

DISCUSSION NOTE

German Dialects in Real-Time Change

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0. Introduction.

Traditionally, research on language change has been a post-mortem activity, focused on isolated changes that are complete and often only documented in written texts. In the 1960s the field was advanced considerably by Labovian sociolinguistics and the investigation of “change in progress” adduced through patterns of community-internal linguistic variation correlated with external facts about speakers such as age and class (see Labov 1994 for an overview). However, despite the many benefits of such work on “dynamic synchrony,” we still know relatively little about how language change unfolds over the lifetimes of individual speakers, that is, in real time (cf. Bailey et al. 1991). The logistical challenges of such research are, of course, considerable. Whereas it is straightforward for psycholinguists to observe language development in children over the course of a few years, documenting changes in the verbal behavior of individuals over several decades is by contrast much less feasible. Nevertheless, present theoretical models of language change could be considerably improved by the results of real-time studies.

1. Language Change in Real Time.

In this note I discuss an ongoing research project conducted by the Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS, Mannheim) on real-time changes in the spoken German of individual speakers. The database for the project is largely comprised of recordings of German dialects and regional colloquial German from the Deutsches Spracharchiv (DSAv). On the theoretical side (discussed at length in Wagener 1997, 1999), the project has been informed to some extent by several previous studies, including Bister-Broosen 1989, Coseriu 1958, Chambers 1992, Fishman 1991,

Haas 1999, Hathaway 1979, Herrgen and Schmidt 1986, Keller 1990, Milroy and Milroy 1992, and Salmons 1991.

The main research questions addressed by the project are twofold:

1. How has the spoken German of individual speakers from different regions changed over four decades?
2. How might this evidence be evaluated in the context of language change over several generations?

The baseline for the present study includes a number of corpora of the DSAv from the 1950s and 1960s. Among these, the massive “Zwirner corpus” of German dialects (named for the principal investigator Eberhard Zwirner) is of central importance. From 1955 to 1960 tape-recorded interviews were made of more than 6,800 speakers from what was then the Federal Republic of Germany including, by means of interviews with refugees, many formerly German-speaking areas east of the Oder-Neisse Line (Knetschke and Sperlbaum 1983:20–23; Haas and Wagener 1992; Wagener and Bausch 1997:110–121). Fortunately, shortly thereafter, approximately 1,750 recorded interviews were conducted by almost the same method in the German Democratic Republic. The DSAv has since acquired these latter recordings and has maintained them in its archives since 1992.

In the Zwirner project, typically speakers from three age groups were interviewed in each locality investigated. There are approximately 4,000 extant recordings of speakers who were between 15 and 45 years of age when they were interviewed, meaning that several of them could in theory be living (and re-interviewable) today. In preliminary fieldwork I estimated that roughly 1,000 subjects from the youngest group could be located who might be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. The potential for analysis of real-time change is thus considerable. At the very least we should be able to substantially document changes in apparent time: by supplementing the voluminous recordings of the Zwirner corpus from the 1950s and 1960s with modern follow-up interviews, we would have data from speakers born a century or more apart.

I carried out a pilot study to determine the optimal way to elicit the data necessary to address the two research questions mentioned above. During this test phase I began by recording consultants in four places in southern Münsterland and in the Ruhr area (Wagener 1999). I developed an interview structure that has since been tested elsewhere in Low German-speaking areas, that is, in four localities in the Lüneburger Heath

and Mecklenburg, as well as in the Central and Upper German dialect regions. These surveys were intended to complement the larger study by linking changes in the speech of individual consultants to: i. their life experiences; and ii. regional patterns of sociolinguistic change over a period of several generations.

The re-recording of the original younger speakers from the 1950s and 1960s recordings had priority. As a first step toward establishing a comfortable interview setting I recommended that interviewers guide consultants in recalling their (often positive) memories of the original interview. My experience has shown that consultants react very positively when asked to give expert information on dialects, especially their own. Encouraging speakers to recall as many details of their original interview as they can makes it possible for the investigator to elicit vital information about changes in the sociolinguistic situation of each speaker, including changes in speakers' social networks and, related to this, other external changes that might affect how speakers have altered their use of dialect versus standard varieties. An in-depth interview, which often succeeds only when the interviewer employs a persistent but gentle questioning technique, is essential in order to be able to reconstruct crucial aspects of speakers' sociolinguistic histories. I have found that this kind of interview produces the best results with older informants in a relatively flexible interview situation.

