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Standardisation and language criticism in European perspective

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Abstract. This article compares the processes of standardisation that were discussed in the different articles on German, English, French, Italian, and Croatian. It highlights diachronic aspects relating to the shaping of norms for written and spoken language as well as synchronic aspects such as the development of pluricentric standards and issues of orthography. Further, the role of the respective authorities of codification will be discussed from both the diachronic and synchronic perspective.

A note on reading the article:
This article brings together the central aspects from the articles on the different languages in this collection. For deeper understanding of the individual language cultures it is recommended to read the articles on each of these, which also include references to secondary literature.

Discussing linguistic processes of standardisation for various national languages raises issues relating to the respective hierarchies of social, regional, institutional, authority-related, national-symbolic, traditional, literary, and variation-specific selection of norms. If processes of linguistic change are reflected on in society by taking a descriptive or judgemental stance, this is referred to as language criticism. Processes of standardisation and 'de-standardisation' are located

- in the continuum between different varieties with differing social prestige (i. e. regional dialects as against standard language or literary language),
- in the context of cultural and economic centres (such as London, Paris, Florence, Dubrovnik, Central and Upper German cities) as opposed to the 'provincial' peripheries,
- in the competition between accepted and rejected authorities of codification (e. g. dictionaries, grammars or language academies),

- in the interplay between loyalty to norms and tolerance of variation, and lastly
- in the range between private and public communication as reflected in orality and literacy.

From the perspective of language criticism, standardisation is especially discussed in times of technical innovation influencing the language system via language usage (e. g. book printing, digital media), or in times of important cultural breaks which place the focus on the medium of knowledge transfer (e. g. Luther's translation of the Latin Bible into different languages). Within these contexts, issues concerning language as a symbol of identity formation, for the mediation of knowledge or political power become important. In the following, the specific characteristics of the processes of standardisation as detailed in the individual articles on German, English, French, Italian, and Croatian will be compared.

The beginning of standardisation in the different language cultures

All processes of standardisation in the European languages ultimately relate to Latin, which was the language on which all written communication in administration, government, church, and science was to be modelled in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age. In addition, the European languages competed with respect to cultural prestige. Since the 17th century, French – as opposed to German and English – was regarded as the prestigious language of the nobility, of literature and education. Similarly, Italian had a great appeal in Croatia in the Renaissance, so that Croatian competed with it as language of literature and education.

The processes of standardisation for all of the discussed languages are closely related to certain geographical centres: the region of Paris for French, Florence and Tuscany for Italian (the terms of *Florentine* or *Tuscan* already showing the influence of these regions as linguistic-literary hubs), Greater London and the university cities of Oxford and Cambridge for English, and the cities of Dubrovnik, Zagreb, Rijeka, and Zadar for Croatian. For German, the East-Central and East-Upper German cities crucially influenced the standardisation process, which is also reflected in the term *Druckersprache* ('printers' language').

The technical innovation of book printing in the 15th century as well as the translation of the Latin Bible into German literary dialects in the 16th century and subsequently into other languages – for instance the *Authorized Version* (1611) for English or the posthumously published Bible translation by Matija Petar Katančić for Croatian (1831) – advanced the processes of standardisation of all the languages compared here. The new technological means of producing and spreading written texts greatly increased the importance of literacy and its norm-setting influence, as decisions for specific norms and against alternative variants (e. g. reform efforts) manifested themselves particularly effectively in written texts.

Standardisation and mediality

In all the compared languages, debates on standardisation are primarily related to the written medium. The spoken register, which is primary in the socialisation process of human beings, differs most distinctly from the written standards, as it is the language of private life and daily interactions without official and public functions. Knowledge of the written standard is closely associated with education and thus serves the function of social distinction. In the 19th and 20th century, orthoepic efforts of standardisation attempt to establish spoken standards, which increasingly follow patterns emerging as regional, social or institutionalised role models and shaping standard pronunciation. The spread of public education, such as the introduction of free compulsory education in France in 1881/1882, facilitate their propagation. In the 20th century, new technical innovations (radio, TV, etc.) on the one hand create the possibility to establish conventions of pronunciation as the norm (such as for British English *Received* or *BBC Pronunciation*). On the other hand, they also take account of linguistic diversity in regional and social accents.

Linguistic criticism in processes of standardisation

In the context of a comparative investigation of language criticism, meta-linguistic reflections and language-critical discussions play a further role in standardisation processes. First meta-linguistic discussions about

modern language may be found in Italian: In the early 14th century, Dante Alighieri in his work *De vulgari eloquentia* differentiates between Volgare (the natural form of communication) and Latin (language grammatically described by scholars) and advocates the development of a language possessing the naturalness of Volgare and the degree of standardisation of Latin. This does not meet with success, however. For English the conscious replacement of Latin as administrative language by English in the 15th century as well as the emancipation of English as a literary language from French are to be mentioned. The process of standardisation of English was further accelerated by the introduction of book printing from the late 15th century on.

