

Language Contact within Systems and Speakers

Potsdam, 21.02.2018

LANGUAGE VARIATION, LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, HERITAGE LANGUAGES Workshop I

Introductory remarks: *Variation, Change, and Boundary Marking*



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Workshop I:

Introductory remarks: *Variation, Change, and Boundary Marking*

Potsdam, 21.02.2018

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Since this is a Research school which is meant to discuss PhD projects this is not the time to talk about my own work but about yours'. In spite of this advice, I will start with some insights of my own research in German language islands across the globe. The reason why is not that it is nicer to talk about own research but that we are going to consider the interaction of language contact and variation, of systems and speakers, of language-internal and language-external impacts on variation and change.

As you might know, I've done some research on German language islands in Russia and Brazil „in the flood“, which means on language islands on the verge of language shift. What we detected in these communities was a certain kind of morphological change (in terms of case reduction) that could be explained as a language contact phenomenon. However, these processes occur in Brazil as well as in Russia, within communities being exposed to a morphologically rather „poor“ language (Brazilian Portuguese) and a „rich“ language (Russian) with six cases. Furthermore, they emerge within linguistic communities more or less susceptible of language contact to the majority language. And it doesn't matter if more „conservative“ language varieties (Low German varieties) are involved or varieties which are more prone to language change. That's why a language-external explanation is not very likely – even if there are some contact-induced phenomena, of course.

On the other hand, what we observe is not just disorder, not amorphous decay but selective change. Reduction turns out to be structured: In noun inflection we notice a rapid case reduction to a two-term distinction or even to common case while in personal pronoun inflection speakers maintain a three-term distinction or at least dative forms. If you want to get some data evidence, just have a look at only two figures showing noun inflection and personal pronoun inflection (both with dative input in a translation task¹):

¹ 125 respondents, 60 test sentences, 270 potentially case marked elements, 28.536 types. *D* = dative realization, *_* = no case ending (for instance *de*), *N* = nominative, *A* = accusative, *NA* = common form for nominative and accusative (*sie*), *DA* = common form for dative and accusative (*mi/di, euch*), *+* = additional form, *0* = no realization.

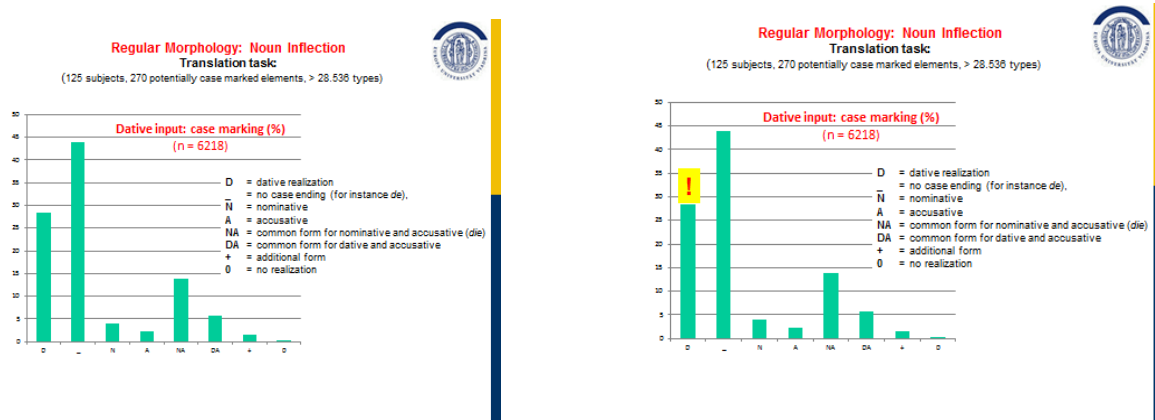


Fig. 1: Regular Morphology – noun inflection (nouns, adjectives, possessive pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, determiners, indefinite pronouns): Case marking on dative input (translation task into intended dialect, n = 6218, in p.c.)

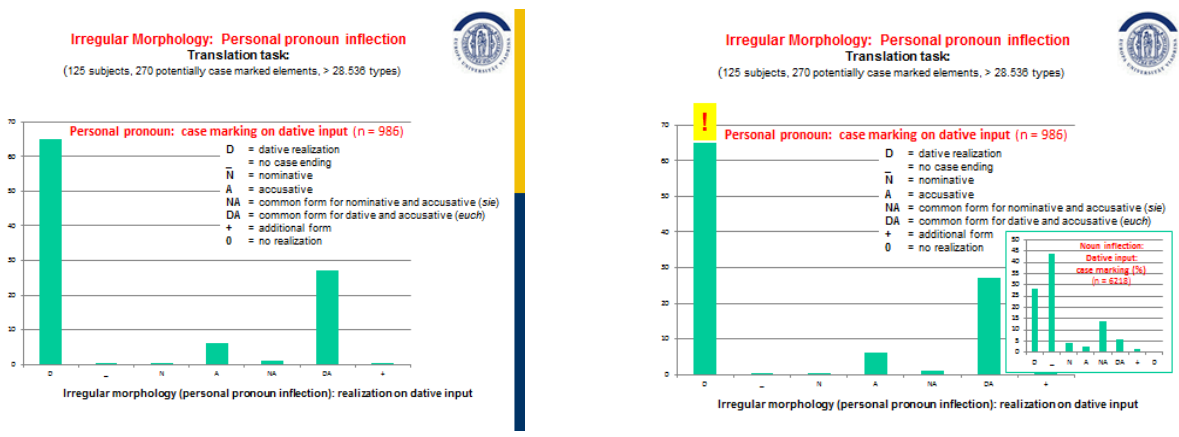
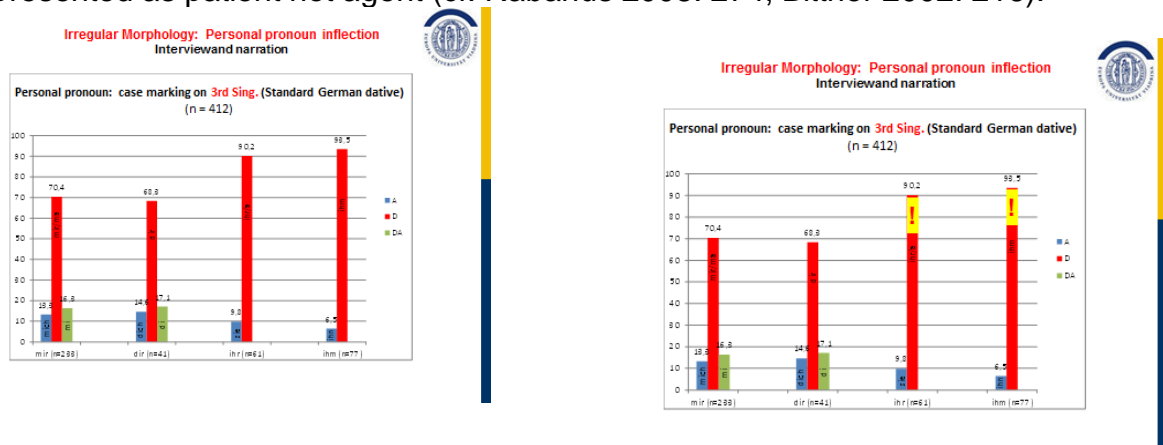


Fig. 2: Irregular Morphology – personal pronoun inflection: Case marking on dative input (translation task into intended dialect, n = 986, in p.c.)

While in noun inflection less than one third realize dative input by dative output, in personal pronoun inflection two thirds use dative forms.

Ultimately, this seems to be an impact of cognitive processes since personal pronouns often refer to animate objects. And datives are especially frequent in third person singular (*ihm, ihr* like in English *him, her*), which have to be marked if represented as patient not agent (cf. Rabanus 2008: 274, Bittner 2002: 216).



And datives are particularly resistant in case semantic core functions like dative as the case of the animate recipient.

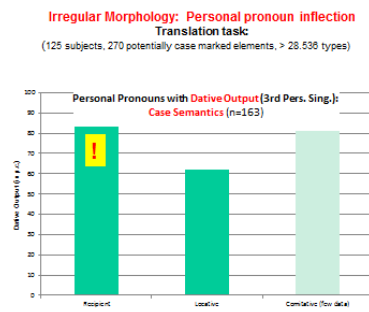
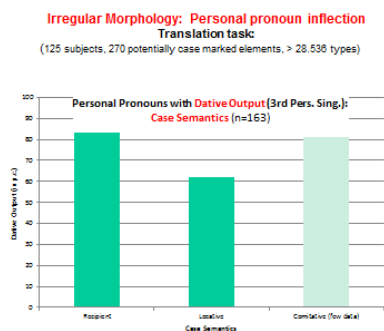


Fig. 3: Irregular Morphology – personal pronoun inflection (3rd pers. sing.): Case semantics with dative output (translation task into intended dialect, n = 163, in p.c.)

That’s why I would suggest not being too quick at hand with language-external explanations. This is our first insight:

It might be more useful to prefer an internal explanation or, at least and more precisely, to consider the interaction of „internal“ and „external“ language change with external effects being the trigger of a basically internally structured process. It seems that sociolinguistics of language contact paves the way for quite ordinary internal change.

But what remains to be explained is why this happens in an accelerated way just in times of language shift. Fig. 4 and 5 drawn from our sociolinguistic survey in the colonies visualize the use of German and of the contact language within the non-public language domains: German is mainly used with the grandparents and parents, rarely with spouses and children. For speaking with the children the contact language is used mostly. The trendlines in these figures (for usage „only“) are almost inverted.

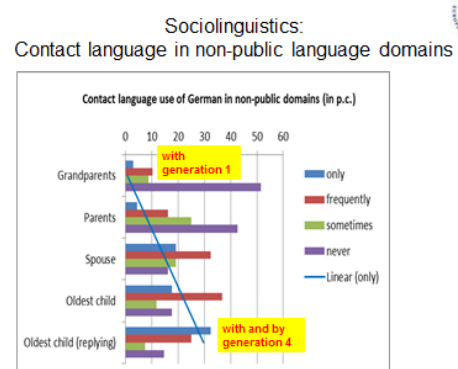
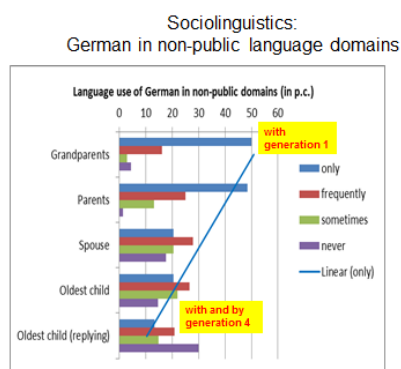


Fig. 4 and 5: Language use of German (all varieties) and contact language in non-public language domains²

The communities mentioned above belong to the biggest German language islands worldwide. But they are – sociolinguistically spoken – language islands in the „flood“, i.e. they undergo an accelerated language shift:

² Fig. 4 and 5: only 2000s’ inquiry data (n=68), without “no response”. The survey consists of 85 items concerning sociodemographic data, social networks, language awareness, language acquisition, language competence and language use, attitudes, related to the varieties and languages in contact.

In the last decades, the German speaking settlements, became subsequently integrated into the national societies. Today, Russian and Brazilian Germans are primarily Russians or Brazilians, speaking Russian or Brazilian Portuguese, married with Russians or Brazilians of other ethnic descent, favoring an urban lifestyle, studying somewhere in the country. Among the younger ones, the German language has become a heritage language.

Change in the Brazilian language islands is more intense, but the Russian language islands catch up quickly. The process of assimilation began earlier in the Brazilian German communities, but it is more rapid in the Russian German communities because of the migration to Germany which have the effect of an earthquake on the villages which today consist of only 10-15 p.c. of local born inhabitants.

Nowadays, ethnic diversity is a familiar trait of all people but it is not a vital resource of social distinction.

What is striking in our findings is that the acceleration in language change in the German language islands is not simply a consequence of language contact and imposition. What we find is a loss of something different: the gradual loss of knowing and caring about what is linguistically „ours“ and what is „theirs“. This is connected to a lack of intergenerational transmission of the German language, an increasing proportion of non-native speakers, and a common practice of code-mixing (frequently without any awareness of using elements of two languages). The determining factor which might have opened the gate for change in these communities could be called a loss of *normativity*, i.e. of norm awareness and norm loyalty. This is our second insight.

Considering this it becomes necessary to assess the distinctiveness of the linguistic communities. This presents us with the problem of *boundary marking* by language.

Ethnic boundaries are not “given” by the essence of origin, language or culture, but constructed by choice and evaluation of social relations.

This is the famous contribution made by Fredrik Barth 1969, the forefather of ethnological constructivism who stated that the most important process is in ethnic boundary marking:



Sociological and ethnological aspects
Ethnic boundary marking? (Barth 1969)

- “The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the **ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses.**” (Barth 1969: 16)
- “I overstated this point (of cultural differences of primary significance for ethnicity used to mark the boundary, PR) in the formulation that people’s choice of diacritica appeared arbitrary. [...] These reifications have consequences, but not the consequences of simply creating the communities and the properties that are imagined, by the mere act of imagining.” (Barth 1994: 12, 13)
- “If ethnicity is the social organization of culture difference, we need to transcend habitual conceptions of the thing ‘culture’. What we subsume under the concept of culture no doubt has empirical properties which will be relevant to an understanding of ethnicity” (Barth 1994: 13).
- “Thus the issue of cultural content versus boundary, as it was formulated, unintentionally served to mislead. [...] As already shown in the case materials in Ethnic groups..., central and culturally valued institutions and activities in an ethnic group may be deeply involved in its boundary maintenance by setting internal processes of convergence into motion” (Barth 1994: 16f., emphasis added by P.R.).

The critical focus of investigation from this point of view becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses. (Barth 1969: 16)

Brubaker, too, warns against the tradition of “groupism”, which takes (ethnic) groups for “things in the world” instead of appraising a shared and imagined “groupness”.

Groups are „what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with” (Brubaker 2002: 165).

The truth of this advice has long been known in Russian German dialectology: Andreas Dulson (1941) already stated that language serves as a boundary marker if it represents a difference: the experience of communicative belonging as long as „compact groups“ are demarcated by language and by social or cultural difference.

In postmodern terminology, Joanna Pfaff-Czarnecka suggests to use the concept of belonging not identity with the aim to assess the heterogeneous and multilingual group memberships and the degree of incorporation into different groups.

The notion of construction has become widely accepted in social sciences and in interactional sociolinguistics. And sometimes in postcolonial studies construction appears as a deus ex machina, a kind of passe-partout explanation, which shifts the field of interpretation from interaction to mental states. But since we have to explain the emergence or obsolescence of boundaries (of social, ethnic or national groups), we still have to answer some questions: What are the resources of this construction? And what is the impact of language in boundary marking?

Boundaries may be differentiated according to three criteria: *durability* (stability), *permeability* (allowing crossing or not), and *liminality* (abrupt or smooth transition)³. What causes the construction of a disruptive boundary or its state as a blurred one?


As Fredrik Barth (1994) conceded 25 years after his programmatic proposition: Construction is not arbitrary, not just an imagination, but as a social organization of cultural difference, it consists in structuring experience along central cultural values.



Sociological and ethnological aspects
Ethnic boundary marking? (Barth 1969 – Barth 1994)

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- “Thus the issue of cultural content *versus* boundary, as it was formulated, unintentionally served to mislead. [...] As already shown in the case materials in ethnic groups [...] **central and culturally valued** institutions and activities in an ethnic group may be deeply involved in its boundary maintenance by setting internal processes of convergence into motion” (Barth 1994: 16f., emphasis added by P.R.).

Instead of disregarding the role of experience and social interaction, I would suggest taking construction as a threefold process:



Construction?

- Selection (Focusing)
- Hierarchization
- Evaluation

³ Cf. Schiffauer et al. 2014, 2018.

A process including *selection* of experiential features (making them “focused” in terms of Le Page/Tabouret-Keller 1985), their *hierarchization* (making them relevant) and – as far as attitudes are involved – their *evaluation* (making them highly valued)⁴.

Thus, we have to ask: under which circumstances does language serve as an ethnic boundary marker, under which does it lose this ability?

