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Swiss German in English language teaching: a plea for the dialect

A concern for the linguistic problems encountered by Swiss German speakers in foreign language learning is by no means a novel phenomenon in this country. During the 1940s and 1950s Professor Eugen DIETH of the English Department of the University of Zürich was actively engaged in describing and analysing those problems which arose in the teaching of English at grammar schools in the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland and could be traced to the linguistic situation in those areas. As a result a number of English coursebooks published in Switzerland for use in Swiss grammar schools were directly or indirectly influenced by DIETH's research, particularly in the field of phonetics[1].

In one sense it is almost a truism to state that any foreign language teacher should possess a good *conscious* knowledge of the structures of his own mother tongue as a necessary prerequisite for developing adequate teaching strategies for the target language. He should, in other words, be in a position to contrast the phonological, syntactic and, if possible, semantic and pragmatic structures of both linguistic systems. Yet the truism is worth repeating here. It is particularly «true» if the mother tongue is a dialect which differs greatly from the standard language, as is indeed the case with standard German and the Swiss German dialects.

I maintain that in a «dialect situation» the dialect rather than the standard language should be taken as the contrastive pole to the target language, and I shall sketch out certain consequences of this axiom in this paper. Although I shall give examples from Zürich German, I shall take the mother tongue (L1) to be *any* Swiss German dialect, the standard language to be standard High German and the target language (L2) to be English.

To begin with it is necessary to review briefly certain aspects of the sociolinguistic situation in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, paying particular attention to the teaching situation and the phenomenon of «hyper-correctness» in the teaching of both standard German and foreign languages in general. Using examples from two areas of the grammar of English and Zürich German I shall then show that a greater consideration of the structures of the dialect can contribute towards the solution of certain problems in the teaching of English, which are in part

1 Cf. e.g. HERTER: *English Spoken* and *Keep Smiling*, DIETH/FRAUCHIGER: *Let's Learn English*, etc.

a result of «hyper-correctness». I shall also point out how certain linguistic structures can be more sensibly ordered in a basic course in English for use at Swiss grammar schools.

The sociolinguistic situation in the German-speaking parts of Switzerland can be classified as a good example of *diglossia*[2]. The relationship between two linguistic systems is considered to be one of *diglossia* if these systems are used to achieve different, clearly definable socio-communicative goals. Of course, the members of the language community are not always aware of the ways in which the two linguistic systems are uniquely adapted to these goals. On the contrary, each system is considered eminently suited to the communicative role assigned to it. Since there is no danger of one system being ousted by the other, the two systems are not in «linguistic competition» with one another.

Standard German in Switzerland is used principally on occasions which are determined by a high degree of formality (e.g. lectures, radio and television talks, official speeches, etc.), by the necessity to communicate with French- and Italian-speaking Swiss and with German speakers from outside Switzerland (e.g. in parliamentary debates, business discussions, etc.), or by purely linguistic constraints (e.g. written texts appear in standard German[3]). Swiss German is not exclusive to any socio-economic group of the population. Nor is it exclusive, apart from the occasions listed above, to more «mundane» topics and situations. It is simply the normal linguistic code adopted for communication in all other situations than those already listed.

Two areas of socio-communicative interaction, however, are beginning to reveal a gradual breakdown in the diglossia pattern, viz. radio and television on the one hand, and the school system on the other[4]. A large percentage of radio programmes are now broadcast in the dialect, and although the number of television dialect programmes is far smaller,

2 The term *diglossia* was introduced by Joshua FISHMAN and has since become one of the standard concepts of sociolinguistics. Cf. Joshua A. FISHMAN (1970): *Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction;* (1971): «The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society», in FISHMAN (ed.) (1971). A diglossia situation in any large socio-economic unit, e.g. a nation state, need not automatically imply that the members of that unit speak both linguistic codes. On the other hand, a socio-economic unit in which a majority of the members is bilingual need not automatically imply that the two linguistic codes are associated with clearly defined socio-communicative goals. It is, however, usual for diglossia and bilingualism to stand in a high positive correlation to one another.

3 There is, however, a fairly extensive *written* literature in certain of the Swiss German dialects. Cf. e.g. the writing of Ernst BURREN (Solothurn) and of Kurt MARTI (Bern).

