

# Standard language in Austria

Barbara Soukup and Sylvia Moosmüller

*University of Vienna and Acoustics Research Institute, Austria*

## DEVELOPMENT AND STATUS OF STANDARD AUSTRIAN GERMAN

These days, German is widely considered (at least in academic treatments) to be a ‘pluricentric’ language – one that is used as a national or regional official language in more than one country (the biggest being Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), generating a range of standard varieties (Ammon *et al.* 2004: XXXI).<sup>1</sup> Clyne (1993: 360) writes that for pluricentric languages ‘national variation is strong at the lexicosemantic, pragmatic and phonological levels but very slight in grammar’. For historical reasons, the standard language of (Northern) Germany is dominant among German standard varieties, which is why national differences are commonly described with respect to the standard language codified for Germany.

While the Austrian Bavarian shares in the development of the ‘common denominator’ of Standard German are undisputed (with Austrian Bavarian belonging to the Upper German dialect group), in 1750 the Austrian court actively adopted the language norms laid out by Gottsched and Adelung, which were in fact based on East Middle German (von Polenz 1999). Later, an Austrian national consciousness arose with the *kleindeutsche Lösung* (which excluded Austria from a unified Germany) in 1871 (Weiss and Weiss 2007); but for all German-speaking territories, the language of the ‘classics’ (e.g. Goethe and Schiller) and the ‘language of the educated’ (*Bildungssprache*) became the models for ‘correct’, ‘beautiful’, and ‘good’ German. However, especially in Austria and Switzerland, identity construction also implied the preservation of linguistic idiosyncrasies, particularly in the lexicon (Mattheier 2003: 235).

Regarding pronunciation, both the usage of the Imperial Theatre and so-called ‘Prague German’ (based in administrative language) functioned as standard models in Austria and, with respect to prestige, outdid the pronunciation norms codified in the work of Theodor Siebs (beginning with his *Deutsche Bühnensprache*, 1898), which dominated in Germany (Ehrlich 2009; Weiss and Weiss 2007). A first linguistic comparison of German German and Austrian German usage was provided by Luick (1904).

The period between the World Wars was marked by a political rapprochement between Austria and Germany, and consequently, awareness of Austrian linguistic autonomy receded. It gained new impetus after World War II, concurrently with a growing Austrian national consciousness (de Cillia 2006, Ebner 2008). A salient expression of this was the conceptualisation of the *Österreichisches Wörterbuch* (*ÖWB*), whose first edition was released in 1951. Currently in its 41st edition (2009), the *ÖWB* is today used as official reference tool in all Austrian schools and government bodies.<sup>2</sup> It has, according to Wiesinger (2006: 141), over the last decades ‘increasingly taken over the task of codifying the German language in Austria’ (our translation) – though not without controversy. In particular, the 35th edition (1979) was highly contentious, containing many dialectal and regional expressions not found in previous editions (see e.g. Clyne 1989; Dressler and Wodak 1983; Retti 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Ammon *et al.* (2004: XI) define ‘standard German’ as ‘the German that is perceived as appropriate and correct in public language usage’ (our free translation).

<sup>2</sup> It is also used by some newspapers, particularly to identify acceptable (i.e. non-colloquial) ‘Austriacisms’, which are often preferred over ‘Germanisms’ (personal communication, *Der Standard, Die Presse*). The Austrian Press Agency (APA) reports keeping an internal ‘handbook’ for these cases.

However, the *ÖWB* remains the only official codex to date, so that Austrian German still lacks a grammar and a pronunciation dictionary (Ammon 2004). Muhr's *Österreichisches Aussprachewörterbuch* (2007) is a recent endeavour to close this gap, though it is subject to much criticism (see Hirschfeld 2008). Further, it focuses on and codifies only the pronunciation of professional news anchors and radio hosts, and hence does not take into account usage in non-trained contexts and by groups of speakers who Austrians themselves *also* associate with the standard (see below; for linguistic descriptions of such usage see e.g. Moosmüller 1991, 2007, 2011; Wiesinger 2009). Of course, this raises fundamental questions of how an Austrian standard pronunciation should be defined and located in the first place – a point we pick up next in the context of language attitude research in Austria.

