

Variation as a window to the past: On the origins of Standard Average European

Research question: European languages constitute a linguistic area where cross-linguistically rather exotic linguistic features are concentrated and shared among genetically only loosely related languages (Standard-Average-European, henceforth SAE). Whereas relevant SAE-features have been identified by areal typology already (Haspelmath 2001, Stolz 2006, Cysouw 2011), the age and origin of SAE are still mysterious. Most likely, there are several historical sources for different SAE-features. We argue that studying variation within SAE-languages helps us decide between competing hypotheses on the origins of individual SAE-features.

Approach: The idea of a European linguistic area has been established mainly on the basis of codified standard varieties. Murelli & Kortmann (2011) suspect that SAE-ness is less articulate at the level of spoken vernaculars: including nonstandard varieties into typological comparison is not just a matter of granularity, but it may create a qualitatively different, perhaps more realistic picture of Europe's position in typological space. If it turns out that at least some subset of SAE-characteristics is present only in codified standard varieties but absent in vernaculars this would be strong evidence for these features being an artefact of common strategies of codification -- a relatively recent sociolinguistic phenomenon rather than the result of long-term adstratal convergence. We refer to such features as 'from-above'-Europeanisms. By contrast, other SAE-features which are diachronically stable and likewise prevalent in standard as well as nonstandard varieties must be much older, perhaps going back to intensive language contact after the Migration Period (Haspelmath 2001, Van der Auwera 2009) ('indifferent'-Europeanisms). The third logically possible kind of SAE-characteristics is 'from-below'-Europeanisms: features that are more prevalent in the vernacular as compared to the standard language. These features are youngest since they did not (yet) reach the standard, which is notoriously conservative, once codified.

Method and data: As a starting point, we selected German for a pilot study because standard German is a core SAE language, has been attested in diachronic depth, has a long tradition of codification, and facts about the structure of dialects are relatively easily accessible. We tested phonological and morphosyntactic SAE-features (taken from existing collections by Haspelmath 2001, Stolz 2006) for their presence in standard German, Old High German, and Alemannic (south-western) dialects. We introduced scalar instead of binary distinctions where necessary (relative prominence instead of sheer presence/absence of the feature). We used existing grammatical descriptions as well as a large electronic corpus of spoken Alemannic.

Results/discussion: Overall, standard German is more SAE than both OHG and Alemannic. Whereas the greatest proportion of putative SAE-features is 'indifferent', the majority of those features displaying a standard-vernacular asymmetry is 'from-above' (e.g. vowel inventories, negation, pro-drop, relativisation), yet a few 'from-below' features do exist, too (*have*-perfect, article systems, case systems). The results suggest that codification clearly has a SAE-ising effect, but only for a subset of features. Some but not all 'from-above'-features can be attributed to the influence of Latin as a model for codification strategies.

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