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# Language Ideologies and Language Criticism in German

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**Abstract.** This article will introduce language ideologies prominently reflected in German Studies and associated with forms of language criticism. These language ideologies are closely linked to milestones in the standardisation of the German language, to thinking surrounding the diversity of variants and the related issue of language prestige, to the establishment of a national language, as well as to the delicate balance between the roles of 'lay persons' and experts, which, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, has led to an increased academisation of the discourse as well as a growing debate surrounding the question of whether language is or should be ideological, ideologically laden or non-ideological.

Figurative language, as a condensate of socio-culturally entrenched language ideologies, lends itself to identifying hardened concepts about language. In German Studies, metaphors are a typical linguistic-historical point of reference in the study of language ideologies. To illustrate the function of metaphoric language, this article will therefore employ the metaphoric image of the plant: an image that has remained a fairly consistent pattern from the 17<sup>th</sup> century until the present.

### Keywords

ideology, national language, standardisation, variants, language prestige, lay discourse, linguistic purism, linguistic nationalism, cultural chauvinism, language contact, pluralism, language culture

### General

In everyday language, the term *ideology* carries with it a stigma. It describes a perception of reality that is distorted by a preconceived belief system. Accordingly, language ideologies would therefore be seen as false or, at a minimum, inadequate, notions of language, because they are rooted in prejudices. However, the academic concept of language ideology as discussed in this article is less critical than it is analytical. We build on the knowledge sociology concept of ideology as defined by Mannheim (1929) and Berger/Luckmann (1966). They viewed ideologies not as belief systems

in which the truth is veiled, but as socially constructed knowledge that, in its specific historic-social context, may hold true for one specific group, while at the same time potentially being controversial.

Within this comprehensive concept of ideology, all knowledge formations – including those that are scientific – are thus ideological, insofar that they are socially and culturally conditioned, i.e. they are also tied to the interests and values of a specific group. Individual knowledge formations are produced by the institutionalisation of social practices and conceptual sedimentations (cf. Berger/Luckmann 1966) and are also shaped to an extent by discourses, understood here to be long-term power-saturated formation systems of knowledge. In this respect, language ideologies are language-related knowledge that finds expression in such diverse forms as statements, concepts, dispositions, practices and discourses (cf. Woolard 2020: 2; see also the foundational article in this volume). Language ideologies are thus always closely intertwined with other knowledge systems, that is, the normative, moral and political beliefs of the groups for whom this knowledge is valid.

For the study of German-language metacommunicative discourses, this concept of language ideologies is relevant in two aspects. Firstly, this examination takes a number of different levels into consideration: it discusses the role and relevance of the language, the metalanguage or ideology, the linguistic ideology and the metalinguistic ideology (understood here to be discourse surrounding language ideology). It studies the views of a number of different language philosophers and language authorities, within groups or institutions (experts) studying language reflection, but also 'lay-persons' and what is known as expert-layperson-communication. Secondly, the argumentation on these different levels employs differing evaluation requirements, i.e. in this article, descriptively intended language ideologies will be included along with those that are explicitly normative and prescriptive. From this perspective, language reflection and language criticism are seen as expressions of language ideologies (see the foundational article in this volume). The practice of subjective metalinguistic reflection, defined in this Handbook as language criticism, constitutes

language-related knowledge; however, language ideologies also manifest themselves within this practice.<sup>1</sup>

In German Studies research, the focus has often been on figurative language, which, as a condensate of socio-culturally entrenched language ideologies, lends itself to identifying hardened concepts about language. These would include metaphors of language as a state, a person, a treasure, a body of water, a building, a tool, or a mirror. In this article, we take the metaphor of a plant as an example and show diachronically how this metaphoric language has been used to construct ideologies and render them plausible.

## Historical

Around 870 CE, Otfrid of Weissenburg, a monk at a monastery in the Alsace, castigated the German language as "uncultivated, boorish and uneducated" (translation by C.D.)<sup>2</sup>. Hebrew, Greek and Latin were seen as far more suitable for the Word of God. In the Middle Ages, language philosophers were generally preoccupied with weighing the usage of German vs. Latin and carving out a space for the German language in religion and poetry (cf. Straßner 1995: VII). From the very beginning, German language ideology discourse was characterised by the assessment of German in comparison to other languages (including French), based on the criteria of correctness, appropriateness, beauty and purity (cf. ibid.: VIII). In 1424, as the Augustinian Canon Dietrich Engelhus professed the great prestige of the German language, a new phase of Latin-oriented development of German literary language began. This was inspired by the apparent adequacy of German (from a language ideology perspective) and led to an increase in the prestige attributed to the language. This phase withstood even the Humanist scholars, oriented as they were to Latin, and persisted into the Reformation era and beyond. The German language began to be employed in government, law, education and the sciences, which can be observed, for instance, in the

1 For more on language criticism research, refer to the *Handbuch Sprachkritik* by Niehr/Kilian/Schiwe (2020) as well as Schiwe (1998).

