

ME AND MY DICTIONARY

Variants – a lucky break for languages

Jacqueline Csuss

Austria is a German-speaking country ... as are Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Southern Tyrol and parts of Belgium. We all speak German, at least so it seems. Our common language is “Hochdeutsch” or standard German and the Duden is our sanctimonious reference. A frequent and admittedly tedious question German speakers (from countries other than Germany) are confronted with is whether, for instance in Austria or Switzerland, we speak German.

So yes, we all speak German; and yet Karl Kraus, the Viennese turn-of-the-century writer and journalist, famously said: “What separates Germans from Austrians is the common language.” Oscar Wilde, by the way, said something similar about the English language: “We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, language.” The same would be true for Flemish and Dutch, Portuguese in Portugal vs. Brazil, Spanish in Spain vs. Latin America.

Standard German is taught in schools, it is the standard written and spoken version in official settings, it is what we speak when we don't speak dialect. To claim, however, that there is one standard version would be misleading because there isn't, not even in Germany. It doesn't mean we don't understand each other; it's just that many words also have a regional variant which often differs only slightly from “Hochdeutsch” and is in most cases self-explanatory. Variants are also often related to the historical past; in the case of Austria, they can be of French origin which entered the standard language in Imperial times, whereas Viennese dialect is full of Czech, Yiddish, Hungarian and Italian words and expressions going back to a time when the city was a melting pot of migrants from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire. To a certain extent they too entered the Austrian standard German. So, when I speak Viennese dialect I'm literally a linguistic mongrel with a huge wealth of phrases or words at my disposal I obviously

can't use in my translations but nonetheless sometimes refer to when I want to give the text a certain sound.

Who determines the standard?

As a German speaker born and raised in Vienna and later as a translator, I always considered my written German as standard as can be – by way of my education and my studies in German literature and philology. Yet, in my early experience with German publishing houses and editors, I saw words changed and removed, sentence structures altered and colloquialisms thrown out for no apparent reason – at least not from my point of view.

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They would refer to these words as “Austriacisms”, a regional vernacular, so they’d claim, not always familiar to the “German-German reader” (and thus the biggest market). Yet, they were words I thought perfectly “German” and as such no problem for any average reader which in fact they weren’t, not to mention that I often considered them more apt and better sounding than the “standard” alternative suggested by the editor. The point I’m getting at: I had to

compromise and make “standard” part of my thinking but I also learned that instead of having my “German” as it were changed I’d either use something less controversial or argue my case which in time I had the confidence to do.

Austriacisms are basically regional variants of “standard German”. They have nothing to do with dialect – German dialects are so manifold and so different from each other that they can indeed be unintelligible – but instead are variants of one and the same language and thus standard. Just like Swiss variants. Or German ones come to that. The difference is not in the language, it’s more a question of who determines standard and why. In this context it’s perhaps worth noting that Christine Nöstlinger, the late Austrian writer of children’s best sellers, refused any editorial changes of the Austriacisms in her books. The only compromise she was willing to agree to was a glossary at the end of her books — mind you, not for the children who loved her stories either way but for the parents reading to them.

Treasure trove of ideas

My dictionary is called *Variantenwörterbuch des Deutschen — die Standardsprache in Österreich, der Schweiz und Deutschland sowie in Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Ostbelgien und Südtirol* (Dictionary of National and Regional German Variants — The Standard language in Austria, Switzerland and Germany as well as in Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, the German-speaking community of Belgium and South Tyrol in Italy) first published by De Gruyter in 2004), a collection of standard German words and phrases noting their national



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*A wealth of variants
Photo: Jacqueline Csuss*

and regional particularities. Every entry is referred to its region and provided with a quote from published texts. Equivalents are not called “standard” but “common language” German. It is basically an attempt to point out the diversity of one language without any kind of hierarchy. The particularities are treated on an equal level and not distinguished as deviating from a cross-national standard language. For me, as a translator, it’s a treasure trove of ideas – and from a linguistic point of view it is an inspiration and fun to read.

Examples for the English language would be the *MacQuarie Dictionary for Australian English* and in particular the famous Hobson-Jobson of 1886, a glossary of Anglo-Indian words and phrases. Another one I find very enjoyable both as a read and an important reference source is *The Joys of Yiddish* by Leo Rosten, a kind of cross-reference for English and German, given that it’s all one family.

Personally I believe it’s precisely a language’s variants which make it truly diverse and ultimately richer. Moreover, with a growing number of non-native writers around the world, most languages nowadays benefit from neologisms, hybrid words and added expressions and not least from a set of new slangs. Instead of “standardising”, we should see these developments as a lucky break, an opportunity to reflect similar evolvments in other languages and to embrace them in our translations. Another argument by the way why the human translation will always be light years ahead of the algorithm!