

Social Class, Authority, and the Origins of a Standard Language Ideology for Sixteenth Century German

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I will start with a few definitions, first of language standardization, which is seen, in general terms, as a process which moves a language away from its inherent structured heterogeneity and toward uniformity. The standardization process targets as an end product an idealized *spoken* standard (which will never be fully realized) and a literary, or *written* standard, the primary purpose of which is the transmission of information over time and space. The idealized spoken standard is distinct from *supra-regional vernaculars*, which are spoken languages which may promote convergence but which differ from a standard language in that the standard language is imposed from above and its norms are subject to covert and overt legislation.

Notice the lack of agency in this discussion. Does the process of standardization descend on a language community like a plague, set in motion by microscopic bacteria? Is it more like a religious experience, a sudden dawning of light, a burning bush? No, standardization is first and foremost a social process, and people are at the bottom of it, individuals with motivations of all kinds. At some point in a language community which is largely oral in its orientation, the written language becomes important economically, socially and culturally; this is where the battle for recognition and power begins. And this is where we come to the concept of ideology, and more specifically, a standard language ideology.

Ideology is a difficult concept, one that has kept sociologists and philosophers busy for some time. In his 1991 book, Terry Eagleton, has pointed out that when we say someone is speaking “ideologically”, we are accusing that person of disorting argument by applying an inflexible framework of preconceived — and usually biased — beliefs, or as he put it more exactly, “I view things as they really are; you squint at them through a tunnel vision imposed by some extraneous system of doctrine” (page 3), or even more to the point: “His thought is redneck, yours is doctrinal and mine is deliciously supple”. Eagleton goes on to provide sixteen possible definitions of ideology, some of them conflicting. I have included these on the handout.

Linguists, of course, approach this issue more specifically, in as far as ideology is relevant to language change. In their seminal 1985 work on authority issues in language, James and Lesley Milroy coined the term *standard language ideology* which they define as: “an idea in the mind rather than a reality — a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent”. Norman Fairclough, perhaps the linguist most active in this area recently, says of this issue that “Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behavior, and the form of social behavior where we rely most of ‘common-sense’ assumptions” (page 2).

We cannot pretend, given thirty years of empirical work in sociolinguistics and social dialectology, that the variants available to choose from are neutral, or that the choice between them is a random one. If you think of it objectively, it's an incredibly cheeky thing to do, really, telling people how to talk. You've got to convince them that you know more than they do about what is good for language, and for language speakers. How do you pull off something like that? First you **mystify** the object, as in the claim *language is so complex you as a mere native speaker can never sort things out for yourself*; and then you claim authority, as in: *I'll be your model. Talk like me, and you can't go wrong*. Finally, there is reward, as in *You'll get ahead now in life*; or, too often, there is punishment. This is the beginning of an *ideology* of standardization which empowers certain individuals and institutions to choose between variants active in the language. We can see both historically and in our own languages that in most cases, the variants chosen as "standard" will be associated with the dominant economic and political powers.

Critical language studies is an area of growing interest, but the work in print rarely considers how ideologies of language use first came into being, and how those ideologies fueled the standardization process which was at its peak in the sixteenth century for a number of European languages. I have looked at this issue for sixteenth century German, working with a database of Nuremberg texts, and working with the social and political structures of that city. While the discussion that follows is limited to Nuremberg in the first half of that century, I believe that many generalizations can be drawn to other city-states in central Europe and to the more general language situation developing at the time.

For German-speaking Europe of the early sixteenth-century, the normalization of the written language as an entity distinct from speech was just beginning *for most* of the population. Of course, it had been well underway for the minority of people, primarily men, who were classically educated, and who wrote fluently in Latin and Greek, highly standardized literary languages. But for much of the population — urban dwellers who made buttons, or mended streets, for example — the concept of a uniform, consistent, supra-regional German was just beginning to develop. For another, quite large group — the rural, the poor, the marginalized, those with restricted world views and very small, dense social and communicative networks — this concept could not have meant much at all. In the sixteenth century, the whole fabric of the language repertoire was changing, but it was changing at a different pace and in different ways, for different people. Social, economic and technological circumstances (such as the development of printing) dictated that German accelerate its development and further widen its scope to take over domains previously occupied by Latin. From this it follows that some variants had to be chosen for legitimization, and others excluded.

So there are two very complex and interrelated questions to answer: First, where was the focus of social and political power in sixteenth century Nuremberg, and cities like Nuremberg? And second, did the standard language ideology originate with that power base -- or, if it did not -- where did it come from? Here I will argue that the growing importance of a written standardized language provided an opportunity for a large-scale restructuring of the prevalent power structures of communities like

Nuremberg. That is, it put a crack in what had previously been an unscalable wall to political power. The grammarians, scribes, and teachers laid claim to the language, and used it to build a power base and gain authority. To see this clearly, it is necessary to outline the way authority was traditionally structured.

