

PERSISTENT FEATURES – CORPUS-BASED EVIDENCE FOR REALLOCATION PROCESSES IN GERMAN

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Abstract: This study aims at tracing a reallocation process of a grammatical feature alongside the dialect-standard axis with the aid of corpus linguistics methods; more precisely with an integrative application of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The phenomenon under investigation is articles without the definiteness marker *d-* in German, usually ascribed to the Bavarian dialect area. Analyses show, however, that this apparently dialectal feature diffuses to other communication settings closer to the intended standard language use. This process is accompanied by a refunctionalisation of reduced article forms, indicating the relevance of language-internal relations for reallocation of grammatical features. The methodical approach should be easily applicable to other variants and – as many European languages show a diaglossic repertoire – relevant to other languages as well.

Keywords: reallocation, article system, Bavarian, dialect-standard axis

1 INTRODUCTION

In the vast majority of investigations dealing with the area of tension between a dialect and the standard¹, the data often speak for a general tendency of dialect reduction, levelling or loss, especially with regard to younger respondents [1]. Latest research on youth languages or on urban communication in German also seem to point in direction of a general (re-)standardisation tendency ([2], [3]). While the quantity of dialect features subjected to reductive change may be reason enough to assume a progressing limitation of dialect use, comparatively little attention has been paid to less frequent, yet nonetheless existing, persistent features.² Within the field of traditional dialectology, the difference between stability and change is associated with primary and secondary dialect features: Secondary features remain subconscious and are more stable, primary features are prone to change [5].

Whereas the approaches cited above discuss stability within one specific variety, few studies focus on stable features diffusing alongside the vertical dialect-

¹ *Dialect* and *standard language* are understood here as two (solely conceptual/theoretic) poles of a diaglossic continuum. This relation can be very specific with regard to the respective region (cf. the language situation in Switzerland or South Tyrol).

² Explaining the stability of forms which to a certain extent seem to be immune to linguistic change is addressed by Weinrich/Labov/Herzog [4] under the heading of the “actuation problem”.

standard axis, with special focus on dialect features transferred to vertically higher³ communication settings [6]. Expanding the traditional categorisation, such processes should affect solely “tertiary features” [7] that are usually very persistent and due to their low degree of salience⁴ also easily transferable to more formal communication settings evoking intended standard language use.⁵ This convergence may be accompanied by at least partly modified pragmatic, sociostylistic, or (as will be shown below) language-internal function of the original dialect features. With regard to dialect contact situations, Britain and Trudgill [10] call this process “reallocation”. Up to date, the focus of reallocation studies mainly lies on phonological phenomena, whereas information on the behaviour of dialectal grammatical features diffusing closer to the intended standard is still a desideratum [11]. As a consequence, hypothesised reasons for such processes, elaborated on the basis of phonological features, have a limited explanatory potential with regard to grammar. In other words, the influence of social norms, identity building or unhindered communication ([12] and [7] amongst others) are arguably not so very well suited for explaining tertiary grammatical features, considering their mostly obligatory, subconscious use and low saliency.

2 APPROACHING REALLOCATION

Contrary to an extensive research on regional variation in general, empirical tracing of grammatical reallocation processes is still scarce, at least with regard to German. In-vogue methods in modern German dialectology like speech production tests or verbal and matched guise techniques that rest on deductive testing of an existing theory [13] are of limited use here, at least for two main reasons: (i) For a full, usage-based understanding of a potential grammatical reallocation phenomenon without considering a priori assumptions, a quantitative and qualitative corpus analysis of free speech production is obligatory. Besides the correlative-global data between the variable communication situation and the variant in question, semantic and pragmatic aspects of its conversational local use must be considered [14]. (ii) With regard to the corpus design, it is crucial that it reflects the horizontal (dialect) region(s), as well as the vertical (dialect-standard axis) dimension.

The following corpus study aims at empirically approaching the grammatical reallocation process. The linguistic features under investigation are the so-called “unstressed articles” ([15], [16]) mostly ascribed to Bavarian dialects. They are used

³ The use of *higher* refers to the usual depiction of a vertical dialect-standard-continuum and does not indicate any other biased evaluation.