4 Cf. the articles on dialect speakers' attitudes to Swiss German, which appeared in the weekend edition (Ausgabe 124) of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 31 May, pp. 65–66.

there are signs of a similar tendency in favour of the dialect. In the school system the status of the dialect varies from area to area, from school to school and even from teacher to teacher. One valid argument for insisting on standard German as the medium of instruction during lessons is that it is the medium through which written communication is achieved. In their first year at school children must obviously learn to read and write standard German. As a consequence the teacher usually reverts to the standard language very swiftly as a medium for instruction in reading and writing. The greater the intellectual demands on the pupils, the more the standard language is used. To a certain degree at least, however, standard German remains an L2 for pupils and teacher alike. The teaching situation is very quickly formalised, and there is a tendency to what I shall call *hyper-correctness.*

By *hyper-correctness* I understand the efforts of a non-native speaker to achieve what he considers to be the acceptable prescriptive norms of the L2, which often result in a strongly artificial style and a failure to accept as grammatically correct certain constructions which are unquestionably wellformed and acceptable to native speakers of the L2. Since the linguistic systems of standard High German and any of the Swiss German dialects are so different, I consider it justifiable to take standard German as an L2 for Swiss German speakers. However, in the dialect situation in which the Swiss German-speaking teacher is caught, the standard language is *not* normally felt to be an L2. On the contrary, the dialect is frequently understood not to be an independent linguistic system at all, but simply a deviation from the norm of the standard.

Examples of hyper-correctness in the German-speaking Swiss' use of standard German are not difficult to find. Within the scope of the present paper, however, I shall have to confine myself to just one example. In the Zürich German dialect the relative pronoun for plural and singular, masculine, feminine and neuter nouns is *wo.* In the standard language this pronoun can only be used in temporal and locative relative clauses. A sentence such as:

(1) *Er sah das Mädchen, wo er am Ball kennengelernt hatte.

is correctly classified as non-well-formed by native speakers of Zürich German. In the sentence:

(2) Sie trat ins Zimmer, wo die Kinder schliefen.

the locative use of the relative pronoun is correct and is classified as well-formed by native speakers of Zürich German. Consider the following sentence, however:

(3) Er verliess das Haus in dem Moment, wo es zu regnen begann.

The tendency towards hyper-correctness leads many speakers of Zürich German into classifying (3) as non-well-formed although the temporal use of *wo* is perfectly acceptable to native speakers of High German.

My main thesis, then, is that in L2 teaching use of the standard language as a contrastive pole to the L2 may well introduce negative interference via hyper-correctness. The development of a contrastive model may be blocked through the use of the standard language if the following two points are not taken into account:

1. Certain difficulties may arise from apparently analogous structures in L2 and the standard language, which would not arise at all by comparing L2 with the dialect. I shall illustrate this point through a discussion of the English past tense and perfect structures.
2. On the other hand, analogous structures in L2 and the dialect may provide an opportunity to discover better didactic solutions to the problem being dealt with. I shall illustrate this through a discussion of those structures in English which represent future time.

Any English teacher in Switzerland must be aware of the great difficulties caused by the use of the past tense and perfect forms in English. It is certainly not possible to go into a detailed linguistic analysis of these structures here, so I shall limit myself to some of the important problems that a teacher should take into account. Consider the following English sentences and their Zürich German translation equivalents:

(4)a. The concert began at eight o'clock.
b. S Konzert hät am Achti aagfange.

(5)a. Fred got up late this morning.
b. De Fredi isch hüt am Morge schpaat ufgschtande.

(6)a. Martha has just phoned.
b. D Martha hät grad aaglüütet.

(7)a. We've seen *Dr No.*
b. Mer händ de *Dr No* gsee.

(8)a. I never went to the Tower when I was in London.
b. Ich bi nie zum Tower ggange, wo-n ich z London gsy bi.

(9)a. I've never seen such bad weather in April.
b. Ich ha no nie so schlächts Wätter gsee im April.

Clearly the perfect must be used in the dialect sentences, whereas it may only occur in the English sentences when there is no realization of a past time adverbial[5].

5 This explanation is of course not entirely correct. It is perfectly possible for a past tense form to occur in a sentence containing no time adverbial at all. This is only the case, how-

Sentences (8) and (9) contain a supplementary problem. Compare:

(8)a. I never went to the Tower when I was in London.

with:

(9)a. I've never seen such bad weather in April.

Many coursebooks and practice books maintain that the perfect is obligatory with the adverb *never*. Sentence (9a.) would be grammatically well-formed according to this rule. Use of the perfect in (8), however:

(8)c. *I've never gone to the Tower when I was in London.

yields a grammatically unacceptable sentence, since the temporal clause *when I was in London* must determine the past tense.

