What do Dialects Tell us about Language History? A Comparison between English and Swiss German

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Abstract: Each language can be subdivided into a large number of dialects, which significantly differ from each other in lexical, grammatical and phonological aspects. The respective language history is manifested in those dialects, be they regional or social. Dialects can thus be used to account for and describe developments and changes in a particular language. This paper compares Swiss German and (British) English dialects and shows in what respect they represent the different language histories of Swiss German and English. Differences and similarities are observed along three main dimensions: historical, social and geographical. In each of these dimensions, most strikingly in the social dimension, significant differences between English and Swiss German can be found. In general, English and Swiss German dialects show very different features according to their distinct developments. Nonetheless, it must not be ignored that English and Swiss German dialects share some important features.

1. Introduction

Why is it, that in Switzerland, the various DIALECTS of German are generally mutually intelligible and are hardly socially stratified? How come no prestige is attributed to any specific Swiss German variety, but the exact opposite is the case with English dialects? And in what way did the Norman conquest in the 11th century influence today's distribution of dialects in England[1]?

In order to understand these and many other phenomena, we have to compare the historical changes that influenced the development of these dialects. We have to consider geographical facts just as much as political history, social circumstances as much as economical changes that occurred over centuries in Great Britain and Switzerland.

In the following, we are to explain what exactly Swiss German and British dialects

[1] In this paper, we will focus on English dialects in Great Britain only.

can tell us about their countries' history, and what were the specific historical developments that determined how these dialects are valued, used and pronounced today.

2. Definitions

To understand the concept of dialect, it is important to see its relation to the concept of LANGUAGE. In order to define dialect, one needs to refer to language. The Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics defines dialect as:

> *a variety of a language, spoken in one part of a country [REGIONAL DIALECT[2]], or by people belonging to a particular social class (SOCIOLECT), which is different in some words, grammar and/or pronunciation from other forms of the same language' (Richards et al. 1985: 80).*

On purely linguistic terms, the Longman definition of dialect is precise and reflects universally accepted criteria of the concept of dialect. Those include the notion of a dialect as a (sub-)variety of a particular language, the differentiation between regional and social dialect, and the three main dimensions in which dialects differ from each other: lexicon, grammar and phonology.

The concept of dialect, however, cannot be explained solely on a linguistic basis. The definition of dialect as 'a variety of a language' (Richards et al. 1985: 80) opens the field for a complex discussion on the distinction and the interrelations between language and dialect. Unlike with the abstract linguistic definition of dialect, no consensus has been found in this discussion. Max Weinreich gives a succinct account on the matter: 'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy' (Campbell 1998: 193). 'The notions of language and dialect, it implies, are fundamentally social [and political] rather than linguistic constructs' (Romaine 1994: 1). It is not by chance that language borders as they are perceived often coincide with nation borders. It is a matter of prestige and power (usually achieved in a historical development) whether a certain variety is considered a language (of its own), or a dialect (of a language). Consider American English (AE): Nobody would doubt that – according to Weinreich's definition – AE has to be regarded as a language of its own[3]. Not few

[2] The term dialect is used to refer both to the phenomenon in general (including regional and social dialect) and to regional dialect.

[3] George Bernhard Shaw commented on the matter: 'England and America are two nations divided by a common language' (quoted in Romaine 1994: 17).

linguists, however, claim AE to be a dialect of English, as it shares a large number of features with British English and is mutually intelligible with it. But then, Swedish, Norwegian and Danish should be considered dialects of the same language, as they are mutually intelligible[4]. Suzanne Romaine concludes: ‘The dividing line between languages ... is linguistically arbitrary but politically and culturally relevant’ (Romaine 1994: 11).

3. English Dialects

Subject to a wide range of varieties, British English alone comprises more dialects than the English language varieties (AE, Australian etc.) in the rest of the world. Roughly, northern and southern dialects differ from each other in pronunciation, lexicon and grammar. Furthermore, there are many dialects in smaller areas, which subdivide these main dialects into many more varieties. The development of these dialects was influenced by historical, social and geographical factors.

