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Language and Regional Identity

Introduction

Europe is a continent of many languages. We all know that, but normally when we think about this fact, we focus on national languages, the type of language that shapes our political and our linguistic geography. But as natural as it may seem today, the idea of a language closely being interrelated with one's identity does not have a very long tradition. In fact it is only since the late 18th century that we think there is some type of intimate connection between the language spoken and the identity of a person as belonging to a nation. And even if the stabilization of European nation states was closely connected with this type of reasoning, European language communities differ considerably in their way of dealing with natural variation within their national language. For some of them, it is only the standardized national language that is relevant in this respect; for others, a certain amount of variation is a central part of their linguistic identity¹.

German as a pluricentric language

The historical basis

The German language is characterized by regional variation to a greater extent than most other Western European languages. To describe this factor in sociolinguistic research, the terms of pluricentric and monocentric languages have been termed². Languages are called monocentric when there is one political or cultural center whose language has been made the standard form of this language accepted by all speakers; they are called pluricentric when the standard form represents a compromise between the idioms used in more than one center. The French and the German languages are good examples for these two types of linguistic communities and their characteristics. So while French is more or less the descendent of the idiom of the Île de France, things are much more complicated in the case of German. We know the German language had its origin not in the variety of one single region but represents a compromise. And it was not a compromise between spoken varieties³. It was the wish of printers – and the authors of their printed texts – that led to a levelling of existing traditions into a form that was able to ensure that texts could be read and understood not only in an area of a local writing tradition but by as many people as possible. It is not by chance, of course, that this development took place shortly after Gutenberg had developed his revolutionary method of printing and after craftsmen in German speaking areas had learnt how to produce paper. Of course, these opportunities came in handy to authors and institutions wanting their texts to be read by a

¹ Let alone states for which multilingualism is a constitutive element of their national identity (e.g., Switzerland).

² The concept of pluricentricity was brought forward by Michael Clyne (cf. Clyne 1992); much research for its application to the situation of German was conducted by Ulrich Ammon (cf. Ammon 2002 und 2004); cf. Eichinger 2007.

³ This development is described in Besch 2003.

larger public (as small it may look from today's standard). The language had to fit the medial revolution of that time⁴ and the following political and religious demand for far reaching communication⁵. By the existence of such a language form, German in the long run was made able to take part in the linguistic trend of the following centuries that brought an ever growing importance to the national vernaculars as compared to Latin (and later on French). Being implemented first of all as a printed and written form, the newly found type of German looked like no single spoken variety of German.

Standardization

That New High German having its origin not as much in the streets as in the printer's office has consequences that can still be seen today. It took until the middle of the 18th century that a final decision about how this written form should look exactly was found, and it took another century to make a large proportion of the population know and understand this standard language. And this is only true for the written form; the mastering of a corresponding spoken variety started during the 18th century with very educated people and standard German as a spoken variety is used widely only for the last fifty years or so⁶. In these decades of our lifetime, the relation between the distribution of traditional regional varieties and spoken standard has changed dramatically. But even after this trend towards unification, German allows and shows a greater degree of regional variation than comparable languages of Europe. The fact that there is an accepted gap between a spoken form, which is more or less regionally bound, and a unified standard (one should say: more or less unified) shows in the terminology used until the end of the 18th century to describe these facts. There are 'Mundarten' ('spoken varieties') as opposed to the 'gute Schreibart' ('written variety'). It was only when the so called 'Bildungsbürgertum' (the bourgeois class whose capital in the German speaking areas of Europe was education) began to dominate the communicative world with its – mostly urban – lifestyle that the traditional spoken forms were marked as rural, which led of course to their marginalization and had consequences for their social value⁷. Paradoxically this objective loss of importance was a prerequisite for the growing emotional value attached to these regional idioms – and rural life all in all. This reinterpretation of the role of regional and other (spoken) varieties became even more important with the growing mobility of the people making up for the population of the growing cities and industrial centers in the second half of the 19th century. Of course, people coming into the growing cities and urban surroundings had to give up their purely regional language, their local dialects, and had to find some linguistic compromise with their working colleagues and neighbours.

