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Shared Standardization Factors in the History of 16 Germanic Languages¹

The idea and the information for this article sprung from a project I was involved in a few years ago. With Dr. Ana Deumert - presently affiliated with Monash University, Australia – I edited a book on the standardization of the 12 Germanic standard languages, with additional chapters on the standardization of Low German, Scots and Pacific and Caribbean Germanic Creole languages. The volume was published by John Benjamins in November 2003 (as Deumert and Vandenbussche 2003) and each of the articles was written by an authoritative scholar from the respective language communities under discussion.

Other books had been written about the history of the Germanic languages (Kloss 1978, König and van der Auwera 1994, to name but two). None, however, specifically addressed the issue of standardization in each of these languages, nor was it ever attempted to actually compare the standardization processes across the different languages of the Germanic language family. This is not so strange. Loose linguistic relatedness in the 19th century tradition of language family trees is not the obvious factor on which to base a comparative discussion of standardization. It would have been far more evident to discuss similarities and differences between the different languages in a specific area, which was affected by the same social, political and economical factors over time. Say, for example, all states of Europe who were affected by processes of Enlightenment and modern state building and who went through the Industrial Revolution.

The idea to pursue a comparative study of standardization in the 'Germania' did have a scientific basis, however. During the closing discussion at a conference in Sheffield in 2001 on the standardization of the Germanic languages², it was frequently remarked that most of the present researchers had little or no knowledge of the standardization history of other Germanic languages, whereas they did find that there existed a great number of shared standardization aspects. Across the Germanic language area, from the Faroe Islands to Bavaria, similar actors influenced the process of language change and similar discourse strategies were used to defend or fight certain standardization decisions.³ None of the scholars who were present in Sheffield, however, knew of a study which presented this information in a compact and comparative fashion.

In order to maximize the comparative 'added value' of the volume, all authors were asked to discuss their standardization history according to one and the same model. We imposed Haugen's (1966a, 1966b) classic standardization model, meaning that each author would have to deal with norm selection, codification, elaboration and acceptance. We chose Haugen because both because the model had proved its usefulness before and because of its very broad character: it provides a well-structured grid with plenty of room for all the specific factors and elements that come with each different language history.

It has been claimed (by Le Page 1988) that there are 3 possible ways of approaching collections of case histories like these, in order to let them make sense:

1. you can string the case studies together as a kind of Canterbury Tales
2. you can build bridges between the individual studies in order to construct a model of one 'single... extraordinarily complex process'
3. or you can aim for a pan-chronic, typological classification, throwing into relief certain recurrent circumstances – political, economic, intellectual, etc. – that either favour or block the rise of a national standard.

We tried to follow the third suggestion, because the first presented little added value, and the second option risked to divert the attention from the fascinating variety of standardization aspects to the construction of a highly sophisticated, impressive and intricately complex model. We hoped that our comparative approach would reveal a number of striking and ever recurring issues across the standardization histories of the individual Germanic languages.

Did this work? Yes and no. An overview of a number of landmarks common to most of the standardization processes of Germanic languages reveals no straightforward clear patterns of common standardization acts. We

¹ I am greatly indebted to Dr. Ana Deumert (Monash University, Australia) for the discussions that inspired the present article. All errors remain, of course, my own.

² *Standard Germanic* conference, held at the University of Sheffield, organised by Prof. Dr. Andrew Linn (University of Sheffield) and Dr. Nicola McLelland (University of Nottingham), on 4-7 January 2001. The proceedings were published as: Linn, Andrew and Nicola McLelland (eds.) 2002. *Standardization. Studies from the Germanic languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

³ The remarkable correspondences as far as purism was concerned even led to a new conference: the *Linguistic Purism in the Germanic Languages* conference, held at the University of Bristol, organised by Dr. Nils Langer (University of Bristol), Maria Lange (University of Bristol), Dr. Patrick Honeybone (University of Edinburgh) and Prof. Winifred Davies (University of Wales, Aberystwyth) on April 2003. The proceedings were published as: Langer, Nils and Winifred V. Davies (eds.) 2005. *Linguistic Purism in the Germanic Languages*. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter.

could, however, argue with some imagination that there seem to have been four major standardization waves through time in the Germanic language area. For the earlier standardized languages like Dutch, German, English and some of the Scandinavian languages, we note the early occurrence of a Bible translation (1500-1600). After that, we see the development of codification tools for these bigger languages between in the 1500 and 1800; a closer look reveals that this seems to have happened in two stages: an early first codification around 1500/1600, and a second more elaborated codification in the 17th century. The smaller languages (Letzebuergisch, Faroese, Afrikaans, Frisian, Norwegian -both Nynorsk and Bokmal-, Scots) go through major standardization processes only as from 1800 onwards. The 20th century, then, brought the establishment of language councils in many language communities.