⁴ For a discussion of the term *saliency* in sociolinguistics see [8].

⁵ „[T]he situation of an interview with an unknown researcher is clearly one in which it is appropriate to use the standard.” [9]

without the initial plosive *d-*, usually expressing definiteness of the associated noun, reducing the article to the derivational suffix (encoding number and case).

- (1) 0580 DoG: *die* *miassen* *letztendlich* *Øas* *buach* *lesen*
Standard German: *die* *müssen* *letztendlich* **das** *buch* *lesen*
 they need in the end the book read
 ‘they need to read the book in the end’

The use of these reduced articles in dialectal speech seems to be highly frequent yet unsystematic⁶, an observation which shall be scrutinized with regard to the vertical dialect-standard axis.

2.1 Data

The aim of the following corpus analysis is to trace potential diffusion processes alongside the dialect-standard axis in German with special focus on the dialect regions of Austria. These southern parts of the coherent German-speaking area are mostly characterised by a small-scale complex structure of dialects (cf. figure 1) and a dense diglossic spectrum of variants⁷ making for an ideal area of investigation regarding vertical reallocation processes. The data rest on a corpus of spoken language recorded in course of a Special Research Programme (SFB) “German in Austria. Variation – Contact – Perception”⁸ (DiÖ). Project part 03 (“Speech repertoires and varietal spectra”) focusses on rural areas of Austria, recording speakers in up to seven different settings. For the present study, the focus lies on data of 44 autochthonous speakers (20–30 years old⁹), each of them born in an Austrian village (13 research locations in total, see figure 1) and still living predominantly there or nearby. The probands were recorded in two different conversation settings to trace their intra-speaker variation spectrum: In a rather formal interview setting, the probands were prone to their (intended) standard language use, whereas a conversation among friends in absence of the interviewer triggered their most informal (dialectal) speech production. The specific corpus design is thus well suited for research questions touching upon the parameters of age, gender, degree of formality (correlated with closeness/distance to the intended standard language use) and region. For each of the dialect regions displayed in fig. 1, six to eight hours of speech recordings were analysed which makes for a total of 32 hours of interviews

⁶ For a discussion of the phenomenon in Bavarian itself and regarding its unclear distribution cf. [15].

⁷ The only exception from this general tendency is the westernmost part of Vorarlberg arguably showing a tendency toward a diglossic functional separation between the use of Alemannic dialect and standard German (see below).

⁸ For an extensive discussion of the SFB cf. [17].

⁹ For the relevance of a comparison with older speakers see chapter 3.

and 34 hours of conversations among friends. If not indicated otherwise, the following observations are limited to the analysis of the article inflection nominative singular neuter. The definite article *das* is the most frequent in the corpus and its analysis thus promises the highest degree of reliability.¹⁰

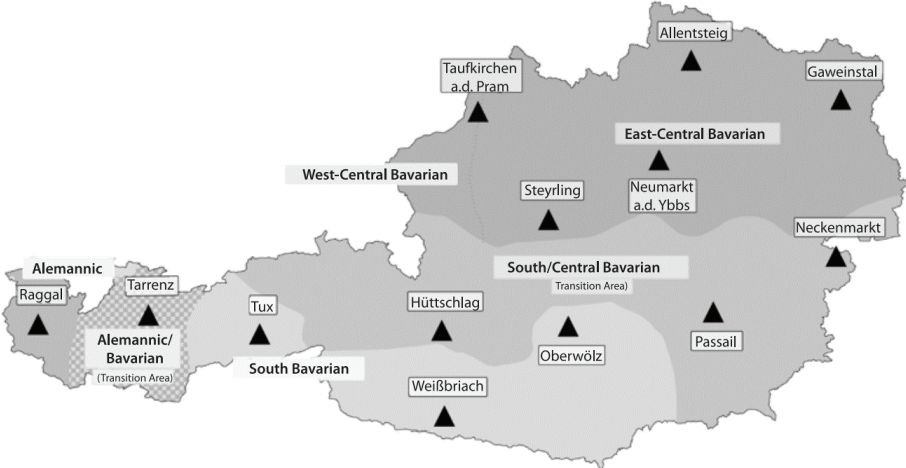


Fig. 1. Dialect areas in Austria and research locations (triangles) [19]

2.2 Preliminary results

The informal communication setting eliciting dialect use displays – as expected – very high relative frequencies of reduced article forms in nominal phrases in all of the analysed dialect regions. The ratios in the respective areas are surprisingly stable with a share of around 50% of reduced forms in most regions. Also, the Chi-squared test gives the p-value of 0.2256, which indicates that generally there is no significant difference in the data. The only outlier is the South/Central Bavarian transition area with a ratio of over 64% of reduced article forms.

	east-central		south-central		south		alemannic/ bavarian		alemannic	
	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.
reduced	115	50	147	64	96	51	18	54	35	50
non-reduced	114	50	83	36	93	49	39	46	35	50
Σ	229		230		189		57		70	

Tab. 1. Absolute/relative frequencies of reduced/full article forms in the respective dialect regions in informal communication settings

¹⁰ The comparatively high frequency of reduced *das*-forms certainly also has phonetical-phonological reasons, a phenomenon I cannot go further into here, see however [18].

Furthermore, the data seem to confirm the observations in previous studies ([18], [20]) that the deletion of the definiteness marker *d-* does not follow any systematic regularity: It appears in all contexts, also in those only full forms would be acceptable in standard language use, inter alia expressing situation-deictic reference (2), as well as demonstrative (3) or anaphoric reference (4):

- (2) 0206 *nehma s_nügste karterl liawa ne?*
 take we the next card rather not?
 'let's rather take the next card, shall we?'
- (3) 0471 *besonderes wort im dialekt (()) oachkatzlschwoaf*
 'special word in [your] dialect (()) tail of a squirrel'
- 0491 *jo es wort is cool*
 'yes this word is cool'
- (4) 0027 *is madl wor holt imma so vul gestresst*
 'this/the girl was just always so extremely stressed out'

The localisation of specific definite reference objects [21] should generally favour the use of full article forms in these contexts, thus dropping of the definiteness marker *d-* in contexts such as (2)–(4) contradicts the central function of definiteness. The seemingly chaotic use and the high frequency of reduced articles in dialect use have led authors to argue for a revocation of the German article system in general with advanced stages in some dialects indicating the progressing loss of definite articles ([18], [20]).

Looking at the interview setting, the quantitative analysis of these formal communications clearly shows a decline of reduced article forms with a ratio of around 30% in most dialect regions (see table 2). Two regions, however, stand out: The South/Central transition area, again with a higher ratio of 49%, and the Alemannic dialect region of (most parts of) Vorarlberg, with only 18% of all nominal phrases showing reduced articles. This last point suggests that the growing diglossic relations between dialect and standard in the westernmost parts of Austria arguably cause a shift to standard-close variants, rendering the communication comparatively less influenced by (Alemannic) dialect features.¹¹ Contrary to the data of the informal setting, these differences are highly significant with $p=0.0001501$.

	East-Central Bavarian		South/Central Bavarian		South Bavarian		Alemannic/Bavarian		Alemannic	
	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.
reduced	53	31	81	49	62	30	9	31	24	18
non-reduced	116	69	86	51	143	70	20	69	109	82
Σ	169		167		205		29		133	

Tab. 2. Absolute/relative frequencies of reduced/full article form in the respective dialect regions in formal communication settings

¹¹ For a discussion of the complex dialect-pragmatic status of Vorarlberg see [22].

