

Linguistic variation in language learning classrooms: considering the role of regional variation and 'non-standard' varieties

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Policy Papers

December 2020

Linguistic variation in language learning classrooms: considering the role of regional variation and 'non-standard' varieties

by **Sascha Stollhans**

- Attitudes to language norms and variation in language teaching vary widely.
- Concerns among professionals include anxiety that introducing learners to 'non-standard' varieties might lead to ambiguity and confusion, and a risk that students might be penalised for non-standard language in assessments.
- On the other hand, linguistic variation is a rich area of study that can appeal to language learners and have a positive impact on motivation.
- In German, as with many other languages, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, communicative conventions etc. can vary depending on factors such as region, social context, degree of formality, medium and relationship between the speakers.
- Learners are likely to come across different varieties, whether online, mixing with L1 speakers, or in the country. They will benefit from some awareness of and sensitivity to these varieties.
- Textbooks for German tend to focus on the 'standard' variety of Germany and only introduce Austrian and Swiss vocabulary to an extent.
- A particularly striking example of how attitudes towards variation in language teaching can be shaped is the Chinese Putonghua Proficiency Test. This

mandatory test for Chinese language teachers focuses on pronunciation, which is largely based on the Beijing variety.

- **The Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) offers some guidance for the inclusion of variation in language teaching.**
- **Treating variation as an insightful and interesting area of study can have a motivational effect on learners. The paper makes concrete recommendations for policy-makers, publishers, authors of learning materials, examination boards and teacher training providers.**

1 Introduction

Attitudes towards 'non-standard' varieties in language teaching often range from "teaching non-standard is a great and engaging way to teach authentic language" to "this should not be done too early as the standard needs to be mastered first". In fact, conflicting views on language variation are not confined to 'foreign' language teaching but can also be commonly found in discourses around first-language use of speakers of a community. There is frequent media coverage in the UK about the policies implemented by individual schools on the use of 'slang' and other regional varieties of English by their pupils (see this BBC News article for a recent example: [Should schools be allowed to ban slang words like 'peng'?](#), 20 January 2020).

In the context of language teaching, a common concern is that introducing 'non-standard' varieties to learners could lead to ambiguity and confusion in learners. Should colloquialisms be taught before the standard has been acquired? Should Austrian words be a general part of German language classes, or are they only relevant to learners who prepare for a journey or move to Austria? Whereas many modern textbooks do introduce learners to regional variation to some extent, this is often limited to vocabulary, and other forms of 'non-standard' variation (e.g. grammatical differences) are not always represented. In terms of regional variation, teachers and textbook authors have to make a decision on which variety to use as a basis. Other forms of variation that could be relevant in the context of language teaching are sociolects (i.e. varieties characteristic of certain social groups, age, class etc.), predominantly oral and online communication as well as colloquial/informal forms of communication.

In this paper, I exemplify different levels of linguistic variation that are relevant to language teaching and learning contexts. In concrete terms, I consider two distinct yet related forms of sociolinguistic variation: regional standard variation and variation on the spectrum between formal written registers and informal oral registers. I discuss research into teacher and learner attitudes towards non-standard language, teaching practices, and teacher training. These examples give an insight into how standards for language teaching are defined, implemented and perceived, and make suggestions for a pedagogically valuable inclusion of non-standard

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language in the language learning classroom. The paper makes recommendations intended for practising teachers, teacher training providers and authors of teaching and learning materials.

2 Language variation exemplified: the case of German

To demonstrate various forms of linguistic variation, I will use the case of German, a widely taught language in the UK school system and across other European countries, in this section to describe some examples of regional variation as well as the distinction between formal written and more informal oral registers.

2.1 Regional variation

German is an official language in six European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg and Switzerland) and in certain regions of Italy, Poland and Brazil. It is further a recognised national or minority language in several other countries, such as Namibia and Ukraine. There are three defined 'standard' varieties: Austrian Standard German, German Standard German and Swiss Standard German. This high level of variation across the 'standard' varieties alone (to not even consider regional dialects) manifests itself at all linguistic levels: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and even spelling conventions.

