

Swabian: thriving or dying? Language variation and change over 35 years

Auer (2005) defines a typology of standard/dialect constellations for Europe to explain changing language repertoires and calls for empirical research to analyse the transitions and establish the boundaries between varieties. To answer this call, this research looks at the Swabian dialect in southwestern Germany, which is changing from a diglossic (i.e., high-low varieties) to diaglossic (a continuum of intermediate varieties) situation, offering the opportunity to analyse the linguistic changes involved in the transition.

Following the variationist sociolinguistic paradigm, this paper presents the results of a 35-year panel study of 15 Swabian speakers who were interviewed in 1982 and 2017. Three phonological and three morphosyntactic variables were analysed to assess frequency and usage constraints in different stylistic situations. The findings show that, while some dialect features have converged toward the standard, others remain, confirming Britain's (2009:121) claim that dialect attrition 'does not necessarily lead to an overall shift to the standard language' and Auer's (2005) assertion that diaglossic repertoires, while susceptible to leveling, tend to be resistant to change.

To explain these findings, indices of identity, mobility, and social network (Cheshire et al. 2008; Sharma 2011) were analysed and the results show how certain features act as markers in establishing a positive Swabian identity, while others are stigmatised and hence avoided. This study offers new understandings in dialect attrition and provides indicators on the nature and direction of language change.

References:

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