

Perceptual and Affective Factors in Language Variation and Change in German-speaking Switzerland

Project Summary

The most recent large-scale documentation of Swiss German dialects is recorded in the *Sprachatlas der Deutschen Schweiz* (SDS; 1962-2003), based on rural data from the 1950s. Swiss German dialects are expected to have changed considerably since then, but evidence for such changes is thin, typically based on studies with small numbers of speakers from few localities. As of today, we do not know the degree to which Swiss German dialects have changed on a larger scale. In the project 'Swiss German Dialects Across Time and Space' (SDATS)¹, we propose to research how linguistic variation in German-speaking Switzerland has evolved in the past 70 years by replicating a subset of the SDS variables and creating a large-scale contemporary corpus of spoken Swiss German.

In my PhD project, I will carry out a series of studies on lexical and morphosyntactic variables, directly comparing historical and contemporary data. Identified patterns will be investigated in light of biological, social, attitudinal, and perceptual factors contributing to language variation and change.

Keywords: Variationist Sociolinguistics, Variation and Change in Swiss German Dialects, Individual and Social Factors in Language Variation and Change, Perceptual Dialectology

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Project Description

Current state of research

The most recent comprehensive documentation of regional variation in German-speaking Switzerland dates back to the middle of the 20th century and is reflected in the *Sprachatlas der Deutschen Schweiz* (SDS; 1962-2003). Operating in a traditional dialectological approach, the researchers travelled to 573 localities spread across German-speaking Switzerland and spent several days with the speakers, eliciting and transcribing around 2'500 linguistic items alongside enormous amounts of spontaneous data. In the decades to follow, the data were processed into more than 1'500 linguistic maps.

Several studies carried out in a limited set of localities suggest that this impressive documentation is no longer up to date.

Sound change, for instance, has been reported by Christen (1998), Siebenhaar (2000; 2002), Schifferle (2010), Leemann et al. (2014), or Leemann and Kolly (2016). Schifferle (2010) documents that the areal distribution of aspirated plosives has expanded since data was collected for the SDS. /l/-vocalization, which is assumed to have originated in Emmental and expanded from the 19th century onwards, has received considerable attention. Several studies indicate that this phenomenon has expanded over the past decades (see e.g. Haas 1973, Christen 2001, or Leemann et al. 2014). *Lexical change* has been described, for example, in Glaser (2008), Juska-Bacher (2010), and Christen et al. (2013). These studies reveal convergence tendencies towards Standard German, resulting in leveling and supralocal regional varieties (e.g., for the word 'freckles', participants in Juska-Bacher's (2010) study predominantly used the Standard German variant *Sommersprossen* (unattested in the SDS), rather than *Merzefläcke*, *Laubfläcke*, *Merzedräck* and other traditional terms). In terms of *morphosyntactic change*, Glaser (2014), Richner-Steiner (2011), and Schlatter-Gappisch (2011) report evidence of change in progress for a number of phenomena, arguing in an apparent-time framework.

In October 2019, we conducted a pilot study with 15 speakers of four localities in the cantons of Bern, Fribourg, and Valais, investigating predicative adjective agreement as a

distinctive morphosyntactic feature of Highest Alemannic dialects², documented in the SDS (III, map 256). An analysis of the relative frequencies of inflected forms corroborates previous findings (e.g. Bucheli Berger & Glaser 2004), and reveals a decline of inflected forms. Whereas mainly older speakers in Fribourg and Valais still tend to inflect predicative adjectives, speakers in transitional Bernese regions seem to have abandoned these structures entirely.

Current Project – Objectives

Based on the literature review, we know that we only have individual, mostly smaller-scaled reports on how Swiss German dialects have changed compared to the SDS. In the project ‘Swiss German Dialects Across Time and Space’ (SDATS) (09/2019-08/2024), we investigate morphosyntactic, lexical, and sound change in Swiss German dialects over the past 70 years on a large scale in order to provide a holistic view of how the Swiss German dialect landscape has changed over the past decades. The Project pursues the following research objectives:

- 1) To carry out a series of studies of phonetic, lexical, and morphosyntactic variables, directly comparing historical SDS data to contemporary data and integrating these findings into a wider historical narrative.
- 2) To carry out a series of studies comparing read text recordings from the SDS to contemporary read text and integrating these results into a wider historical narrative.
- 3) To nurture public interest in this field by making the results available in the form of an engaging and playful online atlas in collaboration with a media outlet.

In my PhD project, I will focus on lexical and morphosyntactic variables (cf. objective 1), directly comparing historical SDS data with our contemporary corpus.

² Contrary to Standard German, adjectives can agree with the subject in gender and number (e.g. *der Himmel isch blau-e* (3SGM), engl. ‘the sky is blue’).

Methodology

The research objectives outlined above will be pursued by conducting a tightly controlled, partial replication of the SDS. We will re-elicite around 250 variables alongside c. 100 dialectal innovations. Our methodology deviates from the SDS in certain respects: we will revisit a representative subset of the original localities (125 out of 573), and – at the same time – increase the number of speakers per locality from two NORMs to eight speakers of two different age groups (four NORMs/NORFs and four young speakers between 20-30). Furthermore, we will assess respondents' perception of dialectal variation (cf. Preston 2010), and we will collect extensive metadata (social networks, language competence and use, attitudinal and cognitive factors). Table 1 summarises key data of the SDATS project compared to the SDS.

	SDS	SDATS
Speakers	2-3 NORMs (NORFs) per locality	8 speakers per locality (2f & 2m between 20-30; 2f & 2m between 65-75)
Localities (n)	573	125
Procedure	non-automatic, direct elicitation in field, no audio-recording of variables	semi-automatic, direct elicitation in field, recording for the entirety of each session
Analysis	on-the-spot coding of data, manual processing, manual preparation of maps	no on-the-spot coding necessary, semi-automatic post-processing, semi-automatic creation of maps
Data	2'500 linguistic items, spontaneous speech, audio recordings of read texts from 66 localities, basic metadata	c. 350 linguistic items, spontaneous speech, read texts from 125 localities, extensive metadata

Table 1: Key data of the SDATS project compared to the SDS

This design will not only enable analyses of language change both in real and apparent time, but it also makes possible an in-depth study of social and individual factors. In my PhD project, I will particularly focus on explaining identified patterns in light of respondents' perception of and their affective dispositions towards linguistic variation and change in German-speaking Switzerland.

The findings will bear on wide-reaching, long-debated questions in research on language variation and change and will result in open access repositories as a service to the public and future research.

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