

CHANGING GERMAN – *EXPONATE, E-MAILS, EINGABEN*

ON THE GERMAN LANGUAGE AND 15 YEARS OF GERMAN UNIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides a snapshot of the change of the German language in the more than fifteen years since the Unification Treaty. It focusses mainly on lexical change and discusses different processes and trends in language change. In addition to certain East German words becoming obsolete in the united Germany, words ‘travelling’ from East to West and from West to East are identified. A third group is illustrated by providing examples of words which have only entered the German language in the last 15 years. Generally though, the focus is on lexical change which has some (often indirect) link with unification and post-unification. Overall, it can be shown that the German language proves remarkably robust in integrating and assimilating the words which are new for the entire speech community or at least for a large subgroup (East or West in this case) and that language change has resulted in a wider choice for speakers and thus a better basis for linguistic creativity.

It is not always the case that the German unification and German language are considered together. The *Handbuch zur deutschen Einheit* (Weidenfeld and Korte 1999), for example, does not list ‘language’ as one of its 71 keywords and concentrates instead on ‘Staatssicherheit’ and

'Bundeswehr'¹, lists 'literature', but not 'film', to only focus then on a discussion of the linguistic change of the term 'Deutschland' (Berschin 1999). Does this mean that the German language did not undergo significant changes as a consequence or at least in the context of German unification? Of course it did, the lack of discussion is just an oversight in a volume which concentrated on sociological, political, ideological and historical changes. Language is intrinsically linked to its speakers – to society. In recent years, sociolinguists have studied language behaviour of different social groups in united Germany (e.g., Kallmeyer and Keim 2004), made east-west comparisons, analysed conversations of east with west Germans (see e.g., Stevenson 2002), and studied the linguistic traits of identity of West-Germans who now live in east Germany (Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain 2005) . Such a speaker-centred view, however, is not the focus of this essay. I am going to discuss selected aspects of the German language as a mirror of societal change. I will show examples from different layers of the language system – text, sentence, word, but mainly concentrate on the latter because it is often these were the change is most apparent.

One might ask the following general question: In post-unification Germany, we have seen new words, grammar rules, text types, ways of talking and writing, and heated debates about them, but is the result a unified language? I will answer straight away: No, of course not and it would be really bad if it had been the result. One of the main features of a thriving language is its diversity, its capability to adapt, and its potential to grow. Overall, the changes we witnessed in

¹ *Staatssicherheit* – the secret police and secret service of East Germany (1950-1989). *Bundeswehr* – armed forces of the Federal Republic of Germany founded in 1955.

the last fifteen years have resulted in more choices for speakers of German to express themselves creatively. Here, we will look at three groups of such changes:

- Linguistic structures – words, grammatical rules, text types – which we would predominantly find in east German discourse are now also found in the West and vice versa – one example is the word ‘Exponate’² in my title.
- Other linguistic structures were no longer necessary and are therefore no longer used by the community of speakers mainly in east Germany – one example is the text type ‘Eingaben’² in my title.
- And finally, German speakers in east, west, north and south created and/or adopted new linguistic structures in the last fifteen years – one example is the word ‘E-Mails’ in my title.

1. Some Background

But before we start, I would like to provide some relevant background about the German language, her speakers, and the discussion about language in East and West Germany before 1990. In order to contextualise the quantitative side of the consequences of unification on German, we will need a little information on the period of language development, the number of speakers of German, the quantity of the German vocabulary.

² *Exponat* – exhibit (n.); originally more frequently used in the east, now also used in the west. *Eingabe* – complaint; East German text type, complaints to institutions and authorities of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) or the state.

The German language is more than 1250 years old, changed over time and is still changing. The pronunciation was modified, new morphemes and words were introduced, the syntactic rules were altered. In all these centuries, speakers of German were also in contact with a variety of other languages and language families such as Latin, Celtic, Slavic, French, Italian, Russian, English and they borrowed extensively from them and in this way enriched the German language. The period of time discussed here is, of course, comparatively small. Therefore, we can expect the changes to be small and few in comparison, but nevertheless they are significant. And it is often the changes which reflect developments in society, not so much the continuities. In the period of time under consideration, how many speakers who are introducing, adopting or witnessing these changes are we talking about? For the twentieth century, Ammon (2001) lists the number of speakers of German as follows: 1964 – 100 million, 1984 – 119 million, 1990 – 92 million. Kettemann's (2004) estimate is slightly higher with 110 millions. Of these about 18 million lived in the German Democratic Republic in the early 1950s and about 15 million in the new states and in East Berlin in 2001. Over the same period, the population of west Germany increased from 49 to 67 million (Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung 2004). Here, I am only looking at the varieties of German used by these 15 million and 67 million speakers. We would also find specific words and usages, commonalities and differences and, of course, language change if we were to compare the German spoken in Austria and Switzerland with each other or with the German of Germany.