Tradition and modern life

The language in the towns had obviously differed from that used in the country before, but these historical urban varieties were somehow based on the surrounding dialects and fitted in a way into the linguistic landscape. This pattern changed even in areas where mostly peo-

⁴ Paper production; printing; cf. Giesecke 2006.

⁵ Which led to the development of new text types of religious ('Reformationsschriften'), political ('Flugschriften') and juridical ('Reichskammergericht') character.

⁶ Elspaß 2005 shows the complicated way to the mastering of standard German by common people; for the general development, see Mattheier 2000.

⁷ Cf. Linke 1996, Eichinger 2002.

ple from the not to distant surroundings made up for the new inhabitants of the cities. A city of this type is Munich, which had 78 000 inhabitants in 1830 and 350 000 in 1890. Most of the people who made up for this increase came from more eastern parts of Bavaria or moved in from northern parts of Germany. This had a twofold effect: The people coming from Bavaria mostly belonged to the working class and brought regional accents into the city that had the effect that the Bavarian of Munich is more of an eastern Bavarian type than its surroundings, and secondly the immigrants from the (near and far) north implemented an orientation towards the standard. So a Munich idiom developed that is of a Bavarian type with a growing orientation towards standard forms. But somehow there is continuity to the regional traditions. The changes are more dramatic in the newly industrialized areas. These urban vernaculars – and ‘Ruhrgebietsdeutsch’ is an outstanding example – are based on another type of regional language: They have to deal with a much more differentiated type of immigration into the area and a different economic and social setting. Concerning the situation of the traditional dialects, one has to take into account that in the whole northern half of Germany the Low German dialects had lost ground for over two hundred years when there was this wave of urbanization and industrialization in the middle of the 19th century. At that time, High German had taken over most functions in everyday life of urban people. Therefore, the use of dialect or even a regional accent in this area is much more socially marked than in most parts of southern Germany. In addition to this, coal mining and the production of steel were not the type of work the traditional dialects had dealt with. What concerns the type of population making up for the growth of this industrial region is that they came from everywhere, with a high percentage from the Prussian east, the famous Polish and Kashubian part of the population of the Ruhr area. The effect of this intermingling of linguistic working class patterns led to the development of a regional idiom with its own special character different from the traditional idea of ‘natural’ dialects. The linguistic description did not care too much about this new form, but as one can see looking back from our times, the emergence of such a variety was an important step towards a pattern of language use that was dominated by urban types of communication even in the rural areas. It is obvious that there was another medial revolution – the emergence of the speaking electronic media – that enabled this mode of communication to percolate through the whole society. In Germany, the introduction of radio emissions in the late 1920s and the use of radio and movies (‘Tönende Wochenschau’) were the crucial steps in this development. Of course the regional varieties did not disappear at once, but the area where they were used changed. Going further in history, the dramatic changes that hit the word of agriculture and craftsmanship in the mid fifties and a similar change in the industrial word since the beginning of the seventies had enormous consequence on the functional domains of regional idioms. All in all, varieties nearer to the standard languages (‘Substandards’) gained by these developments⁸. On the other hand, the remaining regional accents that lost quite a few of their traditional functions are ready to be used in a different way. And this is true for ‘Ruhrgebietsdeutsch’ too: The industrial world that was the basis for this regional type of speaking has been marginalized; the average people who spoke this variety have changed towards some language form nearer to a spoken standard. As a consequence, ‘Ruhr German’ can be used more or less freely as a symbol of regional identity.

⁸ For the concept of substandard, cf. Albrecht 1986.

The interpretation of regional difference

German in a European perspective

As we have seen in our historical overview, the turning point for the status of regional variation was the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th centuries.

Before that time, the linguistic differences had a social effect that was rather different from this sensualistic or romantic view of the connection between one's language and one's person, identity, and self. The languages that were the idioms of power did not care about differences, and so there was a French speaking aristocracy all over Europe as well as a Latin speaking community of educated people.