3.1. Historical Aspects of English Dialects

In 407 AD, the Romans withdrew their forces from Britain. The suppressed Celts, who had settled in Britain and Ireland as early as 1000 BC, were freed. However, the different tribes from the north, south and west soon began to fight each other for power over the country (Pyles et al.1993: 95-96). In 449 AD the Celtic lord Vortigern brought the Saxons and other Germanic tribes from the region of today’s Denmark and northern Germany as mercenaries to Britain in order to gain power. Soon, though, these Germanic tribes became autonomous. They began to settle and started contesting the Celts. By the end of the 6th century they had become the dominant force and established seven large Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. These occupied all the eastern parts of Britain, leaving today’s Wales, Cornwall and the Lake District to the Celts (Hock/Joseph 1996: 43-45 and Pyles et al.1993: 96-99).

[4] Mutual intelligibility appears in most definitions to account for dialects, such as ‘a language is a collection of mutually intelligible dialects’ (Chambers et al. 1998[2]: 3). However, Chambers and Trudgill claim that the ‘criterion of mutual intelligibility ... is not especially useful ... in deciding what is and is not a language’, referring to the example of the Scandinavian language to show the difficulties of the approach (Chambers et al. 1998[2]: 4).

In 850, Scandinavians from today's Norway arrived in northern Britain and invaded the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. They took control over the whole island except Wessex in the south-east of Britain (Barber 1993: 127-128). After two centuries of war the Scandinavians emerged as victors and established the Anglo-Danish kingdom. While Latin was still the HIGH LANGUAGE, Old English dialects were used as LOW LANGUAGE. Because the Nordic and the Germanic tribes belonged to the same language family (Norse being North Germanic, Old English being West Germanic), their languages were 'arguably to a degree mutually intelligible' (Smith 1999: 8). Therefore, the established Old English vernacular and the imported Old Norse formed an ADSTRATUM SYSTEM. In today's English there are still many words that have their origin in Old Norse. Examples of Norse loan words are 'they', 'gift', and 'skirt'[5].

In 1066 the Normans invaded Britain. They had sailed down from Norway in the 10th century and invaded French territory. The French king was forced to give away land to them where they began to settle (today's Normandy) and quickly became one of the driving powers in Europe. They spoke a variety of French called Norman French.

After the Normans had successfully conquered Britain they replaced the Anglo-Saxon nobility with their own and introduced French as the High Language (Barber 1993: 134). English remained Low Language. When the French drove them out of France in 1204 the remaining nobility fled to Britain. This led to a loss of bonds with the continent. French gradually lost importance and was eventually replaced by English. Nevertheless, the Normans had influenced the English dialects in the south (Barber 1993: 134). English still has many loan words of French, for example 'appetite', 'abbey' or 'government'.

A major impact on the development of English was William Caxton's introduction of the PRINTING PRESS at the end of the 15th century. In order to make printed texts available to the masses, Caxton needed to find a coherent system of grammar, vocabulary and, most of all, consistent spelling (Smith 1999: 9). This was a hard task because up to this date English was written as it was spoken; dialects were directly translated into script and this led to a multiplicity of spellings for one single word. Modern English 'church', for example, was spelled 'kyrk', 'chirche', 'churche' or 'kirk', to quote just a few variations (map by A.M. McIntosh, M.L. Samuels and M. Benskin displayed in Crystal 1987: 51). Caxton's rules can rightly be called the basis for Modern English. Of course, spelling and grammar were gradually changed and

[5] For further examples see Barber, 1993: 128.

improved until they had reached the standard of today, but these changes were minor compared to the basis Caxton had laid.

Today's dialect distribution still shows the external influences by French and Old Norse. Northern and southern dialects differ from each other in pronunciation and lexicon. This is because the northern dialects were influenced longer by Old Norse while the southern dialects were under the influence of French.[6]

The distinction between north and south used to be more clear-cut (Crystal 1987: 324-325); in modern times this borderline moved further north, doubtlessly because of the INDUSTRIALISATION that created huge centres around Manchester. An all-new society that sought its identity, among other things, in its own dialect was the consequence. This asks for an exacter distribution of the British dialects. Nowadays we distinguish northern, central and southern dialects, which are split up into upper and lower north, western and eastern central, western and eastern (Crystal 1987: 324).