Some of the specifics that will be discussed later occurred at the word level. So what proportion of the German vocabulary do we consider when we are talking about east or west German specifics? First, one has to ask: How many words does the German language have? This is very difficult to answer, but dictionary entries provide an adequate approximation. The

Grimms' German Dictionary lists about 500,000 lemmas which represent 350,000 keywords, Meyer's encyclopaedia has about 250,000 keywords and the Duden about 200,000 for which 300,000 different meaning variants are listed. The frequently used, general vocabulary comprises an estimated 70,000 words. Compare these figures with the number of words which are specifically east or west German: Hellmann estimated that there were about 2,000 words, meanings, and phrases specific to East Germany and he assumes that there was an equivalent number of West German specifics (Brinkmann et al. 1992). This represents little more than 3% of the general vocabulary and only 0.8% of an estimated overall vocabulary. These figures are surprisingly low if one considers the discussion before 1990 about whether or not there are two German languages in the two German states.

Prior to German unification, linguists predominantly viewed the differentiation of east and west German and the resulting differences in an ideological and political context, in a context of discourses constituting one vs. two German nations. Depending on political aims and ideological persuasion, linguists and politicians emphasised the commonalities or the differences of the German language spoken in the two German states. Many publications portrayed this differentiation process predominantly as changes in East Germany. However, from a purely linguistic point of view it is obvious that the departure from older linguistic traditions happened much sooner and more rapidly in West Germany (Schlosser 1990: 39 quoted in Lerchner 2000). Today, linguists view regional language change as a consequence of different political and socioeconomic approaches as a completely normal process in the development of natural languages (v.Polenz, 1990: 21 quoted in Lerchner 2000).

2. Germans and Language Change

And after 1990, what did people think when these two varieties of German came together in a united Germany? When East Germany joined the Federal Republic in 1990, the onus was mainly on east Germans to adapt to west German society. Occasionally, cynical demands were made with regard to linguistic behaviour as can be seen in the following satirical statement.

... der "Ossi", seit der Wiedervereinigung in der Situation eines Nachhilfeschülers, müsse zuallererst einmal Deutsch lernen, "denn seit dem 3. Oktober 1990 ist er ein richtiger Deutscher, und von einem richtigen Deutschen kann man schließlich verlangen, daß er richtig Deutsch spricht".(aus "Die Ossis lernen Deutsch" in Leipziger Tageblatt 12.3.1991 quoted in Lerchner 1996)

More tangible information comes from a comprehensive survey conducted at the end of the last century. In 1997-1998, the Institute for the German Language in Mannheim administered a representative survey (Stickel and Volz 1999) in east and west Germany to elicit dominant opinions and perceptions Germans have about their language. 95.2% of interviewees believed that many, or some linguistic changes occurred in the period of 1989-1998, only 4.8% believed them to be few (Busse 2004). These figures are surprisingly high. Often, speakers do not perceive their language as changing because human language can be used consciously without having to reflect on it. However, when the own language is seen as changing, phenomena like the addition of new, perhaps borrowed words, the change of syntactic patterns, new spelling rules, new text types are often perceived as negative, inferior, ugly, unnecessary or even threatening.

The survey referred to many different aspects of the German language today. One of the topics was the relation of the German used in east and west Germany. In 1998, 49.1% of east Germans and 41.7% of west Germans did not see any significant differences between the German

spoken in the east and in the west. 71.9% think that the north-south differences are larger than the east-west differences. (Stickel and Volz 1999). These numbers, of course, imply that there also is a large proportion of the German population who do see significant differences between the two varieties of the language. If one compares these figures to the proportion of lexical specifics in both east and west German, one could conclude that the differences are perceived as much larger than they actually are. What are some of these differences?