Apart from the expected decline of dialect features in formal communication settings accompanied by less frequent use of the reduced articles, it is surprising that in most regions still 30% of all nominal phrases – in the South/Central transition area even half! – are used with reduced articles. To probe into this outcome, the quantitative results were complemented with a conversational local analysis focusing on the functional value of the reduced article forms in formal communication settings. Qualitative analyses strikingly show that articles without the definiteness marker *d-* mainly appear in formal communication settings if and only if they refer to an abstract, non-localizable or exclusive entity. Thus, they do not fulfil the core function of definiteness as they express what Ágel [23] calls “reine Aktualisierung” ‘sheer activation’ of a concept without a deictic pointing relation. In other words: Contrary to the unsystematic use in dialect communication, in communication settings closer to the intended standard language, reduced articles are refunctionalised as means of expressing grammatical (inflectional) information without giving indication of localizing a limited, hence definite, entity. The examples (5)–(7) illustrate 96% of all cases without *d-* not containing any definite, let alone demonstrative, reference (see table 3). This functional preference explains their significantly frequent collocation with abstract nouns, unique nouns or nominalized adjectives as the latter are not prototypically associated with concrete localisation or limited reference.

	non-deictic	deictic/demonstrative
reduced	96.06	3.94
non-reduced	40.08	59.92

Tab. 3. Absolute/relative frequencies of reduced/full article form in the respective dialect regions in formal communication settings

- (5) 024 *is positive an dem dialekt is*
the positive with the dialect is’
‘the positive side of the dialect is...’
- (6) 0245 *des is bei uns as schifahrn*
this is for us skiing
‘for us it is skiing’
- (7) 0029 *i hob eben afoch net is gfü dass*
I have just simply not the feeling that
‘I just do not have the feeling that...’

This clear tendency for reduced articles to appear with non-deictic, non-demonstrative referents is not to say, however, that this semantic group of nouns is never used with full article forms (see table 4) nor that concrete nouns never appear with reduced articles. To reveal their status as refunctionalized features, the following

analysis is limited to abstract nouns to shed light on their functional value in a specific context: Articles without the definiteness marker *d-* are predominantly used with reduced article forms in formal communication settings, rendering their ratios in every region significantly higher in comparison to table 2 (see table 4).

	East-Central Bavarian		South/Central Bavarian		South Bavarian		Alemannic/Bavarian		Alemannic	
	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.	abs.	rel.
reduced	92	67	115	74	33	51	16	89	33	67
non-reduced	46	33	41	26	16	33	2	11	16	33

Tab. 4. Absolute/relative frequencies of reduced/full article form in the respective dialect regions in formal communication settings with restriction to abstract nouns

Particularly noticeable are the increased ratios in the Alemannic region (see also chapter 3). It shows the clearest picture with reduced article forms, generally being scarce in formal communication settings, their use with abstract nouns however is comparable to the other areas. The diagrams in figure 2 summarize the significant effects the limitation to functionally relevant contexts have on the evaluation of the status of reduced article forms as reallocation phenomena. With p-values ranging from $p=0.0004874$ (South/Central Bavarian) to $p=7.393e-07$ (East-Central Bavarian) the differences resulting from the limitation on abstract nouns prove to be highly significant in all regions.

3 CONCLUSION

The conducted study reveals substantial differences in the use of article forms without the definiteness marker *-d* in dialectal speech compared to communication settings closer to the intended standard language use. Research on this feature so far ascribes it a rather unsystematic, yet frequent use, which has led some authors to extrapolate the ongoing revocation of the article system. Instead of assuming such an erosion or future loss, a more detailed quantitative and qualitative analyses suggest that whereas reduced articles in fact seem to be used in dialectal communication rather unsystematically, they show a significant functional value in intended standard language use. Their surprisingly high frequency in formal communication settings, and especially their collocation with nouns referring to non-deictic/demonstrative referents, in fact speak for an ongoing reallocation process of a dialect feature accompanied with functional differentiation. It seems that newly developed functions of grammatical, “tertiary” [7] phenomena like the one discussed above rather touch upon inner-linguistic structural or functional relations than upon sociostylistic or allophonic reasons [10]: Grammatical vertical diffusion processes are arguably enhanced when they offer a systematic benefit.

