

# Language variation and (de-)standardisation processes in Germany

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## THE HISTORICAL STANDARDISATION PROCESS

The German language area is characterised by a range of different dialects. The fundamental division into the Low, Middle, and Upper German area (see Figure 1) is based on a phonological process called *the Second Consonant Shift (Grimm's Law)* (Barbour and Stevenson 1998: 85ff.). This classification will also serve as the starting point for this chapter. For the development of a German standard language as a variety accepted nation-wide, two processes were particularly important, which, according to Mihm (2000), can be called processes of *Überschichtung* (superimposition of acrolectal strata) (Auer 2005: 28).

The first process of *Überschichtung* falls into the period of Early New High German (approx. 1350–1650) with its new socio-cultural conditions (urban development, foundation of universities, reformation, etc.) – the period where a German written standard is considered to have been founded (Wolff 2004: 103ff.; Ernst 2005: 138ff.). Martin Luther's translation of the Bible into German (between 1522 and 1545) had a great influence on this process. Luther's geographical and linguistic origin in the eastern middle German region close to the Low German area is generally regarded as a favourable condition (Besch 2000: 1717) for him to include both High and Low German features in the translation.

Another important factor, both in the process of *Überschichtung* and for the distribution of Luther's translation, was Gutenberg's invention of the printing press. Between 1522 and 1546 one in five German households owned an edition of Luther's translation (Ernst 2005: 166). The introduction of a written standard led to a situation where 'a spoken standard came into being which affected many parts of morphology and syntax and some parts of phonology, while other features, particularly in phonology and in the lexicon, remained dialectal' (Auer 2005: 28). In the northern parts of Germany the bourgeoisie adopted more High German forms (in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries), which led to the development of a High German (standardised) H-variety with Low German substrate (see the *Low German* area in Figure 1) and no standardisation process (Stellmacher 1997: 34). In the western and southern areas this led to convergence (Mihm 2000: 2112) and the emergence of regional spoken varieties with a much larger geographical scope than the local dialects. However, these new-emerging varieties were still so regionalised that it makes no sense to talk about a spoken German national standard yet.

The second process of *Überschichtung* took place in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: A spoken German national standard came into being as an actual *Substandard*<sup>1</sup> to the written standard, or an *Umgangssprache* that was available nation-wide alongside the local (geographically bound) dialects (Schmidt 2004: 285ff.). The two most important book publications were Theodor Sieb's 'Deutsche Bühnenaussprache' (literally German stage pronunciation) in 1898, which determined a Low German pronunciation of High German, and Konrad Duden's *Orthographisches Wörterbuch* in 1902. Once more the bourgeoisie of northern and central Germany adopted a spoken variety which was closer to the written language and had

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<sup>1</sup> Here we refer to the German meaning of *Substandard*, i.e. a type of variety close to the standard pole with minor regional influences.



formal situations (Mihm 2000: 2113), and no domains of communication are exclusively reserved for the traditional dialects (Stellmacher 1990: 200). To a large extent the local varieties have been or are being replaced by (fewer) more standardised varieties. Accordingly, the Low German area is characterised by a widespread loss of dialects, ‘dialect loss after *diglossia*’ in Auer’s typology (2005: 37ff.; we have added italics here and subsequently in the terms *diglossia* and *diaglossia*, for clarification).

### *The Middle German area*

In the Middle German area there is a tendency towards base dialect loss, and most speakers are able to use a variety of the (spoken) standard language in any situation (Dingeldein 1997: 131). Nevertheless, there are still regional differences concerning the variability of language use, and the diversity results in three scenarios (see Figure 2):

1. In the Upper Saxony area (the eastern part) and the Ripuarian area (the north-western part) the base dialects hardly exist anymore – dialect loss after *diaglossia* (Auer 2005: 34). Most local forms of the dialects are abandoned and replaced by new more standardised varieties but still contain discrete, regionally bound structural features (Dingeldein 1997: 131).
2. In Northern Hesse and Thuringian (the central part) the dialects have disappeared and the spoken standard language has become the main variety used. Dialect is regarded as the language of the older generation and often associated with lower social class and is in most cases not even passed on to the younger generation. A situation of ‘dialect loss after *diglossia*’ is found (Auer 2005: 37).
3. In the Moselle- and Rheno-Franconian areas (the western part) the traditional dialects are still in use, alongside more intermediate varieties on the dialect-standard continuum. However, Lenz (2003: 412) shows that the base dialects, which are mostly used by older speakers, are being replaced by regiolectal varieties, typically used by younger speakers, who mostly consider dialect as a cultural heritage, which is of no importance anymore in everyday life. Thus, it can still be called a *diaglossic* situation (Auer 2005: 26ff.), but with a probable tendency towards the loss of the basilectal forms.

### *The Upper German area*

Here, dialects are still in use, and the internal differentiation regarding the conditions and fields of dialect and standard use reveals an east–west division. In the Bavarian language area (east) there is more tolerance of the use of (regional) dialect. In the Alemannic and Eastern Franconian area (west) the rural varieties and the regional dialects are commonly avoided in public and formal situations (Ruoff 1997: 145). The dialects in the south-west of Germany do enjoy a rather high overt prestige<sup>2</sup>, though, but they are not used as extensively as in Bavaria.