This survey is thus profoundly speaker-oriented in searching for speaker-specific patterns of real-time change. Let us consider the interview technique in somewhat more detail. The main objective of the first interview is to reconstruct speakers' sociolinguistic biographies on the basis of their life experiences, including how they perceive their verbal behavior to have changed and how they see their sociolinguistic surroundings as having changed. The second interview was focused less on socio- and metalinguistic information and more on eliciting structures that had been produced during the original interview decades earlier. The original Zwirner interviews involved mainly free conversation, on topics dealing with special significance or interest for each individual speaker. For example, many speakers shared interesting details about their professions or unusual life events. The only data from these interviews that could be automatically compared in the follow-up interviews were terms for numbers and the weekdays and, in the recordings from the GDR, in so-called "set texts." I dissected the transcripts from the first recordings into single words and phrases, took them out of their old order and context and, in the new survey, had interviewees translate their

standard German equivalents into dialect in order to gain directly comparable linguistic data.

Beyond these re-interviews with original Zwirner consultants, I have attempted also to identify broader patterns in the speech communities of these speakers. Since we already have at least two more recordings of the first time period at our disposal—from speakers of the middle and older generation at that time—I am now beginning to interview speakers from the middle and younger generations (not interviewed by Zwirner and colleagues). I typically do this by interviewing the children and grandchildren of the Zwirner consultants, eliciting their views on their own language usage, as well their attitudes toward the local dialect. In this way I am able to create a database spanning up to six generations, yielding a solid empirical basis for tracking patterns of individual and community-wide (socio)linguistic change.

2. Identifying Patterns of Change.

The different types of sociolinguistic change involving German dialects can be illustrated with some specific examples. Without further differentiation, I assume for the time being that there are three possible types of change affecting dialectal speech:

- reduction of dialectal variety;
- maintenance of dialectal variety;
- expansion of dialectal variety.

The problem arising here with the survey of both synchronic variation and diachronic change lies in the difficulty of operationalizing hypotheses on change in real time and in determining precisely how such change may be measured. A central question merits clarification: how to differentiate exactly between the synchronic and diachronic axes of variation and change, respectively.

Since there are no tested procedures available for solving these problems, the analysis of our recordings is based on the following method. First, each of the most salient features of language affected by change is quantified. Then, a feature's distance from the standard variety (the structural baseline comparison) is calculated in percentages. This approach can be compared to other procedures for the determination of the "dialectal depth" of speech samples, that is, structural distance from the standard variety. In this regard, Menge (1977, 1995) has rightly criticized studies (e.g., those of the speech of the Ruhr area) that assume nonstandard varieties to be structurally homogenous and entirely

systematic, an assumption unsupported by evidence. Menge and others have pointed out that the distribution of particular features of the nonstandard can vary considerably: across studies, within towns, within neighborhoods, and, as can be added from my own experience, even within individual speakers. Each percentage value calculated for a single nonstandard feature is a random quantity dependent on linguistic variation. It is actually not surprising that these values differ in different recordings of the same speaker.

A solution to this dilemma, in the absence of a universal procedure and measuring at best isolated features, however, seems to be the *combination* of individual values. For all features included in the survey we can calculate a percentage that is modified only very slightly by the variation of individual features. Tests on data drawn from interviews confirm this. Thus our survey of individual language change is not based on the analysis of developments of isolated features, but on the comparison of indices representing the dialect level and the nonstandard level of different speech samples of single speakers and making them commensurable. Similar techniques have been employed in other studies (see Auer 1998, Bhatt and Lindlar 1998, Salewski 1998, Ziegler 1996; cf. also Geiger and Salmons forthcoming who find striking evidence of phonetic change in real time).

Applied to both the original Zwirner recordings and the newer follow-up interviews, indices calculated for all nonstandard features can be related to each other in different ways. First, in order to measure differences between data from earlier and later interviews I obtain a coefficient for individual changes. I am, moreover, able to compare the three recordings of the three generations from the first time period with each other as well as with the present generations. Further, I can determine a coefficient for all of the 1950s and 1960s recordings and compare it to the coefficient for all of the present recordings. Finally, this procedure may be carried out for an entire town, region, or dialect area.

