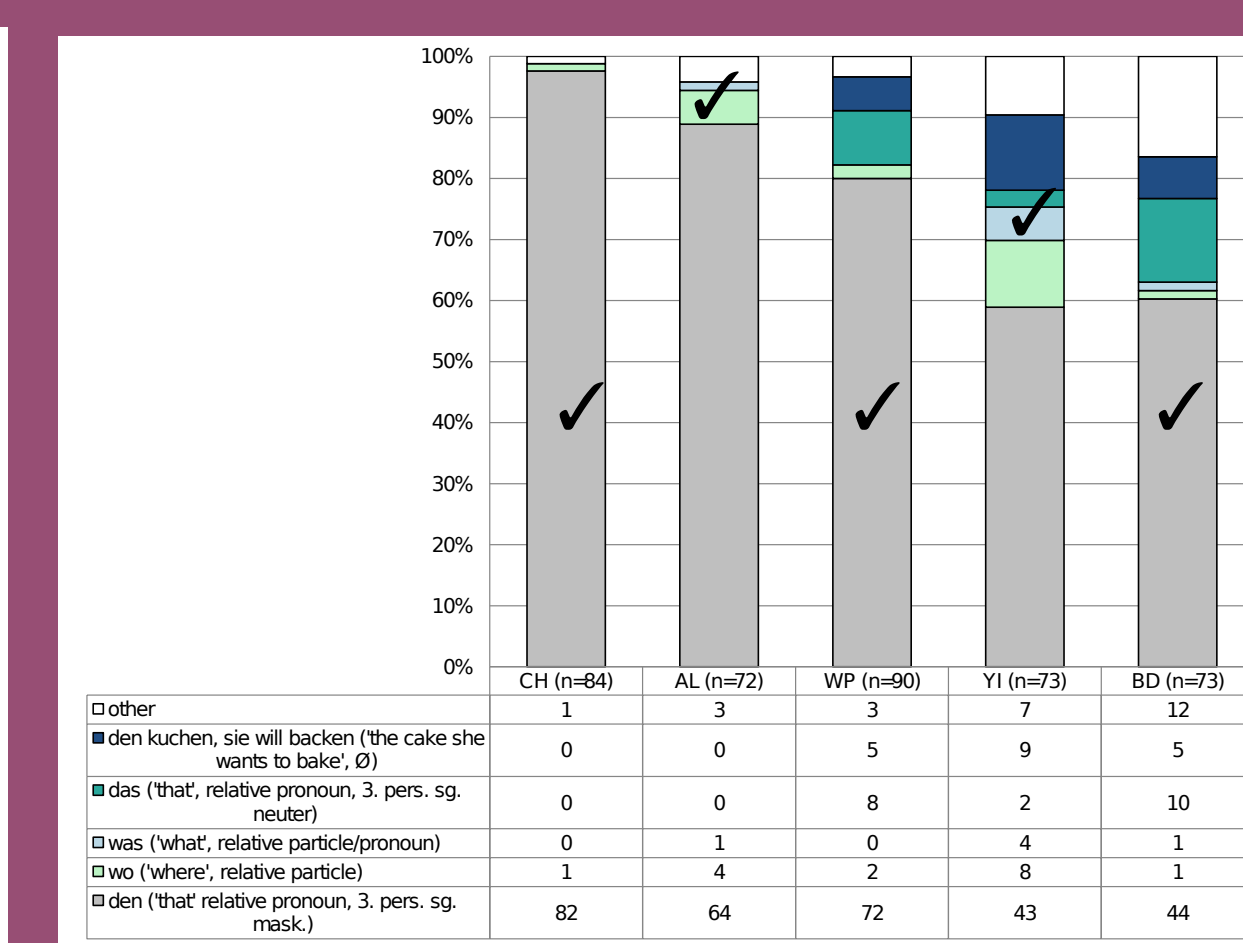


Chart 5: Imitated relative clauses

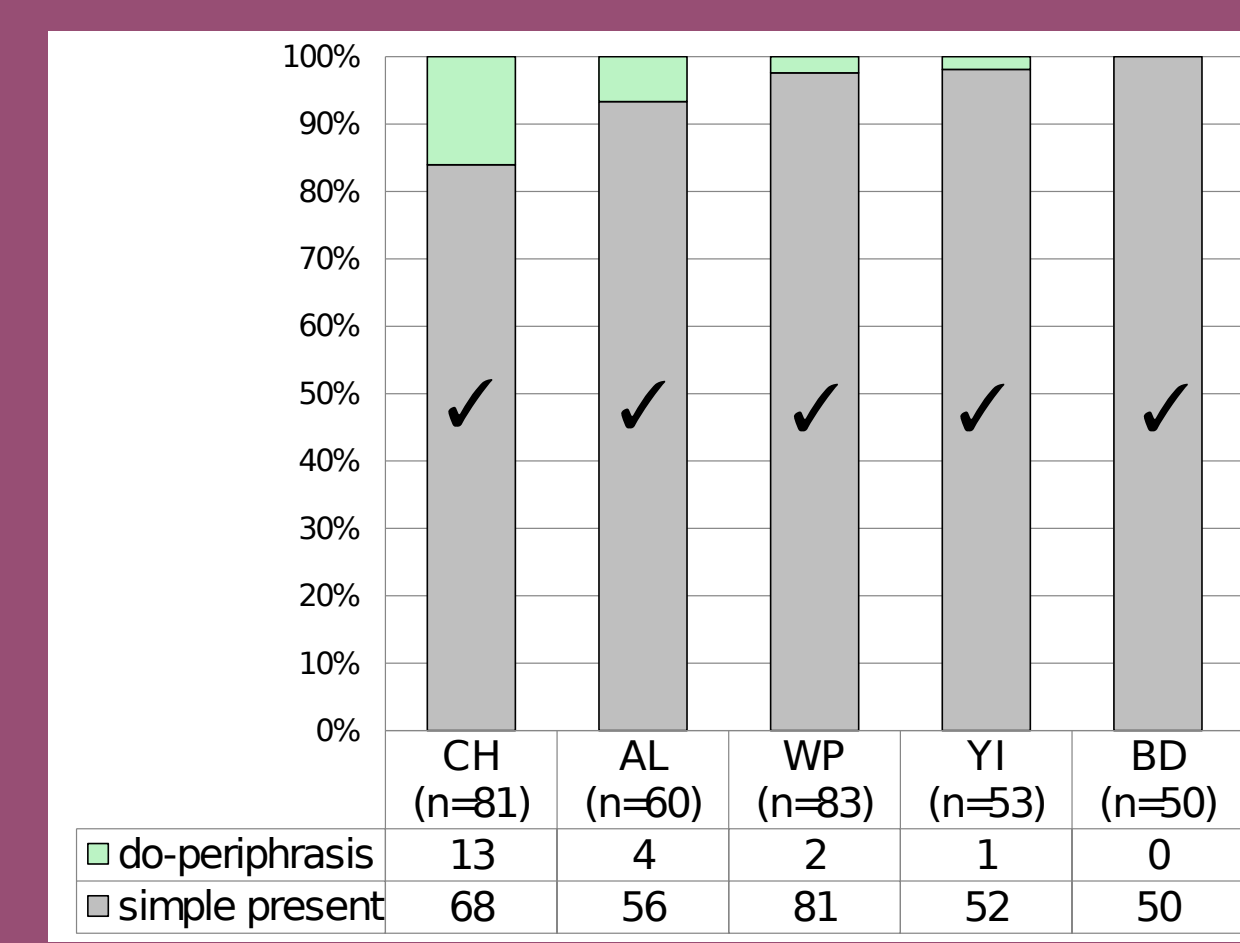


Chart 6: Imitated forms of the simple present in a subordinate clause



Future analysis of the data may yield indications of an accessibility hierarchy for imitation and whether it correlates with the borrowing scale (e.g. Thomason/Kaufman 1988). Beyond this survey, further investigations will focus on other important attributes of language imitation, e.g.: regional influences of the imitators' lects, conscious vs. unconscious structures used in imitation, the training curve during repeated imitation.