

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The love factor in variationist SLA

Effects of multilingual coupledness on sociolinguistic development in second language German

Mason A. Wirtz 

English Department, University of Zurich, Zurich, Switzerland

Email: mason.wirtz@es.uzh.ch

(Received 04 November 2024; Revised 04 August 2025; Accepted 13 August 2025)

Abstract

The love factor in the field of second language acquisition has gained considerable traction since the turn of the century. This article is the first to take a variationist perspective to investigate how multilingual coupledness affects sociolinguistic development in the second language (L2). Participants were 76 users of L2 German living in Austria, all of whom were in a romantic relationship with an Austrian partner. We analyzed the effects of multilingual coupledness on self-reported changes in learners' use of, attitudes toward, and proficiency in standard German, the Austrian dialect variety, and first language(s), and whether (psycho-) social variables moderate this relationship. Individual differences in psychological and social variables (e.g., adaptability, Open-mindedness, length of residence, orientation toward the Austrian dialect) predicted reported changes in the sociolinguistic repertoire. Qualitative analysis revealed a blended operation of socioaffective and exposure-related factors, which helped explain *why*, *how*, and *for whom* multilingual coupledness affects (socio-)linguistic development.

Keywords: major life events; multilingual couples; sociolinguistic variation; the love factor; variationist SLA

Introduction

In the past 30 years, global migration has risen drastically, and today an estimated 3.6% of the world's population (i.e., 1 in 30 individuals) are international migrants (World Migration Report, 2024). As a consequence, plurilingualism and pluriculturalism are becoming increasingly important features of the modern world (e.g., Nunez et al., 2017), and this trend has inevitably led to a growing number of multilingual romantic relationships. While the issue of love being a facilitative factor for language learning has, in the past, “been the cause of smiles rather than the subject of serious investigation” (Pfenninger et al., 2023, p. 82), recent years have seen a surge of analyses attesting the potent effect that falling in love with a speaker of another

tongue can have on (second) language use and proficiency (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Marinova-Todd, 2003; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018). In the words of Singleton and Pfenninger (2018), second language acquisition (SLA) research “is now taking the love issue and its consequences very seriously” (p. 10).

There remain several pervasive issues concerning our understanding of the association between love and language development, however. First, while much of the previous literature on the love factor in SLA highlights a relationship between highly successful (late) second language (L2)¹ learning and romantic connections with target-language (TL) speakers (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018), L2 learners may approach, experience, and adapt to romantic relationships with TL speakers in very different ways, leading them to change differently (e.g., Pfenninger et al., 2023). Second, romantic connections with a TL speaker are likely to, at least for some individuals, incite increased exposure to the L2 across a variety of informal and intimate social contexts in which nonstandard language varieties are especially prevalent. This emphasizes the utility of variationist approaches to SLA, as they prioritize the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation (i.e., L2 sociolinguistic development), which refers to learners’ ability to understand and produce variable linguistic forms in contextually sensitive ways (e.g., Geeslin, 2018; Kanwit & Solon, 2023), and can thus help shed light on the types of L2 development (e.g., acquisition of nonstandard in addition to standard language varieties²) that occur in relation to multilingual coupledness. Third, while it is generally agreed upon among variationist SLA scholars that L2 sociolinguistic development is sensitive to differences in the intensity of exposure and the diversity in types and the depth of social interactions in the TL context (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Gautier & Chevrot, 2015; Wirtz & Pfenninger, 2024), the extent to which psychological variables (e.g., personality traits, psychobehavioral adaptability) are associated with the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation remains comparatively underexplored.

The present study adapts the “Life Event Survey” (Schwaba et al., 2023) in order to explore retrospective perceptions (i.e., self-reports) of linguistic change as a function of multilingual coupledness among learners of L2 German living in Austria. We focus specifically on self-reported changes in L2 learners’ use of, attitudes toward, and proficiency in both standard German (i.e., the standard language typically taught in instructional contexts) and the Bavarian dialect variety in Austria (i.e., a nonstandard language variety socially constrained to informal, everyday settings). Combining quantitative and qualitative data, we seek to uncover (a) *whether, how, and why* romantic connections with a TL speaker affect L2 sociolinguistic development and first language (L1) maintenance, and (b) what individual differences in social and psychological variables may moderate the potential L2 learning effects of multilingual coupledness.

¹Following previous (variationist) SLA work, “the term ‘second language acquisition’ refer[s] to any situation in which individuals learn a new language” (Pfenninger et al., 2023, p. 2), and thus L2 does not refer to “the second language learned,” but to individuals who speak additional-language German.

²Standard varieties refer to varieties which have been subject to processes of standardization, whereas nonstandard varieties refer to vernacular (e.g., local dialect) varieties. This dichotomy in no way suggests that non-standard varieties are inferior, incorrect, or less complex than standard ones; both are systematic and expressive forms of language shaped by historical, social, and cultural forces.

Background

Setting the sociolinguistic stage

The Bavarian dialect regions in Austria are traditionally described in terms of a dialect-standard continuum in which one can observe a range of linguistic forms between the poles standard German and the local dialect (Fanta-Jende, 2023). In line with the tradition of German-speaking sociolinguistics, the term “dialect” is used here to refer to traditional local vernaculars or regional varieties and is not synonymous with “any language variety.” Dialect varieties play a major role in everyday life in Austria, and survey data exemplify that the majority of Austrians report using dialect at least occasionally on a daily basis (Ender & Kaiser, 2009). It is thus no surprise that L2 learners report regular contact with non-standard varieties in everyday interactions (Wirtz, 2025). Structurally, Bavarian dialects are distinct from standard German in terms of phonology, (morpho)syntax, and lexis, and the use of dialect varieties is constrained both by macrosociological and microsituational factors such as age, gender, (in)formality, subject matter knowledge, interlocutor, and so forth (Ender & Kaiser, 2009). Importantly for the present study, L2 learners in Austria are adept at discriminating dialect from standard German varieties (Kaiser et al., 2019), and much in the way L1 speakers do, L2 learners demonstrate relatively dichotomous, overt distinctions between, as well as a pronounced meta-awareness of adequate usage contexts of, the two varieties, even during early stages of residence in the TL community (e.g., Wirtz, 2025).

Multilingual coupledness and language development

The chosen language spoken in multilingual couples has been described as the glue binding the relationship together—the foundation upon which a partnership is built (e.g., Piller, 2002). Indeed, Dewaele and Salomidou (2017) attest via a large-scale survey that love in a L2 is perfectly possible, but the multilingual component may “add an extra obstacle” (p. 117). This is, in part, because the abdication of L1 use in a relationship could be a destabilizing component of individual identity for some, opening the grounds for increased conflict and relationship distress (e.g., Yodanis et al., 2007), difficulty in expressing emotions in the L2 (e.g., Dewaele, 2010), and so forth. In fact, Panicacci and Dewaele (2018) report that some migrants experience a sense of emotional constraint when using the L2, leading them to believe they are “conveying a distorted image of themselves to their interlocutors,” which may prevent them from developing a higher emotional attachment to the TL (see also Panicacci & Dewaele, 2017). For others, especially those who are “open to disruptive novelty in terms of developing identity” (Skrzypek & Singleton, 2016, p. 89), use of the partner’s L1 may be a facilitative factor for L2 development, and romantic love “seems to have the capacity to take the threat out of threats to identity” (Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018, p. 8).

The issue of love in L2 development repeatedly comes up in relation to ultimate L2 attainment for the partner who opts to use the language of their significant other. For example, Kinsella and Singleton (2014) observed that, among 20 Anglophone late learners of French, three individuals who scored within a L1-speaker range had TL life-partners, as well as bilingual or French-speaking children. Moreover, all three had strong links to the French community and French was the language spoken at home and in a majority of their interactions; other participants had been residents as long as these three, “but may not have had a French partner, or possibly their primary social contacts may have been from outside the French-speaking community” (Kinsella &

Singleton, 2014, p. 453). These findings are reflected in earlier work, as well. Marinova-Todd (2003), for instance, established a positive link between L2 proficiency and cohabitation with TL speakers, and Muñoz and Singleton (2007) reported that the highly successful late L2 speakers of English (L1 Spanish) were in a romantic relationship with a TL speaker. Singleton and Pfenninger (2018) also illustrated in their qualitative study of three couples that identity construction may be moved in a particular direction depending on the language(s) used in partnership communication. We know that L2 learning is influenced by the affective context in which it occurs (e.g., Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Pfenninger et al., 2023), and so it is unsurprising that multilingual coupledness can have dramatic effects on changes in language proficiency, use, attitudes, and on individuals' linguistic and cultural affiliation more generally (Ożańska-Ponikwia, 2019; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018).

