

Handwritten vs. Printed Sources in Language History ‘from Below’: Syntactic Variation According to Medium in Historical German

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The concept of language history “from below” has led to a turn towards everyday writing in the form of so-called ego-documents, mainly personal letters. Through this shift, handwritten sources have come into focus, whereas previously, studying printed texts was often the norm. The difference in medium, however, is not frequently reflected in research, where the parameters of genre, author, or purpose are often foregrounded. Since these factors often align with either handwriting or print, the impact of medium alone may be obscured in analyses. Few studies have investigated differences between handwritten and printed source in the field of spelling, but investigations in language structure are largely lacking. Whereas orthographical differences between handwriting and print are typically viewed in a standardization perspective, syntactic variation appears likely to show effects of spontaneous vs. planned, unmonitored vs. controlled language usage. In this vein, handwriting promises to evince forms of language less influenced by conscious linguistic choices, e.g. as a result of language ideology.

This presentation reports on an analysis of syntactic variation according to medium in the history of German. The focus is on differences between handwritten and printed sources from the same periods, regions, genres, and authors, keeping factors other than medium as constant as possible. Two studies based on sermons from different points in time will be contextualized within long-term trends in syntactic change as evinced in sermons, putting the results into perspective. As the comparison of the handwritten and printed texts shows, historical medium variation is not restricted to spelling.