3.2. Social Aspects of English Dialects

SOCIAL STRATIFICATION was and still is of high importance. In the early stages of language development class was marked by High Languages (Latin, French). This supported the formation of clearly distinguishable social dialects (sociolects). The strict stratification of the social classes over a long period of time enhanced the differences.

From 1348 onwards, English was used as school language and in 1362 it was declared the official language (Schiltz, Middle English 3.4). Through this standardisation of English and the loss of French as the High Language a new form was needed in order to separate the nobility from the proletariat. Thus, the dialect spoken by the privileged classes was raised up to become the prestigious variety. In the late nineteenth century, RECEIVED PRONUNCIATION (RP) became the standard form of High English. It is often referred to as the 'Queen's English' since the Royal Family is renowned for speaking very distinct RP. However, one has to bear in mind that RP may be the prestigious form, but it is in fact only spoken by 3% of all English speakers, and that it is just one dialect among many.

[6] David Crystal provides concise maps of dialect distribution in Britain during the respective time periods (Crystal: 28, 30, and 324).

3.3. Geographical Aspects of English Dialects

Geographical barriers, like rivers or mountains, which are hard to overcome, are another reason for the development of dialects. Such obstacles can lead to a relative isolation of a linguistic community and thus prevent its dialect from external influences. Yet a linguistic feature can just as easily spread out along the trade routes without having any influence on nearby areas that do not participate in this form of trade (Trask 1996:198).

The dialects of Ireland, for example, mirror the special geographical situation in which they have developed. Living on an island, the Irish were isolated from external influences and thus continued using their own language for a long time. After the great famine in the middle of the 18th century Ireland became more dependent on England and due to this the use of English augmented in Ireland. Though people did not use much Irish anymore, their former language influenced the way they spoke English. Words were borrowed and the pronunciation of English was influenced by this, and it is argued that parts of the grammatical structure of the Irish language were applied to English (Nationmaster, Irish English).

3.4. Contemporary Development of English Dialects

Today one might think that MASS MEDIA and high MOBILITY would reduce the diversity of dialects, but this is not exclusively the case. A lot of people travel long distances only to get to work. No region in Britain is isolated anymore, so that new linguistic trends can spread all over the country, or even the world, within weeks. This, however, is only partially the case.

A reason for the large variation of dialects is that many people behave loyal to their social class or regional identity and do not shift towards the prestigious form. In this case one says that the form used has COVERT PRESTIGE. Over the past 50 years RP has slightly lost its uncontested status as the prestigious form. In recent times, ESTUARY ENGLISH, a mixture of RP and Cockney, has developed as a new variety, named after the estuary of the River Thames where it originates. Estuary English seems to spread from Greater London to various other regions and basically to all social levels. Experts, though, do not agree whether Estuary English should actually be considered a new standard (thus replacing RP) or only a new variety in the Greater London Area. New varieties develop also through the immigration of people coming from the same country, for example from Pakistan. These groups share pronunciation and generally also lexical and grammatical features.

The English language has undergone major changes, not only in grammar and lexicon but also, and very much so, in pronunciation and spelling. Today, English is spoken in almost every corner of the world. It is native language to almost one billion speakers and secondary language to many more. All these speakers use a certain dialect and speak with an accent. Although there are prestigious forms of usage, dialects are one of the most important features to distinguish and identify speakers. After all, most speakers are happy and proud to speak their own dialect.

4. Swiss German Dialects

The term SWISS GERMAN collectively refers to the Alemannic dialects spoken in the germanophone part of Switzerland and Liechtenstein. Due to the exceptional topographical situation of Switzerland, hundreds of independent regionally marked varieties of Swiss German have developed.

