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The Role of Dialects in the German Society

Ekaterina V. Koneva^{a,*}, Svetlana K. Gural^a^a*Tomsk State University, Lenin Ave., 36, Tomsk, 634050, Russia*

Abstract

In this article we will make a research concerning the role of German dialects in the modern German society, track their origin and development. We will as well study the position of High German language and observe people's attitude towards it. We will study the importance of the mother-tongue for the development of one's personality. In the times of globalization English exerts a great influence on the standard German language. Is it a dangerous tendency? Are the numerous dialects influenced as well? Through our research we will give answers to these and other questions.

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1. Introduction

When we ponder about the cultural heritage of Germany, we definitely think about the famous German poets Goethe and Schiller. But not everyone knows that both of them spoke dialects in their daily speech. Goethe used the Hessian dialect (even though his father insisted that his son communicated in the standard German) and Schiller expressed his thoughts in the Swabian dialect. This fact didn't disturb them from writing their poems in the standard German (or High German – Hochdeutsch).

Goethe wrote: «every region loves its dialect, because it represents that element, which gives the soul its breath». («Jede Region liebt ihren Dialekt, sei er doch eigentlich das Element, in welchem diese Seele ihren Atem schöpfe»). And more: «A dialect is the beginning of the spoken language» («Beim Dialekt fängt die gesprochene Sprache an»).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49-176-995-84553.

E-mail address: kkoneva@rambler.ru

The Institute of the German Language had conducted a poll in the year 2009 that revealed the following results: sixty percent of the German population use dialects in their everyday speech, most of them living in the South of the country. This statistics demonstrates the importance of studying language specialties of the German people, living in different parts of the country, in order to be able to follow the unusual grammatical constructions or anomalous pronunciation patterns.

The German dialects will be discussed in this article.

2. The language situation in Germany

Graphically the language situation in Germany could be represented in the following way: in the center there is a circle, representing the standard German, out of it come numerous rays, going in different directions. These rays are various dialects. All in all there exist sixteen big dialect groups, such as Bavarian, Alemannic, Upper Saxon, Brandenburg and so on. In Germany one doesn't have to go far in order to get confronted with another dialect, which is laborious to understand even for the mother-tongue Germans. Of course, there is always a possibility to switch to the standard language. But people of the same region are more declined to speak in a dialect. In Russia, for example, the situation is completely different: Muscovites communicate without any problems with their countrymen from Siberia or from the Far East.

Twenty-seven-year-old Benjamin Lorenz from Berlin wrote: «A dialect is closely connected to the place where a person was born, thus it forms a part of his or her personality. It is easier to express one's thoughts or to conduct a soul conversation in a dialect than in a high German. Two people speaking the same dialect feel a certain connection, because they have a common background and a similar way of thinking». He also noticed that even when people speak high German, one can still hear differences in their pronunciation. «Till now no one has managed to conceal his or her dialect!» (Lorenz, 2012).

Dominik Kuhn from a small town Reutlingen, near Stuttgart, translates movies into the Swabian dialect. For him speaking a dialect means feeling home. «When I'm abroad for some period of time, for instance for three weeks, and consequently have to speak a foreign language or high German, then I am really eager to see my friends again. A language is a key to the understanding of a culture» (Lobst, 2015). He noticed that there is a close connection between a dialect and people's mentality. According to him, Swabian people can be characterized by the following saying: «Nicht gemotzt ist genug gelobt» («No grumble is enough praise»). So when Swabian people don't complain - everything is fine. They are rather restrained people and one shouldn't expect from them an emotional reaction or praise. But Mr. Kuhn cannot imagine his life without the High German, he calls it a «common denominator» for the numerous German population.

In Bavaria some parents were concerned about their children using a dialect in the everyday speech. But recent investigations proved that dialects exert a positive influence on a child's development. Professor Rupert Hochholzer says: «Dialects are still the main means of communication for many Bavarian children and thus they play an important role for the preservation of their identity» (Rowley, 2013).

