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Critique of language norms in European perspective

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Abstract. Drawing on the concept of *Sprachnormenkritik* (translated as *critique of language norms*), as it has been developed in German linguistics, this article focuses on the sociopolitical implications of language norms. The German term *Sprachnormenkritik* as yet has no equivalent in English, French, Italian, or Croatian linguistics. Notwithstanding, the concept of ‘critique of language norms’, or aspects of it, have been debated in all these languages for centuries. Looking at it from a comparative European perspective, it turns out that whereas the German *Sprachnormenkritik* highlights the immediate correlation between language norms on the one hand, and socioeconomic power and political agency on the other, this notion is not as prominent in the other national discourses about language norms. The political character of criticising language norms, however, becomes particularly apparent when considering its role in the process of implementing political agendas, as for instance in the case of Croatia. Since the 1960s, critique of language norms in Croatian has not only focused on identifying degressive conditions in language usage, but has functioned as a progressive force in foreshadowing and preparing the political independence of the country.

Keywords

critique of language norms, norms, language evaluation, descriptive, prescriptive

The process of setting norms for language and language use is closely related to critique of language and its use. Both in academic and public discussions, questions about language norms entail questions of evaluation. In German, *Sprachnormenkritik* constitutes a central concept, being a technical term on the one hand, but including the public dimension on the other. The term was coined and introduced into the German academic debate about critique of language by Peter von Polenz (1972) in the course of a dispute with the authors of the *Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, being subsequently picked up and further developed by several authors. Critique of language norms is not only about the problem of language norms or matters of standardisation in general. The concept rather comprises specific questions of communication- and language-sociological import,

namely how certain language norms and the acts of emphasising their validity affect the social and communicative cooperation of language communities (sociolinguistic perspective) or societies (socio-political perspective). The main questions pursued by critique of language norms could be formulated as follows: Which specific language norms are demanded or rejected by the protagonists, which epistemological, language-structural and non-linguistic argumentations are utilised and which social, political, and economic ramifications have to be considered? Briefly, the focus lies on the socio-political consequences of language norms and their social functions, since von Polenz regards language norms as a “tool for humans to exercise power over other humans” (von Polenz 1982: 85; transl. by BV). Some participants in this discourse, however, show a less negative attitude towards language norms, arguing that they are necessary means to guarantee understanding in the sense of establishing a communicative Common Ground.

Neither in English, nor in French, Italian, and Croatian, does the term *Sprachnormenkritik* find an equivalent. The concept of ‘critique of language norms’, at least in some of its components, has however been discussed in English for several centuries (some recent cases are the debates about *political correctness* and the programme of *verbal hygiene*). In French and Italian the concept is lacking, even though discussions of norms on different linguistic levels have a long discursive tradition (e.g. *bon usage*, *questione della lingua*). This is comparable with Croatian in a historical perspective, where discussions about language norms also refer to different linguistic levels (e.g. *the Dictionary of the Five Noblest Languages*). Nevertheless, in the last decades the Croatian concept of ‘critique of language norms’ has approximated the politically motivated ones in German and English. In this context it is important to differentiate between the traditional discussions about language norms, language change, and standardisation which have taken place in all these languages on the one hand, and the discourse about demanding and enforcing language norms, and their socio-communicative and societal implications, on the other. While in the first case, the language norms themselves are central to the discussion, in the second case the question in which ways language norms influence the lives of people are in focus. Which impact do they have on members of language communities with regard to social prestige and status, hierarchical structures, social justice and education

policy, and which social agents try or manage to enforce language norms according to their interests?

Critique of language norms focuses on various linguistic phenomena and discusses them on grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic levels in due consideration of social and socio-political contexts. Language norms are described and/or evaluated from a language systematic perspective (level of *langue*) as well as from a functional one (level of *parole*), thus oscillating on a scale between the poles of *language description* and *language evaluation*:

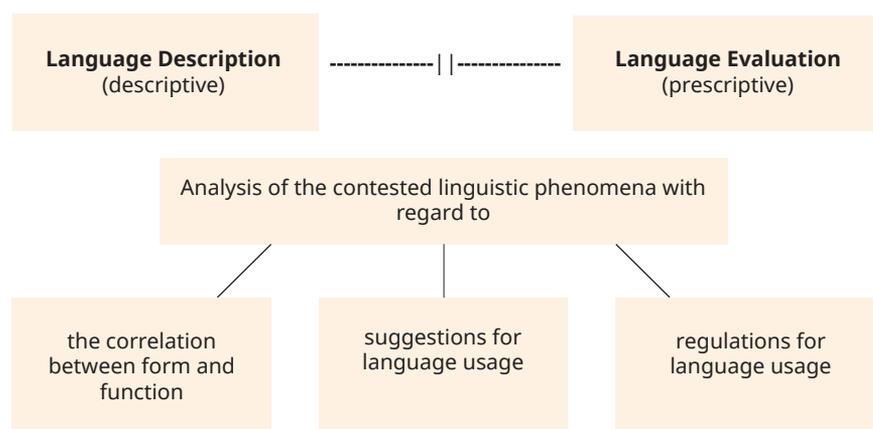


Figure: Gradual transition from language description to language evaluation

Against this background, the following common features can be named: First, in all the languages observed in this project, there are intra- and interlingual discourses about the eligibility of norms and their modification with respect to language variation in spoken and written form; second, there are issues of *linguistic purism* concealed in reflections on language norms; and third, it is discussed which institutions and individuals are capable of implementing (language) norms. However, the direct correlation between language norms on the one hand and socio-economic power, respectively the capacity to act on the political plain, on the other is not always recognized and discussed – and exactly this notion is the kernel of the original German concept of ‘critique of language norms’. Only in the Croatian language, this correlation acuminates in an initiating moment: In the 1960s, critique of language norms in Croatia did not only try to

reveal seemingly declining conditions, but it was progressive, preparing the ground for the political independence movement in Croatia. What all debates in the different languages have in common are the questions of how certain ways of expression 'infect' our thoughts and attitudes consciously or subconsciously, and how the 'rightness' of thinking can be determined on the basis of linguistic phenomena. Thus, epistemological issues concerning language standardisation in the contexts of social function and communication are also at stake. The point of origin is always some contested phenomenon of language use, which is then debated and considered from language structural, socio-pragmatic, and socio-political perspectives.

In modern service societies, the regulation of systems is of great importance. Since language is also regarded as a system, it seems evident that it is necessary to reflect on the role of language norms as a means to regulate the system of language. The language system on one hand and language use on the other, which are connected through the pivot of language norms, constitute a reservoir for established and new variants in the process of language change, in which specific variants are either classified as conforming to or diverging from the norm. Furthermore, questions arise about how equal participation of all citizens (independent of their education) in social activities is enabled and/or restricted by the idea of having one language for one nation and nationwide language education – and related to this, how this axiom conflicts with the development of differentiated and subdivided modern knowledge societies as a condition *sine qua non*.