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# THE PLURICENTRICITY DEBATE

On Austrian German and other Germanic  
Standard Varieties

Stefan Dollinger

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Focus



# The Pluricentricity Debate

This book unpacks a 30-year debate about the pluricentricity of German. It examines the concept of pluricentricity, an idea implicit to the study of World Englishes, which expressly allows for national standard varieties, and the notion of “pluri-areality”, which seeks to challenge the former. Looking at the debate from three angles—methodological, theoretical and epistemological—the volume draws on data from German and English, with additional perspectives from Dutch, Luxembourgish, Swedish, Danish and Norwegian, to establish if and to what degree “pluri-areality” and pluricentricity model various sociolinguistic situations adequately. Dollinger argues that “pluri-areality” is synonymous with “geographical variation” and, as such, no match for pluricentricity. Instead, “pluri-areality” presupposes an atheoretical, supposedly “neutral”, data-driven linguistics that violates basic science—theoretical principles. Three fail-safes are suggested—the uniformitarian hypothesis, Popper’s theory of falsification and speaker attitudes—to avoid philological incompatibilities and terminological clutter. This book is of particular interest to scholars in sociolinguistics, World Englishes, Germanic languages and linguists more generally.

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# Preface

This book highlights a development in German dialectology that I have noticed with increasing unease over the past few years. It stresses what seems to be missing from the debate about Austrian German and how this national variety is linguistically modelled. By placing German in the context of other Germanic languages, it is my hope that the incompatibilities will become clearer.

This book identifies the problems and proposes ways to redress them. It argues that sociolinguistic concepts that have proven themselves in an international context must be the basis for exploration and elaboration, not new coinages. This book makes the case against a “special status” of German and hopes to bring a theoretical angle into a discussion that has stalled for more than 20 years.

As a linguist and a language teacher, I think that whatever we do as linguists must benefit the speakers and learners of the varieties we deal with. If some of our findings have the potential to go against perceived speaker needs, it is time to take stock and see if a major principle was violated. I believe that in German dialectology we have reached that point in what has been called the “problem” of national varieties. This book contains little new data; its novelty lies in the weaving together of arguments that are usually buried in data-driven presentations; in the combination, juxtaposition and comparison of studies not usually read together.

This book’s focus is on theoretical bases and interpretations, how we can know what we know. The new data that is now part of this book was included at the brilliant suggestion of one of two anonymous reviewers in the spring of 2018. I hope the book will be critiqued for its factual points and not, as the clearance reader in early 2019 flippantly accused me of bias, labelling the present book as “not publishable”, as written, “from the perspective of an Austrian more concerned about his linguistic identity, than as an academic soberly gauging the debate”. Even if that were the case, which it is not, the arguments herein have an intrinsic value. Nobody should be

asked to separate their social and linguistic identities. How would this be possible, respectively, and what kind of sociolinguistics would we be getting? Perhaps this is a key question for “pluri-arealists” to answer. When I occasionally refer to the German provenance of colleagues, I do so as a last resort in order to understand why, by virtue of a different kind of socialization and training perhaps, a given view might be so different from the one in the present book.

Not everyone will agree with every point raised, and others will miss some; I felt unable to offer any more depth within the scope of a short monograph. I particularly regret the deletion of the original quotes from the German in footnotes (some 4000 words), as a hard word limit was enforced. I hope to have given just enough context for everyone to allow the arguments to be tested in their own linguistic contexts, so that they may attempt to falsify, in the sense introduced in Section 6.2 and not by categorical dismissal, the account offered herein.

sd

Vancouver, 6 February 2019

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Their naming or highlighting here implies no endorsement of any part of my argument.

# Terminological Note

While English terminology is used throughout this book, I aimed to translate all German terms and concepts as faithfully as possible into (international) English. The use of terms such as “German German”—for the German used in Germany—or “Dutch Dutch”—in opposition to “Belgian Dutch”—is in line with Trudgill’s terminology (e.g. 2004). I see no problem with such “double” names, though some find them objectionable on aesthetic grounds; they can easily be replaced by, e.g. Deutschland German for German German or Netherlandic Dutch for Dutch Dutch.



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# 1 The Problem

Linguists have for a long time been exploring the idea of language universals. In most cases, such universals are conceived as part of linguistic structure, the inner “mechanics” of the language system. It is therefore somewhat rarer that linguists envisage social universals, despite sociolinguists having established a fair number of consistent behaviours. The present book takes a look at an area of sociolinguistic inquiry pertaining to the treatment of what are often called “non-dominant varieties” of a language. Such varieties include Canadian English, vs. the dominant varieties of American English and British English, or Austrian German vs. German German and Belgian Dutch vs. Dutch Dutch. There are different ways to treat such varieties. In German, for instance, national varieties are often considered a “problem” (e.g. Ammon 1995: subtitle), while in English no such perception exists. A comparison of German and English in this regard is therefore at the core of this book, with five other Germanic languages—Dutch, Luxembourgish, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish—thrown into the mix.

The present book argues that linguistic concepts need to be applicable across various languages and philologies in order to be meaningful. If we are to make lasting progress, we need to have clarity with regards to basic terms, concepts and notions. Every bi- or multilingual student of more than one philology will have noticed a certain dissonance within the concepts of any given language when compared to similar concepts in another language. I argue that linguists should accept a competing concept only if there are very compelling reasons to treat any given language differently.

Recent years have seen the use of a competing concept called “pluri-areality” in German dialectology. “Pluri-areality” and pluri-areal are my renderings from the original German “pluriareale Sprache”—pluri-areal language (Wolf 1994: 74; Scheuringer 1996). “Pluri-areality” directly contradicts the established concept of pluricentricity in its fundamental assumptions of how national varieties are to be modelled. Pluricentricity refers to the development of multiple standards, often national standards of a given