In the Bavarian Constitution it is written that the task of education is to awake love for the home country, the latter has a close connection to the dialects. For many Bavarian children their dialect is in the same time their mother-tongue (Muttersprache) or «the tongue of their mother».

The Russian pedagogue K.D. Ushinsky called a mother-tongue the greatest teacher of the humankind. According to him, our thinking skills should be developed on the basis of our mother-tongue. Having achieved a certain level of thinking abilities, we can learn other languages as well. So when a child has absorbed a dialect with his or her mother's milk, he or she has got all the premises for learning the standard German.

In order to feel the difference between various German dialects, we would like to suggest some characteristic examples.

In the Swabian dialect, which is widespread in the South-Eastern part of Baden-Württemberg and in the South-West of Bavaria, one uses a diminutive suffix «le» instead of «lein» («Kindelein» — «Kindele»). For an untrained ear the Swabian dialect is not so easy to understand. Compare the following examples: «Guada Morga!» («Guten Morgen!») (*standard German*) — «Good morning!», «I dääd gärn...» («Ich würde gern...» — «I would like...»), «Deesch-mr z' deier!» («Das ist mir zu teuer!» — «It's too expensive!»).

In the Hessian dialect one has a tendency to use voiceless consonants instead of the voiced ones: Instead of «Polizei» («police») one can hear «Bolizei», instead of «Tasche» («bag») — «Dasch».

In the Pfalz region one uses in the oral speech other forms of the verb. For example, instead of «gebracht» («brought») one says «gebrung» and in place of «gedacht» («thought») — «gedenkt».

Near the border to Netherlands, there is an area called Saterland. A Sater Frisian language is spoken there, which is one of the most ancient Germanic languages. Only two thousand people speak this language and it's the smallest language group in the whole Europe. American linguist and professor Marron Curtis Fort elaborated a dictionary and grammar in order to preserve this language. Johanna Evers is a teacher of the Sater Frisian language. According to her, in the Southern Germany one shows better results in the foreign language learning because they take care of their dialects, whereas in the Northern parts of the country too little attention is paid to this problem. She says that «bilingual education fosters one's intellectual development» (Rowley, 2013). J. Evers elaborated a textbook for learning the Sater Frisian language in order to support children in their language learning.

Comedians and cabaret artists often use dialects in their performances. Many dialects have diminutive forms, which can produce a comic effect when combined with serious themes, for instance, the political ones. However, the official Mass Media prefer the standard German, thinking it's impossible to achieve their goals with dialects.

3. The formation of standard German language

How was the standard German formed? It is well-known that «it developed from a row of languages that had been spoken by different Germanic tribes: they had brought them from the preliterate period» (Rowley, 2013). These tribes are still known in our days — they are preserved in various lands and on different territories. These are the Alemanni, Franks, Bavarians, Saxons, Thuringii and many others. The western Germanians had got mixed with the Roman population and thus stimulated the development of the Romanic languages (such as French, Spanish, Italian). The Germanians of the central and northern Europe had preserved their languages, which later developed to contemporary German, English, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian and so on.

In the twenties of the sixteenth century Martin Luther translated the «New Testament» and later the «Old Testament» into German. This was the beginning of the active German writing. Before that the authors, especially those writing poetry, had used Latin.

For his translation Martin Luther had chosen the dialect of the Upper Saxon chancery, which became a basis for the further development of the High German (or standard German). It's hard to imagine what would have happened, if he had chosen the low German dialect. The standard German would definitely have another appearance.

4. The difference between the dialects

What is the difference between the High German and the Low German dialects?