As de Cillia (1997) points out, then, the *ÖWB* is one of only two exceptions to the generalisation that official language policy-making that might publicly establish and define an Austrian standard German is virtually non-existent. The second exception he cites is the (in)famous (because much hyped) 'Protocol No 10 Regarding provisions on the use of specific Austrian terms of the German language in the framework of the European Union', an addendum to Austria's treaty of accession to the EU (signed in 1994) which lists (only) twenty-three mainly culinary Austrian variants (e.g. Austrian *Marillen* vs. German *Aprikosen* – 'apricots') that are thus granted the same status and legality as the corresponding German terms. This Protocol, however, was never followed up with any further national language policy measures, nor was its observance ever really checked up on (see Markhardt 2002, who furthermore reports that Austriacisms appearing in translated EU documents tend to get 'corrected' to German German variants 'for better comprehensibility').

## LANGUAGE ATTITUDE RESEARCH

Moosmüller (1991) provides some perspective on the question of where and with whom the average Austrian actually locates a (spoken) Austrian standard language.<sup>3</sup> In semi-structured interviews, informants from a variety of social class backgrounds agreed in claiming some autonomy from the standard variety in Germany. Further, there was agreement that a standard language is spoken by educated people; and with respect to regional location, Vienna was seen as the main site of *Hochsprache* (though more so by informants from Salzburg and Vienna than by those from Innsbruck and Graz, who located the standard in other parts of Austria as well).

In a subsequent experiment presenting informants with short speech samples containing from zero up to many features characteristic of Bavarian-Austrian dialect (the main type of regional variety spoken in Austria),<sup>4</sup> and asking them to assign these samples both regionally and socially, Moosmüller (1991) found that only those speech samples which showed a noticeable lack of such salient features – especially of input-switch-rules<sup>5</sup> and features of south-Bavarian origin – were attributed a supra-regional status (and hence, by extension, could be considered Austrian 'standard'). Moreover, the 'dialect-free' speech samples were mainly

<sup>3</sup> Moosmüller and other scholars use the term *Hochsprache* (literally, 'high language') to refer to such a variety (hence implying its social prestige). Other commonly used *popular* terms to designate a standard variety in Austria include *Hochdeutsch* ('High German') and *Schriftdeutsch* ('Writing German'). The former is considered inadequate from an academic perspective, because the same term is in fact used to differentiate between the 'High German' varieties of the southern Germanophone area and 'Low German' in the north. The latter is avoided in academic texts for implying a written norm. Regionally marked varieties are most commonly called *Dialekt* ('dialect') in the Austrian context – a practice which we use here as well.

<sup>4</sup> See the website of the Austrian Academy of Sciences for outlines and descriptions of the Austrian dialect areas: <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/dinamlex/Dialektgebiete.html> (January 27, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> i.e. features where the relationship between standard and dialect forms is only diachronically explicable but not synchronically, and typically no gradient intermediate forms exist - see e.g. Dressler and Wodak (1982), Moosmüller (1991) for discussion.

attributed to Vienna, even if the speakers actually hailed from Salzburg, and to professions associated with high education.

We can therefore conclude that Standard Austrian German is generally seen as a ‘non-dialectal’ variety spoken by the educated people from the middle-Bavarian region (which includes Salzburg and Vienna – see also Soukup 2009 for similar findings), meaning that, while it should not show any salient regional features, it does in reality have a middle-Bavarian basis with respect to non-perceptually salient aspects of phonology, phonetics, and prosody.<sup>6</sup>

