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SOCIETY AND LANGUAGE CHANGE IN GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how a language with a primarily oral tradition can be affected by sociological change. Focusing on a rural community within central Switzerland, factors affecting current and recent language use will be discussed within the context of society in order to establish the causes of linguistic change and how such shifts affect the fabric of the dialects. Findings show how local language change has been brought on partly by economic and social developments. Other areas of influence such as the power of the media as well as the idea of social prestige are discussed too.

THE LINGUISTIC SITUATION IN GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND

Swiss German, the language of about two thirds of the population, is a collective term for a number of varying regional and local upper German dialects, whose popularity has been subjected to many trends (*Mundartwellen)* in the past. It is an *essentially* spoken language, as opposed to standard German, which is chiefly used for written purposes (hence the term *Schriftdeutsch*). There is, however, no strict borderline restricting the use of both varieties within clear-cut boundaries, and the choice of language often depends on context and speech event/text type (for detailed information see Barbour/Stephenson 1990: 215).

DIALECT AND SOCIETY

The large number of Swiss German dialects, which all either carry the name of the major regional towns (*Berndütsch* or *Zürichdütsch*) or their geographic area (*Walliserdütsch* or *Bündnerdütsch*) has in the past been chiefly conditioned by the rigid topographic structure of the area. Thus many communities and regions developed their own linguistic characteristics quite early on at all levels of language. Many of these features have been kept up through to the present, as in the uppermost German dialects of the Canton of Wallis, where e.g. the Middle High German 3-form plural for verbs in the present tense is still in use, as in *schreiben* 'write' : schrib*ant*, schrib*ent*, schrib*unt*.

These dialects are, without pressure of power or status, the equal vehicle of communication for all social levels. An expression of the democratic tradition, they have not undergone a centrally regulating influence. Hence to this day, there generally is no social stigma attached to the speakers of any of the linguistic varieties.

LINGUISTIC CHANGE VERSUS RELATIVE STABILITY

Aspects of change in this mosaic of dialects have to be set against the background of relative stability. It is a fact that so far no supradialectal 'koiné' has arisen to ease communication amongst speakers of different dialects or to pave the way for a standardised Swiss German written language. The following two reasons chiefly account for this:

1) Swiss German is a language whose vocabulary and syntactic structure are not standardised.
2) Due to the varying topographic structure of the entire area the dialectal differences are deep-rooted, which would block such developments. There are numerous close-knit local networks which function, in Milroy's words, as a 'norm enforcment mechanism' (Milroy 1987:179). Hence there would be much resistance to external pressures of a harmonising nature.

The linguistic changes which can be perceived within German-speaking Switzerland happen on a minor scale: As dialects come ever more in contact, there are *regional* tendencies to even out intradialectal differences, which can culminate in the 'melting pots' of larger towns. Moreover, the innovative role of urban centres is generally known and the fear that local dialects are receding in many industrialised countries has been expressed by many dialectologists (Labov 1994: 22). In order to make valid predictions about linguistic divergence or convergence it is necessary for rural dialects to be further documented, as will be done below.

ASPECTS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE IN RURAL CENTRAL SWITZERLAND

The validity of an investigation into linguistic change is restricted in so far as people living in the same place may be differently affected by this process. Furthermore, language change is not constant, apart from the fact of its existence. Change is "sporadic, irrational ... and unpredictable" (Labov 1994: 10). The observations which follow may be seen in that light.

Area and method of investigation

Due to its location at the cross roads of western, eastern, northern and southern dialects, central Switzerland has always been exposed to multiple linguistic influences, which makes it prone to undergo language change. For the purposes of this paper we will focus our attention on the rural southern part of the Canton of Lucerne, which is located in the Alpine foothills, roughly midway between the cities Lucerne and Berne.

The study of change in progress is based on data gathered from a questionnaire and observations from present day speech set against the background of a critical selection of

findings from the linguistic atlas of German-speaking Switzerland, compiled some 30 years ago (SDS 1969f., I-VI).

The linguistic situation within the examined area

The investigated valley, whose topography allowed it initially to be settled from Berne in the south-west as well as from Lucerne in the north-east, enjoys a peripheral position within central Switzerland. Although its main orientation is towards Lucerne, to which it belongs politically and confessionally, its essentially central Swiss dialect shares many characteristics with Berne. This can be illustrated with the most prominent western feature which protrudes into this valley, the use of the plural endings in the present tense. Here, the verbs possess two endings as opposed to the one-form ending prevalent in central and eastern Switzerland: for *schreiben* 'write' this is schrib*e*, schrib*et*, schrib*e* vs schrib*ed*, schrib*ed*, schrib*ed*.

Numerous other local features, such as articulation, speed of speech, vocabulary choice as well as pronunciation point towards influence from Berne too (Hogan-Brun 1993 a & b).

Some aspects of language change

Research has shown that a number of influences from Lucerne to the east have infiltrated into local dialect patterns. A small selection of recent investigations, the following examples serve to illustrate this, first on a lexical level:

item	Berne and Entlebuch (SDS)	central Swiss and Entlebuch (today)
Föhre: 'fir tree'	*Tä(ä)lle* (VI, 128) →	*Fö(ö)re*
holen: 'fetch'	*reiche* (V, 215) →	*hole*
kauern: 'crouch'	*gru(u)pe* (IV, 39) →	*huure*
Schnuppen: 'cold'	*Chnüsel, Pfnüsel* (IV, 63) →	*Schnuppe*
dort: 'there'	*dert* (VI, 101) →	*det*
Eichhorn: 'squirrel'	*Eiker* (VI, 257) →	*Eichhorn*