There are, however, numerous other psychosocial variables to which L2 attainment possibilities and usage patterns, particularly in immersion settings, are sensitive, and these may modulate the L2 learning and usage effects associated with multilingual coupledness:

1. Across the lifespan, individuals continuously experience events of change and uncertainty of varying magnitude (e.g., Haehner et al., 2023), for instance, relationship-related milestones (new romantic relationships, moving in with a partner, marriage, etc.), and such events shape new circumstances to which individuals (must) adapt. Continuously adapting to novel and uncertain conditions requires significant personal agency and regulation (e.g., Brandtstädter, 2010). Accordingly, an individual's perceived adaptability (e.g., Martin et al., 2012), which refers to the capacity to effectively regulate one's psychobehavioral responses to novel situations and challenges, has been posited as a crucial ability in immersion settings (e.g., Zalbidea et al., 2022) where learners are challenged to adjust to culturally relevant behaviors in the TL community, settle into different daily routines, interact and build new social networks, etc. (e.g., Geeslin, 2018).
2. As a result of the global increase of multiculturalism, individuals are challenged to effectively deal with cultural differences, and personality seems to influence the extent to which individuals are capable of constructive behavioral reactions to intercultural situations (Connor-Smith & Flachsbart, 2007). What is more, personality traits relating to multicultural effectiveness have been argued to relate to L2 development, in that they may predict, e.g., affective socialization in the local language and cognitive embracement of the language (e.g., Panicacci, 2019; see also Forsberg-Lundell et al., 2023a). For example, Open-mindedness (i.e., unprejudiced attitude toward cultural differences) has been positively correlated with collocational production (Forsberg Lundell & Sandgren, 2013) and phrasal knowledge (Forsberg Lundell et al., 2018), and Social Initiative (i.e., actively approaching and demonstrating initiative in social interactions) has been linked to a higher likelihood of adopting the partner's language as "the language of the heart" (Dewaele & Salomidou, 2017, p. 121).
3. Finally, individuals who reside abroad, according to Forsberg Lundell (2019), constitute a heterogeneous group. SLA and migration scholars agree that differences in individual migratory experience, in particular the rationales for migration to a new country, have a substantial impact on an individual's social and psychological circumstances in the host community (e.g., Diskin & Regan, 2015; Forsberg Lundell & Bartning, 2015; Niemann & Hertel, 2022), and differences in socio-affective profiles are likely to affect L2 learning (e.g., Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). For instance, individuals who migrate to a specific host community because they appreciate the

culture and language of that community (i.e., “cultural migrants”; Forsberg Lundell & Bartning, 2015, p. 3) are often well-educated, well-integrated, socioeconomically relatively stable and thus have optimal prerequisites for high L2 attainment. In contrast, unfavorable socio-economic and socioaffective circumstances may disadvantage learning opportunities and, by extension, late L2 attainment possibilities (e.g., Forsberg Lundell & Bartning, 2015; Pfenninger et al., 2023).

L2 sociolinguistic development

Variationist SLA work focuses on the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation (i.e., L2 sociolinguistic development), that is, the acquisition of linguistic structures which are variable among TL speakers, and on the linguistic and extralinguistic (e.g., social) factors that affect learners’ use of these variable structures (for overviews, see Geeslin & Hanson, 2023; Kanwit, 2022). Among the most fiercely researched extralinguistic predictors of L2 sociolinguistic development, exposure to TL speakers is considered a key prerequisite to the acquisition of stylistic and regional variation. For example, in study abroad contexts, the differential constellation of L2 learners’ social networks has been found to reliably predict the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation (e.g., Kennedy Terry, 2022), where dense networks with speakers of the same L1 favor the retention of high rates of formal variants, and networks containing a higher number of TL speakers positively correlate with the acquisition of informal variants and stylistic variation (e.g., Gautier & Chevrot, 2015).

Recent variationist work in the Austrian context has investigated learners’ contextually sensitive use of standard language vs. local dialect varieties in German and demonstrated that especially socio-affective profiles (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2024) and length, intensity, and quality (e.g., as regards the authenticity and contextual diversity) of exposure (Wirtz, 2025; Wirtz & Pfenninger, 2024) affect learners’ differential sociolinguistic behavior. Relatedly, it has been asserted that (a) among L2 speakers of German, proficiency in the dialect variety develops in tandem with proficiency in the standard language (Ender & Wirtz, *in press*), and (b) among both L1 and L2 speakers of German, attitudes toward (non-)standard language are sensitive to differences in an individual’s proficiency in and the use of the respective (non-)standard variety, and vice versa (Ender, 2020). These findings raise the question as to how changes in L2 learners’ use of, proficiency in, and attitudes toward standard and nonstandard varieties are (dis-)similarly affected by potentially substantial shifts in an individual’s exposure setting, e.g., via partnership with a TL speaker.

A few select studies have scrutinized the potential relationship between multilingual romantic connections and the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation. Ender (2022), for instance, in her mixed-methods variationist study on sociolinguistic development among L2 speakers of Swiss German, concluded that more intensive contact arising through family connections—in particular through partnership—did not automatically give rise to a high frequency of use of the local dialect variety. Similarly, Gonçalves (2013) found on the basis of her three-year ethnographic study of nine global hybrid couples that one couple spoke the local Bernese dialect together and three reported using a mix between English and the local dialect depending on the context. These findings may remind us of Geeslin (2018), who pointed out that, while the quality and intensity of exposure may be a crucial prerequisite for the use of regional variation, this relationship is “neither causal nor categorical across all learners” (p. 557). Rather, issues of identity are connected to one’s investment in the acquisition process (Norton & McKinney, 2011) and, by extension, to the degree to which individuals *choose* to engage with sociolinguistic variation in the TL context (e.g., van Compernelle & Williams, 2012).

The current study

Research questions and research design

In this study, we pursue three exploratory research questions (RQs) relating to *whether*, *how*, and *why* multilingual coupledness affects perceived changes in the use of, proficiency in, and attitudes toward standard German, the Austrian dialect variety, and the L1 among speakers of L2 German living in Austria. Note that in the following RQs, we refer to these three dimensions collectively as the ‘linguistic repertoire’.

1. RQ1: To what extent is multilingual coupledness associated with perceived changes in the linguistic repertoire?
2. RQ2: To what extent are psychosocial variables (i.e., perceived adaptability, Social Initiative, Open-mindedness, push-pull factors for migration, and length of residence [LoR]) associated with perceived relationship-related changes in the linguistic repertoire?
3. RQ3: Which additional factors do L2 learners identify as substantial drivers for relationship-related changes in their linguistic repertoire?

To address these research questions, we deploy an equal-status concurrent mixed-methods design, guided by the principles of *expansion*, i.e., “seeking to expand the breadth and range of research by using different methods for different inquiry components” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 22). In line with this approach, we place equal weight on insights gathered via quantitative and qualitative data. While the quantitative approach allows us to identify systematic sources of variation for differential patterns of perceived change (RQs 1 and 2), the qualitative data give a richer insight into the feelings, emotions, strategies, etc. that would not otherwise figure in a purely numerical analysis (RQ3). Given the exploratory nature of these RQs, we have abstained from any *a priori* hypotheses.

Participants

The present sample comprises 76 learners of L2 German living in Bavarian dialect-speaking regions of Austria (men: 18, women: 57, gender diverse: 1; 74 heterosexual relationships, 2 same-gender relationships). Recruitment relied on convenience sampling, and participation requirements included that the participants (a) were 18 years of age or older, (b) were not raised in a German-speaking country and did not speak German as a L1, (c) were currently living in Austria, and, finally, (d) were currently in a romantic relationship with an Austrian partner who is a L1 speaker of German and who was (primarily) raised in Austria. Participants who began learning German at an early age were not excluded as long as they fulfilled the aforementioned requirements (three participants reported an age of onset of acquisition (AO) of standard German of 10 years or earlier; exclusion of these participants did not change any fundamental conclusions drawn here).

The sample comprised adult participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.50$ years, $SD = 12.60$, range = 23.00–73.00) who varied in terms of LoR in Austria ($M = 9.00$ years, $SD = 10.20$, range = 0.08–45.30) and length of their romantic relationship with a TL speaker ($M = 11.20$ years, $SD = 7.29$, range = 0.17–45.50). We also asked participants at what age they began learning standard German ($M = 24.00$ years, $SD = 11.7$, range = 1–59) and an Austrian dialect variety ($M = 29.70$ years, $SD = 10.00$, range = 18–60). A majority of the participants spoke English as a L1 ($n = 44$), followed by Spanish ($n = 9$), Italian ($n = 4$), French ($n = 3$), Ukrainian, Tagalog, and Dutch ($n = 2$ each), and other L1s (all $n = 1$).

included, e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Russian, etc. Sixteen participants reported speaking more than one L1, and no data on participants' ethnic background was collected. All but five respondents had attained a higher education degree. Participants practiced diverse occupations, including, e.g., zookeeper, teacher, software developer, researcher, medical doctor, lawyer, etc. The majority of the participants lived in the Austrian provinces of Salzburg ($n = 25$), Vienna ($n = 19$), and Upper Austria ($n = 15$); the minority in Lower Austria ($n = 7$), Styria ($n = 6$), Tyrol ($n = 2$), and Carinthia and Burgenland ($n = 1$ respectively).

No power analysis was conducted before recruiting participants. Instead, the aim was to recruit as many participants as possible who fit the—very specific—criteria described previously.

Procedure and tasks

All quantitative analyses and survey material can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF; <https://osf.io/ekz8y/>). The tasks presented in this section were administered via an online survey coded in Limesurvey. Completion of the survey took approximately 10 to 20 minutes. The survey was administered in English; while this likely induced a certain sampling bias (i.e., individuals with intermediate to advanced English proficiency), personal experience has shown that many L2 users in Austria are often less eager to participate in a survey in German than in English.

Perceptions of linguistic change

We employed a modified version of the approach used in the Life Event Study (Schwaba et al., 2023). Participants were asked about the extent to which their (socio-)linguistic repertoire changed from being in a romantic relationship, and the survey items gauged linguistic changes in the areas outlined in Table 1 (see the [Supplementary Material](#) on OSF for all items).

