

Measuring dialectal competence: self-assessment vs. external assessment

Lay people as well as communication researchers and linguists have long noticed that people adjust their way of speaking to their interlocutor (see the communication accommodation theory, Giles, Coupland, Coupland, 1991, see also the linguistic dynamics approach and so called synchronization by Schmidt, Herrgen 2011). People can adjust their tone of voice, but also their accent strength or whether they use a regional dialect or not. For this adjustment it is crucial how one assesses ways of speaking: i.e. the assessment of one's own way of speaking as well as the assessment of the interlocutor's way of speaking.

The goal of our research was to analyze self-assessment of dialectal competence and external assessment of dialectal competence (both subjective measures), and to identify patterns in the interaction of the two. In our innovative research, we analyzed a survey conducted on a representative sample of the German population. The data was collected from participants as a part of the Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP) – a large-scale study of the German population with a core of same socioeconomic questions every year and specific topics, such as dialects, answered by subsamples. The demographic profile of our subsample of 2,292 participants was representative for the German population. These participants were interviewed on questions regarding dialect at the workplace. The interviews took place in 2019 and consisted of fifteen questions. The set of questions included questions on subjective dialectal competence. A sample of 214 interviewers assessed dialect strength of each of their interviewees as well as their own dialect strength during the interviews, providing us with data of 2,292 interactions. The interviewees also declared whether they can speak a German dialect or not. Both interviewees and interviewers also named the dialects they can speak.

The results show some correspondence between the declarations of participants with the impressions of the interviewers, but also some divergence. These differed depending on the region the interviewee lived in. Most cases of people who could speak dialect but were evaluated as speaking standard were from the Middle-Western part of Germany. Most cases of people who declared no dialect competence, but were evaluated as having a regional accent were from the Middle-Eastern part of Germany. Also, the dialect strength of the interviewer and of the interviewee were associated with each other. The relationship differed strongly depending on the dialect match or mismatch between the interviewer and the interviewee. When both were speaking the same dialect, the convergence was the strongest. When they were both speaking a dialect but different dialects, there was a divergence of the assessment of the way of speaking.

Our approach treats the interviewers not merely as passive tools or intermediaries to reading the interview questions, but as interaction partners of the interviewees. Our method allows for analyzing the very basis of language accommodation (i.e. external assessment and self-assessment of dialectal competence) on large samples and gives a much more broader picture of survey interviews in general.

References

- Giles, Howard; Coupland, Justine; Coupland, N. (1991). "Accommodation Theory: Communication, Context, and Consequence". In Giles, Howard; Coupland, Justine; Coupland, N. (eds.). *Contexts of Accommodation*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, J. E.; Herrgen, J. (2011). *Sprachdynamik. Eine Einführung in die moderne Regionalsprachenforschung*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.