

Austrian listeners' perceptions of standard-dialect shifting: An experimental approach

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BACKGROUND:

- **Speaker-design** approach to sociolinguistic variation (Schilling-Estes 2002): Speakers' communicative strategies and goals drive their **use of different linguistic varieties in interaction**
- Speakers use **shifts between varieties** as **contextualization cues** (Gumperz 1982), to
 - > **index** and highlight **social meanings** (language attitudes) attaching to a respective variety as relevant for utterance interpretation, thus
 - > **deploying styles** (linguistic varieties) **strategically** (rhetorically) to achieve certain **communicative effects**.
- For example, **Austrian native-speakers** in TV discussions often perform **strategic shifts** from socially prestigious standard ('Hochsprache') into more negatively regarded dialect to **express antagonistic footings** (contempt, ridiculing).

PROBLEM ADDRESSED:

- The notion of **strategic style-shifting** is predicated on the assumption that the **different styles deployed are distinguishable for and perceived by listeners**, so that this perception can be incorporated into their contextually situated interpretation of the ongoing discourse.
- However, previously, only one study (Coupland 1980) addressed this issue in an experimental design.

GOAL OF THE EXPERIMENT:

- > To investigate **when and where listeners** actually **hear distinct styles** being employed in ongoing talk.
- > To **establish** the necessary **experimental methodology** for this purpose

SET-UP OF THE EXPERIMENT:

- Setting:** Austria
- Informants:** 42 Austrian native speakers (mostly middle-class, aged 20-70)
- Varieties:** Spoken **standard** Austrian German and Austrian **dialect** (Middle Bavarian-Austrian)
- Format:**
 - 12 audio samples played to informants (~72 sec. on average)
 - Audio samples taken from an Austrian TV political discussion show
 - Informants asked to **underline dialect/non-standard passages** in (standard) **transcripts**
 - Followed by debriefing interviews

(4)
AR: Können wir irgendwie uns einigen meine Herren, ob wir über die Vergangenheit reden wie Sie wollten, oder ob wir jetzt über Ankündigungen reden, weil wenn wir über, das geht irgendwie nicht zusammen, nein, es geht nicht zusammen, und wir schaffen Beschäftigung und wir haben die höchste Arbeitslosenrate, wobei, Herr Präsident Fischer, ich meine, die Sache mit dem, früher war ein Generaldirektor, wurde dafür gelobt dass er die Arbeitnehmer haltet, das ist schon richtig, nur, Sie wissen genauso, das war die falsche Politik zu lange, und das hat uns, da haben, ich meine, da haben die ÖVP und die FPÖ einfach recht, das hat uns einen Berg Schulden schon geschaffen, erinnern Sie sich an die 80er Jahre.

Fig.1: Excerpt from an original transcript as marked up by an informant during the experiment

STEPS IN THE TABULATION OF RESULTS:

- (1) Compilation of all instances where a **word** had been **underlined** by one or more of the informants

| | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------|-------------------|---------------|----------|---------|--------------------|-------|------------|--------|-------|-----------|----------|------|-------|-------------|----|
| 1 | | | 1 | 8 | | | | | 1 | 26 | | 1 | | | |
| die | Frau | Außenminister | nichts | anderes | zu | tun | hatte | als | zu | sagen, | naja, | und | zwar | öffentlich, | |
| 1 | | | | | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 32 | 29 | 37 | 37 |
| nachzulesen | auf | der | Homepage | des | Außenministeriums, | der | Text | steht | fest, | naja, | das | sind | keine | | |
| 38 | 13 | 15 | 23 | 32 | 19 | 11 | 12 | 18 | 28 | 14 | 9 | 6 | | | |
| Guten, | gegen | die | liegt | eh | sozusagen, | gegen | die | liegen | eh | sozusagen | Anzeigen | vor, | | | |
| 3 | 3 | 5 | 10 | 15 | 24 | 27 | 40 | | | | | | | | |
| im | Innenministerium, | und | denen | wird | schon | recht | geschehen. | Das | war | ihre | Reaktion | | | | |

Table 1: Illustration of the tabulation of results from the perception experiment

- (2) This concerned 1,536 (or 68.6%) of the total of 2,240 words included in the transcript of the audio samples
- (3) **Cut-off** set at **25%** of informants (N=11 out of 42)
- (4) **350 out of 2,240 (=15.6%) words** were underlined by at least **25%** of the informants
- (5) Identification of **dialect features** in the underlined words based on past research (e.g. Dressler & Wodak 1982; Moosmüller 1991, 1995, 2007; Scheutz 1985)

RESULTS:

- **80% of the words** underlined by 25% or more of the informants (N=277 out of 350) can be accounted for as containing **Austrian dialect features described in the literature**:
 - input-switches (43.1% of words),
 - morphosyntactic features (7.1%),
 - lexical features (3.4%),
 - /vocalization (3.4%),
 - ge-reduction (2%),
 - consonant cluster simplification (1.1%),
 - multiple features (12%)
- Therefore, these features are good 'diagnostics' of where Austrian listeners will hear dialect as opposed to standard
- The remaining unaccounted-for underlined words occur mostly in immediate juxtaposition with words showing clear dialect features; however, the resulting 'chunks' could not be further specified syntactically nor prosodically.

ASSESSMENT OF THE METHODOLOGY:

- Orientation of informants towards written, prescribed (vs. oral, common-usage) standard
 - > While common in the context of Austrian German, this could also be a function of the methodology used (marking up written transcripts)
- Accomplishing task at natural speech rate was challenging for some informants
- At times it was difficult to determine where underlining started / stopped (see Fig.1)
- Possible ordering effect as informants got used to the task
- The **experiment needs to be replicated** across different settings and configurations to fully explore its power and validity

Overall, this type of experiment **successfully elicits empirical evidence concerning listeners' perceptions of shifts between linguistic varieties.**

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