

Intra-writer variation within and between languages: Developmental and social aspects

Variable use of language can be employed as a strategy for positioning, enregisterment and comparable activities to ground oneself with regard to a social group (cf. Langenhove/Harré 1993, Dailey-O’Cain/Liebscher 2011). It can be used to express belonging or to distance oneself from others. Flexible language use is frequently linked to informal settings where norms are adapted and adjusted. Ego-documents, especially private papers, have been shown to allow for informal language production in writing; they are, therefore, particularly informative in this respect (Elspaß 2012).

The current paper investigates diaries from a heritage and language contact setting, written by one individual, and covering a period of roughly 20 years. They are investigated to uncover strategies of positioning and of identity construction in a bilingual community, and to trace the writer’s increasing ability for stylistic variation according to the topics and incidents he records. The diaries were written in a German/English bilingual community in southern Canada, during the 2nd half of the 19th century. Variation in these data can be observed in two respects: The use of the heritage language, German, changes in relation to the writer’s age, and the choice of language (German/English) – and the corresponding script (Current script/Latin script) – varies over time (cf. Stolberg 2019).

The aim of the paper is to identify the patterns that arise from the variable use of language(s) in these data. Inner-language variation (in German) appears to be related to developmental aspects as the writer moves from puberty into adulthood and increases his competence in written German. Language choice seems to be related to external factors (e.g., topic, change of setting) at first sight, but this turns out not to hold in all cases.

The paper thus contributes to a better understanding of the individual, social and societal factors that interact to result in specific patterns of variation in language use and language choice.

References

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