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# Perceptual dialectology in second language learners of German



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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to investigate how classroom second language learners of German living in Western Canada perceive language variation in terms of dialects of German. A three-part linguistic experiment was carried out over the course of one semester with twenty university students of German, most of whom were native speakers of English. The first task required participants to discriminate dialects from the standard language. Secondly, they completed an intelligibility task to demonstrate their understanding of dialects. In the final task participants indicated their attitudes towards dialects. We found that the discrimination ability of participants was generally high, and that language proficiency predicted their ability to discriminate. That is, the most proficient learners were best able to determine whether speech samples are spoken in dialect or in standard German. Intelligibility (i.e., the ability to understand what was being said) was generally poor and was unaffected by language proficiency. Participants found certain dialects to be more pleasant than others. The results of the study point to the importance of exposing students to—and valuing the legitimacy of—non-standard language varieties.

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## 1. Introduction

Second language (L2) learners immersed in the target culture for the first time often report being surprised—often bewildered—when they first interact with speakers of the target language who do not speak the standard variety. The language taught in classrooms is often quite different from that which learners encounter in the target language environment. What follows is the report on a study investigating how L2 learners of German perceive language varieties.

The German language can be characterized in terms of a standard-colloquial-dialect continuum (Russ, 1999). Whereas some speakers are in control of both a dialect and a variety that approximates the spoken standard, the extent to which a given speaker makes use of linguistic features from, for example, the spoken standard, depends on a number of factors. These include, but are not limited to, his or her level of education, socioeconomic status or region of origin, the formality of the situation, and the interlocutor. Early research in German dialectology focussed on descriptive dialectology: how dialects differ from one another in their phonology, lexicon, morphology and syntax (Bach, 1969; Martinet, 1964; Spangenberg, 1965). Recently, though, there has been a focus on the sociological and pragmatic aspects of dialectology (Macha, 2005). The current study in perceptual dialectology is a contribution to this growing field of sociolinguistics, with a specific focus on L2 learners' perceptions and understanding (i.e., intelligibility) of dialectal speech.

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Perceptual dialectology is a branch of folk linguistics that studies what ordinary people know, think and feel about language. More specifically, researchers in the field study how non-linguists perceive variation in language: perceptions of linguistic boundaries, factors that influence folk perceptions of variation, and the social characteristics associated with dialects. For example, naïve participants in perceptual dialectology studies may be given unlabelled maps of a particular area with the task of indicating where groups of people speak differently from others (Preston, 1989). Previous research has shown that non-linguists are often able to perceive and respond to real linguistic variation (e.g., Pearce, 2009) but that the ability to recognise variation may depend on one's exposure to dialects (e.g., Williams, Garrett, & Coupland, 1999). Participants are often asked to respond to dialectal variation by judging varieties and their speakers along a variety of semantic-differential scales (e.g., Ladegaard, 1998; McKenzie, 2008; Plewnia & Rothe, 2009). For example, Boughton (2006), in a study investigating northern urban French pronunciation, found that the respondents from a variety of regions and social backgrounds made judgements about dialect speakers based on social stereotypes. Listeners in that study assumed that speakers who used non-standard pronunciation were of rural origin or of a lower social class. As such, Boughton concluded that folk perceptions have a considerable impact on language attitudes and behaviour. In a similar study, Preston (1999) investigated stereotyping in American English and found that southern speech was perceived to be "incorrect", whereas northern speech was deemed to be highly prestigious.

In the current study we are interested in determining whether L2 learners are able to recognise the variation that exists in language and/or understand utterances that are spoken in dialect. Language variation exists in the real world, and L2 learners' ability to recognise this variation and function in this environment has important implications for language pedagogy, since, as noted above, classroom learners are rarely introduced to language varieties. If the goal of classroom language instruction is to prepare learners to interact with and understand the speech of a variety of speakers, it is important to determine the extent to which they are affected by non-standard speech varieties (Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2005). We are also interested in L2 learners' developing attitudes towards language variation. Previous research has shown that native speakers who have the ability to recognise specific dialects have certain prejudices and biases. We know little about whether L2 learners with limited contact with non-standard varieties of the target language form attitudes toward specific dialects. We would like to examine how attitudes of L2 learners compare with those of native speakers.

## 2. German dialects and standard German

According to German dialectologists including Russ (1999), dialect and standard language exist along a continuum. A standard language is primarily a written variety with narrowly prescribed grammar, lexical items and pronunciation, and spoken language in formal situations is most like the standard. The prescribed national standards in the German-speaking countries include the standards of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. From there, the language branches out into regional standards, regional colloquial speech and full dialect. Colloquial speech is an extra-territorial variety of language that is spoken in less formal, everyday situations. Dialects, which are limited geographically, vary even more from the standard variety in terms of grammatical, lexical and phonological features. Differentiation along the continuum is dependent on several factors, including most importantly the communication radius (the geographic area in which the speech is understood), the situation in which it is used, and the linguistic norms (Russ, 1999, pp. 33–36). That is to say, the extent to which native speakers of German make use of non-standard varieties depends on a number of factors including location (i.e., speakers in the south make use of dialect more frequently than do speakers in the north), interlocutor (e.g., an interaction with a butcher is more likely to involve the use of dialect than one with a professor), the formality of a situation (e.g., a speaker is more likely to make use of dialect when purchasing bread than giving an academic presentation), and speaker age or education level (e.g., an elderly person or one who is less educated is more likely to speak in dialect than a young person or one who is highly educated).

The geographic distribution of dialect regions is shown in Fig. 1. Modern German dialects are classified into Upper, Central and Low German dialects, as determined by what is known as the Second Sound Shift, which affected the consonants /p/, /t/ and /k/. Low German, spoken in the north, distinguishes itself from Central and Upper German by displaying a complete absence of this sound shift, and Central and Upper German can be grouped together as High German dialects. This shift began in the south and spread northward. Two changes in vowel phonology also distinguish the divisions of modern dialects, diphthongization, which spread from north to south, and monophthongisation, which only affected the Central dialects (Fagan, 2009; König & Paul, 2007; 1978; Niebaum & Macha, 2006).

## 3. Perceptual dialectology in L1 German

Several recent perceptual dialectology studies have been performed on the German language, primarily among native speakers. A general finding is that a speaker's awareness of, and attitudes toward, one dialect or another is often based on his or her experience or familiarity with a regional variety and its speakers. One area of interest is the possible change in German speakers' attitudes about the language since reunification. Plewnia and Rothe (2009) investigated whether there is a difference in attitudes and opinions about language between people in former East and West Germany. The researchers surveyed 2000 participants across Germany with a questionnaire on topics including participants' perceptions of dialects, language use, language change and foreign languages. Participants were divided into two groups for analysis according to their region of origin: east and west. Participants from both groups noted differences in language variation between north and

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