Austrian listeners' perceptions of standard-dialect shifting: An experimental approach
Barbara Soukup
University of Vienna
barbara.soukup@univie.ac.at

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

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

**Steps in the Tabulation of Results:**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>on</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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%),
  - textual features (3.4%),
  - vocalization (3.4%),
  - 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-use) 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.

References:


