

The style dimension of variation and what it can reveal about dialect change in Europe

Peter Auer
University of Freiburg

An essential part of Frans' mission as a social dialectologist over the last decades (in my understanding) has been to demonstrate that linguistic variation in Europe does not function in the same way as linguistic variation in American English does, the main reason being the different status of the dialects in most of Europe. From this it follows that the study of variation and change cannot copy the methodological paradigm developed in Labov-type quantitative sociolinguistics but has to adapt it to the European context.

I want to zoom in on the notion of 'style' as an example. So-called stylistic variation between careful, highly monitored ways of language production such as (word list) reading, and 'informal', spontaneous talk, is part and parcel of the variationist sociolinguistic paradigm, where it has been used to uncover the prestige dimension of variation. In European social dialectology, on the other hand, it turned out to be useful to elicit highly monitored data on the dialectal side of the repertoire, via dialect questionnaires or other elicitation methods, and compare them with spontaneous talk.

I will report on a variety of studies carried out in the last 20 years in south-west Germany, in which this difference between elicited dialect and spontaneous dialect has been employed in order to investigate language change. It will be argued that the comparison of these two types of dialectal data can contribute to the study of change in apparent time.