

Attitudinal flashlights on standard in Austria: perspectives of usage, appropriateness and future¹

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Abstract. This article provides first insights on language biographical interviews conducted in the course of the Special Research Program (SFB) “German in Austria: Variation – Contact – Perception”, which will be briefly introduced as well. Focusing on ‘High German’ from a lay linguistic perspective, it discusses aspects of usage and appropriateness with regard to school contexts as well as its future development.

Keywords: Standard varieties; Austria; attitudes; interviews; school; usage.

Introduction

This article deals with standard German in Austria from the lay perspective and thus with attitudinal aspects of ‘High German’, the typical lay term for standard (cf. Koppensteiner/Lenz 2017). Aspects of variation, change and dynamics of language attitudes with regard to standard and near-standard varieties, both on diatopic and diastratic levels, are still to be answered. This is also the case for the sociolinguistic relationship between the ‘Austrian Standard’ on the one hand and other German standards (in other countries) and other non-standard varieties on the other hand.² Thus, further comprehensive empirical research is required, an issue currently addressed by the Special Research Program (SFB) “German in Austria. Variation – Contact – Perception” (FWF F60), financed by the Austrian Science Fund FWF (cf. www.dioe.at/en). This article will first outline the project’s focus (chapter 1), then provide a methodological overview relevant for the data used (chapter 2), and subsequently present and discuss results with regard to interviews (chapter 3). It closes with a summary and an outlook (chapter 4).

1 This article results from the Special Research Project “German in Austria. Variation – Contact – Perception (FWF F60-G23), financed by the Austrian Science Fund FWF, cf. www.dioe.at/en. It presents research results of the project part “Standard varieties from the perspective of perceptual variationist linguistics” (F 6008-G23).

2 For an overview on the research situation in Austria cf. Koppensteiner/Lenz (in prep.), Soukup/Moosmüller 2011.

Standard ‘in the minds’ – project outline

The SFB “German in Austria” consists of nine project parts distributed over three Austrian universities (Vienna, Graz, Salzburg) and the Austrian Academy of Sciences.³ Project part 8 (PP08: “Standard varieties from the perspective of perceptual variationist linguistics”) focuses on German ‘in the minds’ of speakers and listeners and is thus located within the attitudinal-perceptual paradigm (cf. Koppensteiner/Lenz 2017). PP08 pursues two central aims: (1) to deliver comprehensive analyses of the variation and dynamics of language attitudes and perception with regard to the standard register of German in Austria from (a) non-linguistic perspective(s); (2) to reveal lay strategies of conceptualization on standard German and (connected) patterns of evaluation. Due to the methodological complexity and heterogeneity of the (attitudinal-perceptual) topic, the project applies a multi-variate approach, striving a balanced relationship of both the speakers’ and listeners’ perspective. This includes language-biographical interviews, ‘guided conversations among friends’ as well as listener judgment tests (including online questionnaires).

Methodological approach – language-biographical interview

For pragmatic reasons, here only the method ‘interviews’ can be sketched briefly. This direct approach-type (cf. Garrett 2010: 37–38) is used to elicit attitudinal utterances in a (rather) formal setting⁴, employing a structured interview guideline to discuss topics such as language biography, (individual) “vertical” structure of “varieties”, or situational language use. Interviews were conducted in 13 different rural locations all over Austria (at least 10 informants/location). Of these, two locations of the eastern part of Austria ([Neckenmarkt](#), [Allentsteig](#)) with a total of 9 informants will be used to give first

³ For a general introduction of the SFB ‘German in Austria. Variation – Contact – Perception’ cf. Budin et al. (2018), Lenz (2018), Lenz (in print).

⁴ Which is determined amongst other by parameters of explorer and informant not knowing each other, a (near-)standard type of speech used along with an implicit hierarchy between both persons (expert vs. lay person”. The opposite is the case for method ‘conversations among friends’. At a later project stage, both will be contrasted intra- and inter-individually (cf. Koppensteiner/Lenz 2017).

insights on ‘High German’ from lay perspectives with regard to its importance and actual use in school as well as the future of ‘High German’.⁵

Perspectives on ‘High German’ – first insights

Questioned about the importance of ‘High German’ in class, there are recurring comments indicating that school “prepares for the real life” which makes the use of “high language” a necessity (e.g. Inf. 0031). However, that view is differentiated with regard to the subject: in Mathematics “it’s about figures” and thus ‘High German’ is of subordinated importance – in contrast to subject German, where teachers “should teach our Austrian German and not dialect” (Inf. 0025). Dialect “does not fit” in school (Inf. 0028). That also addresses the sphere of teachers being role models with regard to language use: ‘High German’ is the “requested” type of speech in school, using dialectal varieties does not meet the needs of a “good linguistic role model” (Inf. 0031). Other comments indicate that school as an institution has a leading role in imparting / “teaching” ‘High German’, especially in rural areas (Inf. 0027).

Do these opinions meet linguistic reality in schools according to the informants interviewed? Here, a differentiated picture is articulated: Depending on the type of school (“pupils from high school talk High German, pupils from secondary modern schools talk dialect” [Inf. 0031]), a considerable degree of dialect (“lots of dialect” [Inf. 0027]) or “something in-between” (Inf. 0026) seems to be of pronounced communicative relevance, and especially “between the lessons” not only with colleagues but teachers as well (Inf. 0032).

If – according to these informants – ‘High German’ is used heterogeneously at school, how does this affect the evaluation of the future of the development of ‘High German’? In this context, we necessarily need to take the role of teachers as “normative authorities” within Ammon’s (1995: 80) model of a “social forces field of a standard variety” (*Soziales Kräftefeld einer Standardvarietät*) into account. In our data, we face various utterances: Aspects of “tradition” and “the

⁵ Apart from the fact, that these are only two locations of the 13 covered by the project, both are located in the Eastern part of Austria. Thus, the insights given are not “representative” for the whole of Austria and in-depth analyses “with such an *attitude*” are yet to be conducted.

past” implicitly target the linguistic development every variety and language encounters (Inf. 0024). Sometimes, that process is perceived as “natural”, as a necessity that “always has happened [...] regardless if we want or not” (Inf. 0031). At least the latter part might be interpretable as implicitly negative, although such an evaluation was avoided to a certain extent by all informants analyzed in this article. Thus, being “neutral” (Inf. 0024, 0026, 0027) towards the development of ‘High German’ was often indicated.

Synopsis and outlook

According to these first insights, ‘High German’ is perceived as type of speech with a considerable amount of (functional) prestige especially in formal situations⁶, while its actual use seems to deviate from such (normative) views to a certain extent. In-depth analyses, which still have to be conducted, will shed light on heterogeneous attitudinal shapes of ‘standard in Austria. Results of PP08 will at a later stage be also contrasted with [project part 10](#) of the SFB ‘German in Austria’, which deals with language use and attitudes in Austrian schools⁷.

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⁶ For theoretical perspectives on prestige cf. e.g. Edwards (1996), Garrett (2010); Cf. e.g. Moosmüller (1991), Soukup (2009), Soukup/Moosmüller (2011), Koppensteiner/Lenz (in print) with regard to such evaluations within Austrian adults.

⁷ Recent findings with focus on attitudinal aspects within Austrian school and/or youth contexts cf. e.g. de Cilla/Ransmayr (2015), Fink/Ransmayr/de Cilla (2017), Ender/Kasberger/Kaiser (2017), Lenz (2014).

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Weblinks

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