

Language biographies as a tool for exploring bilingual speech

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In order to explain language change within a usage-based approach, it is not sufficient to argue purely linguistically, because social and cognitive factors always shape the language processing too (Schmid 2020). This also holds true for a multilingual settings where especially social pressure can play a decisive role for language maintenance or language shift. In empirical research, it is therefore beneficial to collect as precise metadata about the investigated speakers as possible. I argue that a language biography approach (Nekvapil 2003) is a useful tool for examining the outcome of language contact linked to the social and cognitive factors at play.

I have collected my data within the project Language across generations: contact induced change in morphosyntax in German-Polish bilingual speech funded by the German Research Foundation (Kościołek 2019). The corpus consists of narrative interviews (Küsters 2006) with Czech-German bilinguals born in the 1950s in the former Czechoslovakia who emigrated to West Germany between 1968 and 1989. Half of the sample are descendants of Sudeten Germans, who could stay in their homeland despite the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia (“Spätaussiedler*innen”, SP); the other half has no German family background (“Migrant*innen”, MI). Based on their narrations, it was possible not only to compile the language biography for each speaker, but also to capture their language ideologies (Silverstein 1979; Kroskrity 2004) and to find out about their language management (Neustupný 2002; Nekvapil 2009).

Both concepts are included in (1) and (2). In (1), a speaker from the SP group mentions that her family wanted to resettle to Germany in order to preserve German identity. The consequence of this attitude was the renunciation of the Czech language after the resettlement (2).

(1) # meine Mutter hat immer gesagt sie wollte dass ihre Kinder deutsch aufwachsen

my mother always said she wanted her children to grow up German

(2) aber # in diesem Zeitpunkt wo wir hier am fünfzehnten sechsten achtundsechzig sind wir ausgesiedelt und dann habe ich die Sprache in der Tschechei gelassen

but # at that time when we were here on the fifteenth sixth sixty-eight we were resettled and then I left the language in Czechia

(IL_BLA_SP_DE)

The talk aims at introducing a typical language biography of a speaker of both groups under investigation. The type of language acquisition and the particularities of the use of Czech and German are related to the sociolinguistic factors language ideologies and language management, and can account for the deviations from the homeland varieties found in the interviewees’ speech production. The first results already suggest greater language attrition (Schmid et al. 2019) in the Czech speech of the “Spätaussiedler*innen” group and more stabilization phenomena (Long 2003: 521) in the German of the “Migrant*innen” group.

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