To answer this question, let us look at the historic linguistics. Between the 600s and 800s AD the western Germanic dialects got separated into different groups: namely, to the High German and Low German groups. This phenomena is called the Second Germanic consonant shift. The Low German dialects (in the Northern Germany) had stayed unaffected and had preserved their usual Germanic sounds, whereas in the central and southern parts of the country (to the South of the Benrath line), there had been some changes concerning the consonants (p → pf, f; t → tz; k → kch, ch; b → p/b). This consonant shift was chosen for the standard language. In the northern part of the country one can still hear instead of «das» and «was» — «dat» и «wat», and in place of «Wasser» («water») and «Apfel» («apple») one says «Water» and «Appel». These examples show us an obvious similarity to the English sounds («what», «water», «apple»).

We can observe that the number of people speaking the Low German language (Plattdeutsch) is in decline. But there are young artists who do their best to preserve their dialect. For example, there is a pop-group called «Tüdelband» from Hamburg, consisting of young performers, who sing their songs in the Low German. Their concerts are attended by people of different generations: young people enjoy their music, the older ones – want to hear the language. Mire Buthman, a singer of the group, described the situation around the Low German dialect: the generation of her parents refused to express their thoughts in a dialect, because it wasn't trendy at that time. Mire's

generation is more interested in preserving it. According to her, «some terms in the Low German have nice sounding words that create a special atmosphere, which cannot be achieved by using the standard German or English language (Lobst, 2015).

When we look at the development of the German language, we can clearly see, that every language is an open and self-developing system. This fact should be considered when teaching German, its dialects and other foreign languages as well (Gural, 2014). «A teacher has the task to unveil a language to the students as a super-complex linked structure, as to help the students to understand in a better way the linguistic picture of the world in the educational process. From the very beginning the students should be immersed into the natural dynamic process of the language development» (Gural, 2012).

5. Third-party influences

In recent years German language is to a great extent affected by the English language, which has undoubtedly to do with the globalization process in the world. This influence takes places through the radio, television, Mass Media, advertising. English words are used not only to substitute the missing equivalents in the German language (as it was with the word «computer» and other specific terms), but they are considered to be «fashionable», besides German people have got used to using foreign words, without even thinking about it. Here are some examples. They say «Highlight des Tages» («Highlight of the day»), «viel Power» («a lot of power»), «Emails checken» («to check emails»). Among the young people it is trendy to use the word «cool».

Professor Karl-Heinz Götttert wrote a book «Bidding farewell to the mother-tongue. German language in times of globalization». Already in the introduction we get confronted with some alarming numbers: according to the poll conducted by the «Society of the German language» in the year 2008, 22 percent of Germans are not against of substituting their mother-tongue by the unitary European language; moreover, 13 percent of Germans would rather speak a unitary European language (11 % English and only 2% German) (Götttert, 2006).

Of course, this tendency is alarming. But fortunately, as it was mentioned before, 60 percent of the German population preserve the cultural heritage of the Germanic tribes through their dialects, in such a way they still manage to keep their identity safe.

Academics and people engaged in the cultural sector should do their best to support the purity of the language. There are two ways to achieve this goal: 1. By a conscious usage of the words that already exist in the language. 2. By creating new words on the basis of already existing ones, according to the grammar rules of the own language.

It's probably too late now or even unnecessary to make up words for the already existing borrowings, which for example have to do with different computer terms (such as «Browser», «Account», «Homepage»). But it's always possible to use the German words «Kraft» and «glücklich» instead of the English «power» and «happy».

Besides, the influence of the radio and television shouldn't be ignored. If the Mass Media manage to use more and more German words and also start transmitting more German songs, it could be the first step to pure and support the language. It might be helpful to transmit songs in dialects as well (following the example of the above mentioned pop-group «Tüdelband»), which could unite people from different regions and exert a benevolent influence on child's development. In such a case, when children feel connected to their «mother-tongue», they might as well perceive an inner necessity to do their best to keep safe the purity of the standard German.

6. Conclusion

Dialects play an important role in the life of German people. They help them to preserve their identity and culture in this ever-changing world. Dialects stay stable, whereas the Standard German undergoes permanent influence from outside, mostly from the English language. Through dialects adults and children feel connected to their homeland. One should do their best to contribute to the protection of the culture through speaking dialects and preserving local specialties.

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