The Swiss dialects can be subdivided into three major dialect groups: (1) Low Alemannic: the dialect of Basel City; (2) High Alemannic: most Swiss German dialects belong to this group and they have preserved certain characteristics of Middle High German; (3) Highest Alemannic: the dialects of Wallis and Graubünden which have certain linguistic features that stem from Old High German (Net-Lexikon, Schweizerdeutsch: 06.05.2004). Swiss German dialects are mutually intelligible, but nevertheless the variable pronunciations and regionally bound vocabulary can give rise to communicative problems.

4.1. Historical and Geographical Aspects of Swiss German Dialects

4.1.1. The Middle Ages: Roman and Alemannic Influence

The quadrilingual situation of Switzerland can be traced back to the spread of Romanic and Alemannic languages in the Middle Ages (Sonderegger 1964: 7). From the 1st century to the early Middle Ages the ROMAN EMPIRE had a strong impact on Switzerland, not only in terms of religion (Christianisation) or legal system but also in terms of language. The Romanic language was omnipresent in the southern part of Switzerland where French, Italian and ROMANSH (languages stemming from the Romanic language) are located today. As a consequence of the process of Romanisation, the once prevailing pre-Alemannic or non-Alemannic languages of the Celts, Etruscans, Ligurians, and Venetians almost vanished (Sonderegger 1964: 10).

In the second half of the 5th century the situation in Switzerland was subject to change: Alemannic people from the north migrated to Switzerland and slowly moved towards the Alps. The interference of Roman and Germanic culture had a considerable and lasting effect on the German dialects in Switzerland: The Germanic language incorporated Romanic elements, e.g. through lexical borrowing. Many expressions of Swiss German dialects have Romanic roots, such as 'Lawine' from Romanic 'labina' (landslide) or 'Gletscher' from Latin 'glacies' (ice) (Sonderegger 1964: 13).

4.1.2. The Birth of Swiss German

The time span between the 7th and 11th century proved to be most fruitful for the further spread of the Germanic language in the area of Switzerland. The original Alemannic settlements in the Rhine valley near St.Gallen expanded towards the south and west; the settlers conquered the *Mittelland* as well as the regions of the *Voralpen* (Sonderegger 1964: 19, 20). During the Middle Ages, German dialects participated in the EARLY NEW HIGH GERMAN DIPHTONGATION, but the Swiss German dialects were mostly excluded from this change and thus remained on the linguistic level of Middle High German of the 13th century, or even on the level of Old High German of the 9th to 11th century in the very south (Sonderegger 1964: 14).

This isolation of Swiss German from the northern German area was strengthened because of political changes as well. In 1499, Switzerland 'gain[ed] its independence from the German Empire by the Treaty of Basel' (Rash 1998: 129) and thus the circumstances for a further specification of the independent Swiss German dialects were given.

4.1.3. New High German

In the 15th and 16th century, German dialects of the north and east developed a written form of NEW HIGH GERMAN. According to Sonderegger, the Swiss German dialects were not completely unaffected by this general German language development, but the process in Switzerland decelerated considerably. Here, the gradual adoption of New High German as a written language only occurred in the 16th to the 18th century with the reformation movement in Zürich (Lötscher 1983: 57). This spread of High German as a written language, however, did not proceed without meeting resistance. Many Swiss developed a patriotic attitude towards their 'language' and accepted

High German only with reluctance (Sonderegger 1964: 23-24). After all, the importance of Swiss German as a spoken language remained.

4.2. Sociolinguistic Aspects of Swiss German Dialects

4.2.1. The Role of German in Switzerland

Although the different dialects are mutually intelligible in GSS [German Speaking Switzerland], they are at times extremely difficult to comprehend for Germans and especially non-native High German speakers. This is one of the major problems for the multilingual Swiss society: Speakers of French, Italian and Romansh 'only' learn High German at school, which makes it difficult for them to communicate adequately in the German speaking parts of Switzerland and excludes them to a certain degree from the country's economically and politically most powerful sub-group: 'No-one can deny that the SG [Swiss German] dialects create a barrier to communication between the language communities' (Rash 1998: 127).