German as a whole seemed not yet to be fit to be seen as a medium of communication in the public sphere, and although there was a certain knowledge about the differences of German spoken by the average people throughout the German speaking areas, these dialects were not held in very high esteem. When the emancipation of German as a European language started – more or less in the beginning of the 18th century – things changed slowly. So Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz – who wrote Latin and French for all his lifetime, his German works being published only after his death – proposed to collect the vocabulary of the different dialects spoken at his time to use them as a means to fill the lexical gaps in the 'official' German language. During the 18th century, the discussion about regional variation within the German language focused mainly on the point where regional varieties should be allowed to contribute to the newly developed standard German. Only after a consensus about this question was reached – around the beginning of the 19th century – was there room for a new interpretation of regional differentiation. With the historic and national turn at the beginning of the 19th century, dialects were seen as more natural and powerful than the standardized form of German that spread over more and more parts of the population – a consequence of the growing efficiency of the school system. Historical linguistics developed at that time and scientists like Jacob Grimm loved dialects as they seemed to allow a direct look into the history (and into the great medieval times) of our language, and people like Johann Andreas Schmeller started dialectological research. In this setting, for the first time spoken language was dealt with seriously.

Linguistic characters

These developments that had to do with politics as well as with language were the romantic and national interpretations of phenomena that had found the interest of sensualistic thinkers (and travellers) already during the late 18th century. As the sensualist theory implied that cultural productions and the general outlay of the cultural development of a people were largely influenced by the sensations brought to them by their surroundings, the interaction between the area and landscape one lived in and the language one spoke became a topic of not only marginal interest. And even the rationalist part of enlightenment tended to see linguistic differences in such a way. So the great classicist and grammarian Johann Christoph Gottsched, after having traveled on his way to Vienna through the rather hilly area of the 'Oberpfalz' wrote a poem about the horrible language that paralleled the equally horrible landscape⁹. He pro-

⁹ The historical and linguistic context is described in Eichinger 1983.

posed all the world should be without mountains and flat as the area around Leipzig where he came from: This would be the ideal scenery producing the perfect language as well. Of course, he implies that in Leipzig at his time this ideal status of the language was reached. Gottsched's own words describe his impressions of the region north of Regensburg:

So weit mein Auge trägt, erblick ich Stein und Wald,
Ein wüstes raues Land, der Faunen Aufenthalt;
Wo kein gesittet Volk in schönen Städten hauset;
Wo, statt der Musen, Pan auf heischern Röhren brauset.

Apollo wich mit Fleiß aus dieser frechen Flur,
Warum? Sie wies ihm nicht die Schönheit der Natur.
Sie ist der Schreibart gleich, die von den Alpen stammet,
Rauh, höckricht, hart und steif, wie er sie stets verdammet.
[...]

Komm, angenehme Zeit! Beschleunige den Lauf!
Mach alle Länder glatt, heb alle Hügel auf.

I would not dare to translate this into understandable English: The point of these verses is that Apollo and the muses flew from this area where landscape and language fit together in a horrible way – in strict opposition to the situation in Saxony and especially the city of Leipzig ('polite people in beautiful cities') where the flat and even landscape paralleled an educated language.

As you may suspect, the inhabitants of regions characterized by hills and mountains were not too pleased with this interpretation. And as you can easily suspect, there was more behind these remarks than simple geography. These sentences were written in 1750 when Leipzig was in the height of its cultural importance and when one had to speak like in Leipzig if one wanted to be taken seriously. But things changed rather rapidly. Only fifteen years later, Goethe was sent to Leipzig as a student to learn proper German. And in the beginning, he tries to follow the rules given by Gottsched and Gellert, but after a few months, he expresses his discontent with this boring and 'watery' (wässericht) normalized language and takes pride of this 'oberdeutsch' (southern German) traditions of speaking. In this context, he coins the famous quotation that it is dialect where the soul finds its respiration ('in dem die Seele Atem schöpft'). Be this as it may, one sees a growing acceptance of the idea that the kind of language used is not independent of the characteristics of region, landscape, and physical surroundings. The fact as such is not doubted in the discussion about this interdependence, but you have different interpretations and consequences thereof. As can be seen from the example of Gottsched, the idea of the era of enlightenment was more or less to do away with these differences to reach a clear and rational status of the society. This idea lay also on the ground of French language politics, especially since the French Revolution: To be a functioning member of the new Republican society, you had to speak French.