3. Out-of-date or still a give-away

Most German speakers agree on their rejection of the official variety of east German as found in e.g. party documents, newspaper articles, and official reports of the time. Gärtner associates his rejection with a number of pejorative adjectives.

Die Kommunikation im Geltungsbereich dieser Mundart bzw. die Sprache dieser Mundart [das Offizialdeutsch der DDR] war: verstaatlicht – monopolisiert – terminologisiert – adialogisch – unverbindlich – belehrend – drohend – zeremonienhaft – kriecherisch – übertreibend verheißend – verhüllend – verklärend – pathetisch – wirklichkeitsfern – unschön – humorlos³ (Gärtner 1996).

The officialese of the east German political and economic systems became quickly outdated with the disappearance of the east German state. Words like ‘Politbüro’, ‘Verbindungsoffizier’,

³ The communication in the domain of East German officialese was nationalized – monopolized – terminologized – counter-conversational – noncommittal – instructional – threatening – ceremonial – bootlicking – excessively promising – euphemistic – pathetic – escapist – unattractive – humorless.

‘übererfüllen’⁴ and phrases like ‘Generalsekretär des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands’ and ‘Kampfreserve der Partei’⁵ disappeared from current usage together with the concepts they denote. They are now almost exclusively used in historical contexts. Similarly, certain text types which were utilised in specific communicative situations disappeared. Lerchner (1996) mentions the following situations / text types: ‘Aussprache’, ‘Rechenschaftslegung’, ‘Erfahrungsaustausch’, ‘Auszeichnungsveranstaltung’, ‘Produktionsberatung’⁶, ... And one could add the ‘Eingaben’ from my title. Of course, analogous situations arise today and in other language communities, but the specific communicative rituals these words denote, rituals which were often politically and ideologically determined, are no longer performed. Words, phrases and names which were used to essentially cloak the real nature of the denoted concepts – ‘Freie Deutsche Jugend, Freier Deutscher

⁴ *Politbüro* – polit bureau; executive committee of the East German state party, in which most government decisions were essentially made. *Verbindungsoffizier* – liaison officer between secret police and army unit in East Germany. *übererfüllen* – over-accomplish; to exceed the parameters of a plan prepared by a state institution.

⁵ *Generalsekretär des Zentralkomitees der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands* – party leader of the socialist state party. *Kampfreserve der Partei* – fighting reserve of the party; metaphor used for the only youth organization of East Germany.

⁶ *Aussprache* – face-to-face discussion in which some participants would be criticized; *Rechenschaftslegung* – reporting within the context of a planned economy; *Erfahrungsaustausch* – dissemination of good practice, official meeting of co-workers in the same field; *Auszeichnungsveranstaltung* – award ceremony for mainly medals and certificates; *Produktionsberatung* – discussion of the state-enforced production plan.

Gewerkschaftsbund’, ‘Ehrenpflicht zum Schutz des Friedens’⁷ – disappeared similarly quickly together with the institutions with which they were associated. However, Gärtner bemoans that other words are still used for political manipulation and cites the following examples from the context of unification: ‘Wiedervereinigung’, ‘Mitteldeutschland’, ‘Oder-Neiße-Linie’⁸ (Gärtner 1996).

Vocabulary of everyday language does not become archaic as quickly as the above mentioned vocabulary, but some words are still used exclusively in east Germany: ‘Kulturraum’, ‘Kultursaal’, ‘Kulturpalast’, ‘Rekonstruktion’ are probably less and less often heard, whereas ‘(Faß)Brause’, ‘Dederon’, ‘Fahrerlaubnis’, ‘Plast(e)’, ‘Zellophantüte’ and ‘Bierbüchse’⁹ are still uttered frequently and by many.

⁷ *Freie Deutsche Jugend* – Free German Youth, name of the only East German youth organization, which was controlled by the state party; *Freier Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund* – Free German Union Association, umbrella organization for all East German unions, controlled by the state party; *Ehrenpflicht zum Schutz des Friedens* – honorary duty to protect peace, euphemism for obligatory military service.