- Phonological variation/pronunciation: whereas the Swiss standard variety is predominantly a written variety, the Austrian and German varieties have phonological standards.
- Orthography: the Swiss standard variety does not use the letter *ß* but uses *ss* instead (e.g. *Straße* vs. *Strasse*, 'street'). The Austrian and German standard varieties differentiate between the two, with *ß* being used only after long vowels in diphthongs.
- Grammar/syntax: a prominent example is the choice of auxiliary verbs in the German perfect tense that can vary, compare e.g. the translation for "I (have) stood" in the Austrian and Swiss standard variety (*Ich bin gestanden*, literally 'I am stood') with the German standard variety (*Ich habe gestanden*, 'I have stood'). Both *haben* ('to have') and *sein* ('to be') are used as auxiliary verbs in all three varieties, but not always with the same verbs.
- Lexicon: there are certain words that are specific to only one or two of the standard varieties, e.g. *Paradeiser* (the Austrian word for 'tomato', compare German 'Tomate') and *Velo* (the Swiss word for 'bicycle', compare German/Austrian *Fahrrad*)

It is important to note that these examples are just features of the three recognised standard varieties of German. Within each variety, a magnitude of dialects and more specific regionalisms can be found.

2.2 Conceptually oral and written registers

Other than regional variation, language can vary depending on by and for whom it is used and in which context. These include youth language, sociolects such as *Kiezdeutsch* (an urban variety spoken predominantly by young people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds) and generally forms of the language that are perceived to belong to an oral register.

It can be distinguished between 'conceptually written' and 'conceptually oral' registers ([Koch and Oesterreicher 2017](#)). The notion of 'conceptuality' is important here, as features of e.g. 'conceptually oral' communication can commonly be found in private letters, emails, text messages, social media posts etc. Therefore 'conceptually oral' communication is not confined to speech and colloquialisms, but it can widely be found in written media. The internet and social media are prominent platforms that make features of 'conceptually oral' registers readily available to speakers and learners across the world. Indeed, you can also often find the use of dialect and regionalisms on social media.

In the case of German, 'conceptually oral' registers can deviate from the standard in various ways; some common examples include:

- Omission or reduction of certain verbal endings, such as the *-e* in the first person singular, e.g. 'I have': *ich habe* vs. *ich hab*
- Word order in subordinate clauses: whereas in Standard German, the verb of a subordinate clause is at the end, it can be in the second position (the usual position for main clauses) in a 'conceptually oral' variety (particularly in certain pragmatic contexts), e.g. 'because I saw her: *weil ich sie gesehen habe* vs. *weil ich habe sie gesehen*
- The use of cases after certain prepositions, especially those for which in 'conceptually oral' registers the dative case is used instead of the genitive case, e.g. 'because of the weather': *wegen des Wetters* (genitive) vs. *wegen dem Wetter* (dative)

The last point is a widely discussed phenomenon in German, where the variant with the genitive is often perceived to be of more sophisticated style or more carefully considered language. However, the following [tweet](#) by German MP Bernd Riexinger demonstrates just how common it is to use the dative after preposition such as *wegen*, even among high-profile public figures, even though in a classroom setting, this would often be marked wrong:

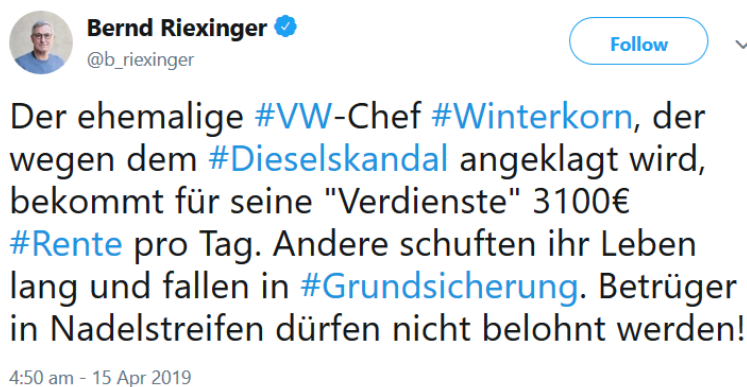


Figure 1. Tweet by Bernd Riexinger (@b_riexinger), 15 April 2019: “The former VW boss Winterkorn, who was reported because of the Diesel scandal [dative case], received a pension of €3100 a day for his ‘merits’. For others who have grafted their whole life basic benefits decrease. Swindlers in pin-striped suits should not be rewarded!” (author’s translation)

3 Variation in language learning classrooms

Considering how commonly certain forms of regional and non-standard variation can be found among L1 speakers, it may seem plausible to argue that these should also be included in language learning classrooms. As I argue, this is to the benefit of a full range of learners, including so-called ‘heritage’ speakers (i.e. students who speak or are exposed to a language other than English at home) of these languages who are present in many classrooms. In this section, I provide a snapshot of the status quo, focusing particularly on commonly found attitudes, variation in textbooks and learning materials, and guidance provided by the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR).

3.1 Attitudes towards teaching ‘non-standard varieties’

Teacher and learner attitudes towards ‘non-standard language’ vary widely. While variation offers the potential for learners to engage with a fascinating area of language and ‘authentic’ language use (Watts 2000), there may also be concerns about the risk of being penalised and losing marks if ‘non-standard’ forms are used, particularly in assessments.

A particularly striking example of how attitudes towards non-standard variation in language teaching can be shaped is the [Chinese Putonghua Proficiency Test](#) (普通話水平測試), which tests ‘native’ speakers’ spoken language skills in Mandarin Chinese. It is a requirement for Chinese language teachers to achieve a certain level in this test (as it is, for example, for civil servants, TV and radio presenters). The test focuses on a phonological standard based on the Beijing dialect and therefore perpetuates the idea that this standard is superior to other dialects and enforces it in language teaching and other areas.

Conflicting attitudes can be found in a study I carried out with teachers of German as a foreign language ([Stollhans 2015](#)), who saw an educational value in teaching what was often

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called 'authentic' language, but were at the same time concerned about register variation, particularly when it deviates from a prescribed standard norm. Some feared that this could lead to ambiguity and confuse students, or that it might lead to language use that is considered less 'correct' or 'proper'. Similar results have also been found in [Durrell's \(2017\)](#) study, which exemplifies how the teaching practice in UK schools often focuses largely on 'conceptually written' registers.

3.2 Variation in textbooks and learning materials

When producing textbooks and other language learning materials, authors need to make a decision on which varieties to include and how to include them. In the case of German, the German standard (as opposed to the Austrian or Swiss one) is usually dominant, although contemporary textbooks tend to introduce some Austrian or Swiss vocabulary.

The dominance of the German standard is reflected in the fact that Austrian and Swiss lexical items in materials are usually marked as regional, e.g. by adding comments, abbreviations such as "A" and "CH" or the corresponding flags, whereas the German version is usually left unmarked. This is, for example the case in popular German beginners' textbooks for adults, such as [Motive](#) (Hueber) or [DaF Kompakt](#) (Klett). In listening exercises, there is generally a focus on standard pronunciation and grammar, whereas speakers with (very mild) Austrian or Swiss accents can sometimes be heard.

Other forms of variation are even less commonly found. Many textbooks of German and other languages introduce colloquialisms and mark them as such, but grammatical structures that are in breach with the 'rules' of the standard variety are usually avoided. On the other hand, there are nowadays efforts in some publications to convey a more inclusive image of a language, particularly in the field of adult education. Good examples can be found for Dutch, for example in the [Routledge Intensive Dutch Course](#) and the [Routledge Intermediate Dutch Reader](#), which introduce colloquialisms, 'slang', and even swearing.