3. Examples of Change.

A good example of how this procedure to track real-time change works involves the most salient phonological feature of Low German dialects, retention of the West Germanic voiceless plosives /p/, /t/, /k/. The data were collected from small towns in three regions, one in the eastern Ruhr area, and the others on either side of the former East/West-German border: a town in the county of Verden (former West Germany), and two towns close together in the county of Ludwigslust (former East

Germany). It should be pointed out that this is the first time that material from the GDR corpus has been analyzed in this way. The graphic representation of the data below suggests the kinds of results of real-time analysis. Differences in numbers of speakers reflect the pilot nature of this study.

3.1. City of C., County of Recklinghausen, Ruhr area

Basis of analysis:

7 Tape recordings (TR)

1. TR from Zwirner corpus made in May 1957.
 Speaker S1 was born in C. in 1894; 63 years old at the time of interview; occupation: farmer.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 99%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 99%.
2. TR from Zwirner corpus made in May 1957.
 Speaker S2 was born in C. in 1912; 45 years old at the time of interview; occupation: farmer.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 83%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 85%.
3. Re-recording with speaker S2 made in December 1992 (a third recording was made in February 1993); 80 years old at the time of re-interview; occupation: farmer.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 69%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 74%.
4. TR from Zwirner corpus made in May 1957.
 Speaker S3 was born in C. in 1938; 18 years old at the time of interview; occupation: high school student.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 89%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 81%.
5. Re-recording with speaker S3 made in January 1993; 54 years old at the time of interview; occupation: professor.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 0%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 2%.

6. New recording made in November 1997; Speaker S4 was born in C. in 1948; 49 years old at the time of interview; occupation: commercial clerk.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 0%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 5%.
7. New recording made in November 1997; Speaker S5 was born in C. in 1960; 36 years old at the time of interview; occupation: elementary school teacher.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 0%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 9%.

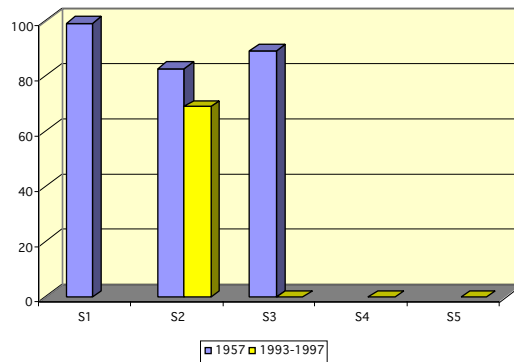


Figure 1. Dialect level: Percentage of voiceless plosives. Place: C., County of Recklinghausen, Ruhr area.

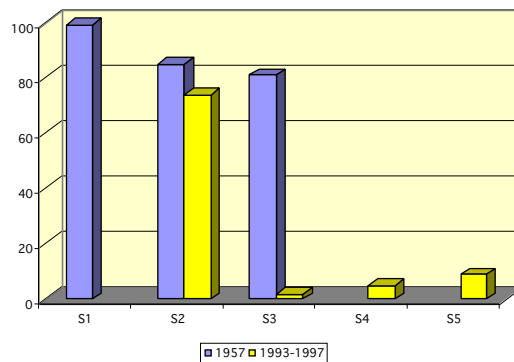


Figure 2. Dialect level: Percentage of all Low German phonological features. Place: C., County of Recklinghausen, Ruhr area.

In Wagener 1999 I presented two graphs representing the dialectal situation for the small Münsterland town S. in the county of Lüdinhhausen. They clearly showed a pattern of very gradual dialect change across the first five generations and a break between the fifth and the sixth generations. This can be viewed as a shift from Low German dialect to the regional variety of the colloquial spoken standard. By contrast, the development of the small town B. in a southeastern Ruhr district (county of Ennepe-Ruhr; discussed in Wagener 1999) is erratic: the shift from dialect to spoken standard occurred earlier and a continuous development cannot be discerned. A similar trend can be seen in the graphs above for C. (county of Recklinghausen): the high level of proficiency in Low German in the oldest generation (speaker 1, born in 1894) declines somewhat across the next two generations (represented by S2, born in 1912, and by S3, born in 1938), when interviewed in the 1950s. The re-recording of these two speakers shows a different development, a change, occurring as a small decline in the dialectal competence of S2, but a total loss of Low German in S3. S3's early shift to standard German was motivated by his professional career, as well as his relocation to the Rhineland for university study. The two women representing the present generations (S4, S5) do not speak the original Low German dialect anymore. Their spoken language is only influenced by a few Low German features and shows typical features of the Ruhr-area colloquial variety, fewer in the more structured interview of the older consultant, and somewhat more in the more emotionally charged speech of the teacher. The most salient Low German feature, unshifted plosives, is widespread in the first generations. Overall, though, the total presence of nonstandard features in recordings from the 1990s is consistently somewhat higher than the use of unshifted voiceless stops.