Much of the scholarly historical work on the social structure of Nuremberg has been written by Gerald Strauss, who sees the city, very traditionally as a series of social groups: “patricians, artisans, consumers and producers, bee keepers, officials, clerics, jurists, servants, women as a sex and women as wives, widows, prostitutes, and so on” (1966: 116-117).

A quantitative picture of Nuremberg indicates that these groups are very different in size and composition, as seen in Figure 1.

Where was the political power? The governing body, called the Select Council, was controlled exclusively by the patricians. We see here that this group represents approximately 2 percent of the whole estimated population or 50 percent of the upper status class. It is crucial to note that it was the patriciate alone who comprised the Select Council. This Council was the heart and mind of the city's government; its power, self-prescribed and perpetuated, seems to have been all encompassing. Forty-two patrician men ordained every facet of life, including the material of undergarments, the value and amount of gifts to be exchanged upon engagement to be married, the shape and weight of peppered pork sausages, the proper fees for a midwife on the basis of difficulty of birth, and the disposition of goods among heirs. In the Royal City of Nuremberg there were no handworkers' guilds; the Select Council was successful at inhibiting their development (unlike other German cities and city-states) as this would have impinged upon the sovereignty of the Council.

The remainder of the upper class, those not empowered to sit on the Select Council, were simply called *honorable*. The ruling patricians went to a great deal of effort to codify social distinctions between themselves and the honorables and between the honorables and the rest of the population. This establishes clearly where the political power was to be found. What about economic power?

Generally in the literature the patriciate is represented as the predominate power in the economic sphere as well as in the government. Strauss sees historically a causal relationship between economic success and patrician standing, so that the core clans were seen as those with exclusive structural power and simultaneously as the foundation of the kinship-based merchant corporations at the heart of Nuremberg's economic health and success. And it is certainly true that the patriciate and the honorable were commercially successful and very wealthy. Nevertheless, they did not control the majority of the city's economic resources. After careful examination of the tax rolls, Toch (1978) established that 62 percent of those listed in the four highest tax brackets were neither patrician nor honorable: they were merchants, master craftsmen, and tradespeople of what must be called an emerging middle class. (Figure 2)

In a search for the origin of the standard language ideology, this middle class must concern us. The group is under-represented and under-powered in the ruling body which ordains all facets of every-day life, and it has been refused the outlet of the guild structure through which it would normally have a high degree of self-determination. At the same time we have seen that this group is not only bigger than

the patrician class, it also controls a bigger portion of the city's wealth. In addition, this large and wealthy group seems to have no means for changing this status quo.

Then how did this very large group of people with considerable resources define and achieve power and status? Toch (1978:163) states the issue quite simply: "The artisans and skilled workers' membership in the Select Council - eight at any given time - konnte natürlich nicht das Bedürfnis tausender Handwerker nach sozialer Anerkennung stillen." This must be true also for the rest of the middle class who were not skilled laborers.

The major divisions within the so-called middle class can be presented in the way they were seen in Nuremberg at the time, falling into four primary groups: those in government service (official scribes, persons working in service of the council or city); the free trades (with many subsystems including clerics, health workers, teachers, private scribes, and artists); the skilled crafts (with dozens of subgroups including metalcrafts, textile workers, construction, transport, etc), and some of the merchants (those involved in finance, large-scale production, manufacturing, etc). Of course, there were patricians and honorables who took part in one or more of these occupations.

The "middle class" occupational groups were answerable to the Select Council; only two had any intermediary body with actual power: the clerics (who were responsible to the church) and the skilled craftspeople (who were governed by their own representatives in the *Rugamt*). If these individuals are removed, we see that four groups remain: merchants, health workers, artists, and those who dealt with the written language as grammarians, teachers, and scribes. The first three groups, merchants, health workers, and artists, have regions of authority inherent to their pursuits. This is not true of the fourth group, and it is this group which really concerns us, because it is with them that the ideology of language standardization originates.

It is certainly not a homogenous group. It includes people like Lazarus Spengler, who was well off and well connected in every sense of the word, as well as the rent-a-scribe who set up a table in the market square and wrote personal letters for a few coins. Who were these people? By enlarge, their fathers were middle class merchants and skilled artisans with the funds to educate sons. Figure 3 indicates that the bulk of men who went off to the university were not patrician or honorable, although it looks like the patricians were more likely to head to Italy for their studies, a fact attributable most certainly to the increased cost of studying there. Along with printers, these were the individuals who had a personal investment in the success of the developing standard ideology. These individuals — those who set the standard ideology and perpetuated it — provide a contrast to both the political elite, the Patricians, and to the Humanists.