⁸ *Wiedervereinigung* – reunification, implies that Germany used to be united in the same manner and borders as it is now and hides the fact that East Germany joined West Germany; *Mitteldeutschland* – central Germany in stead of east Germany, implies that there are further German areas in today’s Poland; *Oder-Neiße-Linie* – Oder-Neiße demarcation, denies the status of these two rivers as the official border between Poland and Germany.

⁹ *Kulturraum*, *Kultursaal* – a room for cultural events; *Kulturpalast* – building for cultural events; *Rekonstruktion* – restoration of buildings; *(Faß)Brause* – soft drink, soda; *Dederon* – synthetic polyamide, patented in East Germany; *Fahrerlaubnis* – driving license; *Plast(e)* – PVC; *Zellophantüte* – plastic bag; *Bierbüchse* – beer can.

Außerdem fiel auf ..., dass Alltagssprachliche Wendungen (z.B. 'sich einbringen in', 'Fakt', 'sich einen Kopf machen') durchweg ohne sprachliche Verzögerungen produziert werden. Meines Erachtens hat dies etwas mit der unreflektierten Art der Verwendung des Alltagssprachlichen Registers schlechthin zu tun, im Gegensatz zu einem erhöhten Maß an metasprachlichem Bewusstsein bei offiziellen Begriffen. Ostdeutsche Sprecher sind sich womöglich der DDR-Spezifität im Bereich der Alltagssprache kaum bewusst und halten ihre Alltagssprachlichen Wendungen für gemeindeutsch.¹⁰ (Kreutz 2002)

Many east Germans do not even realise that such words and phrases are specific to the variety of German they speak. Or they believe of others that they are specific and they are frequently used in other varieties, too. Hellman (2004) complains that all too often even Germanist linguists have limited knowledge of the other variety and therefore assume wrongly that a particular word or expression is specific to their variety only. One such erroneous assumption which can be heard often is that east German has fewer English loan words, but it borrowed probably as many foreign words as west German did (Schlosser 2004). Often they were different and entered the language via a different route, e.g. via Russian: 'Kombi', 'Dispatcher', 'aktiv'. These are still in use in east Germany, but hardly ever travelled to the west. This is the reason why we still have 'regional' synonym pairs: 'Nicki' vs. 'T-Shirt', 'Kaskadeur' vs. 'Stuntman'; 'Mannequin' vs. 'Model', 'Kosmonaut' vs. 'Astronaut'. In such pairs, it is often

¹⁰ *sich einbringen in* – to contribute, to actively participate; *Fakt* – fact; *sich einen Kopf machen* – to worry, to consider.

the case that each word was borrowed from a different language. Words and phrases like the ones given in the examples above are still restricted in their usage to one or the other variety – east or west – but they are mostly understood across Germany. Hellmann (2004) views this as evidence that the linguistic unification of Germany has been completed. However, there are also voices that claim it is insufficient to look only at different words in the two varieties when the aim is to explain communication difficulties between easterners and westerners. Schlosser (2000), for example, argues that it is high time to move away from the comparison of specifically east and west German words and expressions and to concentrate instead on the language used by west Germans as critically seen by east Germans and suggests ‘etwas rechnet sich’, ‘Nullsummenspiel’, ‘Minuswachstum’, ‘industrieller Rückbau’, and ‘Aufbau Ost’¹¹ as examples which warrant scrutiny. He also urges us to re-think the use of the generic masculine form of certain professions and titles such as ‘Präsident’ and ‘Ökonom’ as is still frequently done by many east German women. He goes on to claim that it is not at all certain that east German women will completely switch to the use of exclusively female word formations for professions and similar words.

4. Well-travelled Words

Of course, there is evidence of words and phrases travelling from east to west and vice versa. One reason might be the east-west mobility. 2.18 million east Germans moved west between 1991 and 2004, according to the Federal Office for Statistics in Wiesbaden only 1.28 million westerners

¹¹ *etwas rechnet sich* – it can be done with financial gains; *Nullsummenspiel* – gains and losses will be balanced; *Minuswachstum* – negative growth, shrinking; *industrieller Rückbau* – demolishing of industrial plants; *Aufbau Ost* – program by the German government to develop east Germany.

moved to the five new states. This means that east Germany lost about 900,000 people. Partially it is this east-west/west-east mobility which ensured the spread of specifically east German words and expressions, partially it is the normalisation effect of modern mass media which results in the spreading of words and expressions beyond the region where they were used originally. The main reason, however, for east Germans adopting west German words, phrases and discourse patterns is the unification process itself. After East Germany joined the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990, the new states adopted the political and socioeconomic systems of their western twin state more or less wholesale. This meant for east Germans to learn the rules and the terminology of an outrageously complex taxation system, an ailing health and retirement insurance system, an embarrassingly inefficient educational system among many others.