2 "unkultiviert, bärisch und ungebildet".

intensive, systematic examination of the language in German dictionaries and grammar textbooks. Martin Luther's approach to the German language became the model, even among his opponents (cf. *ibid.*: VII; cf. also Gardt 1999; Schiewe 1998).

Over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, language ideology discourse appeared to reach the apex of emancipation. Until that point, the predominating goal had been to free the expansion of German from Latin and to establish a written German language that would include all the dialects. As the 17<sup>th</sup> century dawned, the focus shifted to a reflection on the influence of the French language.

A history of (German) language ideology thus illustrates quite impressively the relationship between socio-historical conditions and language-historical developments. It reveals how changes on the political, cultural and societal levels create shifts in knowledge that are revealed, *inter alia*, in language-related knowledge, language ideologies or argumentation surrounding language criticism or language reflection. A common thread in many of these language-reflective and, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, frequently also cultural-chauvinistically-laden discourses, was the desire for cultural autonomy and a national identity bound to the German language.

The German language ideologies handed down from the Middle Ages through the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are primarily concerned with the establishment of a standardised written German. Here, the emergence of 'High German' was related to a minimum of two intertwined social aims and, therefore, inherently linked to language ideology: First, the desire for cultivation and second, the desire for a national identity and national unity. To enable the expansion of the sciences and arts, it was viewed as essential for a standardised German language to be established. The expansion of standard German thus led to a verticalisation of the spectrum of variants. While High German was proclaimed a prestige variant, dialects were disparaged as the language of the uneducated and uncultivated. A parallel development can be observed in the pseudo-dialectisation of Low German, in which, as the significance of the Hanseatic League diminished, written and printed Low German was increasingly infrequently employed. The language therefore became perceived as a predominantly spoken language used in the northern regions of the German-speaking world.

The establishment of standardised High German was also intended to counter the dominance of the French language (the *lingua franca* of the nobility) and foster the expansion of a national culture that would compensate for the lack of national unity. Social categories emerged, such as the *Alamode-Stutzer* ('a-la-mode dandy') of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the *Deutschfranzose* ('Franco-German') of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which were stereotypical representatives styled to warn against the evolution of the German language into a hybrid language and against adopting an allegedly foreign cultural aspect in the name of a German national culture. The German language as a whole was to be valorised and used to construct a national German culture.

While those participating in the language-reflective discourse largely shared these goals, if with differing degrees of emphasis, determination of the principles upon which standardisation was to be based proved to be highly controversial (for more on German language normatisation, standardisation, linguistic purism and language institutions, cf. Felder/Schwinn/Jacob 2017; Felder/Jacob 2018; Schwinn 2018; Jacob/Schwinn 2019). In particular, 18<sup>th</sup>-century southern German linguists, including Fulda and Nast, called for enriching the German language with dialectal language. They argued that dialects preserved original feelings and ways of thinking and that these should not be allowed to be replaced by expressions and phrases that contradicted the rules of the German language (such as the borrowed translation *er hat warm* from the French phraseologism *il a chaud*)<sup>3</sup>. Linguists in the northern and central German regions argued anomalistically, in accordance with the semantics of cultivation, against this analogistic position, calling for language usage to be oriented on the language used by authors (e.g. Johann Friedrich Heynatz) or by the educated classes in Upper Saxony (e.g. Johann Christoph Adelung).