In the Alemannic and eastern Franconian area there is a *diaglossic* situation (Auer 2005: 26ff.) with many different strata between the dialect and standard language poles. In the Bavarian area there are intermediate forms but the structural distance between the dialects and the standard language is generally larger in comparison to the Alemannic and eastern Franconian area. Nonetheless, the situation here, too, can be characterised as *diaglossic* (Auer 2005: 26ff.).

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<sup>2</sup> In 1999 the Federal State of Baden-Württemberg started a publicity campaign with the slogan *Wir können alles. Außer Hochdeutsch.* (‘We master everything. Except for High German.’) ([http://www.badenwuerttemberg.de/de/-Werbe\\_und\\_Sympathiekampagne/124658.html](http://www.badenwuerttemberg.de/de/-Werbe_und_Sympathiekampagne/124658.html) [Accessed on June 10, 2010]).



**Figure 2:** Generalised map of dialect–standard constellations of today’s Germany

(red. Stoeckle)

The large cities merely have an indirect linguistic influence: They function as a model for regional identification and thus strengthen the linguistic self-confidence of their related dialect areas (Munich for the central Bavarian, Stuttgart for the Swabian, Nuremberg for the Franconian, etc.). Ruoff (1997: 143) states that dialects in the south of Germany are changing, but that this change does not appear to be in the direction of the standard language.

## STANDARDISATION AND DE-STANDARDISATION

Even though there are so many different developments in German with a range of regionally conditioned influences (Lenz 2003: 32), it still makes sense to talk (cautiously) about a nation-wide language change in direction of a more standardised *spoken* language, a change that is defined both as a reduction in the use of traditional or base dialects and a conversion of these into more standardised regional varieties (Bellmann 1983: 117). The question is, in which direction is this development going?

1. Towards a normative, written standard – *die Standardsprache*. The assumption here is that there is only one correct way of speaking German, and that is to speak it exactly as it is written. This means a strict normative standard which is highly codified with rather fixed definitions through dictionaries, grammars, etc. This is the standard taught and used in the education system (Huesmann 1998: 21). The underlying ideology is based upon correct and incorrect language mediated through education, the formal media (news, debates, etc.), the bureaucratic system, and the idea of the nation state ('one nation-state, one language').
2. Towards a plurality of regional standards – *Regionale Standard-varietäten*. These standards are developed from dialects that have either levelled, converged, or otherwise become more standardised to the extent of an independent regional standard being clearly distinguishable (pragmatically) from other regional standards. This means a range of co-existing regional standards which have developed independently of the normative, written standard, ideologically rooted in a strong (geographical) local identity (which might be the case in Bavaria).
3. Towards a spoken standard – *die Umgangssprache* (sometimes known as *der Substandard* [Bellmann 1983] in German sociolinguistics). This spoken standard is a continuum with room for variation and it is negatively defined by that the majority of its features are *not* dialectal/regional, *nor* are they standard features (Lenz 2003: 35; Spiekermann 2004: 10). The speakers are no longer dialectal/regional nor do they move towards the normative, written standard language. Due to its divergence from the normative standard this is also called a de-standardisation process (Mattheier 2003) and it is ideologically underpinned by a global identity with (probably) a bias towards urban areas and youth culture and the more informal media (reality or talk shows, etc.).

It might be argued that all three are parts of a standardisation process. The development towards a spoken standard could be defined as incorporating both of the other developments, and as such it could be regarded as a nationwide variety with inherent variation in German. Recent studies in south-west Germany support this, in that the use of both dialect and the traditional standard is returning in favour of *allegro* features, non-standard features and non-regional (dialectal) features (Spiekermann 2004: 100).

## SELF-EVALUATION AND LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

In 1983 and 1998 the *Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach* (Allensbach institute for opinion polls) asked about 2000 people 'Are you able to speak the dialect of your region?' (Niebaum and Macha 2006: 165ff.; Allensbach 1998: 3). Some of the results will be highlighted in the following discussion.

Dialect seems to play a more important role in the southern than in the northern parts of Germany. Comparing the results from 1983 and 1998 it is possible to observe that dialect competence diminishes in all regions except for Bavaria.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the number of informants who report that they do not speak their local dialect diminishes too, but the group of informants who claim they know their dialect 'a little' is growing (except in Bavaria). In brief, there is a growing number of speakers who report a reduced form of dialect competence – a variety which may correspond to what is commonly called a regional dialect.

<sup>3</sup> In 1998 72% of the informants in Bavaria stated that they are competent in the local dialect, whereas in 1983 only 66% stated so. In all other parts of the country, the number decreased – e.g. in Northern Germany from 43% in 1983 to 39% in 1998.

