

Identity and place: The changing role of Swabian in modern Germany

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The concepts of identity, time and place have long pitted dialectology and sociolinguistics at opposite ends of the methodological spectrum. Traditional dialectologists have concentrated on homogeneous groups of speakers – typically elderly, rural men, who have spent their entire lives in a single location – as the ‘true dialect speakers’. Sociolinguists have sought orderly heterogeneity and the ‘authentic speaker’ – “the ‘ideal’ informant with all of the ‘right’ social characteristics that suit the analysis to be conducted” (Britain 2016:217). More recent research points to the role of ‘dialect identity’ – the “positioning as a user or non-user of the local dialect” (Johnstone 2016:51) – and ‘place-identity’ – the use of local/regional dialect forms in innovative and strategic ways Coupland (2001) – as pivotal factors in dialect usage.

This paper presents the preliminary results of a 35-year panel study with twelve Swabian speakers from Schwäbisch Gmünd who were interviewed in both 1982 and 2017. Ten Swabian linguistic variables, covering phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical levels of the grammar, provide a rich palette for speakers to index different dialect identities. Features that reflect a positive Swabian identity are being retained, while others that are stigmatised are receding in favour of the standard language. Indices of Swabian identity and mobility have been developed to show how local identity and residential and workplacemobility influence speakers’ choice of dialect variants over time. The findings from this research offer new understandings in dialect retention/attrition and show how identity and a sense of place play a vital role in our understanding of language change.

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