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Introduction

The *Online Handbook of Language Criticism in a European Perspective* offers a contrastive perspective of language criticism in European language cultures. Language criticism is a special form of language reflection. We define it as the “practice of subjective metalinguistic reflection” which spans a continuum ranging from neutral to decidedly evaluative metalinguistic utterances reflecting about language use and language norms. So, language criticism covers a spectrum of observations about language that range from relatively neutral ones to those taking a clearly determined position. Language criticism is thus understood as an umbrella term for a wide spectrum of descriptive and evaluative language criticism. This definition is an extension of that of the term *Sprachkritik* (language criticism) in German linguistics, which refers only to the evaluation of language.

Descriptive language criticism is interested in linguistic expressions and possibilities for communicative actions. It can be illustrated with a prototypical question like, “Which functional, cognitive and social consequences does the elimination of a case category (such as the German genitive case) have for language and thought in a speech community?” This type of language criticism describes and discusses the implications on the language system and on language use based on linguistic criteria in form-function analyses. In contrast, statements of the following type exemplify a mostly evaluative form of language criticism: “The language use in the social media is harmful to the language as a whole due to its preference for abbreviations and shortenings”. The continuum between these forms of language criticism is here investigated in a comparative perspective. The *Online Handbook of Language Criticism in a European Perspective* describes all of these forms and puts them in relation to one another.

Considering these aspects, we refer to both language reflection that is based on values but that takes a neutral stance (= descriptive language criticism) and language reflection that makes a clear value judgement (= evaluative language criticism). Language criticism is thus understood more broadly as the “practice of subjective metalinguistic reflection”. This practice comprises a neutrally categorising as well as an attitudinal evaluative aspect. Hence, a linguistic phenomenon may be neutrally discussed, but speakers may also state a clear value judgement on it.

The aforementioned forms of language criticism take place in academic as well as in non-academic linguistic discussions about one’s own or foreign language cultures. The act of talking about language can be seen

as a kind of 'crystallisation point' of processes of social identity construction. This idea is based on the hypothesis that culturally shaped views are manifested in languages as practices of identity construction. Convergences and divergences between language cultures can be discovered by looking at these practices of subjective metalinguistic reflection. The handbook compares the German, English, French, Italian and Croatian languages and cultures in synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Whenever the handbook mentions the practice of subjective metalinguistic reflection in German, English, French, Italian, or Croatian, the analysis focuses on the respective historically and geographically rooted language (for instance German spoken in Germany). However, the transnational perspective is not neglected (e.g. regarding German as spoken in Austria, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, and Switzerland). The regional scope is thus expanded depending on the type of question, approach, and relevance of cultural relations.

The handbook is a periodic and multilingual online publication. Encyclopedic articles are published successively on selected topics that highlight key concepts in language criticism and that are of cultural relevance to the European perspective. The aim is thus to present a history of concepts of European language criticism. On the one hand, the handbook gives specific insights into the individual language cultures. On the other hand, it aims at comparing and contrasting them. The handbook thus contains articles that focus on individual languages and articles that compare different ones. All articles are published in German. The articles looking individually at the practice of subjective metalinguistic reflection in English, French, Italian and Croatian can additionally be read in the article's object language (i.e. in German/English, German/French, German/Italian, and German/Croatian).

The handbook is published periodically. Each volume focuses on specific topics of language criticism in a European perspective. The structure of the individual volumes follows a similar pattern: The comparative articles, as we would like to call them (i.e. "Critique of language norms in European perspective") display one of the concepts of language criticism in a comparative perspective including all five object languages. They are also translated into these five languages. The third chapter focuses on the concept's importance for the German language culture (e.g. "Critique of language norms (*Sprachnormenkritik*) in German"), this chapter also

being available in all of the five languages. The fourth chapter shows the concept's relevance for the English language culture. It is presented in both German and English. Similarly, the fifth to seventh chapter look at the concept in relation to French, Italian, and Croatian, respectively.

The handbook is a publication of the project group European Language Criticism Online (*Europäische Sprachkritik Online, ESO*). The ESO-Project is based in the European Center for Linguistics (*Europäisches Zentrum für Sprachwissenschaften, EZS*), which is a cooperation between the Faculty for Modern Languages of Heidelberg University and the German Institute (*Institut für Deutsche Sprache, IDS*) in Mannheim. Various professors, researchers, postgraduate members and scholarship holders of the PhD programme *Sprachkritik als Gesellschaftskritik im europäischen Vergleich* (Language criticism as social criticism in a European perspective), which is financed by the state of Baden-Württemberg, participate in this project. The project is further assisted by national and international collaborators. The project group displays its research findings on a multilingual and multimodal online platform (www.europsprachkritik.com). The handbook in which the articles are published is linked to this online platform. It is addressed to researchers, young academics and students of the various philologies in Germany and abroad. It is also addressed to persons from other disciplines, especially those with a background in social and cultural studies. Additionally, the online platform features some smaller contributions for the general public that has an interest in language(s).

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the eight reviewers from the German and English Departments as well as the Departments for Romance and Slavic Studies for the changes they have made as well as for their comments and suggestions. The handbook was made possible in this form thanks to their expertise.

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