In language terms, the tripartite split: Language Ideologs, Political Elite, Humanist is much more productive than the patrician: honorable: other division provided earlier. The political elite and humanists would have one thing in common, in terms of language: less concern with standardization of written, or spoken German. The Humanists worked primarily in Latin, and for them, education was classical in its language and approach. The political elite, the patricians, were negative toward higher education (a doctorate precluded election to the Select Council); their economic

concerns had to do with trade, which had been functioning with written and spoken German for a long time without standardization. Each had its own sphere of power and influence and authority.

It seems quite logical that those men who came from such social backgrounds and trained as professional teachers, clerks, and scribes would be especially sensitive to an opportunity to achieve some kind of authority and power, taping into the existing dominant bloc to make a niche for themselves. The developing standard language ideology, which brought with it a concrete set of tasks to be established and a growing domain of authority which transcended social class, provided such an opportunity.

Norman Fairclough has pointed out that the institutionalization or legitimization of certain social behaviors over others originates with a 'dominant bloc' (an alliance of those who see their interests as tied to capital, and capitalism) and functions to keep distinct from one another the powered and the disempowered:

Ideological power, the power to project one's practices as universal and 'common sense', is a significant complement to economic and political power, and of particular significance here because it is exercised in discourse... There are ... in gross terms two ways in which those who have power can exercise it and keep it: through coercing others to go along with them, with the ultimate sanctions of physical violence or death; or through winning others' consent to, or at least acquiescence in, their possession and exercise of power. In short, through *coercion* or *consent* (1989:33).

Fabian Frangk, a self-employed sixteenth century grammarian, was a man who did have a well-developed conception of a standardized, homogeneous, supra-regional language, and who embraced a standard ideology. Frangk expressed with great clarity what he believed to be true, that there was one "right" German, spoken or written, which could be learned.

He who wishes to refrain from misuse and wishes to write and speak German correctly, that person must avoid absolutely the German language in the manner and custom of the land. It is useful and good to be familiar with each and every dialect and their misuses so that one can avoid errors... ...[the writings of] the chancery of Emperor Maximilian and of Luther as well as of the editions of Johan Schonsberger of Augsburg are the highest quality and purest available. Especially when they have been carefully proofread and corrected and have come directly from the chancery or printing shop and thus have not been re-written or newly printed by less capable or inspired individuals. (Fabian Frangk: Ein Cantzley und Title buchlin. 1531. Reprinted in Müller 1882: 94).

Now, while it is certainly true that there were grammarians and teachers who were more tolerant of regional variation, Frangk was not alone in his beliefs. Notice a number of things here: Frangk does not distinguish between the written and the spoken languages, finding one set of norms adequate for both, and he draws clear lines of authority. He makes a beach head by naming the political and religious authorities of his day, Emperor Maximilian and Luther, and thus draws on their power;

he then draws in the printers, one particular printer, who provides a powerful economic/merchant link, a conspiritor in the coercion process, if you will. He carefully underscores the idea that the written language is tricky thing which must be overseen in every stage by experts, inspired experts, no less, who are capable of carefully proofreading and correcting, to bring the language into line with the models he has identified as appropriate.

Frangk's statement presents a body of ideas characteristic of a particular social group or class, the purpose of which, at least in part, is to help to legitimate a dominant political power. He offers a position for a subject, and he is motivated, to some great degree, by his own social interests: if he can convince his audience of these claims he is making, then they are dependent on him. He defends himself by saying that this is socially necessary; it is how he makes sense of his world. Thus in Frangk's arguments we see at least half of Eagleton's many possible definitions of ideology.

Why is this of interest to those of you concerned with the way German has changed over time? It has been said by many scholars, that we cannot understand any individual element of linguistic structure until we understand how it came to be. Language change is at the heart of most of what we do, and it becomes increasingly clear that language change is intricately complicated. It is more than social and stylistic marking, too. It has to do with large scale and very abstract social phenomena, such as the influence of large urban areas in the diffusion of social innovations of all kind (as in the work Trudgill and Chambers have shown, quantitatively, that cities are often the loci of larger-scale change in Norway and England). Attitudes toward language use fall into this realm, and such attitudes are perhaps the least understood phenomena in the process of language change. In historical studies, language attitudes must be reconstructed.

Labov compares Jespersen to Wyld, and I quote:

H.C. Wyld was the most concerned with the direct study of variations in spelling, as opposed to others like Jespersen who paid more attention to the statements of grammarians and orthoepists. It was then inevitable that Wyld would date the origin of most English sound changes earlier than others, since the early stages of sound change that show up in spelling variations antedate the late stages that could be recognized by a grammarian. (34).

It seems to me that Labov has missed a point and it is this: in the study of the Early Modern period, it is not enough to study either the grammarians, and their role in the changing language, but neither is it enough to constrict our study to the evolution of any individual linguistic element over time. It seems to me that a crucial element to understanding how language change comes to be is understanding the greater social context in which variants compete, and for Early Modern German this means a better understanding of the individuals who constructed an ideology of language standardization.