Language, region, and nation

Geography and more

Within the German context, national identity had more to do with language as a sign of ethnicity – to choose a slightly modernist terminology. Regional diversity is part of this ideological frame¹⁰. It shows different aspects of the historical development of our ‘national’ culture. It is heavily disputed to which point our language also forms our sight and interpretation of the world. Of course, this argumentation also implies that the different practical traditions are coined in regional form. Being guests of the ‘Bergbaumuseum’ (being: ‘vor Ort’ and doing something ‘Tiefschürfendes’; both word terms from the early language of mining), it is more than obvious to take an example from the field of mining. Mining was one of the first areas of craftsmanship in which a German terminology was coined. It was the terminology developed within the silver mines of the Fuggers in the Middle Ages which characterizes this business until now¹¹. In a similar way, many regional languages were characterized by the economic preferences and by the natural conditions they met as well. So dialectological research found that in alpine Switzerland there are more linguistic techniques to be found that allow an exact local orientation¹², and it is said to be out of this reason that the ‘her-’ and ‘hin’-adverbs of German with their strict orientation with respect to the speakers standing point come from the South of Germany and are not used that fluently in the northern parts of the language area. The partition into a northern and a southern part of the area in which German is spoken has consequences on different linguistic levels. The differences in the pronunciation of German, which most of its speakers cannot hide, have their main difference along the line where the area of Low German met that of High German. With Low German used less and less, the speakers in the North took over High German and spoke it more or less to the letter. Speakers from the South always show some interference with their local spoken form as there is no sharp systematic border between the high German dialects and High German as a Standard Language. The same should be true for the several levels of grammar, too, but on the grammatical level, the norm of even spoken German seems to be rather strict – we do not allow so much variation. There are some differences, but they do not make up for a very impressive picture¹³. Much more impressive are the differences in the vocabulary. To cite just one simple example: when in the northern parts of Germany, the fruit in question is called Apfelsine (meaning: apple from China). You can see from this form that people who used this word got to know this fruit via the Netherlands while the alternative name of Orange represents a Frenchified form of the Italian Arancia, so we got the word from Genoa and then around the Alps. In addition to these structural differences, there are rules of linguistic contact, questions of politeness, and things like that which differ according to this regional differentiation, too. In principle, twodifferent techniques exist for being polite: politeness by distance and politeness by nearness. If you come from northern Germany, you should symbolize politeness through the markers of high esteem, as a Southerner you may even ritually insult your partner to show him or her that you are so near to him that you cannot even offend him by words and phrases that should normally count as an insult¹⁴.

¹⁰ Cf. Berthele 2003.

¹¹ For the linguistic history of mining see Piirainen 1998.

¹² For a recent discussion of these aspects, see Berthele 2006.

¹³ Formation of present perfect with haben/sein with certain verbs; verbal rection (etwas erinnern / sich an etwas erinnern), Genus (der/das Tachometer), Numerus (plural form of Wagen: Wagen or Wägen).

¹⁴ For the mentioned characteristics of southern German, see Eichinger 2001.

Traditions and stereotypes

I hope that from this sketch you can see what stereotypes about the respective other are composed of. And it is obvious that there is a certain difference between the autostereotype and the heterostereotype. My historical overview in the first part of this paper shows that in this northern-southern distinction one of the central developments of German language history is reflected: The ones who speak High German against those who try to do so. On the basis of this principal distinction and on the basis of the romanticist and national interpretation of the 19th century, traditional regional differences as reflected in dialects have their place in this puzzle of stereotypes too. And so even in our not so romantic modern times, there are reflections of this. A few years ago, I was asked to comment on an article in the German 'Playboy' who had asked its readers which was the sexiest dialect: The winner was Bavarian; Palatian, the dialect spoken in the area of Mannheim, was last. But I do not want to comment on that.