The local words, *Tä(ä)lle, reiche, gru(u)pe, Chnüsel, dert* and *Eiker,* which are western features and which were still popular locally some 30 years ago, have meanwhile given way to central Swiss *Fö(ö)re, hole, huure, Schnuppe, det* and *Eichhorn.*

The same phenomenon can be traced on a morphological level within the same span of time, e.g.:

item	Berne and Entlebuch (SDS)	central Swiss and Entlebuch (today)

attr. numeral *zwei:* 'two'	*zwee, zwoo, zwei* (III,236) →	*zwee, zwee, zwöi*
attr. adjective	not inflected : *alt Manne* → (III,253)	inflected: *alti Manne*
def. masc.art.nom.sg. 'the'	*dr* (III,134)→	*de*

<div align="right">(Hogan-Brun 1993b: 50).</div>

The inflected form *alti Manne: '*old men' is now commonly used within the explored area as opposed to *alt Manne*, furthermore *zwee, zwoo, zwei* has given way to *zwee, zwee, zwöi* and *dr* has been replaced by *de.*

An item from phonology is the l-vocalization through *u*, as in :

item	rural western dialects (Schmid 1915:17)	Luzern
Brille: 'glasses'	Bry$^{(w)}$«	<--Brille
viel: 'much'	fy^w	<--viel
wolle er: 'he wants' (invers.)	w0$^{(w)}$«r	<--well«r

<div align="right">(Hogan-Brun 1995: 107)</div>

The l-vocalization through *u,* a typical rural phenomenon which started spreading around the turn of the century, has not fully penetrated Lucerne (Christen 1988). Traces of the old *l*-variant are now finding their way back into parts of the rural communities.

Local linguistic innovation

In the face of the selection of lexical, morphological and phonological changes above, which point at influence from central Switzerland, reference must be made to the fact that, by creating its own innovations, the examined region shows some linguistic independence:

item	Entlebuch	SDS	today
pl. *fangen:* 'catch'	*fai, fait, fai*	III, 76 →	*föi, föit, föi*
pl. *gehen:* 'go'	*gai, gait, gai*	III, 58 →	*göi, göit, göi*
2.sg. *kommen:* 'come'	*chuusch(t)*	III,100 →	*chonsch*
2.sg. *können:* 'can'	*chaisch(t)*	III, 104 →	*cha(n)sch*
part. perf. *laufen:* 'run'	*glüffe*	III, 8 →	*gloffe*
pl. *lassen:* 'let'	*lai, lait, lai*	III, 66 →	*löi, löit, löi*
pl. *schlagen:* 'hit'	*schlai, schlait, schlai*	III, 72 →	*schlöi, schlöit, schlöi*
pl. *stehen:* 'stand'	*stai, stait, stai*	III, 59 →	*stöi, stöit, stöi*
attr. Zahlwort neutr. *zwei:* 'two'	*zwei*	III, 236 →	*zwöi*

These relatively recent changes are not (yet) favoured amongst the older inhabitants.

Reasons for change

In order to understand the causes of change it is important to establish where in society the change originates, how/whether this spreads to other social groups and which groups show resistance to it. This preliminary investigation considers these criteria broadly. The explored changes, some of which have been listed above, have to be seen in the light of the following facts:

Changes within the employment sector generally have affected the fabric of the local population. With almost two thirds of the population employed in the tertiary sector, the agricultural workforce has steadily decreased to barely 8 %. Hence many inhabitants of the explored area, which is considered to be one of the poorest agricultural regions in Switzerland, have to seek employment elsewhere. Lucerne is the favoured workplace. The nearest institutions of further education are located in Lucerne too, which is why many young people join these commuters daily. These two groups of people come into everyday contact with the Lucerne dialect. Some of them adapt to urban linguistic standards to some extent, which they either bring home unconsciously or because they find it prestigious to be associated with a dialect outside their own area. In the case of the *l*-vocalization, a typical western rural feature, which spread at the turn of this century (Schmid 1915: 17) without being fully accepted in Lucerne, this reversing trend presents an interesting twist in the history of local linguistic developments! However, not all the age ranges or social levels are affected in the same way by such changes. It is chiefly commuters, young and middle-aged employees who seem to be more open to such innovations. Older inhabitants and people who work locally appear to be less susceptible to these changes. Another influencing factor seems to be whether the people and their parents are local natives.

With the linguistic environemt extending beyond other speakers, the influence, albeit small, of the media and of High German in general has to be taken into account as well. Changes like *Fö(ö)re* (Germ. 'Föhre'), *hole* (Germ. 'holen'), *Schnuppe* (Germ. 'Schnupfen') and *Eichhorn* (Germ.'Eichhorn') are likely to have been reinforced by the presence of the same word in standard German.

OUTLOOK

This investigation into rural dialect patterns has identified aspects of change on all levels of language and traced its causes outside of linguistics: social movements, the indirect influence of urban dialects, the idea of prestige and the effect of the media as well as of High-German, all operating in complex interaction, have been accounted for. Internal factors, whose function it is to uphold the communicative function of a language, so far

seem to play a minor role locally. From the selection above the change from the number 'two': *zwöi* to *zwo*, which chiefly takes place during a telephone conversation, appears to be internally motivated to avoid confusion with 'three': *dröi*. At this stage, both external and internal factors seem to operate independently. Furthermore, the documented changes are an effect of *conscious* choices about language, and as such they are restricted to surface forms. Stemming from *above* and not from *below* the language (Labov 1994: 604), they do not reach the level where *systematic* linguistic change takes place. Such changes are therefore subjected to non-permanent trends which are not likely to affect the fabric of language. Moreover, the evidence of the innovative power of these dialects points to the fact that, within German-speaking Switzerland, the forecast of linguistic convergence seems to be inappropriate for the time being.

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