As we will hear from Olga Goritskaya about the case of Belarusian Russian, it is not „easy to distinguish between language-internal and contact-induced processes“ (abstract). This has to do with the structural similarity between Russian and Belarusian. And it is due to the blurred boundaries between the linguistic communities of Russian and Belarusian (and particularly within the linguistic community of the fused lect of Trasjanka) which are not at all „compact groups“ but overlapping in different ways.

The case of Ragusan presented by Jelena Živojinović, this medieval Romance Italo-Dalmatian language in the area of Dubrovnik and Split, presents us with the question at which point multilingualism becomes „redundant“ in entirely multilingual communities leading to the death of a language. Morphological code-mixing or fusion are not evidence of weakness but a sign of a certain capacity to integrate linguistic material into the own language. Shift comes when the „own“ becomes unclear (or unimportant). May be it was more the competition with the Venetian variety than with the Slavic variety which made multilingualism „redundant“.

The emergence of urban multiethnic varieties is studied by Kathleen Schumann and Serkan Yüksel in sales interactions in Berlin. Apparently, the limits of variation in these multilingual interactions depend on the resources of the speaker and the anticipated ones of the hearer. But, what is more, they display an attempt to draw a line of inclusion or exclusion which signifies the framing intended by the interactors – and this framing may be local or ethnic or national or urban or whatever boundary marking affords.



Language as ethnic boundary marker?

- Communicative needs
- Distinctiveness
- Ethnic frame
- Vitality of linguistic community
- Positive evaluation

With the focus on ethnicity we could say: Language is an ethnic boundary marker if it serves a *communicative need* (in some language domains), if it displays a certain *distinctiveness*, and if it is considered a legitimate distinction within an *ethnic frame*.

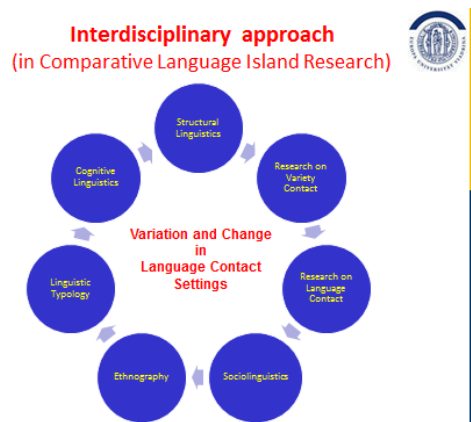
⁴ Barth himself, has admitted some oversimplifications when reviewing his approach in 1969 at a 25-years-anniversary conference in 1993: The main objections have been the following:

- The claim, it wouldn't be the “cultural stuff” which defines the ethnic group, but the boundary was “overstated”, and thus “people's choice of diacritica appeared arbitrary” (Barth 1994: 12).
- These diacritica of boundary marking are not constructed by a “mere act of imagining”, but rather have “empirical properties” (Barth 1994: 13): they are based on “experience”, and reflect “salient, major cultural discontinuities” (Barth 1994: 14).
- In this sense, “ethnicity is the social organization of culture difference” (Barth 1994: 13).

An ethnic frame is chosen if social experience is reasonably focused as an ethnic structure with prototypical actors of relevant „ethnic“ characteristics and if an *ethnolinguistic vitality* of the speech community is *positively evaluated* (cf. Esser 1996). Then, ethnic (or multiethnic) varieties are maintained or even emerge.

Ethnic boundaries are going to vanish if the experience of difference is less prominent, if language loses the ability to focus this experience, and if differences no longer represent an ethnic „loading“. Then, normativity decreases and borders become diffuse – not when oppression is most severe, but when language and culture lose their discreteness. Then, language shift – and sometimes language decay – is the consequence. Losing boundaries is akin to losing norm awareness, norm institutions and norm loyalty, which opens the gate for obsolescence, assimilation, and change.

Having this in mind, as you might guess: The interdependence of boundary marking, language contact, variation and change requires an interdisciplinary methodological approach.



This means to combine the study of internal (structural, typological and cognitive), external (variety and language contact), and attitudinal (sociolinguistic and ethnographical) features. If possible a comparative investigation might be useful – of different types of speakers and pragmatic settings as is included into the projects which will be presented now.

And this may invite us to the presentations which I have the great pleasure to comment on.