

Small Languages in the Didactics of a Major Language

– what students can learn from small languages

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Problem

Many students of a “big” philology don’t have in mind, that language science is part of the studies. Asking students for reasons to studying the subject, most mention literature and culture. Thinking about the language is difficult, especially when it is the native tongue. Comparative language work is claimed as a solution (e.g. Rothstein (ed.) 2011). Apart from the comparison with migrant (first) languages, small varieties and languages can help the students to look at the “big” language from another perspective. The poster will show some ideas in the fields of orthography, variation and linguistic landscape. The “big” language to compare with is mostly German.

Orthography / Codification

- The way to create an orthography is mostly not easy (Tröster-Mutz 2007, Wmffre 2007)
- Orthography is a system in the written language, the relation to spoken language is not 1:1
- Not all (small) languages have an orthography / only one orthography

Examples:

– Spellings to find a way to represent all major dialects, e.g. Breton Orthographies (Wmffre 2007): One spelling for different pronunciations:

<zh>-spelling for all dialects: <Breizh>: in KLT-Dialects /breiz/, in Vanntais-dialect: /breih/

– Romansch Grischun (Lia Rumantscha 2002)

Uses different principles: majority form, one of three possible forms, new creation

Surselvia	Surmeirian	Vallader	Rumantsch Grischun	Englisch
pasch	pasch	pasch	pasch (3:0)	‘peace’
alv	alv	alb	alv (2:1)	‘white’
gie	gea,ea	sch	gea (on of three)	‘yes’
jeu	ia	eu	jau (none)	‘I’
aur	or	or	aur (one of the variants)	‘gold’

Table: Spelling principles in Rumantsch Grischun (cf. lia rumantscha, e.g. Langenscheid Wörterbuch Deutsch-Rätomanisch)

Different aims with the orthography of a small language:

– create a spelling similar to the “big” language, thus everybody alphabetized in the major language can read it easily

– create a spelling with typical differences, to point out the uniqueness of the small language e.g.

Saterland Frisian: Diacritics in Fort’s (2015) spelling for certain long vowels: <ie> for [i:], <úu> for [u:].

What Students can learn

- Orthography is always a compromise
- The principle “Schreib, wie du sprichst” (‘write as you speak’) cannot work for a complete language area. For example, in German: vs. <p> with clear distinction in [±voice] works in northern German pronunciation, but not in southern dialects with partial merge of the feature. Thus learners of the written language cannot easily learn, what letter to use, even though spelling tables (Anlauttabellen) suggest it.
- Thus it is necessary to understand an orthography as an independent system and to learn to explain its relationship to the spoken language
- The view from a small language can help to achieve this goal

Linguistic Landscape

Common definition:

„The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration. (Landry/Bourhis 1997:25)“.

- The linguistic landscape of an area shows different languages
- One of them can be a small language of the given area
- This can be a first step toward the small language: The Kerncurriculum requires the inclusion of small languages, e.g. in Germany, Niedersachsen: „die verschiedenen Herkunftssprachen in den Lerngruppen einschließlich der „kleinen“ Sprachen Niederdeutsch und Saterfriesisch (lesser used languages) [sollen Gegenstand im Deutschunterricht sein]“ (Kerncurriculum Niedersachsen, Primarstufe, Version 2006).
- This leads to major problems for students/teachers, who don’t have knowledge of these languages
- Linguistic landscape can be a key to those languages

What students can learn

- Working with own material involves the students more into the studies (Frank 2022)
- Language awareness, especially towards the small languages
- Language can be used as distance language (formal) or language of proximity (“Nähesprache”), cf. Picture bottom left
- Finding language examples opens opportunities to every kind of language reflection
- Linguistic Landscape-based concepts can be adapted for school teaching (Tröster-Mutz 2020) “in the field”.



Top left: Bad Bederkesa
bottom left: Ströhen, 2022: This picture of a facility room is in Low German okay, a literal translation to German would be very informal/rude.

Top right: Binz/Rügen
bottom right: Binz/Rügen

All photos by S. Tröster-Mutz

Variation

- Many small languages are not standardized
- They show variations even in written languages
- Variants are a way to understand language change
- Variants can be found on more levels than the lexicon

Examples Low German:

- Forms of the verb in plural: either -t (löpt) ‘walk, run’ or -en (löpen)
- No dative/accusative distinction

Examples German dialects / regional language use:

- Southern German Pl. Wägen ‘car, waggon’ instead of Wagen
- Southern German wo as universal relative marker: Die, wo zuerst da gewesen sind. ‘those, who were there first’
- Different uses of auxiliaries: Osnabrück area: Ich bin angefangen, bin gesessen (instead of habe angefangen, habe gesessen) ‘I have started, I have sit’.
- Deictic particles before the noun: Saarland dialects: Die do Tasch (instead of Die Tasche da) ‘this particular bag’

What students can learn

- A standard isn’t always a compromise between all speakers
- A standard is often a written standard only
- The dichotomy right/wrong in terms of language is only relevant in contexts of standard
- Not all grammatical features of the standard language are something to be found in all varieties
- This leads to better language awareness and helps to discuss grammatical phenomena

Literature

Frank, Marina (2022): Niederdeutsch in Oldenburg und umzu – Fachdidaktische Perspektiven auf Linguistic Landscapes in der Hochschullehre (Talk given at the VndS-Meeting in Dortmund, 8.6.22)
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