3.3 Sociolinguistic variation as per the Common European Framework for Languages

As teachers, policy-makers and authors of materials are increasingly guided by the [Common European Framework for Languages \(CEFR\)](#), it is worth exploring the framework's recommendations on sociolinguistic variation. In its current version from 2001, the CEFR classifies sociolinguistic competences as one of the three components of communicative language competence (alongside linguistic competences and pragmatic competences), and therefore attaches significant value to it. In its definition of 'sociolinguistic competences', it includes knowledge of "linguistic markers of social relations; politeness conventions; expressions of folk-wisdom; register differences; and dialect and accent" (p. 118).

In an attempt to scale these items according to the CEFR's common reference levels of language proficiency (ranging from A1, the lower 'basic user' level, to C2, the upper 'proficient user' level), the CEFR has produced the table seen in Figure 2, which includes only some of the aforementioned items. It recommends developing a "relatively neutral register" up to approximately level B1 and defines this register as the "register that native speakers are likely to use towards and expect from foreigners and strangers generally" (p. 120). For levels A1-B1, this is mainly concerned with politeness conventions (e.g. "saying please, thank you, sorry") and pragmatic functions (e.g. "make and respond to invitations, suggestions, apologies"). From level B2, register variation and contextually appropriate idiomatic language play an increasingly significant role. In terms of regional differences, the CEFR does not offer as much detail but highlights that it is important to avoid stereotyping by strengthening intercultural competence.

	SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROPRIATENESS
C2	<p><i>Has a good command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms with awareness of connotative levels of meaning.</i></p> <p><i>Appreciates fully the sociolinguistic and sociocultural implications of language used by native speakers and can react accordingly.</i></p> <p><i>Can mediate effectively between speakers of the target language and that of his/her community of origin taking account of sociocultural and sociolinguistic differences.</i></p>
C1	<p><i>Can recognise a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, appreciating register shifts; may, however, need to confirm occasional details, especially if the accent is unfamiliar.</i></p> <p><i>Can follow films employing a considerable degree of slang and idiomatic usage.</i></p> <p><i>Can use language flexibly and effectively for social purposes, including emotional, allusive and joking usage.</i></p>
B2	<p><i>Can express him or herself confidently, clearly and politely in a formal or informal register, appropriate to the situation and person(s) concerned.</i></p> <p><i>Can with some effort keep up with and contribute to group discussions even when speech is fast and colloquial.</i></p> <p><i>Can sustain relationships with native speakers without unintentionally amusing or irritating them or requiring them to behave other than they would with a native speaker.</i></p> <p><i>Can express him or herself appropriately in situations and avoid crass errors of formulation.</i></p>
B1	<p><i>Can perform and respond to a wide range of language functions, using their most common exponents in a neutral register.</i></p> <p><i>Is aware of the salient politeness conventions and acts appropriately.</i></p> <p><i>Is aware of, and looks out for signs of, the most significant differences between the customs, usages, attitudes, values and beliefs prevalent in the community concerned and those of his or her own.</i></p>
A2	<p><i>Can perform and respond to basic language functions, such as information exchange and requests and express opinions and attitudes in a simple way.</i></p> <p><i>Can socialise simply but effectively using the simplest common expressions and following basic routines.</i></p> <p><i>Can handle very short social exchanges, using everyday polite forms of greeting and address. Can make and respond to invitations, suggestions, apologies, etc.</i></p>
A1	<p><i>Can establish basic social contact by using the simplest everyday polite forms of: greetings and farewells; introductions; saying please, thank you, sorry, etc.</i></p>

Figure 2. Scaling of items for aspects of sociolinguistic competence according to the CEFR (2001, p. 122)

As textbooks and course programmes in the UK are increasingly aligned to the levels of the CEFR, the inclusion of sociolinguistic factors is very welcome and should potentially be further expanded. The CEFR's attribution of register variation to its higher levels is also in line with Durrell's (2017) observation that this aspect of linguistic variation is often neglected in schools, where usually only levels A1-B1 are covered.