Steinegger (1998) reports attitudinal research whose purpose was to assess Austrians’ own spoken language usage patterns via self-reporting, for example asking in which situations informants considered it appropriate or themselves preferred to speak dialect, standard (here: *Hochdeutsch*), or *Umgangssprache* (‘something that lies between dialect and standard’ – Steinegger 1998: 388; our translation). To date, this constitutes the largest-scale questionnaire-based attitude survey in Austria, collecting data from a fairly representative sample of 1,500 informants across all provinces. One of the most salient findings, which reappears time and again across virtually all language attitude-related research in the Austrian context (e.g. Hathaway 1979; Jochum 1999; Kleinberg 2007; Malliga 1997; Satzke 1986; Soukup 2009), is a strong, across-the-board (i.e. across gender and social groups) tendency towards compartmentalisation, in the sense that dialectal varieties and the standard are assigned complementary interactional realms, dialect being associated with private domains (family, friends, colleagues) and the standard being associated with ‘public’ domains such as education, broadcast media, and government (but also talk with strangers, purportedly for reasons of comprehensibility).<sup>7</sup> Overall, two thirds of the informants indicated that their assessment of the appropriateness of speaking in the dialect depended entirely on the situation of use; over 90% reported their own readiness to adapt their language use to the situation and/ or their interactional partner. When these interactional partners happen to be children, however, dialect use is regarded quite negatively, which is concomitant with a strong demand for standard to be the language of schooling (see also discussion further below).

Data for Steinegger’s (1998) report were collected in two waves – in 1984/85 and in 1991. The main difference between the two sets is a sharp increase in an expressed (but not further specified) desire for more linguistic ‘independence’ (*auf sprachliche Eigenständigkeit achten*) vis-à-vis Germany. Generally, then, the function of Austrian language usage for identity construction, particularly in indexing non-German identity, is another common theme in Austrian language attitude research (see e.g. also de Cillia 1997; Kaiser 2006; Moosmüller 1991 as cited above; Scheuringer 1992). However, researchers usually find their informants to hold rather vague and ambivalent notions, if any at all, regarding a specifically *Austrian standard* language usage. Thus, while the importance of ‘Austrian German’ for Austrian identity construction is routinely stressed, the ‘peculiarities’ of such a variety are usually located on the dialectal level, so that speaking ‘Austrian German’ is more often than not equated with speaking dialect (see also discussion in Kaiser 2006). Dialect use, however, is usually seen to carry ‘lower’ social prestige than ‘standard German’ (in folk linguistic terms, *schön sprechen*, ‘talking nicely’, only ever refers to the standard), although only few Austrian speakers actually prefer to use standard over dialectal varieties (see Steinegger 1998, who reports a rate of only 5% of informants whose preferred language choice is standard/ *Hochdeutsch*). For this reason, some scholars (e.g. de Cillia 1997; Muhr 1982; Reiffenstein 1982) have diagnosed feelings of linguistic insecurity and even ‘guilt’ in the population regarding a constant non-adherence to an accepted norm of ‘good’ language use.

<sup>6</sup> Such non-salient features include the lenition of fortis plosives, such that, for example, *Dank* (‘thanks’) and *Tank* (‘gasoline tank’) sound the same.

<sup>7</sup> Jochum (1999) notes that in the westernmost province of Vorarlberg, the only region in Austria where Alemannic dialects are spoken, dialect use is actually more widespread in terms of domains than in the remaining Bavarian-Austrian region.

The fact that dialect is generally considered the language of lesser prestige in Austria is confirmed throughout the literature, but specifically also in studies that are based on speaker evaluation experiments (e.g. Moosmüller 1988; Satzke 1986; Soukup 2009). Thus Soukup (2009), for example, found that speakers' standard (i.e. 'non-dialectal') language use generates higher ratings regarding education, sophistication and intelligence, whereas dialect is associated with being uneducated, unintelligent, coarse, and rough by comparison. On the other hand, dialect use may also project being more natural, emotional, and honest.<sup>8</sup> Concomitantly, in their comments informants once more clearly associated dialect use with private and standard with public realms (see above).

It must be noted, though, that the vast majority of attitudinal research has been carried out in the Bavarian-Austrian dialect region. By contrast, there is some evidence that language usage and attitudes in the Alemannic-speaking region of Vorarlberg resemble more closely those evident in Switzerland, including a more positive attitude towards non-standard speech (see e.g. Jochum 1999; Steinegger 1998). Overall, however, the situation in Vorarlberg remains vastly under-researched.