However, independent of economic, social and political transformations, language use changed in west and east Germany. More and more west Germans recognise a ‘Broiler’ and a ‘Datsche’, although they might not use the words actively. They start using ‘andenken’ as a verb and might attempt to ‘sich einbringen’ by contributing to the ‘andiskutieren’. Now they rely on ‘Fakten’ almost as often as their neighbours to the east, they know that something could easily be ‘abgenickt’ as long as they are not dealing with a ‘Betonkopf’. They have also “increased” their ‘Zielsetzung’ to a ‘Zielstellung’¹². East Germans, on the other hand, find the things they can buy at the supermarket ‘lecker’, use ‘erinnern’ transitively, if they have a job they will go to work ‘unter der Woche’, occasionally they might even drink a beer from the ‘Dose’ especially if this

¹² *Broiler* – grilled chicken; *Datsche* – cottage; *andenken* – to begin to think about sthg.; *andiskutieren* – to start discussing sthg.; *abgenickt* – agreed; *Betonkopf* – pig-headed person; *Zielstellung*, *Zielsetzung* – target.

happens ‘an Ostern’, and when giving a reason they use ‘weil’¹³ as a coordinating conjunction in spoken German. Here unification has provided the basis for more linguistic variety (e.g. synonymy), more colourful words and expressions (e.g. interesting metaphors) and additional words with a new specific meaning (e.g. aktionsart).

5. Pan-German Changes

All the changes illustrated above can be said to have been triggered by unification in one way or another. However, over the last fifteen years we have also been witness to important changes globally. New technologies and media have brought us new text types: e-mail, electronic chat, and blogs; new syntactic structures: abbreviated sentences and formulae: ‘lol’, ‘atb’¹⁴ (many of these are borrowed from English); and new words: ‘googeln’, ‘bloggen’, ‘sim sen’.¹⁵ This influence of internet technology on communication and language is not surprising if one takes into account that in 2004 64% of all German household had a computer and 47% had an internet connection (Statistisches Bundesamt Pressestelle 2004). The speakers of German have ensured that the language stayed vibrant by accommodating a large number of new words, adopting them (e.g. ‘downgeloadet’), creating loan translations (e.g. ‘herunterladen’) and introducing new words (e.g. ‘sim sen’).¹⁵ However, it is not just new technologies and media which caused speakers of German to borrow foreign words, delicious life style changes brought us Italian words such as ‘Latte’, ‘Cappuccino’, and ‘Tiramisu’.

¹³ *lecker* – tasty; *erinnern* – remember (now used with a direct object); *unter der Woche* – during the week, on a working day; *Dose* – can; *an Ostern* – at Easter.

¹⁴ *lol* – laughing out loud; *atb* – all the best.

¹⁵ *herunterladen* – download; *sim sen* – to send SMS.

One other significant change which occurred in the last 15 years should at least be mentioned: the spelling reform. Teachers and civil servants had to get used to new orthographic rules and changes in the dictionary, east and west were united in the heated debate of some of the changes. A review of these spellings would go well beyond the confines of this essay.

6. Conclusion

Here we can conclude with Kreutz (2002, summarises Oksaar 1994: 222-225) that we need to look for the sources of communication difficulties which are still perceived in year 15 after unification outside of the lexicon. Such difficulties are more likely to have to do with individual and group differences such as age, life style, experience, expectations. There is no guarantee that dividing line for such differences coincides with the borders of new and old German states. The east-west focus on the vocabulary provides some evidence for a progressing unification progress which is not going to result in uniformity. To the contrary, the processes I briefly illustrated resulted in more diversity, productivity, and potential for creativity. To adapt a quote from the speech the German President gave on 3 October 2005: “Dann ist mir um die Zukunft [der deutschen Sprache] nicht bang” (Köhler 2005).

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