Where do these differences in estimation come from? What makes a language or a dialect attractive is not – or not in the first place – the aesthetic value of its linguistic form. Much more important is the connotations that are connected with a certain idiom. For a traditional dialect, for instance, Bavarian, it surely helps when there is supporting evidence of natural friendliness, for instance, beautiful landscape, good food, and so on. On the other hand, opposite to this slightly romantic ideal, a certain modernism and coolness is a prerequisite for a positive evaluation too. So, for instance, in all polls concerning this question, the language of Berlin belongs to the winners.

You can already see where my argumentation points to. What are the consequences for 'Ruhrgebietsdeutsch' (Ruhr German)? At least during the first century of its existence, it had a bad press. The principal problem of the language of this area was a threefold one. Firstly, it did not fit into the traditional picture of regional dialects, which were in principle autochthonous and rural; its dialectal parts belonged to a dialect region where the use of dialectal forms bears a strong social interpretation, and thirdly, it represented an unusual kind of language contact, language mixing being in itself a problematic feature in the public opinion. All in all, these features, of course, reflect the fact that 'Ruhrgebietsdeutsch' is the language of a historically new phenomenon. The language of the working class in a protoindustrial society was something no one knew how to deal with. This is not something that fits in the traditional picture, even if it was the future at the time of its origin. Our stereotypes about language apparently do not like industries. It was not by chance that I cited above the case of Saxonian, which was in rather high esteem until it became the language of one of the first industrialized areas in Germany. In a way, in such languages, the German way of interpreting regional difference interferes with the British one. In England, the norm of acceptable English is formed in the South-East (around London), speaking with an northern accent automatically is associated with working class speech, which of course is a remembrance of the north of England being the center of industrialization¹⁵. As English is a paradigmatic monocentric language, regional aspects as such play no role in the discussion of Standard English. In a way, 'Ruhrgebietsdeutsch' is a phenomenon like this and as such not easily integrated into the German type of interpretation of re-

¹⁵ These differences are outlined in Durrell 1999.

gional facts¹⁶. Its problem is that apparently autostereotypes and heterostereotypes about this language drifted apart, similar to the surroundings and lifestyle it represented.

New functions in a post traditional environment

I have to apologize: In the following sentences, I will formulate the way cultural sociologists describe modern societies that are more determined by self-chosen symbolic worlds than by traditional bindings¹⁷. This life style sociology looks at salient elements of everyday life, and the outcome normally looks like a collection of all prejudices one could find about a certain group. After this precaution: due to the historical facts, the 'Ruhrgebiet' (Ruhr area) for a long time has been connected with the prototypical phenomena of industrialization. That means large factories with smoke and dirt but, on the other hand, the pride on the quality of the work one does, the solidarity with co-workers¹⁸. It means also: the accessories of a proletarian lifestyle, with its extrovert (football is our life)¹⁹, introvert²⁰ (breeding doves, rabbits, and so on) and lower classes' extravagant (low ride [Opel] Manta)²¹ styles. Somewhere in between these life style accessories, 'Ruhr German' as the relevant idiom has to fit in too. I could enumerate many markers of this life style, but I think the picture is clear enough. It is obvious that quite a few of the features stereotypically connected with 'Ruhrgebiet' are no longer existent or at least representative for the situation of today. The rapid and principal changes which separate us from the 'original' of this lifestyle are not only marked by the fact that historical museums easily cover the everyday life of our youth, and factories are transformed into cultural centers²², but that parts of this historical identity can be used as freely chosen markers of regional identity in normal linguistic life or as resources for comical or critical role models of a critical identity as opposed to the mainstream. When Herbert Grönemeyer sang about Bochum²³, the Misfits²⁴ about Oberhausen, these role models are used. Of course, the use of the specific language form changes where the function of serving as a regional symbol becomes so dominant. With a functional embedding like this, salient markers of 'regionalness' have to do the job. This is easier in the part of Germany where Low German was originally the language of everyday communication: Coming from High German, you get into another system so even small

¹⁶ For a detailed description, see Becker 2003.

¹⁷ Schulze 1992 is the most influential analysis of this type; but cf. Meyer 2001.

¹⁸ Cf. Becker 2003, pp. 1 / 2

¹⁹ Portrayed in a prototypical way in the movie 'Fußball ist unser Leben' (football is our life; 2000), cf. Wikipedia 'Fußball ist unser Leben (Film)'.