These scales were adapted from previous self-report questionnaires in sociolinguistics and SLA, for example, the dialect-standard profile (Steiner et al., 2023), the Bilingual Language Profile (Birdsong et al., 2012), and from Wirtz and Pickl's (2025) test battery of items gauging perceived change in the sociolinguistic repertoire in relation to major life events. Importantly, while self-reports may be subject to drawbacks such as individual cases of over- or underestimation of proficiency, they have generally been found to be a reliable measure of language proficiency and use (e.g., Gertken et al., 2014). What is more, Schwaba et al. (2023), from whom the present survey design was adapted, found that retrospective perceptions of change and longitudinally measured change in event-related personality development correlated moderately to strongly.

Following the closed-ended items, participants could optionally provide qualitative narratives in an open-ended item ("Would you like to tell us anything else about how your relationship has influenced you and your use of languages?").

Individual differences in (psycho-)social and language usage variables

Perceived adaptability

Adaptability, that is "individuals' capacity to constructively regulate psycho-behavioral functions in response to new, changing, and/or uncertain circumstances, conditions and situations" (Martin et al., 2012, p. 59), was measured via nine items (e.g., "I am able to think through a number of possible options to assist me in a new situation") from the

Table 1. Measuring retrospectively perceived change

Perceived changes in ...	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha/ correlation coefficient	Sample item	Response scale
... the cross-contextual use of standard German, Austrian dialect, and L1(s) (i.e., in each of the following contexts [aggregated for analysis]: with friends, with oneself, at work or school, during service encounters)	4 per language (variety)	Standard German: [$\alpha = 0.86$] Austrian dialect: [$\alpha = 0.90$] L1(s): [$\alpha = 0.73$]	In an average week, how often do you use [standard German/Austrian dialect/your native language(s)] with friends?	−3 (<i>much less often due to my relationship</i>) to 0 (<i>no change due to my relationship</i>) to 3 (<i>much more often due to my relationship</i>)
... attitudes toward standard German, Austrian dialect, and L1(s)	3 per language (variety)	Standard German: [$\alpha = 0.91$] Austrian dialect: [$\alpha = 0.94$] L1(s): [$\alpha = 0.89$]	I like speaking [standard German/Austrian dialect/my native language(s)].	−3 (<i>much less due to my relationship</i>) to 0 (<i>no change due to my relationship</i>) to 3 (<i>much more due to my relationship</i>)
... proficiency in standard German, Austrian dialect, and L1(s)	2 for standard German and Austrian dialect items (speaking and comprehension skills), 1 for L1(s) (speaking skills)	Standard German: [$r = 0.86$] Austrian dialect: [$r = 0.73$]	How well do you speak [standard German/Austrian dialect/your native language(s)]?	−3 (<i>much worse due to my relationship</i>) to 0 (<i>no change due to my relationship</i>) to 3 (<i>much better due to my relationship</i>)

Adaptability Scale (Martin et al., 2012), rated on seven-point scales from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree* ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 5.40$, $SD = 1.07$, range = 3.22–7.00; see [Supplementary Figure 1](#) on OSF for the visual descriptive overview).

Multicultural Personality Questionnaire—subscales for Social Initiative and Open-mindedness

We employed the Multicultural Personality Questionnaire (MPQ; see van der Zee et al., 2013) to measure two personality dimensions: Social Initiative, i.e., “actively approaching social situations and demonstrating initiative in these interactions” and Open-mindedness, i.e., “an open and unprejudiced attitude toward cultural differences” (van der Zee et al., 2013, p. 118). Social Initiative was measured via four items³ (e.g., “Takes the lead”), and Open-mindedness via eight items (e.g., “Is looking for new ways to attain his or her goal”), and responses were provided on five-point scales from 1 = *totally not applicable* to 5 = *totally applicable* (Social Initiative: $\alpha = 0.72$, $M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.75$, range = 1.75–5.00; Open-mindedness: $\alpha = 0.73$, $M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.50$, range = 2.00–5.00; see [Supplementary Figure 1](#) on OSF for the visual descriptive overview). Because of the already lengthy survey, we opted out of deference to participants to collect data on only the two aforementioned personality traits of the five in the MPQ, as these two (a) have repeatedly been found to correlate with L2 skills (e.g., Forsberg Lundell & Sandgren, 2013; Forsberg Lundell et al., 2018, 2023a, 2023b), (b) correlate with relationship-related language usage (Dewaele & Salomidou, 2017), and (c) most closely reflect qualitative rationales from previous variationist SLA work in Austria concerning why some individuals choose to acquire dialect varieties while others do not (e.g., Wirtz et al., 2024).

Push-pull factors for migration

While previous SLA research has often focused on different *types* of migrants, such as lifestyle migrants, transnational migrants, or cultural migrants (e.g., Diskin & Regan, 2015; Forsberg Lundell, 2019), we abstain from such categorization in lieu of employing a more continuous account of the fluid and shifting driver complexes that shape migration. Urbański (2022) clarifies that there are various push and pull factors that affect migration, i.e., factors which may drive individuals to move away from their home country (e.g., economic instability, lack of employment, etc.) alongside those which pull individuals to the respective host country (e.g., education or employment opportunities, interest in the culture or language, etc.). Participants reported on five items concerning potential pull factors (e.g., “I came to Austria because I wanted to learn the German language and about the Austrian culture”) and four items concerning potential push factors (e.g., “I came to Austria because I was forced to leave my home country”). Responses were recorded on seven-point scales from 0 = *not true at all* to 6 = *very true*. We then computed a Push-Pull profile, such that higher values indicate a stronger pull to Austria and negative values a stronger push away from an individual’s home country ($M = 0.89$, $SD = 1.41$, range = –6.00 to 4.30; see [Supplementary Figure 2](#) on OSF for the visual descriptive overview of the individual rationales for migration and of the push-pull profile).

³Note that, to shorten the survey out of deference to participants, four repetitive items in the Social Initiative scale were omitted.

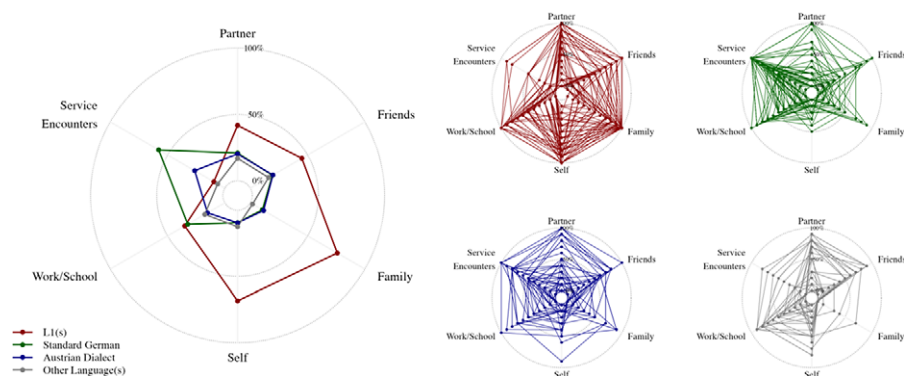


Figure 1. Aggregate (Left) and Individual (Right) Usage Patterns Across the Six Contexts.

Current self-reported language usage and proficiency

Based on the principles of the Bilingual Language Profile (Birdsong et al., 2012), participants reported on their current language usage practices—specifically on their use of their L1(s), standard German, Austrian dialect, and other language(s)—with their partner, family, friends, with themselves, at school or work, and during service encounters, respectively. Responses within each of the six communicative contexts respectively had to sum up to 100%. Figure 1 displays radar plots summarizing both the aggregate usage patterns across the six contexts as well as the individual responses, both of which illustrate that a majority of participants employs their L1 at comparatively high rates, followed by standard German, Austrian dialect, and, finally, additional languages. To simultaneously account for participants' current language proficiency, they were asked about their current speaking and comprehension skills in standard German and Austrian dialect on a scale from 0 to 6 (standard German: $M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.53$, range = 0.50–6.00; Austrian dialect: $M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.92$, range = 0.00–6.00; see Supplementary Figure 3 on OSF for the visual descriptive overview). We then computed a dialect-standard profile (DSP) for each participant (Steiner et al., 2023), such that positive values indicate a higher dominance of the Austrian dialect in terms of everyday language usage and proficiency, and negative values a higher dominance of standard German ($M = -1.75$, $SD = 2.44$, range = -5.92 to 3.75 ; see Supplementary Figure 4 on OSF for the visual descriptive overview).

Data analysis

RQ1 assessing the degree of perceived relationship-related linguistic change was addressed via visualization of descriptive data. For RQ2, which explores the link between psychosocial variables (i.e., perceived adaptability, Social Initiative, Open-mindedness, push-pull factors for migration, and LoR) and perceived relationship-related changes in the linguistic repertoire, we employed regression modeling in R (R Core Team, 2020). Each change domain, apart from perceived change in attitudes toward and proficiency in the L1, given the low degree of variation here (see the next section), was modeled separately, resulting in a total of seven models. In line with the previous discussions about factors that may feasibly affect the strength or directionality of linguistic change in relation to multilingual coupledness, we included five independent variables: perceived adaptability, Social Initiative, Open-mindedness, push-pull

factors of migration, and LoR (all of which were numeric and z-scored for modeling). Note that, because of the extreme diversity in LoR values over 15 years, LoR values of 15 and above were recoded to 15 to facilitate statistical modeling ($n = 10$), resulting in a new mean LoR of 6.76. Length of relationship (z-scored) was included as a control variable (a) because it seemed plausible that individuals who had been in a relationship longer may report a higher magnitude of change and (b) so that the resultant model estimates would reflect predictions based on the mean relationship length. The DSP (z-scored) was also included as a control variable (a) because differences in current language usage practices and proficiency levels may affect the magnitude of change participants report and (b) so that the resultant model estimates would reflect predictions for an individual with an average language usage frequency and proficiency. Due to the substantially uneven distribution between men and women participants as indicated by the descriptive data, gender was not considered in the models (but see the [Supplementary Material](#) on OSF for visualizations of the independent variables faceted by gender, which show minimal differences). Since linear models are susceptible to outliers, we visually inspected scatter plots to identify clear outliers in the predictor variables, and two points (3.86 SD and 4.89 SD below the sample mean) were subsequently removed. Finally, a numerical check revealed that the degree of multicollinearity in this particular set of predictors is negligible ($k = 2.11$; k values between 0 and 6 indicate a negligible degree of collinearity). [Table 2](#) provides an overview of the independent and control variables entered into the regression analyses.