'The diglossic situation in GSS is … that the written standard language is used for written communication and formal oral use, and the dialects are used for informal oral communication …' (Rash 1998: 17). Mainly because of radio and television, the importance of oral communication, and thus the use of dialects in various contexts, is increasing.

4.2.2. Sociolinguistic and Pragmalinguistic Aspects

'In GSS, it is unusual but not unheard-of for social variation and notions of prestige to be regarded as influencing linguistic choices and subsequent changes' (Rash 1998: 225f.). There are some examples of socially marked 'urban *Sondersprachen*' in Switzerland (Rash 1998: 256), such as *Jenisch*, *Matte-Bärndütsch*, *Mattenenglisch* or, for Basel, the language of the 'Haiwoog-Schangi', but they have vanished to a large extent. Nowadays, youth language seems to be the most distinctive and elaborate socially patterned variety in Switzerland.

The differences between the dialects mainly arise because of geographical distribution thus no variety is seen as socially better than any other. Some dialects tend to be perceived as more pleasant than others or might indicate a distinctly urban or rural background of the speaker, but normally this is not connected with any social

or personal judgement[7]. In times past, a speaker of Swiss German was generally seen as inferior to a speaker of High German or French. Even some of its native speakers thought that Swiss German was the language of the uneducated lower class. Thus, the dialects temporarily turned into sociolects in people's minds.

Today, Swiss German is highly common for informal and, to a certain extent, also formal oral communication and, increasingly, for informal written communication, too. It also helps to maintain and strengthen a national identity (of the German speaking part at least) and to mark a certain difference of the Swiss from their German neighbours: 'At the end of the 20th century, the Swiss appear to be more certain than ever that they are not Germans …' (Rash 1998: 263f.). This general self-confidence is partly manifested in the growing prestige and power of Swiss German and may eventually weaken the cultural dilemma of Switzerland, which is that 'GSS shares a political history with people from three other language communities, [but] belongs to a German language community which extends beyond its borders and with which it shares much of its cultural heritage' (Rash 1998: 261).

5. Comparison of English and Swiss German Dialects

Swiss German dialects and English dialects have each developed in different historical and geographical contexts, but they do share certain characteristics. This chapter focuses on some of the prominent differences and on some remarkable similarities of historical, geographical and social aspects of the English and Swiss German dialects.

5.1. Differences

Probably the most striking difference between English and Swiss German dialects and language change concerns the SOCIAL DIMENSION. Social aspects determine English dialects to a high degree, whereas in Swiss German sociolects hardly exist. English distinguishes different style levels, ranging from working class to middle class to upper class (with even more refined distinctions such as the subdivisions of each class, e.g. lower working class, middle working class and upper working class). These still very present (although not as strongly stratified as in earlier times) distinctions originate in the historical development of English in society. Language

[7] Studies have shown, though, that subjective judgements of other dialects can be quite harsh: Some varieties are seen as coarse (e.g. the Basel dialect), aggressive (e.g. St. Gallen and Thurgau) or vulgar (e.g. Zürich); see Rash, 1998: 268ff.

was used to demonstrate and strengthen social differences and thus sociolects were of at least equal importance as regional dialects.

In Switzerland, social stratification was never manifested in language that distinctly. Very few sociolects have developed, for example *Matte-Bärndütsch* and *Jenisch* (Rash 1998: 256), but they have largely vanished to date. Thus, Swiss German dialects do not reveal much about the social background of the speaker, English dialects do to a considerable extent. Accordingly, English and Swiss German present day dialects reflect very different social developments in earlier times.

Swiss German and English dialects also differ in terms of DIVERSITY and MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY respectively. English (regional) dialects differ from each other far more than Swiss German dialects do and thus they are less easily mutually intelligible. This has mainly two reasons: (a) The English dialects had two different external influences, Norman French in the south-east and Old Norse in the north-west (Barker 1993: 127-134), whereas all Swiss German dialects arose from the mixture of Alemannic and Romanic languages. Thus, in England two different groups of dialects have formed (north-west and south-east) that only mixed step by step. In Switzerland, on the other hand, the differences between dialects are only gradual, as they all stem from Alemannic and Romanic. (b) The geographical areas in which English and Swiss German dialects are spread are very different in size. The regional proximity of the Swiss dialects promoted certain homogeneity among them[8], whereas the large distances in Britain maintained dialect differences over a longer period.