Subjective evaluations of the different German varieties were also investigated (Allensbach 2008). The most popular German dialects/varieties were said to be Bavarian (35%), Low German (29%), Berlinese<sup>4</sup> (22%) and Swabian (20%). The most unpleasant dialects/varieties were said to be Saxon (54%) and Bavarian (21%). Particularly interesting in this context are the contradictory attitudes towards Bavarian and the relatively high prestige attributed to Low German. One explanatory factor is that Bavarian is relatively prominent in broadcast media, so that most Germans have an idea what it sounds like. Varieties like *Mecklenburgerisch* or *Saarländisch* appear at the very bottom of such scales (Allensbach 2008: 2f.), simply because they are unknown to most speakers.

Since dialects are used very rarely nowadays in the north of Germany, it could be assumed that the poll respondents did not refer to the base dialects of this area, but rather to a variety close to the standard language with only some regional features. This assumption is supported by Hundt (1992), who studied attitudes towards the regional standards of Hamburg, Berlin, the Palatinate and Bavaria using the matched-guise technique. Even though the number of regional features in each speech sample was the same, the variety of Hamburg was (unlike the other varieties) not regarded as a regional way of speaking, but as a normal way of speaking *Hochdeutsch*, i.e. the standard language (Hundt 1992: 69).

## LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND THE ROLE OF THE SPOKEN MEDIA

Empirical studies of the media's role in the construction of language ideology in German society are still lacking (Brandt 2000: 2164; Holly 1995: 364). Straßner's (1983) overview of the development of dialect use in the mass media since their beginnings reveals a clear predominance of the standard variety, with only some 5% dialect use in radio and even less in television. The omnipresence of the spoken standard language in the media has had two important consequences: It led to a 'popularisation of the standard language' (Holly 1995: 365) which guaranteed access to (at least) a passive knowledge of the standard variety. At the same time the spoken standard variety gained importance compared to its written counterpart (Brandt 2000: 2165).

Since World War II the highest amount of dialect use is found in fictional genres like radio plays and televised popular theatre. Dialects predominantly seem to fulfil a function of establishing contrasts between different characters or of characterising certain locations. In this respect traditional ideologies, which generally link regional varieties with local culture, still play an important role. This is also reflected in the fact that programs oriented towards a more local audience employ more vernacular varieties than programs which are more distant from a local context (Androutsopoulos 2010: 750). Local identity is often not established by the dialects themselves but by prominent representatives of the particular region. Lameli *et al.* (2008) found evidence that such representatives are often associated with a region by their local origin or by a certain regional image rather than by linguistic features<sup>5</sup> (Lameli *et al.* 2008: 79).

The relationship between standard language and dialects in the media in Germany no longer appears to be particularly salient (Burger 2005: 364). Although public discourse still shows an interest in linguistic norms<sup>6</sup> and the print media regularly publish articles about the decline of the German language, these worries mostly concern certain low-prestige linguistic

<sup>4</sup> Berlinese is the only urban variety on the list, which may have to do with Berlin's status as the capital and cultural centre of Germany.

<sup>5</sup> The comedian Otto Waalkes, who was often mentioned as a typical representative of the Frisian German dialect area in the study by Lameli *et al.* (2008), can be considered a typical case for this: He is easily locatable as originating from the northern part of Germany but he does not speak (or very rarely speaks) Frisian.

<sup>6</sup> The high popularity of the books by Bastian Sick (Sick 2002–2009), in which the author deals with questions about 'right' and 'wrong' German, can be seen as symptomatic of this.

forms (which are difficult to locate geographically)<sup>7</sup> and the use of anglicisms (Spitzmüller 2006, 2007). This may be an indicator that the traditional dialects have lost their relevance in public discourse, at least for people who are not regionally bound.

However, considering not only the poles of standard and dialect but also including the whole range of varieties between them, a different picture is obtained. Vernaculars enter broadcast language as original voices (*O-Töne*) in magazine programs, features, and games (Straßner 1983: 1519). It is important to consider the linguistic status of these varieties: The transmission area of shows does not coincide with the corresponding dialect area and this results in the use of a kind of synthesised dialect, i.e. a compromise form which can be understood everywhere but which nobody actually uses anywhere else (Straßner 1983: 1519)<sup>8</sup>.

There has certainly been a rise in the prevalence of original voices in television with the appearance of commercial broadcasting in the mid-1980s, which resulted in a dramatic increase of ‘light’ programs. Earlier, new TV formats such as talk shows or *Big Brother* paved the way for more ordinary speakers (i.e. people without special speech training) to feature in broadcasts. An increase of natural speech in the spoken media could be observed, which led to a ‘relaxation of norms in the spoken standard varieties’ and to a better ‘knowledge of other varieties’ (Holly 1995: 365f.).

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<sup>7</sup> A prominent example of this case is the subordinating conjunction *weil*, which is often used in the spoken language with verb-second word order, instead of verb-final word order as requested by the standard norm.

<sup>8</sup> Androutsopoulos (2010: 749) warns of a ‘reflection fallacy’, since vernacular varieties often used in contrast to the common, non-local codes do not necessarily have to coincide with the actual dialects spoken outside the media.

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