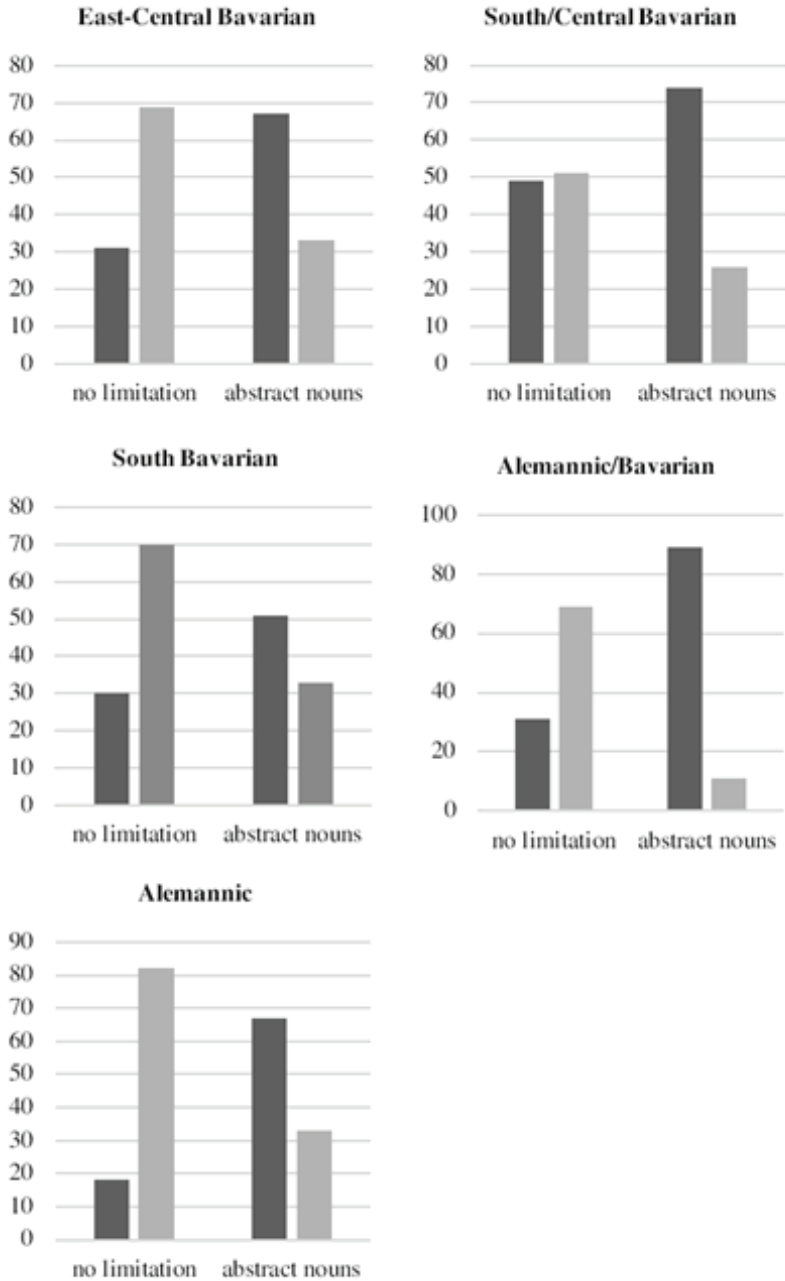


Fig. 2. Ratios of reduced (dark grey)/non-reduced (light grey) forms in all nominal phrases vs. with abstract nouns in all Austrian dialect regions

Finally, some qualifying point must be mentioned: Certainly, a range of follow-up-studies are necessary to confirm these observations with other inflectional forms of the article, with other semantic groups of nouns, with other dialect areas and – especially – with other age groups. With regard to that last point, a real- or apparent-time study could shed light on the question if the specific use of reduced articles in formal settings in fact indicates ongoing language change. Pilot studies regarding the age factor seem to confirm the status of reduced article form as reallocation phenomena; their collocation with unique nouns also underpins the findings with abstract nouns, the results of which I cannot demonstrate here for reasons of space. Nevertheless, the findings presented here have shown that it is not always the commonly assumed levelling and simplification processes of dialect features and their decline in favour of variants closer to the standard-pole that cause a change in the variant spectrum. An added functional value and low saliency of a (tertiary) dialect feature may pave the way for reallocation processes that are traceable with differentiated quantitative and qualitative corpus-linguistic methods.

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