Within this context and from a linguistic-historical perspective, the metaphorical image of the plant has proven to be effective in at least two regards. On the one hand, the metaphor of the plant refers back to the concept of hypostasis, in which language is viewed as an autonomous living creature whose nature is governed by natural, internal laws. The plant must therefore be observed independently of

3 Translator's note: 'he is warm' would be correctly expressed in High German as *ihm ist warm*.

its speakers (cf. Gardt 1999: 109) and be standardised according to its own internal rules (analogism). On the other hand, the life of plants is cyclical, from growth to flowering to death, and can be influenced by human intervention. Specifically, plants can be cultivated and, when appropriately cared for, will bear fruit. This dimension of the plant metaphor draws on the image of the caretaker of the language as a gardener (cf. Stukenbrock 2005: 102–107). From a linguistic purism perspective, the plant metaphor can be expanded to also include the use of foreign words and borrowed words. An element of this ideology was the notion that the use of foreign expressions would also lead to the adoption of foreign thinking, foreign customs and, in particular, foreign vices. The goals for establishing a cultivated and more prestigious German national culture were therefore closely intertwined.

Straßner (1995) provides an overview of how 19<sup>th</sup>-century discourses surrounding grammar, literature, linguistics, didactics and purism led to the development and consolidation of language-related knowledge. He maintains that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a language ideology came to the fore that regarded language not only as a “creative, formative achievement” but as a “self-creational act” (Straßner 1995: 279; translations by C. D.)<sup>4</sup>. The Romantic-era perspective on language was consequently aimed at liberating the original language from its rationality and retracing it anew (cf. *ibid.*). Novalis strove for a simplified language. Schlegel, on the other hand, viewed figurative language as a means for exploring original contexts. Thus, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with a purist national-language ideology, an “orientation towards universality” also emerged (*ibid.*: 280; translation by C. D.; for more on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see also Gardt 1999)<sup>5</sup>.

After 1871, the purist discourse re-established dominance, particularly through the institution of the *Deutscher Sprachverein* ('German Language Society'). Although the National Socialists objected to what they viewed as exaggerated purism, as part of their ideology surrounding the racial nature of language, they themselves practiced linguistic exclusion as a means of social exclusion. One example of this can be seen in Heinz

4 Straßner (1995: 279): [nicht allein als eine] “gestaltende, formende Leistung” [ansieht, sondern als] “selbstschöpferische[n] Akt”.

5 Straßner (1995: 280): “Ausrichtung auf Universalität”.

Mitlacher's (1938: 372f.; translation by C.D.)<sup>6</sup> contributions to the journal *Muttersprache* ('Mother Tongue'), in which he purported that "Jewish influences on the German language can be proven".

### Present

As the National Socialist era came to an end, the allies in the western occupied zones determined the necessity of submitting the inhabitants of Germany and Austria to a re-education programme that was not only ideological but linguistic in nature. The occupying powers viewed the German language as a medium for expressing and influencing National-Socialist ideology. This led to the implementation of language policy measures intended to ban Nazi vocabulary and certain linguistic practices (forms of greeting, titles) from everyday language use. These measures encompassed censures and language regulations for the press and radio broadcasters as well as in the area of cultural and educational policy, e.g. the language used in school textbooks (cf. Deissler 2004). Additionally, certain forms of communication, e.g. discussion as a vehicle for democratisation, were held up against top-down forms of communication and promoted through educational programmes (cf. Verheyen 2010).

The division of Germany provided additional fodder for language ideology debates. In the East German GDR, alongside the state-propagated official language standard, an unofficial language developed that reflected "the wide gulf between social reality and official language regulations" (Wolf-Bleiß 2010: n.p.; translation by C.D.)<sup>7</sup>. Typical features of the language situation in the GDR included divergent vocabularies as well as the alternation between everyday language and official speech (cf. Hartinger 2007: 21).

In Germany, the topic of standardisation has traditionally centred around the written language. The spoken language, however, over "the

6 Mitlacher (1938: 372f.): [dass sich] "jüdische Prägungen im deutschen Sprachgut" [finden ließen].

7 Wolf-Bleiß (2010: n.p.): "[...] die Kluft zwischen gesellschaftlicher Realität und offizieller Sprachregelung".

course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially with the pragmatic turning point [...] was brought into focus in the issue of standardisation" (Felder/Jacob 2018: 75; translation by C.D.)<sup>8</sup>. The integration of the spoken language into standardisation issues is illustrated, for example, by some dictionaries and grammar textbooks in which the textual basis includes not (only) the written but (also) the spoken language (cf. Dudenredaktion 2015; Brinkmann 1971: IX; Engel 2004: 10; Weinrich 2007: 16; Hoffmann 2021: 7).