A third difference worth noting is the LANGUAGE CHANGES English and Swiss German dialects have undergone since the Middle Ages. Swiss German has not experienced any substantial language changes as it has only partially participated in the development towards New High German in the 15th century (Sonderegger 1964: 14-21). The adaptation of High German as a written standard had only a minor effect on the dialects as spoken varieties. English on the other hand has undergone similar changes like High German and its dialects have changed a lot since the Middle Ages.

5.2. Similarities

In the 15th to 17th century, communication in Britain was an arduous task: a wide variety of English dialects had developed throughout the Middle Ages. Instead of

[8] The dialect of Wallis (Walliserdeutsch) is an exception. Being isolated by the Alps and bordering on (Swiss-) French and Italian dialects only, it is fairly different from the other Swiss German dialects and is generally understood only with difficulty, even by other Swiss German speakers.

sharing a single linguistic convention, each part of Britain had its own way of talking and writing (Culpeper 1997: 47). When trade began to flourish, URBAN AREAS became centres of economic and scientific progress, while rural areas were excluded from this development. The dialect spoken in the capital city soon stood out as the most prestigious variety of English and 'gradually came to be seen as a national standard' (Culpeper 1997: 48). Although the STANDARDISATION made communication easier, it also had its price: it led to a rigid social HIERARCHY among the varieties of English. A dialect was no longer just a regionally marked variety, but became a means for social classification.

In Switzerland, too, the language situation was influenced through the process of standardisation. Early New High German Diphthongation and the development of a new form of High German strongly affected the German-speaking neighbours of Switzerland, yet these language developments were not equally effective in the various parts of German-speaking Switzerland (Lötscher 1983: 56). Therefore, communication across the boundaries and even within the country became increasingly difficult. Around the 17th and 18th century, the Swiss adopted High German as a written standard which enabled them to communicate with the Germans as well as with other speakers of Swiss German dialects.

Another similarity shared by speakers of English and Swiss German dialects can be placed opposite of the phenomenon of standardisation: it is a 'strong sense of national [or regional] IDENTITY' (Rash 1998: 261) expressed through the use of dialect and the will to preserve its originality and regional specificity. In recent years, dialect is generally felt to be an important aspect of culture and is therefore celebrated in poems, folk songs and theatre performances, as for example the Baseldytschi Bihni or Mani Matter (Lötscher 1983: 74, 75).

A third linguistic specificity which is part of English dialects as well as of Swiss German dialects is the frequent use of LOAN WORDS. Lexical borrowing, 'the transfer of lexical material from one language to another' (Rash 1998: 197), has strongly influenced the English language. Old Norse in the north, Norman French in the south and a general Romanic influence have left their traces in the lexicon of the various English dialects (Culpeper 1997: 61, 63).

In Switzerland the Romanic language of the Roman Empire had a considerable effect not only in the francophone and italophone parts of the country, but also in the German-speaking area. The adoption of French expressions was mainly 'a result of direct language contact at the French-German language boundary' (Rash 1998: 201).

In the 17th to 19th century, however, France and Switzerland had an exemplary good relationship and the import of French loan words thus increased once more (Rash 1998: 203).

6. Conclusion

We can conclude that dialects of a specific language are always a product of their historical evolution. Therefore, they can be used as pointers to reconstruct historical events and illuminate how and why a language changed over time. They are indicators of past language modifications that occurred due to geographical boundaries, social hierarchies, foreign influences, political dealings or economical novelties. The fact, for instance, that in Switzerland no particular dialect is considered to be of inherently higher value stands in direct connection to the historical happenings in Switzerland during the last centuries. Because English and Swiss German dialects developed under strongly dissimilar circumstances, they are so divergently assessed.

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