²⁰ Cf. 'WeG Eder Arbeitersiedlungen' (<http://www.gelsenkirchen.de/Touristik/Stadtportrait/Stadtfuehrer/Arbeitersiedlungen.asp>).

²¹ Another movie 'Manta, Manta' (1991); also found in Wikipedia with relevant comments.

²² Cf. 'In der Gaskraftzentrale eines ehemaligen Bochumer Stahlwerks, dort, wo einst der Puls der Industriekultur schlug, hat das Ruhrgebiet ein Energiezentrum anderer Art hervorgebracht: einen Veranstaltungsort ohne Vorbild, eines der außergewöhnlichsten Festspielhäuser Europas.' (<http://www.jahrhunderthalle-bochum.de/>).

²³ Grönemeyer grew up in the Ruhrpott, Germany's largest industrial region centered around the Ruhr river. This album - and this song - pay homage to Grönemeyer's hometown. This particular song has gained cult status in Bochum and is traditionally sung before VfL Bochum 1848 pro soccer games. (http://german.about.com/library/blmus_groeneBO01.htm).

²⁴ Two female comedians: 'stehse auf'm Gasometer im Sturmesbrausen, und alles watte siehs is Oberhausen' ('and you are standing on the gasometer surrounded by a raging storm and everything you see is Oberhausen').

markers are very visible. This explains Werner Besch's remark that northern German spoken language is characterized by only ten phonetic phenomena²⁵.

One would expect that 'Ruhrgebietsdeutsch' uses parts of this list too, and in a doctoral dissertation about this topic (Becker 2003) all these markers find themselves as core markers of this language variety. So, it is part of a northern German type of spoken regional language, but of course, there are additional differentiating markers, and it is the combination of all of them that gives a picture of Ruhrgebietsdeutsch. The central additional phonetic markers are the use of low German plosives where High German has fricatives and affricate (*wat*, *dat*, *bissken*, *kopp*), strong vocalizing of [r] in different positions, connected with a prolongation of the vowel (*wuuade* instead of *wurde*), and a strong tendency to contractions (*hasse* instead of *hast du*). In grammatical morphology, the most salient marker is the use of uninflected pronouns (*mit sein sohn*), in syntax the generalized use of one oblique case (*mit dat kind*), also in possessive constructions (*den seinen stock*) and the use of a 'Verlaufsform' (*am spielen war*). This is more or less the central core of things you have to use to be received as a user of Ruhrgebietsdeutsch. If this rather restricted list of phenomena qualifies this variety as a descendant of the old language of the industrial era or as a modern substandard of Standard German with some regional markers remains at the moment undecidable.

Final remarks

In the history of regional and social differentiation of German, at least three essential changes have taken place. The unifying process of standardization began with the 19th century. This had enormous consequences on the function and development of non-standard-varieties. This led among other things to an ideological reinterpretation of traditional regional languages. With the process of urbanization and industrialization during the second half of the 19th century, new functional varieties appeared: On the whole, they were motivated by external or internal language contact. 'Ruhrgebietsdeutsch' is a paradigmatic example for this development. Changes in the world of media, language use, but also consequences of the general modernization reduced the functional areas of both types of spoken substandards; in a pluricentric language culture, parts of the traditions of speaking laid down in these varieties are used and usable as markers of regional identity – even if we do not know exactly how this works.

²⁵ "Geschlossene Aussprache e für langes ä in *Medchen*, *Hefen* (*Häfen*) etc.; Aussprache von ei, au, eu jeweils mit längerem Ton auf dem ersten Vokal; kurzer Vokal in *Rad*, *Bad*, *Glas*; ch statt g im freien und gedeckten Auslaut: *mach* (*mag*), *fliecht* (*fliegt*) etc.; f statt pf im Anlauf: *fosten* (*Pfosten*), *fanne* (*Pfanne*) etc.; zudem Tendenz zu *dingk* statt *Ding* etc. und zum Konsonantenschwund im Auslaut: *sin* (*sind*), *do* (*doch*), *ma* (*mal*)" (Besch 2001, p. 421).

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