

LINGUISTIC IDENTITY, LANGUAGE ATTITUDES AND LANGUAGE PERCEPTION IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM.

A comparative study across the German-Belgian border.
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GERMAN-SPEAKING COMMUNITY OF BELGIUM

(German: *Deutschsprachige Gemeinschaft Belgiens, DG*):

One of the three federal communities of Belgium (since 1973)

Official language: German; dialects spoken: Riparian and Moselle Franconian varieties

More than 75.000 inhabitants → linguistic minority

Eventful history: 3 changes in nationality within 25 years (between 1920 and 1945)



COMPARISON TO THE BORDERING GERMAN AREAS:

Great similarities between the linguistic situation in the German-speaking Community and in the bordering German areas on the level of traditional dialects, on the level of regional linguistic features and in the vertical structure of variety use

Differences on the level of the cultural and political situations

→ Comparison can enlighten the role of nationality as well as the role of the linguistic minority situation

RESEARCH QUESTION:

Do language attitudes, language perception and linguistic identity of the German-speaking Belgians differ from those of the locals in the bordering German areas?

RESEARCH METHODS:

Collection and analysis of data concerning East Belgian German in public discourse
Investigations in three places in the GC (Eupen, Kelmis, St. Vith) and in two comparable places in bordering Germany (Aachen, Prüm), 10 informants per place

Questionnaire based in-depth interviews

Listening task

Map-drawing task

PUBLIC DISCOURSE (NEWSPAPER, RADIO, PUBLICATIONS, WEBSITES):

- German language in general: German speaking Belgians have the impression that they always have to fight for their right to speak German in all circumstances, that it is not self-evident, even if they are living in a region that is officially German-speaking

- use of East Belgian German: East Belgian linguistic characteristics are regularly treated in the media: cf. radio competition of the Belgischer Rundfunk (BRF): „Ostbelgien lernt Deutsch – der germanistische Adventskalender“, Gebrüder Blumenkohl, publication of a popular scientific dictionary of East-Belgian everyday German (Heinen/Kremer 2011)
→ prevalent subject in the minds of the speakers, but dichotomy: appreciation for East Belgian German, signal of group identity vs. sense of inferiority towards Germans

FIRST RESULTS (AFTER 11 INTERVIEWS IN EUPEN, KELMIS AND ST. VITH)

LANGUAGE:

Perception of German:

- Differing from German in Germany (different sound, Belgian vocabulary)
- Not seen as homogeneous: division into northern speech and southern speech (particularly differences of prosody)
- Not Standard German, seen as a more simple, less formal variety, „wie einem der Schnabel gewachsen ist“ („the way the beak has grown“)
- Names: Kelmiser Küchendeutsch, Eupener Slang, Kelmiser Dütsch, Eupener Deutsch
- Features: „dat/wat“, „wa“, „j-“ instead of „g-“, dialect words, sound and prosody of the respective local dialects, not well articulated, restricted vocabulary

Ambiguous feelings about regionally-marked German in the GC:

Identity marker, source of sympathy, gives a homely feeling vs. incorrect, bad German

Attitudes depend on speech situation: Only appropriate in relaxed, private situations. In more formal situations, use of

regional speech elements can be seen as horrible, ridiculous, awkward, uneducated → you have to speak non-regionally-marked Standard German (good German, nice German), but: low esteem of their own Standard German proficiency

Idea of a more or less homogeneous German in Germany: well articulated, very formal, sophisticated Standard German → reveals a sense of inferiority in GC towards Germans.

On the other hand: awareness that there are regional varieties of German in Germany too → contradictory statements

Ambiguous feelings about German in Germany:
Ideal, perfect German vs. snobbish, unnatural → enhance value of own speech by devaluating a prestigious variety

Listening task: Varying results, difficulty to name the exact features that made them locate an audio sample, difficulties to locate audio samples from Germany with strong regional features (that exist in the GC as well) → idea: if it is regionally marked, it cannot be a speaker from Germany

IDENTITY:

Negative identification: being neither Walloon nor German
Tendency to devalue the out-groups:
- Walloons: not very organised, not very accurate
- Germans: too accurate, too strict, self-admiring, not popular abroad

At the same time: Defining their identity as a mixture of the best characteristics of these two groups: „German-speaking Belgians are as disciplined and organised as Germans, but have the ‘savoir-vivre’ of the Walloons“

Take pride in their status: being a minority (a curiosity), being bilingual or multilingual

Proud to be Belgians, proud to live in a multilingual, multicultural country → curiosity

Want to be perceived as Belgians and as German-speaking Belgians