Apart from the fact that there seems to have been little codification before 1500 (except in the case of Icelandic) and that the big languages were standardized earlier than the smaller ones, this does not teach us very much about the actual nature of standardization processes. This comes as no surprise: it is not the books, the grammars or the language societies which are at the heart of the standardization process, but the actual language users, the language community. I would therefore like to concentrate this article on three issues which do seem to have a larger relevance in the standardization context, and which are closely related to the actions and reactions of the speech community. First, I will discuss a number of typical standardizers across all language histories. Then I will address the issue of the ideological value of standardization for the creation of social identity, one of the domains that have been neglected and/or forgotten so far in many traditional standardization histories. Finally, I will say a few words about the assumed social power of standardization. One terminological note: I use the term 'focussing' to refer to the formation of convergence norms, that is, the rather spontaneous emergence of relatively uniform writing standards in limited geographical areas. I use 'standardization' to refer to the conscious and deliberate attempts to come to a uniform standard language.

The standardizers

8 core elements come to the fore in the various language histories as highly influential in the process; each of these "standardizers" deserves further analysis in each language community, across time.

1. Printers appear in the early stages of standardization history as agents that strive towards a relative uniformity in their printed documents for economic motives. In many cases, printing centres (often related to official instances) become "de facto" diffusers of supra-regional writing conventions. The gradual emergence of certain processes of focussing allow us to define "Schreiblandschaften" and "Drucklandschaften", as in the case of German. It should be noted, however, that the introduction of printing and the subsequent importation of "exogenic" spelling and grammar patterns may have erased other local (and relatively uniform) writing practices. We know that this happened in the case of Scots, for example.

2. Centres of political power emerge as the places where relatively consistent attempts at the uniformization of the written language were initiated and controlled. We noted this in the histories of all Germanic languages where there was focussing from the Middle Ages onwards (one could refer here, among others, to the examples of English, Swedish, German and Low German). Although the role of their written administration (or chanceries, Kanzleien) in dialect levelling and variant reduction is commonly acknowledged, the actual lasting impact of these "chancery standards" on the later standard varieties remains an intriguing issue. My personal impression is that we can witness patterns of limited variation in these chancery standards that are very similar to what we see in the "intended standard languages" in pauper letters in the 19th century. These similar patterns may tell us something about the social importance of consistent spelling for specific social groups at a specific moment in time.

3. The practices of commerce and trade seem to have favoured the spread and the promotion of specific regional varieties as a means of supra-regional communication. This became particularly clear in the case of Low German where the Luebeck norm took a high flight all over the Hanse area. Whether (and to what extent) these varieties were actually fully mastered by the involved merchants remains to be seen. I am also intrigued by the way in which these standards would have been used by the "less-educated" and "lower" classes involved in the international trade. We do not have the necessary primary sources, but I could imagine that some of these merchants may have communicated through highly simplified varieties based on the 'prestige standard'.

4. In the case of the Nordic languages, literary authors and legal writing played a major part in standardization matters, before official instances started to interfere with standardization. In the case of Icelandic, for example, the 12th century sagas were edited together with grammar treatises. The relationship between the creation and diffusion of vernacular literature, on the one hand, and the growing sensibility for standardization issues in early literate societies, on the other, might be a promising approach for a better understanding of the development and acceptance of the standardization process. As many language communities have incorporated literary heroes into their collective history "who taught their people how to read and write" it may also be worth to describe and check in how far these authors actually contributed to the spread of *standard* writing (cf. Dutch in Flanders, e.g.).

5. Schools traditionally function as centres where writing standards are passed on to the next generation. All authors stress this school factor repeatedly. Here, however, we also meet the "black box" of historical pedagogy

and, according to me, one of the crucial points for future advances in the study of the spread of literacy and standardized writing behaviour.

We know little, almost nothing, about the methods and practices in language teaching in earlier times, especially where the lower classes or the non-elite are concerned.

From our research so far, we do know that there is a connection in many linguistic communities and in many different societies

- between class and the spread of literacy,
- between class and the spread of the mastery of standard norms,
- between the handarbeit/schriftarbeit-orientation of the scribes and the quality of their written language.

It is crucial that we get further insight into the language teaching methods used in upper class and lower class schools. It is equally important to get a clear understanding of the appreciation and importance of standard norms in different professional groups. If we understand which kind of “functional literacy” was expected from the lower and middle classes, we may be able to explain the relative neglect of “minimal variation in form” in the non-elitist school circuit. I can imagine that in lower class jobs, “writing with minimal variation in form” was not considered as important; other physical skills probably were. Accordingly, there may have been no perceived need to teach the lower classes what they would not need in work life later.