John LYONS (1968) argues that the perfect in English is the realisation of a perfective aspect, an argument which is essentially that of most of the transformationalists since CHOMSKY (1957). However, Dietrich NEHLS (1975) points out that, if we stick strictly to the aspectual dichotomy between perfective and imperfective, as these terms are understood in the linguistic description of the Russian verbal system, and if we do not confuse the term *aspect* with the term *mode of action,* then the realization of aspect in English can only be the progressive *-ing* form as against the non-progressive form. It is of course still possible to take the perfect as a tense form in English, as does Robert MCCOARD (1978). However, this would mean giving up the elegant dichotomy into two basic tense forms in both English and German, *past* and *non-past* (or *present*). Yet none of these descriptions of the perfect offers an explanation for its morpho-syntactic form. For all three linguistic systems, English, Zürich German and standard German, the perfect structure consists of the verbs *have* (in English), *haa* or *sy* (in Zürich German) and *haben* or *sein* (in standard German) marked for the feature NON-PAST, together with a complement structure containing no subject NP and a verb participle marked for the feature PAST.

Examination of the corpus of English and Zürich German sentences given above reveals that there is a clear surface structure restriction on the realisation of perfect structures in English, whereas no such restriction occurs in Zürich German. Indeed *every* sentence containing the feature PAST in Zürich German *must* be embedded as a subjectless complement of *haa* or *sy* accompanied by the feature NON-PAST. It will not

ever, when a past time adverbial has previously appeared in the text and thus governs the form of the verbs in the sentences that follow. I shall take this as being an obvious fact.

do to revert to the facts of standard German here in order to explain these differences, since they will only introduce further confusing dimensions. In standard German the use of the perfect and the imperfect varies (in some cases almost freely) in precisely those sentences in which only the past tense would be permissible in English. Compare the following two German sentences:

(10)a. Hans rief gestern an.
b. Hans hat gestern angerufen.

with the English sentence:

(10)c. John rang up yesterday.

A descriptively adequate partial grammar should thus be developed to provide an explanation for the grammaticality or non-grammaticality of past tense and perfect structures in English and in that Swiss German dialect which is contrasted with it. Such a grammar should specify exactly what surface structure conditions govern the well-formedness of such sentences and indicate whether or not further syntactic and/or semantic information determines their final morpho-syntactic shape. It should offer a semantic interpretation of past tense and perfect structures in English and link this with the socio-communicative situations in which the relevant structures appear in linguistic performance.

The typical socio-communicative situations in which the past tense and the perfect occur can be sketched out as follows:

The speaker uses the perfect in English when he is interested in the occurrence of an action or state in the past, i.e. when he is interested in the *that* of an action and when its consequent relevance to the theme of the ongoing interaction is of primary importance. The orientation of the action or state in time and space is thus of minimal importance for the speaker. On the other hand, he uses the past tense when he is interested in the *when, where, who* and *how* of an action or state in the past, i.e. when the spatio-temporal *orientation* of that action/state is important. Thus the perfect most frequently appears in oral communication or in expository texts and is used as a «theme-introducing» or «theme-changing» element.

A contrastive analysis of English with *Swiss* German should lead the English teacher or coursebook author to a teaching strategy which clearly separates the two forms and introduces the perfect only after the past tense has been thoroughly understood by the pupils and is part of their linguistic repertoire in English. This suggestion is perfectly plausible, since very many sentences in which the perfect structure is used in British English can be rendered by a verb in the past tense form in American

English[6]. Thus the lesser of the two evils is to be preferred, an overgeneralization in favour of the past tense rather than one in favour of the perfect[7].

Let us now turn to those forms of the verb in English which express future time. Consider the following English sentences, which display in their surface structures various realizations of the semantic feature FUTURE:

(11) Fred and Harry are flying to Greece next summer.
(12) Susie will not be here next Wednesday.
(13) It's going to snow.
(14) I'm going to buy a Rolls Royce when I've made a million.