Levels of standardisation

In addition to literary language, institutions of power, such as the courtly centres, law courts, chanceries and offices, serve as language models and thus play a central role in shaping the respective language norms. Efforts to establish norms and conventions at first drive the standardisation processes of lexis and orthography, and later of syntax and orthoepy (standard pronunciation).

In French, following lexis and orthography, grammar and pronunciation move into focus of metalinguistic criticism from the 18th century on. In English, a too elaborated and complex sentence structure modelled on Latin comes to be criticised especially from the second half of the 17th century on. Loan words face similar criticism in all the compared languages (especially when they are considered as *modish words*), regardless of whether they are borrowed from Latin, French, Italian or English.

In German in the 18th and 19th centuries, issues of standardisation concern especially the orthography, lexis and grammar, such as the use of the tenses, of mood and of the genera verbi (i.e. active–passive distinctions).

In Italian in the 19th century, initiated by Alessandro Manzoni, the process of standardisation is dominated by the model function of Tuscan or spoken educated Florentine on all levels of language.

In Croatian, the process of standardisation is very closely linked with the emergence of a national sentiment in the Renaissance. The selection of the variety that is being standardised is not primarily guided by social

prestige but is rather based on its wide distribution in ethnic Croatia as well as by the fact that it is spoken in the only free cultural centre. The selected standard variety has served as an important national symbol since, continuing to this day.

Varieties carrying a high social prestige naturally have a great impact on standardisation processes. Their importance is however surpassed by the dictionaries and grammar books which serve to establish the selected norms through their codification, being essential to all the languages compared here. Likewise, language academies and institutions with similar though not comparable prestige in a speech community are to be seen in this context, significantly influencing standardisation processes.

Characteristics of standardisation processes

As outlined in the articles on the different language cultures compared in this volume, the linguistics literature differentiates between processes of standardisation that are part of an active language policy 'from above', in being supported or initiated by social and political institutions, and standardisation processes 'from below', in which no active intervention on the part of social and political institutions takes place. For English and German, the process of standardisation largely takes place 'from below', i.e. the speakers themselves – authors, book printers, language reformers, grammarians and lexicographers – discuss issues of literary language, shape its norms and conventions, and spread them in publications.

The lack of institutional intervention 'from above' is, despite isolated attempts, more marked in English, where – unlike German – not even a spelling reform has ever been officially undertaken. Current English orthography goes back to spelling conventions that were developed in Middle English and that have born hardly any relationship to the pronunciation of words since the 16th century. Already in the 16th century John Cheke, for instance, propagated a reformed orthography based on phonological principles. His as well as other attempts at a spelling reform, however, never succeeded.

The processes of standardisation in French and Italian also initially start 'from below' by a gradual diffusion of linguistic-literary models throughout the speech community. In contrast to German and English,

however, the processes of standardisation in both French and Italian are being institutionalised from early on, especially in the form of language academies such as the *Accademia della Crusca* (1583), as the oldest language academy ever founded, and the *Académie Française* (1635). These language academies have performed the task of cultivating and preserving the respective national language ever since. They both furthermore played a decisive role in regulating and standardising Italian and French in the phases of acceptance, expansion, and codification. A fundamental difference between both academies is that the *Accademia della Crusca* is a non-governmental organisation, in contrast to the *Académie Française*.

Current issues of standardisation

Both German and English tolerate a certain amount of variation and deviation from the norm in language usage. This can be witnessed when non-standard expressions are adopted into dictionaries and grammar books (e. g. *Rudelgucken* 'to watch an event on a live open-air screen in public'; or the preposition *wegen* 'because of' with a dative object, usually marked as a regional variant). Even though they are often explicitly labelled as "colloquial", they are mentioned nevertheless.

For English, the variation between *have got* and *have gotten* may be mentioned as an example which is often associated with British and American English usage. For contemporary English it is furthermore important to note that the global spread of English as a first and second language has resulted in the emergence of many different regional and national varieties of English that have partly begun to develop their own linguistic standards.

The development of a *Global English* as a *lingua franca* in combination with novel means of communication in the late 20th and early 21st century (especially through the digital media and the internet) have led to a gradual blurring of the boundaries between the different national varieties of English and to a pluricentric process of standardisation, in which the influence of American English seems to increase over that of British English with accelerating speed.

A blurring of the boundaries between the different national varieties, analogous to English, might also be expected for French with regard to

the varieties of French on the African continent. However, this is not the case. Instead, in France a discrepancy is visible between, on the one hand, the great interest of the media in debates about the French standard language and, on the other hand, the small influence of this debate on the shape of Standard French. The ongoing discussion of the discrepancy between spoken and written French (*français écrit* and *français parlé*) is particularly relevant from a language-critical perspective. The issue of the phoneme-grapheme relation has so far not had any impact on reforming French orthography. Instead, there is still a divide between descriptive efforts to record linguistic variation and diversity in public debates as well as in linguistics and the prescriptive demands of traditional authorities such as the *Académie Française* to conform to the codified norms.