As for the qualitative data for RQ3 (i.e., beliefs about why multilingual coupledness has, or has not, affected the linguistic repertoire), we conducted a bottom-up qualitative analysis of all responses to the open-ended item (3,487 words from 53 of the participants). We began by familiarizing ourselves with the data and generated initial codes (e.g., single words, short phrases) of reoccurring topics. We subsequently searched for interactions between the codes from the first phase, focusing on identifying patterns and relationships between the coded elements, and finally, the codes were collated into overarching themes. Approximately two weeks later, all responses were read again to check theme accuracy and to ensure that they reflected participants' key appraisals. Finally, since "frequency does not simply correspond to importance" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 720) in qualitative data, we present a range of extracts for each theme to show both the diversity and similarities in participants' views on the linguistic ramifications of the love factor.

Results

RQ1: Impact of multilingual coupledness on interindividual perceived change

In this section, we turn to RQ1 inquiring about the degree of linguistic change participants reported in relation to multilingual coupledness. [Figure 2](#) presents a visual overview of respondents' perceived change in language use, attitudes, and proficiency.

In relation to multilingual coupledness, participants believed that their usage frequency of standard German and Austrian dialect increased, while they reported less frequent use of their L1(s).

The reports concerning changes in attitudes toward standard language and Austrian dialect were relatively diverse, with a majority of participants reporting increases, but a sizable number also indicating more negative attitudes toward the standard and dialect varieties (i.e., 17% and 21%, respectively). In contrast, attitudes toward the L1(s) remained, according to participants, relatively unaffected by multilingual coupledness.

Table 2. Overview of the independent and control variables used in the regression analyses

Measure	Task	Literature	Analysis
Perceived adaptability	Adaptability Scale	Martin et al. (2012)	Independent variable
Social Initiative	MPQ	van der Zee et al. (2013)	Independent variable
Open-mindedness	MPQ	van der Zee et al. (2013)	Independent variable
Push-pull factors for migration	Questionnaire items	Loosely adapted from Urbański (2022)	Independent variable
Length of residence (LoR)	Single item in questionnaire	–	Independent variable
Dialect-standard profile (DSP)	DSP questionnaire	Steiner et al. (2023)	Control variable
Length of relationship	Single item in questionnaire	–	Control variable

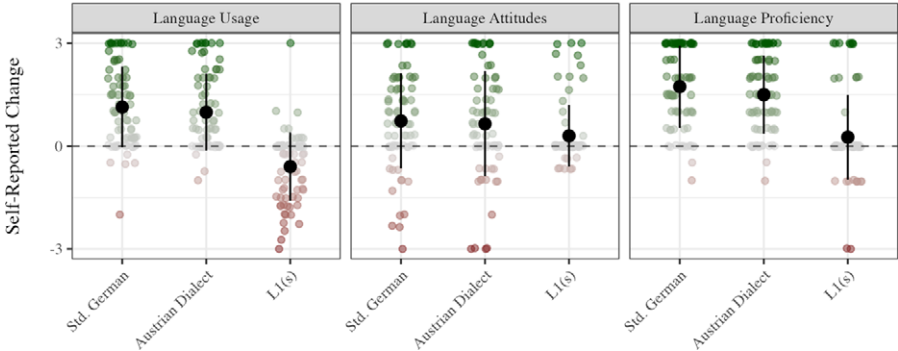


Figure 2. Perceived linguistic changes in relation to multilingual coupledness.
Note: Each dot represents a participant; the black dot and whiskers show the mean and standard deviation, respectively.

Mean reports of perceived change were highest with respect to proficiency in standard German and Austrian dialect. Only a small minority of participants indicated either positive or negative changes in their L1 proficiency in relation to multilingual coupledness.

RQ2: Psychosocial predictors of perceived linguistic change

In this section, we address RQ2 regarding the psychosocial predictors of perceived linguistic change in relation to multilingual coupledness. Figures 3a–3g illustrate the conditional effects of the seven regression models assessing perceived relationship-related linguistic change as a function of the predictor and control variables (see Table 2). Note that only the five focal predictors and significant control variables are visualized—the control variable length of relationship was not significant in any of the models.

Perceived adaptability was a significant positive predictor only for self-reported changes in standard German proficiency ($\beta = 0.41 \pm 0.17, p = 0.022$), though we found a

comparatively high positive effect size—albeit nonsignificant—in relation to perceived changes in the use of the standard language as well ($\beta = 0.21 \pm 0.18, p = 0.247$).

We identified a marginally significant negative relationship between Social Initiative and reported changes in individuals' use of both the standard language ($\beta = -0.32 \pm 0.17, p = 0.060$) and Austrian dialect ($\beta = -0.24 \pm 0.13, p = 0.068$), where low scorers on Social Initiative reported the most pronounced change, as [Figures 3a](#) and [3b](#) illustrate.

Open-mindedness, by contrast, was a positive predictor of reported changes in the use of the dialect variety ($\beta = 0.32 \pm 0.15, p = 0.033$). Notable effect sizes were also observed in this variable's positive, albeit nonsignificant, relationship to perceived changes in attitudes toward the dialect variety ($\beta = 0.36 \pm 0.22, p = 0.100$) and proficiency therein ($\beta = 0.22 \pm 0.15, p = 0.142$).

Interestingly, migratory experience (i.e., an individual's push-pull profile) was not a significant predictor of any of the measures of change. The directionality of the effect was always positive, however, which means that individuals who were more strongly 'pulled' to Austria (e.g., for cultural, educational, relationship-related, or professional reasons) reported slightly higher rates of change.

LoR was a positive predictor of reported changes in individuals' proficiency in the Austrian dialect variety ($\beta = 0.36 \pm 0.15, p = 0.018$), but, interestingly, was less strongly associated with participants' reported changes in the use of the dialect variety ($\beta = 0.23 \pm 0.15, p = 0.123$).

Finally, the DSP—that is, an individual's affinity for the local dialect variety, operationalized via participants' current everyday language use and proficiency—was included as a control variable and was significant in all but two cases (in relation to perceived changes in the use of and proficiency in standard German), as [Figure 3](#) shows. In other words, the magnitude of participants' perceived relationship-related linguistic change was sensitive to differences in their current self-reported usage patterns and proficiency.

RQ3: Participants' stories: What mechanisms lie behind the patterns of perceived linguistic change?

In line with our mixed-methods approach drawing on the principles of *expansion* (i.e., expanding the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components), we now turn to our third and final RQ addressing which additional factors (i.e., *beyond* those identified in the quantitative analysis) learners believe have played a role in shaping their language use, attitudes, and proficiency in relation to multilingual coupledness. Specifically, we scrutinize the individual narratives collected via the open-ended item "Would you like to tell us anything else about how your relationship has influenced you and your use of languages?". During the qualitative analysis, we identified five overarching themes as presented in [Table 3](#). Additional examples of each theme can be found in the [Supplementary Material](#) on OSF. Note that participants' self-reported gender and age appear after the underscore in their respective participant ID.

Theme (1) relates to romantic relationships as a motivational device for L2 development. Particularly among individuals who migrated to Austria to join their partner, partnership was reported as a main reason for acquiring German (Excerpt 1). Motivation to continuously improve one's language proficiency also appeared driven by the relationship, for instance, to effectively interact with the partner's family and to reduce stress on the partner by lessening the need to use the learner's L1 in partnership communication (Excerpt 2). This motivated learning behavior contributes to

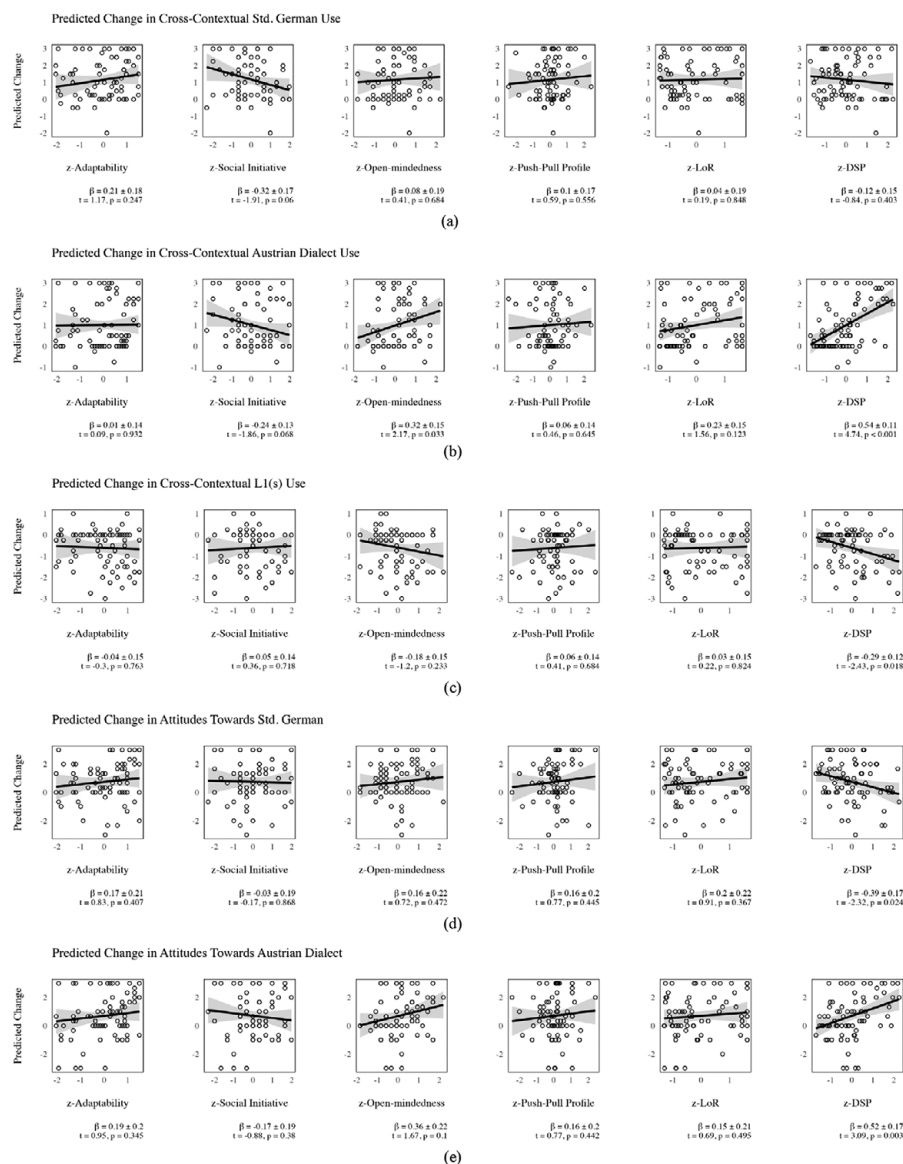


Figure 3. Conditional effects plots.

Note. The lines and shading represent the predicted conditional effects and the confidence bands, respectively, computed from the regression models. Additionally, we superimposed the raw data onto the conditional effects plots, with each point representing a participant.

explaining the substantial increase in use of and proficiency in standard German and the dialect variety, as demonstrated by the descriptive data.

As for (2), the opportunity to practice the L2 with one's partner, especially without the risk of social ridicule, was noted as a driver for increased L2 use and proficiency.

As the example in (3) illustrates, multilingual partnership itself need not, and likely will not, causally relate to changes in language use, attitudes, and proficiency—rather, it

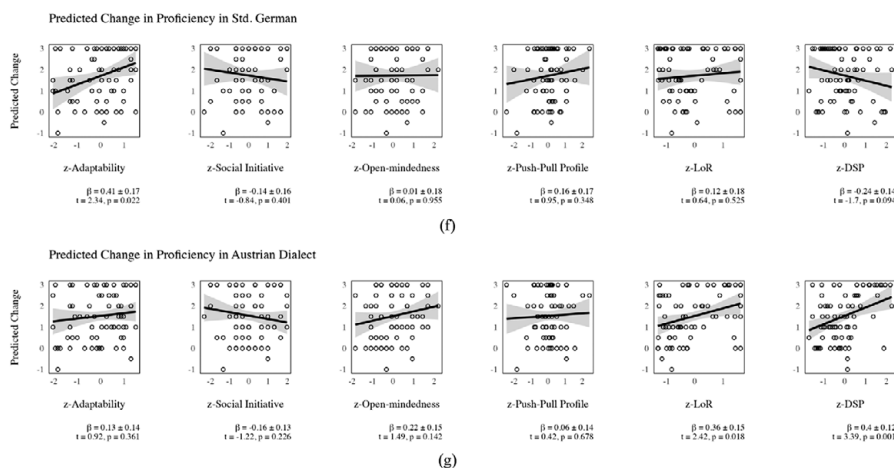


Figure 3. Continued

is the social and affective changes (e.g., changes in social networks, residential mobility and the urban-rural differences in language contact, language learning motivation, etc.) brought about by the partnership which are likely to drive linguistic change.

As concerns the acquisition of dialect varieties (i.e., nonstandard language), participants attested in the examples from (4) that the increased exposure to sociolinguistic variation through their partner (either directly or indirectly, e.g., by way of expanded social networks with TL speakers) was crucial in improving their ability to navigate the dialect landscape in Austria. This finding also resonates with the positive effects of LoR and the DSP identified in the quantitative analysis.

Regarding (5), we found that learners' attitudes toward (non-)standard varieties were often dependent on the status the varieties held in the respective partnership. For instance, some participants who registered more negative attitudes toward (non-)standard varieties cited their TL partner's negative stance toward using German in the relationship (Excerpt 7). Others referenced anxiety regarding their own German proficiency, and how this affects how they are perceived by their interlocutors (Excerpt 8).

Discussion

RQ 1: Perceived linguistic ramifications of multilingual coupledness

The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived changes in the (socio-)linguistic repertoire in relation to multilingual coupledness among users of L2 German. Answering RQ1, we found that learners reported positive effects of multilingual coupledness on their use of, attitudes toward, and proficiency in standard German and dialect varieties, which supports the accumulating empirical findings hitherto concerning the potentially beneficial effects that falling in love with a speaker of another tongue can have on L2 development (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Marinova-Todd, 2003; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018). That said, Bühler et al. (2023) maintain that "it should not be surprising [...] that people do not change in the same ways [...] or that people may react differently to the same life event" (p. 19), and alongside this, L2

Table 3. Beliefs about the effects of multilingual coupledness on L2 development

Theme	Examples
(1) Romantic relationships as motivation for L2 development	Excerpt 1. <i>Since I moved to Austria because of my partner I wouldn't have learned German without them. (P9_M31)</i> Excerpt 2. <i>As an expat it's much easier to connect and integrate with English speakers rather than German speakers. But my partner's parents don't speak English, and it can be tiring for my partner to speak English all the time, so there's motivation to learn. (P60_W24)</i>
(2) Low-stakes L2 usage opportunities fostered through romantic relationships	Excerpt 3. <i>Speaking German with my Austrian partner helped me to learn the language at my own pace. Interacting with strangers can really set you back in terms of confidence, so having someone I could trust alongside me was essential to my progress. (P3_W28)</i>
(3) Indirect effects of romantic relationships for L2 development	Excerpt 4. <i>My ability in and attitude towards certain languages/dialects has changed because I live in (rural) Austria, and I live there because of my relationship with a local Austrian – so “indirectly” my relationship has affected these things. [...] I speak a local Austrian dialect with my husband's family and everyone I interact with locally, but never with my husband, as he is more comfortable speaking English than I am speaking German/Austrian. (P30_W37)</i>
(4) Romantic relationships as a form of intensive exposure to the L2	Excerpt 5. <i>When I arrived [in Austria] I understood practically NOTHING [...]. My now husband and I met within a week of my arrival and that true immersion in the Austrian language and dialect made all the difference. Just taking classes and interacting with storekeepers would not have had the same effect. [...] It was the social integration through having an Austrian partner that built my active and passive vocabulary and taught my ear to understand what I was hearing. (P34_W57)</i> Excerpt 6. <i>Having an Austrian partner has for sure made me understand and get to speak more the language than before (high German), and also some dialect. (P57_W34)</i>
(5) Attitudes (within the partnership) toward sociolinguistic variation	Excerpt 7. <i>He doesn't like talking to me in High German because it feels too formal and unnatural for him, and he doesn't like using dialect with me either because he believes it isn't elegant and feels somewhat embarrassed engaging with me in a less prestigious form. So we have developed a unique familylect between the two of us, which takes English and weaves in some High German, dialect, cutesy words, and playful phrases. (P98_W43)</i> Excerpt 8. <i>I try to make German the default language in most of my interactions. However, when I try to speak with friends or colleagues, I feel like my High German is too “stuffy” but my dialect is also too “put on” and/or “fake.” (P77_W33)</i>

acquisition, especially in adulthood, is an exceedingly individual endeavor characterized by pronounced inter- and intraindividual variation (e.g., Forsberg Lundell et al., 2023b; Pfenninger et al., 2023). Given this, we investigated whether individual differences in social and psychological factors may moderate the potential L2 learning effects of a romantic partnership with a TL speaker.