The question as to whether there is a future tense in English or not and which of the verbal structures in the sentences above could be said to realize it must remain for the moment open. Most coursebooks maintain that *will* and *shall* together with the basic form of the verb constitute the future tense. However, in their performative analysis of the English modal verbs BOYD and THORNE (1969) seriously question the validity of the traditional analysis with *will* and *shall.* They believe that *will* in the so-called future tense in fact expresses the modality of *prediction.* The structure with *be going* and the infinitive form of the verb is dealt with in most coursebooks and practice books, but has never been sufficiently explained either in more traditional grammars or in transformational-generative work. It is most frequently described as the form in which actions or states in the immediate future are realized. Sentence (13):

(13) It's going to snow.

would support this analysis. Sentence (14), however:

(14) I'm going to buy a Rolls Royce when I've made a million.

offers a clear counter-argument. The progressive form of the verb with the auxiliary *be* in the non-past form, as in sentence (11):

6 Cf. G. VANNECK (1958): «The colloquial preterite in Modern American English», in *Word 14*, pp. 237–242. VANNECK makes the mistake of believing that every sentence with a verb in the perfect is realisable as a sentence with a past tense verb in American English. As MCCOARD points out, this is patently false. Imagine a situation in which two children are playing with a football and one of them kicks it through the kitchen window. The other could say *Oh boy! You've had it now* but certainly not *Oh boy! You had it now.* The pragmatic setting of the utterance is far more important for the logical use of the perfect and the past tense than many modern grammarians would like to believe.

7 Precisely this tactic has been applied in *English, of Course!* with, as far as I can tell, a reasonable amount of success. It is still surprising, however, how unwilling teachers are to give up making an explicit comparison of the two forms. Needless to say, most coursebooks on the market present the past tense and the perfect in consecutive lessons and thus force teachers to contrast them.

(11) Fred and Harry are flying to Greece next summer.

is very rarely treated in linguistic work on the verb phrase in English. Yet this structure is very commonly used to express planned actions in the future.

Swiss teachers of English generally prefer the structure with *will/shall* to the other structures. I maintain, however, that this can be largely understood as a consequence of hyper-correctness. In most grammars of German the auxiliary *werden* with the infinitive form of the verb is given as the future tense. Yet other structures are used in German to realise the feature FUTURE in the surface structure of sentences. The present tense form of the verb is frequently used in German to express actions and states in the future, and in Zürich German this is in fact the *only* way of expressing futurity, apart from the modal auxiliaries that is. Structures with the auxiliary verb *wëërde* are extremely rare, and when they do occur, they invariably express the modality of *prediction.*

The Zürich German translation equivalents of sentences (11) to (14) are as follows:

(11)a. Fred and Harry are flying to Greece next summer.
b. Im nächschte Summer flüüged de Fredi und de Harry uf Griecheland.

(12)a. Susie will not be here next Wednesday.
b. D Susi isch am nächschte Mittwuch nöd da.

(13)a. It's going to snow.
b. Es chunt go schneie.

(14)a. I'm going to buy a Rolls Royce when I've made a million.
b. Ich chauf mir en Rolls Royce, wänn ich e Milion ha.

From the sentence:

(13)b. Es chunt go schneie.

it is clear why many English teachers in Switzerland adopt the theory that *be going* + infinitive expresses an action or state in the near future. Zürich German uses a parallel construction to English with the verbs *cho (come)* and *go,* which must originally have been the basic form *gaa (go),* but now functions in such structures as a particle expressing immediacy. The structures used in Zürich German to realise syntactically the semantic feature FUTURE are considerably closer to the structures of English than those of standard German, although the analogous structures *cho. . .go* and *be going* are to a certain extent false friends. It thus seems more sensible to gather contrastive data from those two linguistic systems and to construct a descriptively adequate grammar to account for the data, which may serve as the basis for revised teaching strategies in this area of the grammar. One suggestion might be that in a basic course

of English for use in Swiss grammar schools the first structures realising FUTURE to be introduced should be the progressive form of verbs of action and the *be going* + infinitive form. Only when these structures have been fully assimilated should the auxiliary verbs *will* and *shall* be introduced.

In this paper I have sketched out certain difficulties in English teaching at Swiss grammar schools which may arise as an indirect consequence of an educational policy which tends to overstress the importance of the standard language. Of especial interest is the phenomenon of hyper-correctness, which I have also ascribed, at least in part, to such overstressing. It has not been my intention to present arguments *against* the use of standard German in the teaching situation. Swiss German and standard German coexist in a diglossia situation, each linguistic system having its own well-defined socio-communicative functions. However, in English language teaching the *exclusive* comparison of English with standard High German could lead to certain problems. I have dealt briefly with two important «problem areas» in the teaching of English and have shown how a contrastive grammar of English and Swiss German may help to lessen the difficulties for both teacher and pupil. Like Professor DIETH I am of the opinion that a greater awareness of the structures of one's mother tongue, particularly when it is a dialect which differs radically from the standard, should be instilled into the foreign language teacher as an integral part of his basic training. One can only cherish the fond hope that this will lead to better teaching strategies in the practical application of abstract linguistic theories.

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