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Standardisation and language criticism in German

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Abstract. Standardisation is mainly discussed in relation to language history, language variation and sociolinguistics. Investigations of the role of standardisation in German language criticism are as yet a desideratum. However, individual aspects of standardisation are sometimes consulted for the explanation or evaluation of language criticism in German. This article describes forms of language reflexion and language criticism as regulatory aspects for orienting orality and literacy to norms. First, authorities and institutions guiding the process of standardisation are discussed (e.g. church, nobility, bourgeoisie, scholars, linguistic societies, publications, or rhetorical and stylistic principles). Second, domains that were to be standardised are mentioned (e.g. lexis, syntax). In addition to the historical perspective, this article looks at current issues about standardisation in correlation with language criticism.

Keywords

instances of standardisation, norm, destandardisation

General

The term of *standardisation* is particularly focused on in linguistic research on language history, language variation, and sociolinguistics (see Mattheier/Radtke 1997). In the research literature about German language criticism it does not play a major role. (Orgeldinger 1999 is an inspiring exception in this research context, explicitly establishing the connection between standardisation and language criticism). Dealing with language criticism in English, French, and Italian in comparative perspective, however, clearly shows that the concept is of great importance when discussing issues of language criticism. This raises the question to what extent aspects of standardisation can explain issues of language criticism in German, or may serve as assessment criteria.

Historical

In the history of the German language, standardisation processes built up until the 19th century. While in Early Modern High German (c. 1350 until c. 1650) the “idea of a transregional linguistic unity, in general, of ›superior‹ and ›inferior‹ writing [...] was barely existent” (Bär 1999, 4778, our translation), writing and speaking according to a standard norm came to be an issue in the literature about standardisation in Modern High German (from c. 1650 on). In this, language reflection and language criticism became regulatory moments in order to align orality and literacy to certain norms. Whereas in Old and Middle High German particularly the Church and the nobility had been authorities of standardisation, the process of urbanisation in connection with the development of civic societies, the invention of book printing and the uniformity of literary language shaped the process of standardisation in Early Modern High German. The awareness for a national language was raised in the Baroque language societies of the 17th century. Thus, J.G. Schottelius’s work *Ausführliche Arbeit von der Deutschen HauptSprache* (1663) aspired to unite the linguistic diversity of the German-speaking regions under a single norm. In the 18th century, authors of language-reflective and language-critical works strove to simplify the syntax of German and reduce ambiguity in the vocabulary. J.Chr. Gottsched and J.Chr. Adelung are representatives of these rationalistic attempts at standardisation. At the end of the 19th century, the government stipulated the first orthographic reform, which replaced the hitherto inconsistent orthographic conventions. Further, the late 19th century saw attempts at standardising spoken language, such as Th. Siebs’s work on German standard pronunciation for the stage of 1898 (*Deutsche Bühnenaussprache*, see Bär 1999, 4781).

In a diachronic perspective, processes of standardisation increased and related to both lexis and grammar (see Bär 2011), as well as textuality. Considering language contact, aspects of orthography, orthoepy and semantics (e.g. linguistic borrowings, ad-hoc-formations, blendings, etc.) were of relevance. In grammar (see e.g. Konopka 1996), for instance the use of the tenses (e.g. the perfect-preterite alternation), of mood (e.g. the role of the subjunctive in indirect speech), and of the genera verbi (active-passive distinctions) played a role as well as changes in syntax (e.g. verb-second word order in adverbial subordinate clauses, verbal

paraphrases with the "auxiliary verb" *tun* (to do); see Langer 2001). In the course of the 20th century, and especially following the 'pragmatic turn', the spoken language became increasingly important for issues of standardisation. The relation between standardisation and language criticism is illustrated in sociolinguistic discussions of the concept of ›destandardisation‹: If norms in spoken, as opposed to written, language are "regarded as welcome, correct or exemplary" (Mattheier 1997: 2, our translation), and if this is accompanied by a loss of prestige of the codified norm in the written language, the research literature of the 1960s (e.g. František Daneš or Peter von Polenz) refers to this as destandardisation. Thus, not only the codified lexical and grammatical norms have been relevant for the development of the German standard language but also the sociolinguistic context.

Literature on rhetorics played a central role as language-reflexive or language-critical form of orientation in the processes of standardisation: The distinction between grammar as *ars recte dicendi* and rhetorics as *ars bene dicendi* was prevalent in the history of language criticism until the 19th century. The development of a linguistic standard in the sense of shaping 'good German' was, to a great extent, guided by rhetorical and stylistic principles and categories such as *perspicuity*, *clarity*, *adequacy* or *purity* of language, which were directly based on the classic rhetorical concepts of *perspicuitas*, *claritas*, *aptum*, and *puritas* (see *Handbuch der Rhetorik und Stilistik*, edited by Fix/Gardt/Knape 2008).

To sum up, one may say that individual authorities (e.g. Luther, Opitz, Goethe or Schiller) and institutions (e.g. the law courts of the German Reich, chanceries, offices) played a central role as role models in the shaping of the German standard language. Furthermore, since the 17th century – and to this day – there have been forms of meta-linguistic depreciation and stigmatisation that delimit free language variation in German (see Davies/Langer 2006).

Present

The social changes from the 1950s until today have been characterised by "*equalisation, commitment and emancipation*" (Bär 2009, 76, our translation, highlighting in the original). These developments are also reflected in the

language, in particular with respect to language reflexion and language criticism. Today there is no longer a single language norm but instead parallel language norms reflect the regional, functional, and social participation of their speakers. The resulting language variants are “more or less equal in rights and value” (ibid.: 77, our translation). In addition, mass media enable new formats of text and talk and shape what is perceived as the norm. “*Cyber German*” (*Cyberdeutsch*, ibid., 78, our translation) is being discussed in society as well as in linguistic research. Globalisation and internationalisation have further led to new forms of language contact. Economy and politics as well as migration have resulted in new varieties of German. The question of the German language standard is raised in society rather than in linguistics, where this pluralisation is discussed descriptively in the perspective of language change: From the middle of the 20th century on, there has been a convergence between non-standard varieties and the standard, between literary and spoken language, and between the different stylistic registers (ibid.: 84–93).

How can the interaction between standardisation and language criticism be summarised and be more clearly defined? The term *standardisation* describes the processes of codification in the context of the national varieties of German (national language standards) and is directly linked to language norms (Mattheier 1997). When language norms become the focus of language criticism, these debates may have a direct impact on processes of standardisation (see “awareness of language (diversity)” in Felder 2003, our translation). Standardisation stems from historically legitimised and institutionalised standards of a speech community and focusses especially on grammar, lexis, style, pronunciation, and orthography until the present day. Criteria of standardisation refer to orality and literacy – common maxims are, for instance, *Man spricht hochdeutsch* (‘One speaks High German’) or *Man schreibt (orthographisch und grammatisch) richtig sowie allgemein verständlich* (‘One writes [orthographically and grammatically] correct and generally comprehensibly’). In addition to these manifestations of mediality (spoken vs. written language, multi-modal internet formats) criteria of standardisation can be defined *ex negativo*, such as that they are non-regional or trans-regional and socially unmarked (see Steger 1988; Felder 2016). Thus, standardisation is a process that aligns to abstract criteria such as regional dialects and sociolects. In order to describe the origin of these abstract criteria in the context

of language use and language change, language reflexion is required. Language and its usage become the focus of meta-linguistic discussion, embracing language norms and their abstract criteria, potentially also claiming specific forms as standard-conformant and more adequate than other alternative uses (see Felder/Jacob 2014: 154f.).

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