RQ2: Psychosocial predictors of perceived linguistic change

The negative relationship observed between the personality trait Social Initiative and perceived changes in both standard German and dialect use is perhaps surprising at first

glance. Indeed, this finding stands in some contrast with Dewaele and Salomidou (2017), who found that Social Initiative was positively correlated with the statement about the partner's language having become the participant's "language of the heart." Notably, however, there is likely a fundamental difference between language use more broadly and language use with a partner, which may explain the differences between our results and those reported by Dewaele and Salomidou (2017). That said, negative relationships between Social Initiative and L2 outcomes are not unheard of: Forsberg Lundell et al. (2023b), for example, identified a negative correlation between Social Initiative and perceived nativelikeness among L2 learners of French. Recall that the construct Social Initiative reflects an individual's tendency to actively approach social situations and to take the initiative (e.g., "Is inclined to speak out," "Takes the lead"), and thus high scores identify individuals who easily build up social networks and lead social action (van der Zee et al., 2013). Individuals scoring low on Social Initiative, i.e., those who are less outspoken and who aim not to stand out in social settings, may be more prone to accommodate to the German-speaking environment, i.e., adopting (non-)standard forms of speech in order to blend in and interface with the host community. What is more, Social Initiative is based on the dimension Extraversion in the Big Five Model of personality traits (McCrae & Costa, 1987), and Forsberg Lundell et al. (2023b) put forward that "a more introverted, less socially active personality type, would be more prone to observe and listen to others attentively" (p. 617), which may give rise to a more pronounced adoption of the varieties used among TL speakers.

We found a significant effect of Open-mindedness on changes in the use of the dialect variety, as well as notable effect sizes in relation to changes in attitudes toward, and—though to a lesser extent—proficiency in the local dialect variety. High scorers on Open-mindedness are disposed to adopt other individuals' perspectives easily, to be tolerant, and not prejudiced (van der Zee et al., 2013), which may explain their tendency to adopt local forms of speech. This finding may remind us of Forsberg Lundell and Sandgren's (2013) insights on the association between Open-mindedness and collocational production among late French L2 learners; the authors maintain that individuals "who had an open mind and were able to empathize with others that led to their engagement with successful learning strategies (including exposing themselves to the L2 community), in order to integrate well professionally and socially" (p. 249).

Adaptability, that is, the ability to modify or adjust one's behavior to navigate novel and challenging circumstances, has been deemed an important marker of flexibility and a predictor of effective learning (Collie et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2013). Given the idea that differences in perceived adaptability may be associated with the differential ability to effectively manage new linguistic, social, and cultural demands characteristic of immersion settings (e.g., Zalbidea et al., 2022), it stands to reason that L2 learning may also be moderated by this psychobehavioral factor. We found the strongest correlation between perceived adaptability and perceived changes in proficiency in standard German, but also a correlation between adaptability and self-reported changes in the use of standard German, albeit a weaker and nonsignificant one. The fact that we did not find any notable relationships between adaptability and perceived change in the use of, attitudes toward, or proficiency in the dialect variety is perhaps less surprising when considering the findings from psychology research that adaptability resources have a pronounced impact on success in academic outcomes (e.g., Martin et al., 2013)—that is, in contexts which are most strongly associated with the standard German variety.

LoR was a significant predictor of perceived relationship-related changes in learners' proficiency in the dialect variety, a finding which holds up well with the robust evidence

in variationist SLA work that significant exposure to the TL community is critical before changes in the sociolinguistic repertoire may manifest (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig & Bastos, 2011; Gautier & Chevrot, 2015; Kennedy Terry, 2022; Wirtz & Pfenninger, 2024). What is more, the finding that LoR correlated less strongly with perceived changes in learners' use of the dialect variety underscores Vergeiner's (2019) claim from the field of variationist sociolinguistics, the recurring theme in variationist SLA work (e.g., Geeslin & Gudmestad, 2008), and findings from the field of multilingualism (e.g., Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018; Panicacci, 2020) that competence need not determine performance—in other words, multilingual coupledness may benefit the development of proficiency in the dialect variety, but this does not necessarily give rise to a higher frequency of *usage* of the dialect variety. These findings emphasize that the relationship between proficiency and use is not shaped exclusively by intensity of exposure but also by issues of identity (e.g., Regan, 2013, 2022): For example, TL conventions such as the use of the Austro-Bavarian vernacular (despite proficiency therein) may not align with “learners’ own social identities and orientations to language learning” (van Compernelle & Williams, 2012, p. 246; see also e.g. Ender, 2022; Wirtz et al., 2024), or other languages might simply have a more prominent emotional force for the L2 learner (e.g., Panicacci & Dewaele, 2018, Panicacci, 2019).

The dialect-standard profile (DSP) captures an individual's affinity for the Austrian dialect variety in terms of their current self-reported frequency of use of and proficiency in an Austrian dialect. We found that the magnitude of learners' perceptions of relationship-related linguistic change was sensitive to differences in participants' current linguistic usage and proficiency profile, which substantiates our rationale for including the DSP as a control variable.

RQ3: Beliefs about why multilingual coupledness affects the linguistic repertoire

The qualitative analysis provided richer insights into participants' backgrounds and their perceptions about *why* and *how* their linguistic behavior has been affected by multilingual coupledness. The reported changes in a learner's sociolinguistic repertoire are intricately intertwined with exposure-related and emotional variables, as voiced by the participants. Scholars as early as Arnold and Brown (1999, p. 8) noted that “anxiety is quite possibly the affective factor that most pervasively obstructs the learning process” (for a recent overview, see also MacIntyre & Wang, 2022), and the notion that select learners reported feeling nervous about using the TL (including the dialect variety) in public demonstrates that anxiety can disrupt sociolinguistic development (see also Wirtz, 2025). Low-stakes usage opportunities in the comfort of a partnership, however, appear to alleviate some of these negative effects—specifically by way of mitigating the risk of L2-related shame and/or social ridicule (which may facilitate fatigue, negative mood states, poor well-being, general anxiety, etc., and thus impair L2 learning)—and ultimately promote L2 use and proficiency.

Furthermore, as previously noted, variationist SLA emphasizes that, while sufficient exposure to the TL community is a necessary prerequisite to sociolinguistic development, active employment of local forms of speech (or avoidance thereof) is a matter of sociolinguistic agency (e.g., Grammon, 2024; van Compernelle & Williams, 2012), influenced by, e.g., a learner's past, present, and future goals and whether or not L1 conventions align with learners' own social identities and orientations to language learning (Ender, 2022; Wirtz et al., 2024). As voiced by the participants, more active engagement with the Austrian dialect was motivated by aspirations to accommodate the partner's linguistic and

cultural affiliation, to more effectively interact with the TL community, and also to more consciously assert identity and belonging—findings which also bear parallels to several of the themes Regan (2022) identified concerning learners' motivation to acclimate in L2 French. At the same time, learners' attitudes toward (non-)standard language were closely related to the status the varieties held in the partnership, and in learners' social circles more generally. These findings are reminiscent of sociolinguistic research arguing that “networks do not affect linguistic variation simply by determining a speaker's level of exposure to a given style of speaking; rather, any such influence is filtered through an evaluative process” (Sharma & Dodsworth, 2020, p. 355). In other words, an individual's affective stance toward the dialect variety or the standard language will depend “at least in part on the expectations of those with whom one habitually interacts” (Gal, 1979, p. 141).

Importantly, linguistic behavior and development are shaped by a multitude of forces; among these are affective and cognitive resources as well as day-to-day experiences (e.g., Pfenninger & Kliesch, 2023). Thus, perceived effects of a single life event—namely, linguistic changes in relation to multilingual coupledness—may be overshadowed by the cumulative effects of other forces. Indeed, participants noted that it was not always the relationship per se which influenced perceived change in the sociolinguistic repertoire, but rather the wealth of social and affective changes brought about via coupledness. Disentangling and ascertaining the differential effects of these relationship-related changes on L2 acquisition represents a crucial next step in our goal to better understand the relationship between love and language development.

Limitations and future directions

There are several (methodological) limitations which warrant consideration. First, our measure of perceived linguistic change inherently conflates frequency with self-perceived causation. While useful for the current research questions (i.e., participants only reported on the degree of change which they believed was caused by this respective life event), one may consider juxtaposing this type of questioning with a two-pronged pair of questions which first addresses frequency and next inquires as to how much the participant attributes this to the relationship. Second, qualitative inquiries into related research questions may consider adding open-ended items before the closed-ended items to avoid prompting certain types of responses. Third, to avoid excessive participant attrition, we were unable to collect a satisfactory amount of data on partner characteristics, for example, the partner's patterns of language use, their previous mobility, or the partner's experiences in navigating multilingual coupledness—all of which are factors that future research may consider addressing. Fourth, this article necessarily addressed the macro-level of language use, proficiency, and attitudes in relation to multilingual coupledness while neglecting issues at the microlevel, for instance, within-interaction code-switching and how this is affected by (the length of) romantic relationships; observational studies on (changes in) the linguistic repertoire will inevitably shed light on this matter. Fifth, a majority of participants in this sample (44/76) spoke L1 English, and its status as a *lingua franca* is likely to affect both partnership communication and everyday interactions more generally. For example, individuals with L1 English are in a privileged position to be able to draw on their L1 in everyday communicative interactions. We thus agree with Long (2022) that future research will do well to explore learner samples which “reflect a broad diversity of linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds” (p. 430). Sixth and last, given the constraints of the current exploratory survey, we were unable to collect data on select demographic and psychological variables which may be of interest in the future.

Regarding the former, mobility patterns and place of residence must take center stage, specifically because the qualitative analysis illustrated that the urban-rural divide likely influences L2 sociolinguistic development. Concerning the latter point, psychological variables such as relationship satisfaction will offer deeper insights into how relationship-specific characteristics impact the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation.