In addition, beginning in the 1970s, the increasing number of immigrants entering Germany opened up an important new area of language ideological debate. While in the early years, the dominating debates surrounded the pidginisation of the German language (cf. Bodemann/Ostow 1975) and xenolects as linguistic simplifications (cf. Roche 1989), beginning in the 2000s, a growing debate emerged over whether styles of speech connotated with migrants should be regarded as fossilised and therefore the deficient acquisition of a second language or as independent variants of the German language (cf. Auer 2003; Wiese 2012). This question certainly cannot be resolved solely from a linguistic perspective but must be addressed within the larger context of the debate surrounding the social participation of minorities in post-migrant societies.

Since the 1970s, an additional growing language ideology debate has arisen surrounding "public sensitivity to language" (Wengeler 2002; translation by C.D.)<sup>9</sup> and "politically correct speech", as it is described by critics of the phenomena subsumed thereunder.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, beginning in the 1990s, there has been criticism of a monocentric concept of language that asserts that there is only one standard language, and that (national) variants are merely deviations from this standard. Ammon (1995) thus called for recognition of the pluricentricity of standard German, which would lead to its diversification into different standard variants (e.g. in Germany, Austria and Switzerland), and

8 Felder/Jacob (2018: 75): [die gesprochene Sprache geriet jedoch im] "Verlauf des 20. Jahrhunderts und vor allem mit der pragmatischen Wende [...] bei Standardisierungsfragen in den Fokus der Betrachtung".

9 Wengeler (2002): "öffentliche Sprachsensibilität"; "politisch korrekten Sprachgebrauch".

10 For a discussion of the history of the term *political correctness* and its use in political discourse as a right-wing battle cry, see e.g. Erd (2004); Eugster (2019).

acknowledgment of the equal status of these variants. (Regional) variants would thus no longer be seen as deviating from the standard language and standard languages would no longer be theorised as invariant.

One of the factors giving rise to the discussions surrounding language ideology came from the establishment of new forms of communication in digital media. Here, two opposing views dominate. One points to the decline in written German competence and the resultant de-standardisation of the language, while the other emphasises the growth in linguistic creativity and the social expansion of everyday writing through the use of new media (cf. Dürscheid/Brommer 2009).

Most of the figurative language that enjoyed regular use in past centuries can still be found today in German 'lay discourse', including the metaphor of language as a plant. For example, Sick speaks of the linguistic overgrowth on the Internet" (Sick 2016: 449; translation by C. D.)<sup>11</sup>, the "flower garden of the German language" (Sick 2007: 197; translation by C. D.)<sup>12</sup> and of the "diligent style gardener" (Sick 2007: 197; translation by C. D.)<sup>13</sup>.

## Final Remarks

The picture painted in this article is based on prominent and canonical sources as well as research traditions. According to these, purism appears to strongly influence the German language. However, the language ideologies show a growing pluralisation and the discourse reveals a certain openness to the diversity of the language and its transformation. Purist, language nationalistic and culturally chauvinistic language ideologies persisted into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, even then, there were glimmers of a more pluralistic understanding of language (e.g. Adelung's anomalistic rather than analogistic definition, Kleinpaul's concept of the German language as a polyglot, Wunderlich's thoughts on the diversity of the German language). Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a shift began to take place in language ideologies within 'lay linguistics', e.g. in the

11 Sick (2016: 449): "sprachliche[r] Wildwuchs im Internet".

12 Sick (2007: 197): "Blumengarten der deutschen Sprache".

13 Sick (2007: 197): "fleißige Stilgärtner".

area of linguistic purism. The approach to language under National Socialism led, among other things, to deliberations on language reflection and language criticism themselves, as in the debate between Peter von Polenz and the authors of the *Wörterbuch des Unmenschen* ('Dictionary of the Un-Man') (cf. Felder/Schwinn/Jacob 2017: 55). Under the auspices of descriptiveness, language ideologies are being re-ideologised. Alongside the purist 'lay discourse', an academisation of the discourse can be observed. Language ideologies that occasionally include references to constructivist or critical views of language in linguistics see language itself as ideological. Language is, for example, no longer a plant, but an ideology, which in public discourse, however, is not understood in the sense of knowledge about language but in the sense of (a usually unilateral and therefore inadequate) world view that is conveyed in the form of language. And so, a debate has flared up in the public discourse as to whether language is or should be ideological, ideologically laden, or non-ideological. The field of language criticism itself has become a space in which to negotiate language ideologies, where – as seen, for example, in the discussion surrounding use of the N-word – even the question itself of whether a distinction must be made between language, language usage and speakers remains open to debate.

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