6. Official language planning instances (academies, language councils or committees) appear as a fairly recent phenomenon in the history of Germanic standardization. They have, however, clearly taken over the central position and power in the recent standardization history of many languages and, as such, become the guardian of the norm in the case of Dutch, Danish, Norwegian and other languages. It remains a striking fact that similar official language planning bodies are not present (nor welcome) in the larger (and politically and economically more powerful) language communities of English and German, for example.

7. Academics (not necessarily linguists) have clearly put their mark on the creation of standard languages and on the “management” of standardization measures over the past centuries. Up until today, in the case of the beginning standardization of Creole languages, they are still at the centre of the debate.

8. Many of the accounts of recent trends and developments in standardization refer to the media as one of the most influential players in the current linguistic evolution, both with respect to the spoken and the written varieties. The moderate processes of uniformization which were instigated by the printed media during the Middle Ages are totally overshadowed by the present day status and power of television and radio in the standardization debate; the use of the term ‘BBC English’ next to the ‘Queen’s English’ is illustrative of this shift from the upper social classes towards television as far as the widely accepted norm reference is concerned.

Three remarks spring to mind, however, when overlooking this list:

1. It is striking that the power and the decisions of these actors were/are not always unanimously appreciated. Present-day examples show us that these conflicting views may actually cause serious opposition against certain standardization measures within the language community. Although a number of preserved documents from earlier times allow us to try and appreciate similar feelings during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is not possible to assess the reactions towards (or even the basic interest in) earlier attempts at standardization or creation of convergence norms.

2. It is equally remarkable that large parts of the language communities hardly ever appear in the traditional accounts of standardization. This can beyond any doubt partially be accounted for by the lack of original historical sources, but one still wonders (although certain contributors did highlight the influence of these groups) which was the role in the language evolution of many of the languages described here of, for example, the lower social classes, women, or children. As one author put it [Icelandic]: “We cannot exclude the possibility that the speech of the lower strata of society was different from what the written sources imply” (Arnason 2003: 267). The fact that they usually “lagged behind” does not necessarily exclude them from possible interference and influence on the language evolution. These groups do comprise the larger part of the language community, after all, and recent investigations into the linguistic behaviour of these groups seem to indicate that there may still have been widely used transitional substandard or ‘intended standard’ varieties which occupied an important place in the language continuum at the time and which actually fulfilled the functions of the upper class standard for the lower strata of society (see German, English and Dutch, for example).

3. Given the fact that we can follow the emergence of a number of standardization processes today in real time (in the case of the Creoles), it may be a promising approach to go back to one of Labov’s ground rules and “to use the present to explain the past.” The practical, social and political discussions that spice and flavour the actual standardization debates in the Creole communities may be reminiscent of equally animated discussions in the history of the “older” languages. I am aware that the context is entirely different but I believe that the type of arguments and the general underlying discourse in those debates may not have altered that much in certain cases – if I look at the arguments and discussions used through time in purist discussions in the Germanic language area, I can see many parallels, across time and societies (cf. Langer and Davies eds. 2005). The

reactions against orthography reforms (see, for example, the Danish “mayonnaise war” – Kristiansen 2003 - or the animosity surrounding the latest German spelling reform - Johnson 2005) may bear resemblance to equally intense polemics on radical standardization proposals in earlier times.

Some may argue that one cannot draw these historical parallels, because 20th century standardization is fundamentally different from earlier standardizations, in that the earlier standardization attempts were an elitist affair. Still, I believe that those elites reacted on the standardization reforms on the basis of what they felt those reforms would do to the symbol which language represented for them. Nowadays, the involved language community –albeit larger and more diverse – may basically be inspired by the same idea, be it that the public debate is far more influenced by external factors like the media.

Ideological aspects of standardization

Two main strategies of ideological exploitation appeared throughout the discussed language histories.

The first is well known as the “standardization ideology” as expressed and described by James Milroy (1999). In many of the language histories a uniform standard language was indeed used at a certain stage as an “intrinsically better” system compared to the other varieties at play in the language community. Many of the standardizers discussed above presented their standard as a token of educatedness or schooled identity and of a clear social and moral superiority over the users of non-standard varieties, and went to great lengths to convince the language community of these inherent qualities. It may be worth exploring and comparing how and when this idea of conscious and deliberate social distinction actually spread in the various language communities under discussion - close attention to the current evolutions in the selection of standards for Creole languages may be enlightening in this respect-, never forgetting that members of the language community may also choose to deny and fight the association of a standard variety with social superiority, which can either lead to the creation of new languages intentionally based on regional and dialectal features (Nynorsk, Faroese) or to conscious attempts to save the ‘innocence’ of the language by stripping the prestige variety of its overt class connections (as in the case of Danish).