Finally, we believe this study is methodologically noteworthy in the field of applied linguistics in that we focus not only on self-reports of current language use but also on retrospective perceptions of linguistic change in relation to a major life event—namely, multilingual coupledness. Indeed, previous work in applied linguistics has employed methods to gauge the degree of linguistic change among individuals, for example, retrodictive qualitative modeling (e.g., Dörnyei, 2014), which entails tracing backward from a present state to a past state, or ecological-historical approaches, which involve retrocasting and analyzing change and the manifestation of learner agency over time (e.g., Sasaki et al., 2024). These methods, while useful for investigating perceived trajectories of change and the rationales thereof, were not designed to tap into participants' perceptions of linguistic change in relation to a select event experience. The 'Life Event Survey' (Schwaba et al., 2023), by contrast, presents a useful approach to estimate the linguistic relevance of life events, especially of events for which collecting group-level, carefully controlled longitudinal data is simply unfeasible. It is clear that retrospective judgements of change are no substitute for longitudinally measured change; however, life-event researchers in the field of developmental psychology have argued that "meaning-making takes place over time [...] and so understanding the effect of a past event on subsequent [...] change may best be done retrospectively, allowing participants time to integrate event-related changes into their self-perception" (Schwaba et al., 2023, p. 1153). A promising way forward, as we see it, may be to employ a mix of retrospective and retrodictive methods, e.g., using the life event survey method to home in on the linguistic consequences of select experiences while utilizing retrodictive modeling to buttress this restricted focus and identify additional moderators of perceived linguistic change.

Conclusion

Finding love in a foreign country, or moving to a foreign country because of love, can be an exhilarating experience, and this significant life-course transition will undoubtedly bring with it a host of linguistic and cultural changes. Even among same-language couples, accommodating to the partner's linguistic cues (e.g., linguistic alignment) is expectable during relationship formation (e.g., Brinberg & Ram, 2021), and attending to the partner's, in addition to one's own, linguistic and cultural affiliation represents a crucial component in achieving effective communication (e.g., Piller, 2001). To again quote Dewaele and Salomidou (2017), "love in an LX [i.e., additional language beyond the L1(s)] is perfectly possible but it adds some extra challenges" (p. 129), not the least of which may include the acquisition, or further refinement, of the partner's L1. At the same time, romantic connections may function as a facilitative force for L2 motivation and development, as we have seen here and elsewhere (e.g., Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018; see also Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007), though a number of social, psychological, experiential (including gender and sexuality, see Akiyama & Ortega, 2024), and contextual variables will moderate the actual magnitude of relationship-related change in the (socio-)linguistic repertoire. Given the potent effects that falling in love with a speaker of another tongue can have on (second) language

development, we must agree with our predecessors (e.g., Dewaele & Salomidou; Pfenninger et al., 2023; Piller, 2002; Singleton & Pfenninger, 2018) on the claim that the love factor and its consequences for language learning have earned a brighter spotlight in SLA moving forward.

Data availability statement. Data and R scripts for the quantitative analyses, as well as all materials used for this study, are available via the following link <https://osf.io/ekz8y/>.

Acknowledgments. I would like to express my gratitude to all of the participants for taking the time to provide such rich data. I also thank the anonymous reviewers and the editor for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript. Any errors are, of course, my own.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

References

- Akiyama, Y., & Ortega, L. (2024). Coming out, heteronormativity, and possibilities of intercultural learning in a Google Hangouts telecollaboration. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 27(5), 656–674. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2024.2306388>
- Arnold, J., & Brown, H. D. (1999). A map of the terrain. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in Language Learning* (pp. 1–24). Cambridge University Press.
- Bardovi-Harlig, K., & Bastos, M.-T. (2011). Proficiency, length of stay, and intensity of interaction and the acquisition of conventional expressions in L2 pragmatics. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 8(3), 347–384. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2011.017>
- Birdsong, D., Gertken, L., & Amengual, M. (2012). *Bilingual Language Profile: An Easy-to-Use Instrument to Assess Bilingualism*. <https://sites.la.utexas.edu/bilingual/>
- Brandtstädter, J. (2010). Life management in developmental settings of modernity: Challenges to the adaptive self. In R. K. Silbereisen & X. Chen (Eds.), *Social Change and Human Development: Concept and Results* (pp. 50–72). Sage.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Novel insights into patients' life-worlds: The value of qualitative research. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 6(9), 720–721. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30296-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30296-2)
- Brinberg, M., & Ram, N. (2021). Do new romantic couples use more similar language over time? Evidence from intensive longitudinal text messages. *Journal of Communication*, 71(3), 454–477. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab012>
- Bühler, J. L., Orth, U., Bleidorn, W., Weber, E., Kretzschmar, A., Scheling, L., & Hopwood, C. J. (2023). Life events and personality change: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *European Journal of Personality*, 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08902070231190219>
- Collie, R. J., Holliman, A. J., & Martin, A. J. (2017). Adaptability, engagement and academic achievement at university. *Educational Psychology*, 37(5), 632–647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2016.1231296>
- Connor-Smith, J. K., & Flachsbart, C. (2007). Relations between personality and coping: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 93(6), 1080–1107. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.6.1080>
- Dewaele, J.-M. (2010). *Emotions in multiple languages*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dewaele, J.-M., & Salomidou, L. (2017). Loving a partner in a Foreign Language. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 108, 116–130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2016.12.009>
- Dyskin, C., & Regan, V. (2015). Migratory Experience and Second Language Acquisition Among Polish and Chinese Migrants in Dublin, Ireland. In F. Forsberg Lundell & I. Bartning (Eds.), *Cultural migrants and optimal language acquisition* (pp. 137–177). Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2014). Researching complex dynamic systems: 'Retrodictive qualitative modelling' in the language classroom. *Language Teaching*, 47(1), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444811000516>
- Dörnyei, Z., & Ryan, S. (2015). *The psychology of the language learner revisited*. Routledge.
- Ender, A. (2020). Zum Zusammenhang von Dialektkompetenz und Dialektbe wertung in Erst- und Zweit-sprache. In M. Hundt, A. Kleene, A. Plewnia, & V. Sauer (Eds.), *Regiolekte. Objektive Sprachdaten und subjektive Sprachwahrnehmung* (pp. 77–102). Narr Francke Attempto Verlag.
- Ender, A. (2022). *Dialekt-Standard-Variation im ungesteuerten Zweitspracherwerb des Deutschen. Eine soziolinguistische Analyse zum Erwerb von Variation bei erwachsenen Lernenden*. De Gruyter.

- Ender, A., & Kaiser, I. (2009). Zum Stellenwert von Dialekt und Standard im österreichischen und Schweizer Alltag – Ergebnisse einer Umfrage. *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik*, 37(2), 266–295. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ZGL.2009.018>
- Ender, A., & Wirtz, M. A. (in press). In(ter)dependent dialect and standard L2 systems? On the development of receptive varietal proficiency. In L. Rosseel & E. Zenner (Eds.), *Acquiring Language variation: The interaction between world and mind*. Benjamins.
- Fanta-Jende, J. (2023). *Individuelle Sprachrepertoires und vertikale Spektren des Deutschen in Österreich. Phonetisch-phonologische Variation auf der Dialekt-Standard-Achse* [Doctoral Dissertation]. University of Vienna.
- Forsberg Lundell, F. (2019). Long-term residence abroad and SLA: the case of cultural migrants in France. In M. Howard (Ed.), *Study abroad, second language acquisition and interculturality* (pp. 155–178). Multilingual Matters.
- Forsberg Lundell, F., & Bartning, I. (2015). Introduction: Cultural migrants—Introducing a new concept in SLA research. In F. Forsberg Lundell & I. Bartning (Eds.), *Cultural Migrants and Optimal Language Acquisition* (pp. 1–16). Multilingual Matters.
- Forsberg Lundell, F., & Sandgren, M. (2013). High-level proficiency in late L2 acquisition. Relationships between collocational production, language aptitude and personality. In G. Granena & M. Long (Eds.), *Sensitive periods, language aptitude, and ultimate L2 attainment* (pp. 231–256). John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Forsberg Lundell, F., Arvidsson, K., & Jemstedt, A. (2023a). The importance of psychological and social factors in adult SLA: The case of productive collocation knowledge in L2 Swedish of L1 French long-term residents. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(2), 558–570. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263122000419>
- Forsberg Lundell, F., Arvidsson, K., & Jemstedt, A. (2023b). What factors predict perceived nativelikeness in long-term L2 users? *Second Language Research*, 39(3), 597–622. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02676583221091396>
- Forsberg Lundell, F., Eyckmans, J., Rosiers, A., & Arvidsson, K. (2018). Is multicultural effectiveness related to phrasal knowledge in English as a second language? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 7(2), 232–240. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.7n.2p.232>
- Gal, S. (1979). *Language shift: Social determinants of linguistic change in bilingual Austria*. Academic.
- Gautier, R., & Chevrot, J.-P. (2015). Social networks and acquisition of sociolinguistic variation in a study abroad context: A preliminary study. In R. Mitchell, N. Tracy-Ventura, & K. McManus, *Social Interaction, Identity and Language Learning During Residence Abroad* (pp. 169–184). Eurosla.
- Geeslin, K. L. (2018). Variable structures and sociolinguistic variation. In P. A. Malovrh & A. G. Benati (Eds.), *The Handbook of Advanced Proficiency in Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 547–565). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Geeslin, K. L., & Gudmestad, A. (2008). Comparing interview and written elicitation tasks in native and non-native data: Do speakers do what we think they do? In J. B. de Garavito & E. Valenzuela (Eds.), *Selected Proceedings of the 10th Hispanic Linguistics Symposium* (pp. 64–88). Cascadia Proceedings Project.
- Geeslin, K. L., & Hanson, S. (2023). Sociolinguistic approaches to communicative competence. In M. Kanwit & M. Solon (Eds.), *Communicative Competence in a Second Language. Theory, Method, and Applications* (pp. 40–59). Routledge.
- Gertken, L. M., Amengual, M., & Birdsong, D. (2014). Assessing language dominance with the bilingual language profile. In P. Leclercq, A. Edmonds, & H. Hilton (Eds.), *Measuring L2 proficiency: Perspectives from SLA* (pp. 208–225). Multilingual Matters.
- Gonçalves, K. (2013). *Conversations of intercultural couples*. Mouton de Gruyter.
- Grammon, D. (2024). Inappropriate identities: Racialized language ideologies and sociolinguistic competence in a study abroad context. *Applied Linguistics*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amae003>
- Haehner, P., Rakhshani, A., Fassbender, I., Lucas, R. E., Donnellan, M. B., & Luhmann, M. (2023). Perception of major life events and personality trait change. *European Journal of Personality*, 37(5), 524–542. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08902070221107973>
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X033007014>
- Kaiser, I., Ender, A., & Kasberger, G. (2019). Varietäten des österreichischen Deutsch aus der HörerInnenperspektive: Diskriminationsfähigkeiten und sozio-indexikalische Interpretation. In L. Bülow, A. Fischer, & K. Herbert (Eds.), *Dimensionen des sprachlichen Raums: Variation – Mehrsprachigkeit – Konzeptualisierung* (pp. 341–362). Peter Lang Verlag.