3.2. Small Town K., County of Verden, Lower Saxony

Basis of analysis:

5 Tape recordings (TR)

1. TR from Zwirner corpus made in September 1957.
 Speaker S1 was born in K. in 1891; 66 years old at the time of interview; occupation: wheelwright.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 99%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 99%.

2. TR from Zwirner corpus made in September 1957.
 Speaker S2 was born in K. in 1902; 54 years old at the time of interview; occupation: farmer.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 97%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 96%.
3. TR from Zwirner corpus made in September 1957.
 Speaker S3 was born in K. in 1926; 31 years old at the time of interview; occupation: owner of a brickyard.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 94%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 93%.
4. Re-recording with speaker S3 made in October 1997; 71 years old at the time of re-interview; occupation: owner of a brickyard.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 88%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 84%.
5. New recording made in October 1997.
 Speaker S4 was born in K. in 1964; 33 years old at the time of interview; occupation: travel agency employee.
 Percentage of voiceless plosives: 3%.
 Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 7%.

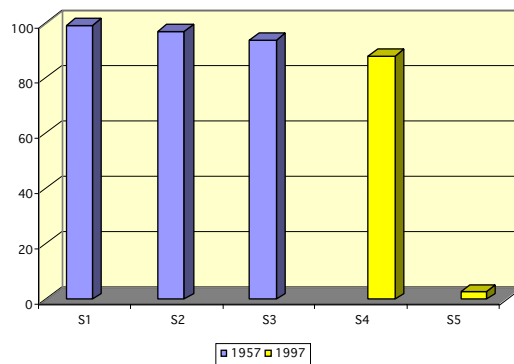


Figure 3. Dialect level: Percentage of voiceless plosives. Place: K., County of Verden, Lower Saxony.

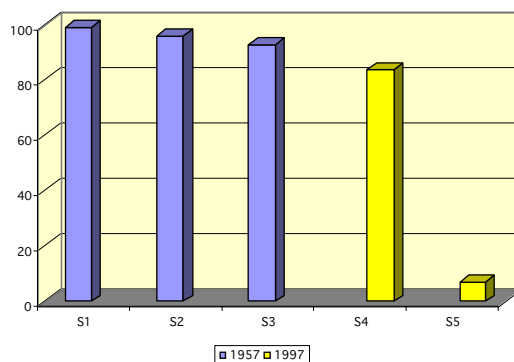


Figure 4. Dialect level: Percentage of all Low German phonological features. Place: K., County of Verden, Lower Saxony.

These graphs reflect the recent shift from Low German dialect to a northern German standard variety. But the gap between S3 and S4 confirms the hypothesis that the shift in the daily use of Low German has happened within the last decades. When S3 was interviewed in 1957 as a 31-year-old man, he spoke a Low German very similar to that of the persons of the older generation; his daughter (S4), interviewed at the age of 33 in 1997, speaks a northern colloquial variety of German with only isolated features of Low German. These mark her speech, though standard, as regionally bound.

3.3. Small towns G. + A., County of Ludwigslust, Mecklenburg

Basis of analysis:

8 Tape recordings (TR)

1. TR from GDR corpus made in December 1962.
Speaker S1 was born in A. in 1890; 72 years old at the time of interview; occupation: lumberman.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 95%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 96%.
2. TR from GDR corpus made in April 1963.
Speaker S2 was born in G. in 1897; 65 years old at the time of interview; occupation: homemaker.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 96%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 98%.