4 Recommendations and policy implications

If variation is regarded as an exciting aspect of both the L1 and other languages, discovering it (and other linguistic features) can also have a motivational effect on learners, as has been demonstrated by the [Linguistics in Modern Foreign Languages](http://www.linguisticsinmfl.co.uk/) initiative (<http://www.linguisticsinmfl.co.uk/>), a cross-institutional project which promotes the inclusion of linguistics topics in secondary-level MFL teaching. People are intrinsically fascinated by linguistic variation, so making it a part of the MFL curriculum could also be a way of tackling the declining number of language learners in the UK.

Any recommendations on the role of non-standard varieties in language teaching should, of course, consider the specific educational context and setting, including desired learning outcomes and learner motivation. Immigrant learners of Spanish in Mexico, for example, need and want to focus on the Mexican variety of Spanish, as well as on a register that equips them to successfully master everyday situations in the country.

A further consideration for the UK context is the significant number of children pursuing GCSE or A Level qualifications in a so-called 'heritage' language. In informal home settings, these students will often have encountered language varieties which differ from the 'official' variety taught in school. Therefore, acknowledging different language varieties and their equal value is also important in terms of inclusion and showing respect to these children's heritage.

With regards to including variation in MFL teaching, concrete policy recommendations for different UK stakeholders include:

- Curriculum leaders and teachers: In the UK, we should make it our mission to enlighten learners about the rich and dynamic forms of variation a language entails, which will help them develop intercultural and sociolinguistic competence. However, the foundation of this must already be laid when learning about the first language, including its regional and other sociolinguistic varieties. A healthy and informed attitude towards variation in the L1 is the first step towards an understanding and appreciation of the complexity of languages and will also help counteract any ambiguity and insecurity that might arise from being presented conflicting varieties in a 'foreign' language. To an extent, both regional and pragmatic variation can be included right from beginners' level, while perceived norms and standards ("a relatively neutral register", as the CEFR calls it) should be highlighted as such. I

would agree with the CEFR that a more in-depth study of registers and other forms of variation can safely be included once a certain linguistic level has been achieved, but this should not mean that certain features cannot be discussed accessibly right from the start. Learners can be taught that, just like in their first language, the use of specific varieties depends on the appropriate context.

- Examination boards: Naturally, this also means that in tests and examinations the use of non-standard variations should be accepted when appropriate (e.g. in German the use of the dative case after the preposition *wegen* in a personal letter).
- Teacher training providers: Teacher training should include appropriate linguistics elements to sensitise teachers to issues around variation and equip them with the means to be able to make informed decisions about the inclusion of non-standard varieties in their teaching. [Bárkányi and Fuertes Gutiérrez \(2019\)](#) found in their survey of Spanish teachers in the UK that the majority would like to receive “specific training for the teaching of Spanish dialectal varieties in teacher education”, so there clearly seems to be an appetite for this.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to Nicola McLelland and Annette Zhao for inviting me to convene a panel on this topic at the 2019 MEITS conference *Language rules? Languages, standards and linguistic inequality: multilingualism and variation in education, law and citizenship* at the University of Nottingham. I would also like to thank in particular my co-panellists Christine Sas, Mara Fuertes Gutiérrez and Weiqun Wang for their enlightening contributions on Dutch, Spanish and Chinese, which have significantly informed my ideas in this paper (while all errors are mine alone!).

Resources

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Cite this article

Stollhans, Sascha. 2020. 'Linguistic variation in language learning classrooms: considering the role of regional variation and 'non-standard' varieties'. *Languages, Society and Policy*.

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