## STANDARD LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA

Language attitude research also shows that Austrians do commonly associate standard language with the Austrian broadcast media – at least in the context of supra-regional distribution, and specifically in connection with news-casting (e.g. Soukup 2009; Steinegger 1998). The biggest programming and broadcast news supplier in Austria is the Austrian national public broadcasting company ORF. In existence in its present form since the 1960s, it held a monopoly on Austrian broadcasting until the late 1990s (though German TV channels and hence German TV news have been present via cable since at least the 1970s). The market share of ORF's two main TV stations, ORF1 and ORF2, lies at around 40% (with the remainder being mostly distributed across German cable stations); its three national and one regional radio stations (Ö1, Ö3, FM4; Ö2) together cover almost 80% of that market.<sup>9</sup>

A rough calculation (categorizing all TV programs over a week for where they were produced and tallying up broadcast minutes) shows that on ORF1 almost 60% of air time on average goes to shows of non-German-speaking origin dubbed for the bigger German market (and hence in a Germany-oriented standard). 15% is German-produced content, and the remaining 25% is of Austrian origin – and thus supposedly the only place where some Austrian standard variety might be found. (The distribution is in fact very similar on the biggest private Austrian TV station ATVplus). By contrast, ORF2 provides only 4% foreign and 30% German, but 66% Austrian programming. ORF1 hosts 4¼ hours of news on average per week (ATVplus: ca. 2 hours), while ORF2 provides 12¼ hours (or almost 2 hours per day).

Being the main host of Austrian language production on TV, then, particularly in a news context, ORF's respective policies warrant some investigation. Information provided by ORF staff (p.c.) confirms that language use is indeed subject to institutional guidelines. Thus, a 'Chief Speaker' is centrally charged with overseeing, disseminating, and updating usage policies and standards regarding pronunciation (particularly of foreign and place names) and lexical usage (e.g. regarding Austriacisms vs. Germanisms such as A: *bisher* vs. G: *bislang* – 'so far'). A pronunciation database (in cooperation with German and Swiss public TV) serves as reference, as well as *Duden Aussprachewörterbuch* (2000). Further, to obtain permission to go on air, staff have to pass through an 'assessment centre' first, where voice and speech pro-

<sup>8</sup> This study, carried out in Linz in the northern province of Upper Austria, has recently been replicated in Graz in the southern province of Styria and in Vienna by Goldgruber (2011), with findings much to the same effect.

<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://mediaresearch.orf.at/>.

duction are scrutinised (e.g. for speech defects); subsequently, training programs are offered centrally via headquarters in Vienna.

However, while until twenty years ago ORF employed and rigorously trained (and thus brought into line) fully professional speakers for news-casting and voice-overs, it is now common usage for field journalists to submit their own reports ready-made, including the voice track. This has led to a perceptible change in the linguistic landscape particularly on TV, where usage has become much less consistent. To this is added an increased tolerance or even desire for locally ‘coloured’ speech, particularly for regional broadcasts (on radio Ö2, as well as during 30 minutes of daily regional TV news on ORF2).<sup>10</sup> But these days even national news anchors can be heard to ‘take liberties’ regarding the traditional norms derived from *Duden* and *Siebs Deutsche Aussprache* (de Boor *et al.* 1969, with an addendum for Austria), tending towards a style that may even include a limited set of features of clearly Bavarian-Austrian origin (such as lenition of fortis plosives), as well as voiceless word-initial /s/ and, on the morphosyntactic level, the use of perfect instead of imperfect tense. Thus, while the reference norms themselves have in theory not changed, in practice Austrian media language today (particularly on TV, less so on the radio, where language use seems more ‘conservative’) appears to move in the direction of actual usage by presumed ‘standard speakers’ in non-professional contexts (i.e. non-dialectal, supra-regional, ‘educated people’s’ speech – see the discussion above) – rather than the other way round.

## STANDARD LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Language attitude studies also reveal that, in addition to associating standard language with the media, people in Austria particularly associate it with the educational system (e.g. Soukup 2009; Steinegger 1998), which warrants a search for corresponding legal provisions in Austrian school policies.