3. TR from GDR corpus made in December 1962.
Speaker S3 was born in A. in 1901; 61 years old at the time of interview; occupation: tailor.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 99%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 96%.
4. TR from GDR corpus made in December 1962.
Speaker S4 was born in A. in 1912; 50 years old at the time of interview; occupation: homemaker.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 95%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 93%.
5. TR from GDR corpus made in April 1963.
Speaker S5 was born in G. in 1920, 42 years old at the time of interview; occupation: joiner.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 89%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 93%.
6. Re-recording with speaker S5 made in February 2000; 79 years old at the time of interview; occupation: joiner.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 86%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 91%.
7. TR from GDR corpus made in December 1962.
Speaker S6 was born in A. in 1936; 26 years old at the time of interview; occupation: farmer.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 93%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 93%.
8. Re-recording with speaker S6 made in February 2000, 63 years old at the time of interview; occupation: farmer.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 95%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 93%.
9. New recording made in February 2000.
Speaker S7 was born in A. in 1942; 57 years old at the time of interview; occupation: locksmith.
Percentage of voiceless plosives: 91%.
Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 88%.

10. New recording made in February 2000.

Speaker S8 was born in G. in 1964; 35 years old at the time of interview; occupation: auto mechanic.

Percentage of voiceless plosives: 71%.

Percentage of all Low German phonological features: 47%.

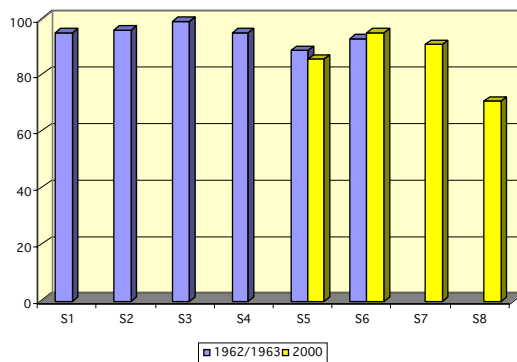


Figure 5. Dialect level: Percentage of voiceless plosives. Places: G. + A., County of Ludwigslust, Mecklenburg.

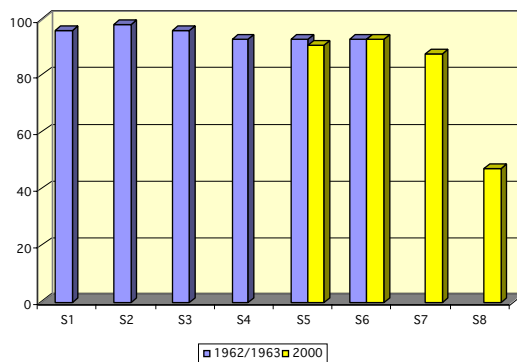


Figure 6. Dialect level: Percentage of all Low German phonological features. Places: G. + A., County of Ludwigslust, Mecklenburg.

These graphs present the results of the analyses of two small towns lying close together in the county of Ludwigslust in the former GDR. Because of their proximity, the data from these localities are compiled in

one graph. (Only 8 out of the 10 originally planned interviews were completed.)

The re-recordings of two persons show some astonishing patterns: The high level of proficiency in Low German demonstrated in the interviews from the 1950s has not declined. These consultants have maintained their dialect despite an official language policy of the GDR that effectively discouraged the maintenance of Low German. Even the newly recorded speaker S7 displays a remarkable level of dialectal proficiency; S8, on the other hand, is more typical of the northern German shift toward a standard variety with isolated features from the Low German substrate.

4. Conclusions

Limitations of this discussion note prevent an exhaustive analysis of our material. But even these few examples point out that a focus on the individual speaker and the observation of language change in real time can offer detailed information about the course and the mechanism of change generally.

My future work will build on some of the features discussed above, calculate their specific values, and determine the course of their changes. Other areas of language analysis that could not be covered by our analysis of a single feature will need to be included as well. Fortunately, there are other attempts of great promise, for example, the study of Geiger and Salmons forthcoming, focusing on changes in voice onset time values over the lifetimes of individual speakers, as well as across communities.

In a time when the German language is completing one of the most remarkable developments in its history—the shift from multiple regional dialects toward fewer supraregional varieties—and at the point where we have the opportunity to observe this development as it occurs, the detailed study of language change in progress becomes a pressing obligation for linguists.

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