

The Emerging Standard Language: Newspapers in Early Modern German

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According to Burke (2004), two models can be distinguished as regards the rise of a standard variety: The first model implies that one variety prevails over other varieties, as has been the case in England or Italy, for example. While the victory of the Tuscan norm in Italy was culturally driven, the triumph of the south-eastern dialects in England was rather motivated by political centralization (Burke 2004). The second model says that the standard variety is the result of a selection process, whereby particular linguistic variants are selected from a wide range of dialectal varieties. A prominent example for the second model is the German standard language, which is initially limited to written language with no association of the standard with any particular spoken dialect (Durrell 1999: 301). The current paper addresses the question how the standardization process in the German-speaking world is reflected in newspapers of the 17th and 18th centuries. This text type is particularly well suited to acquire a deeper understanding of standardization in German for various reasons: A widely held opinion states the significant influence of chancery language on early newspapers, due to the typical affiliation of news correspondents to the imperial and city chanceries (Mackensen 1964). In addition, chancery language was taken as a model for writing by many at the time. A somewhat different picture arises when we include the perspective of the recipients of newspapers. It is well-known that even though early newspapers represent a written language variety, they are not only read by the few who knew to read, but also systematically read aloud to a large audience in the 17th and 18th centuries (Welke 1981). Furthermore, given the laborious collection of messages and the cumbersome printing process, the printers at the time were under great time pressure. At least in the early days of periodically published newspapers, there was no time for linguistically reworking the incoming news. And since news arrived from a wide variety of dialect areas, early periodicals increased the dissemination of local varieties. Mackensen (1964) therefore considers early periodicals of primary importance for the standardization process. The current paper will show that early newspapers do in fact not allow a uniform assessment in terms of their syntactic complexity: some news segments display a quite simple syntax, whereas others are of high syntactic complexity. Measures of syntactic complexity include the placement of adverbial clauses and sentence length. By the end of the 18th century, the growing conventionalization of the new register as well as the impact of standardization processes render newspapers much more balanced in terms of syntactic complexity.

References

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