Analysis of the respective documents shows that, overall, reference to the use of any particular variety of German (such as the standard) decreases in explicitness in the curricula with increasing years of schooling.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the curricula for ‘pre-school’ (optional, age 5) and for (mandatory) elementary school (grades 1–4, from age 6) for the subject ‘German, Reading and Writing’ explicitly include provisions holding that children are indeed ‘to be led towards an adequate use of *Standardsprache* (‘standard language’), on the basis of the child’s individual language’.<sup>12</sup> Mention is furthermore made of raising children’s awareness of commonalities and differences between dialect (*Mundart*) and standard language when practising speaking skills, with the specific goal of correcting ‘mistakes that result from the difference between dialect and standard language’. Children are supposed to increase their ‘confidence in the use of the standard language’, and to practise and expand ‘standard language sentence patterns’ and word usage. To avoid or decrease speech inhibitions, ‘guidance towards the forms of the standard language must in no case be subject to performance pressures’. Indeed, the ‘transition’ from dialect to the standard must be ‘smooth’ (*ohne Bruch*). This, of course, presupposes that such a transition is to take place, or at least will have taken place by the time children leave elementary school. This is also indirectly evident in the fact that very little mention is made of the issue any more in the curricula for grades 5–12; and, if at all, mention

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the Upper Austrian station has recorded complaints from customers regarding radio anchors who were perceptibly NOT from the region (p.c.).

<sup>11</sup> The full texts of the Austrian school curricula are available via the website of the Austrian Ministry of Education: <http://www.bmukk.gv.at/>. In the following, all quotations represent our own translations into English.

<sup>12</sup> That this ‘standard language’ is most likely a variety of German is not made explicit, but can be inferred from provisions for children with ‘non-German mother tongue’, who are not admitted as regular students unless they show satisfactory command of German, and who are the subject of special remedial curricula. But the law does in fact make provisions for schooling in languages other than German.

is limited to the curriculum for the subject ‘German’, where terminology includes vague references to ‘speaking and writing norms’ (*Sprach- und Schreibnormen*) and the idea that ‘teachers are to watch over the quality of utterances’, which leaves much room for interpretation. Only in grade 11 can a call for some awareness-raising regarding language variation be found in the curriculum. However, for all levels, there appears to be no textbook that deals with the issue of Austrian language variation in any explicit way.

Interestingly, in the currently applicable versions of the school curricula no explicit mention is made of the language variety the *teachers* are supposed to use. Our own consultations with long-time teachers suggest that previously, the teaching language (*Unterrichtssprache*) for all subjects was indeed officially defined as the ‘standard language’ in the general didactic provisions of the curricula – this is no longer the case after the curriculum reforms of the last decade. However, the standard is reportedly (and from our experience) still the *de facto* norm teachers aspire to and the norm they are held to by their colleagues and principals (e.g. in the state exams) as well as by parents. Increasingly, this is also a function of high numbers of students whose linguistic background is not Austrian. In rural areas, however, the standard norm is reportedly not always upheld in practice – even (or perhaps particularly) in elementary school, where curricular provisions are most explicit (see above), but where much is also made of ‘tuning in’ to the children and their own language use.

At university level, no explicit official mention of teaching language could be found either; but it is noteworthy that, as Moosmüller (1991) found, the use of *Hochsprache* is commonly associated with the profession of university teachers.

In sum, then, it can be seen that there are indeed official ideological ties between the Austrian educational system and standard language use – though perhaps more so by tradition and expectation than by explicitly stated principle of policy (nor are any definitions to be found).

## CONCLUSION

One ‘sticking point’ for a coherent standard language policy in Austria (*de facto* or *de iure*) seems to lie in the fact that, although Viennese educated speech is on a more subconscious level accepted as a model of a standard Austrian German (see above), it is less so when people are directly asked whether it should be codified and implemented as such. Thus, any endeavour for codification that strives for linguistic realism is often rejected as ‘Vienna-centric’ (which was also a point of contention with the 35th edition of the *ÖWB*). Similarly, as discussed above, ‘Germany-centrism’ is frequently lamented and autonomy for Austrian German claimed; but there is much insecurity about whether a standard Austrian German could really be on a par with standard German as associated with Germany. Indeed, as for example Ammon (2004) points out, such asymmetries and ambivalences are quite typical of pluricentric language situations where one variety dominates over the rest – as in the case of German.

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