- Kanwit, M. (2022). Sociolinguistic competence: What we know so far and where we're heading. In K. L. Geeslin (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Sociolinguistics* (pp. 30–44). Routledge.
- Kanwit, M., & Solon, M. (Eds.). (2023). *Communicative competence in a second language: theory, method, and applications*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003160779>
- Kennedy Terry, K. M. (2022). At the intersection of SLA and sociolinguistics: The predictive power of social networks during study abroad. *The Modern Language Journal*, 106(1), 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12763>
- Kinsella, C., & Singleton, D. (2014). Much more than age. *Applied Linguistics*, 35(4), 441–462. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu032>
- Long, A. Y. (2022). Commonly studied language pairs. In K. L. Geeslin (Ed.), *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics* (pp. 420–432). Routledge.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Wang, L. (2022). Anxiety. In S. Li, P. Hiver, & M. Papi (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Individual Differences* (pp. 175–189). Routledge.
- Marinova-Todd, S. H. (2003). *Comprehensive analysis of ultimate attainment in adult second language acquisition* [Doctoral Dissertation]. Harvard University.
- Martin, A. J., Nejad, H. G., Colmar, S., & Liem, G. A. D. (2013). Adaptability: How students' responses to uncertainty and novelty predict their academic and non-academic outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(3), 728–746. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032794>
- Martin, A. J., Nejad, H., Colmar, S., & Liem, G. A. D. (2012). Adaptability: Conceptual and empirical perspectives on responses to change, novelty and uncertainty. *Journal of Psychologists and Counsellors in Schools*, 22(1), 58–81. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jgc.2012.8>
- McCrae, R. R., & Costa, P. T. (1987). Validation of the five-factor model of personality across instruments and observers. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52(1), 81–90. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.52.1.81>
- Muñoz, C., & Singleton, D. (2007). Foreign accent in advanced learners: Two successful profiles. *EUROSLA Yearbook*, 7(1), 171–190. <https://doi.org/10.1075/eurosla.7.10mun>
- Niemann, L., & Hertel, G. (2022). Perceived forcedness and perils of migration: Development and validation of a questionnaire for residents in receiving countries. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 89, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.05.002>
- Norton, B., & McKinney, C. (2011). An identity approach to second language acquisition. In D. Atkinson (Ed.), *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 73–94). Routledge.
- Nunez, C., Nunez Mahdi, R., & Popma, L. (2017). *Intercultural sensitivity: From denial to intercultural competence*. Van Gorcum.
- Ożańska-Ponikwia, K. (2019). Expression and perception of emotions by Polish–English bilinguals I love you vs. *Kocham Cię*. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 22(4), 493–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1270893>
- Panicacci, A. (2019). Do the languages migrants use in private and emotional domains define their cultural belonging more than the passport they have? *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 69, 87–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.01.003>
- Panicacci, A. (2020). Does expressing emotions in the local language help migrants acculturate? *International Journal of Language and Culture*, 6(2), 279–304. <https://doi.org/10.1075/ijolc.17013.pan>
- Panicacci, A., & Dewaele, J.-M. (2017). 'A voice from elsewhere': Acculturation, personality and migrants' self-perceptions across languages and cultures. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 14(4), 419–436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2016.1273937>
- Panicacci, A., & Dewaele, J.-M. (2018). Do interlocutors or conversation topics affect migrants' sense of feeling different when switching languages? *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 39(3), 240–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2017.1361962>
- Pfenniger, S. E., & Kliesch, M. (2023). Variability as a functional marker of second language development in older adult learners. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 45(4), 1004–1030. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263123000013>
- Pfenniger, S. E., Festman, J., & Singleton, D. (2023). *Second language acquisition and lifelong learning*. Routledge.
- Piller, I. (2001). Linguistic intermarriage: Language choice and negotiation of identity. In A. Pavlenko, A. Blackledge, I. Piller, & M. Teutsch-Dwyer (Eds.), *Multilingualism, Second Language Learning, and Gender* (pp. 199–230). De Gruyter Mouton.

- Piller, I. (2002). *Bilingual couples talk*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Regan, V. (2013). The bookseller and the basketball player: Tales from the French Polonia. In D. Singleton, V. Regan, & E. Debaene (Eds.), *Linguistic and Cultural Acquisition in a Migrant Community* (pp. 28–48). Multilingual Matters.
- Regan, V. (2022). Variation, identity and language attitudes. In R. Bayley, D. R. Preston, & X. Li (Eds.), *Variation in Second and Heritage Languages* (pp. 253–278). Benjamins.
- R Core Team. (2020). R: A Language and Environment for Statistical Computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing [Computer software]. <https://www.R-project.org/>
- Sasaki, M., Mizumoto, A., & Murakami, A. (2024). Developmental trajectories of multicompetent writers: An ecological-historical approach to L1/L2 writing abilities and L2 proficiency. *Journal of the European Second Language Association*, 8(1), 114–130.
- Schwaba, T., Denissen, J. J. A., Luhmann, M., Hopwood, C., & Bleidorn, W. (2023). Subjective experiences of life events match individual differences in personality development. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Personality Processes and Individual Differences*, 125(5), 1136–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pssp0000483>
- Sharma, D., & Dodsworth, R. (2020). Language variation and social networks. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 6(6), 341–361. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011619-030524>
- Singleton, D., & Pfenninger, S. E. (2018). L2 proficiency as a function of cultural identity in interlingual couples. *Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition*, 4(1), 7–22.
- Skrzypek, A., & Singleton, D. (2016). Age and identity. In V. Regan, C. Diskin, & J. Martyn (Eds.), *Language, identity and migration* (pp. 83–97). Peter Lang.
- Steiner, C., Jeszenszky, P., Stebler, V., & Leemann, A. (2023). Extraverted innovators and conscientious laggards? Investigating effects of personality traits on language change. *Language Variation and Change*, 35(1), 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954394523000091>
- Urbański, M. (2022). Comparing push and pull factors affecting migration. *Economies*, 10(1), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/economies10010021>
- van Compernelle, R. A., & Williams, L. (2012). Reconceptualizing sociolinguistic competence as mediated action: Identity, meaning-making, agency. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2), 234–250. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2012.01334.x>
- van der Zee, K., van Oudenhoven, J. P., Ponterotto, J. G., & Fietzer, A. W. (2013). Multicultural Personality Questionnaire: Development of a short form. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 95(1), 118–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891.2012.718302>
- Vergeiner, P. C. (2019). *Kookkurrenz – Kovariation – Kontrast. Formen und Funktionen individueller Dialekt-/Standardvariation in universitären Beratungsgesprächen*. Peter Lang.
- Wirtz, M. A. (2025). *Dynamics of L2 sociolinguistic development in adulthood*. Multilingual Matters.
- Wirtz, M. A., & Pfenninger, S. E. (2024). Signature dynamics of development in second language sociolinguistic competence: Evidence from an intensive microlongitudinal study. *Language Learning*, 74(3), 707–743. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lang.12634>
- Wirtz, M. A., & Pickl, S. (2025). *Major life events as drivers of perceived linguistic change across adulthood*. *Language Variation and Change*, Advanced Online Publication, 1–24.
- Wirtz, M. A., Pfenninger, S. E., Kaiser, I., & Ender, A. (2024). Sociolinguistic competence and varietal repertoires in a second language: A study on addressee-dependent varietal behavior using virtual reality. *Modern Language Journal*, 108(1), 385–411. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12918>
- World Migration Report. (2024). *World Migration Report 2024*. <https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>
- Yodanis, C., Boeckmann, I., & Sieber, C. (2007). Language heterogamy and relationship dynamics: Conflict, commitment, and communication. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 33(2), 241–261.
- Zalbidea, J., Issa, B. I., & Faretta-Stutenberg, M. (2022). Brief but mighty? Sustained L2 learning and perceived psychobehavioral benefits after short-term study abroad. *The Modern Language Journal*, 106(2), 411–428. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12777>

Cite this article: Wirtz, M. A. (2025). The love factor in variationist SLA: Effects of multilingual coupledness on sociolinguistic development in second language German. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263125101320>