Considering Milroy’s claim that “the idea that a spelling system should be invariant is a post-eighteenth-century notion” (1999: 34), many of the standards of the elite groups in society propagated at the time may actually not have had the “minimal variation in form” which is nowadays taken for granted. One gets the impression that the very sensibility for this “formal standardness” (the ultimate reduction of variation in form) only affected specific social groups at the moment where this “standardness” became important for their social prestige or economical welfare; in Bourdieu’s (1991) terms one could claim that this change only came about once the mastery of the standardized variety had acquired the status of “symbolical capital”. The fact that both mass literacy and the spread of minimal-variation-in-form through society only gained momentum in Europe after the success of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent rearrangement of the traditional social structures (with the creation and the rise of the petty bourgeoisie and the middle classes), may be illustrative for the sudden instrumental value (upward social mobility) that became attached to a former symbol of an unreachable social identity.

The second and equally widespread type of ideological “recuperation” was the exploitation of standardization by political rulers and language planning lobbies as a core representation of sovereignty, national unity and identity. The idea behind this political dimension of standardization which appeared in a striking manner after the rise of the nation-state concept and which is still very much at the centre of national language policies nowadays, was rephrased in swollen lyrical terms by Scaglione (1984): “[T]his is the pride and glory of national languages: to save a nation from drifting apart in moments of internal material chaos, and to keep it together in moments of calm.” In this view, the existing unity of the community is crowned with the adoption of a common standard language (cf. Swedish). The opposite also occurred: the adoption of a common standard language was used to reinforce and create the idea of the unified community. In other words: instead of considering the standard language as the final emanation of an identity, certain discriminated sociolinguistic communities believed that the national identity could be pursued and obtained through the creation/adoption of a standard language. This evolution was noted in the case of certain pluricentric languages (Dutch, for example), with separate political and social developments in the internal and external peripheries, as well as in young nation-states in search (and pressing need) of a national identity to free the state of reminiscences of former occupiers (cf. Letzebuergisch where, at the time of the second World War, a new spelling system was considered an effective counter-measure to purify the language of undesired political connotations).

Conclusion?

In the end, it appears that the articles in the volume under discussion bring our understanding of language standardization back to heart of Haugen’s view on the process, in the sense that it is particularly rewarding to interpret it in the context of the “ecology of language”, a concept which Dil (1972: xiv) referred to as “perhaps the most impressive element in Haugen’s work as a linguist.” Haugen introduced the metaphor of ‘language ecology’ to refer to the study of the interaction between languages and their broader social, linguistic, historical and political environment, or “the interrelationship between organisms and their languages” (Haugen 1987: 92). As an element of language ecology, standardization is fundamentally viewed as a crucially social and psychological process,

which goes far beyond the mere technical level of agreeing upon coherent rules, and which cannot be considered independent of its implications on the language community.

It is revealing of the ongoing appeal of Haugen's views that - referring the present day case of the earliest stages of Creole standardization - one of the contributors explicitly refers to the importance of an ecological approach to language: "Standardization is not a technical matter to be carried out by linguistically trained experts but an ecological one" (Mühlhäusler), stressing at the same time the vital aspect of an integrated and holistic view on the process (Mühlhäusler 1996) which takes into account the importance of the underlying socio-cultural conditions in the language community.

Haugen's critical appreciation of the pending disappearance of smaller language communities is taken to the point where standardization is presented as the ultimate means of saving languages and cultures, before it is too late: "The steamroller approach to small languages has much in common with the superhighway that destroys our landscape. What is group cohesion and ethnic pride worth, how can one measure in money the values that are lost when a group gives up its language in favour of another?" (Haugen 1987: 96).

Although history teaches us that language standardization has actually contributed to this effect in the case of a number of languages discussed (Dutch in Belgium, Luxembourgish, Frisian), one cannot isolate the process from the social context in which it is embedded.

Languages survive as long as they as they have a communicative function in the lives of the speakers, either at the centre or in the fringes of the language community, with or without explicit standardization. The power of standardization lies in the fact that it presents the language user with a potential tool enabling the long-lasting and strengthened presence of his language in his daily life. Its major weakness remains its ultimate dependence on the approval or refusal of the language community and the speaker, who are not only free to select and elaborate a specific variety, but also to accept and diffuse it, or not.

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