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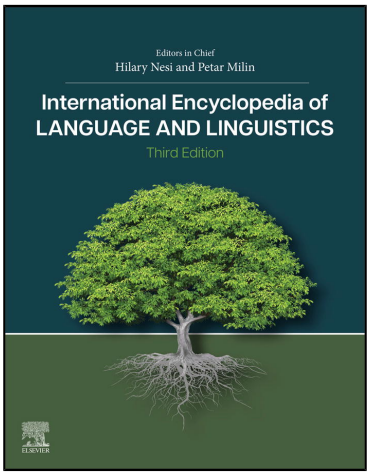

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Standard Language and the Processes of Language Standardization and Destandardization

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Key Points

- Standard languages are socially conditioned phenomena, meaning that they cannot be identified as, and taken for, objective entities.
- The basic research question is who decides about what is (not) standard, how, in what social contexts and interactions, in what genres, with what intentions and with what consequences. Therefore, metalinguistic data on the behavior of users toward language are indispensable.
- The quantitative approach favors the frequency as the main argument to identify standard variants. It ignores metalinguistic data and relies on technological tools, such as linguistic corpora and large language models. This simplifies the research process. However, this approach tends to blur the distinction between 'usage' and 'standard'.
- The qualitative approach is more realistic from a social point of view. It systematically considers the influence of relevant social actors and their metalinguistic activities in social contexts in which the standard languages are negotiated. Frequencies are a supporting argument.

Abstract

The term 'standard language' typically refers to a codified language consisting of variants that co-occur in formal contexts and are systematically taught and promoted in educational settings. It is a socially conditioned phenomenon shaped within culturally developed language communities. The quantitative approach identifies the standard with respect to (the most) frequently occurring variants. In contrast, the qualitative approach treats high frequencies as a hypothesis, suggesting, rather than proving, that such variants are standard. Metalinguistic data on users' behavior toward language, their social status, power as well as the contexts in which standards are negotiated are indispensable.

Introduction

Standard language is a term usually used for a codified language consisting of variants that co-occur in elaborated language genres and that is systematically taught and promoted in educational processes. It is a socially conditioned phenomenon that is established in culturally developed language communities. According to Garvin (1993), reflecting the tradition of the Prague School and its theory of language cultivation in a broader context (Nebeská, 2003), the standard language has several functions. **The unifying function** is realized in the possibility for users of the standard variety to communicate across the language community, which contributes to the constitution of the identity of the respective community in the cultural and political sense. At the same time, standard varieties enable such communities to define themselves in relation to other communities externally and to users of other varieties internally (this is called **the separatist function**). The third function consists in that the standard variety is a bearer of **prestige** (see also the ideological term *best language*, Milroy & Milroy, 2012, or Kristiansen, 2021). This is related to **the participatory function**, which offers various opportunities to enjoy the benefits of social mobility, access to jobs and positions in public administration or participation in public discourse in general. The fifth, **frame-of-reference function**, is interpreted by Garvin as enabling

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the assessment of linguistic correctness. It could be refined as appropriateness in terms of specific stylistic functions, social contexts as well as text types. By the cultivation of good language, the Prague School means "the conscious fostering of the standard language: this can be done by (1) theoretical linguistic work, (2) language education in the schools, and (3) literary practice" (Prague School, 1973, p. 102).

Methodological Challenges for Language Standardization Research

In the variation-norm relationship, language standardization in many respects represents a shift from heterogeneity to homogeneity. However, standard varieties are not monovariant. In the processes of negotiation and subsequent stabilization of their norms, diverse group interests, ideologies and power positions of the actors involved are interconnected. Therefore, the basic research question concerning the standard must be refined. Rather than asking the seemingly objective question "what is (not) a variant of the standard?" it is more methodologically appropriate to ask "who decides about what is (not) a variant of the standard, how, in what social contexts and interactions, in what genres, with what intentions and with what consequences". A concomitant effect of this transformation of the basic research question is the admission of the indexicality and fragmentation of standard varieties (not only) in postmodern societies, leading to a plurality of standards. This holds not only for the pluricentric and/or pluriareal languages (Meer and Durgasingh, 2025). Recently, identifying standard varieties usually depends on the technological tools of investigation, on large corpora, the unequal persuasiveness of experts' or laypeople's arguments and conclusions, the different appreciation of how large amounts of data have been collected and evaluated (belief in scientism), and other related preconditions.

Quantitative Approach

The quantitative approach to standard language reflects the dynamic development of the technologies required for digitalization and compilation of electronic corpora, as well as the software used to process these data. This approach typically identifies the standard varieties with the regularities of variants and linguistic structures actually used (in relation to the Czech language, see already Beneš, 1961), which exhibit high or the highest frequencies and even distributions of occurrence. Thus, the variants belonging to the standard language are primarily considered to be those among the competing variants that are the most frequent in the language (Cvrček, 2008, Konopka, 2011), or more precisely: in specific corpora and at a given time. As Konopka and Waßner (2013, p. 12) state, "comparing the frequencies and the distributions can indicate to which extent the phenomena are part of the standard language". Thus, the standard tends to amount to language use, or to a statistically understood norm in a broader sense (Gloy, 2004). In line with the principles of quantitative linguistics, this notion of standard can be differentiated more finely, e.g. into analyses of variant frequencies distributed according to independent variables of genres of spoken and written language, of territories, or of social classes. Although the approach is fundamentally descriptive, normative effects are often attributed to these regularities by those who (have to) evaluate disputed variants. Thus, the originally descriptive research result can easily be discursively transformed into a prescriptive argument.

In general, the quantitative approach may continue to gain relevance in the future due to the growing amount of linguistic data contained in large language models. Texts generated by artificial intelligence will expand the database (including the information about the occurrence of competing variants, i.e. facticity) from which normative effects will easily be derived, especially for automatic proofreading purposes. However, questions about how these results will be used in future research and practice go beyond the scope of the quantitative approach.

Qualitative Approach

The complement or alternative to the quantitative conceptualization of the standard is a more differentiated qualitative approach based on the aforementioned modified research question. Its substance lies in the objection to automatic inference of normative effects from mere demonstrability of high(er) frequencies and even distributions of competing variants (i.e. simple facticity). According to Gloy (2004), it is not logically necessary to infer normativity from the regular occurrence of variants, nor is it the only possible inference, because regularity in the use of these variants can occur for reasons other than their conformity to norms. Thus, it is more appropriate to first interpret the high frequencies and even distributions in the occurrences of variants as a hypothesis that they are part of the standard rather than as evidence of this conclusion (for more details, see Dovalil, 2013b). Thus, the proof of correspondence to the standard is subsequently made on the basis of this initial hypothesis. Unlike the quantitative approach, the qualitative approach can analyze, on the one hand, discourses in which actors refer to the high frequencies and even distributions of contentious variants in relevant text types to strengthen their arguments, and these arguments are accepted as convincing by others for this very reason, and, on the other hand, discourses in which these kinds of arguments are ignored, although a decision about the standard is made anyway.

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Process of Language Standardization, Its Social Actors and Actions

The creation and stabilization of standard varieties is dynamic and cyclical in nature. Haugen's four-phase model of standardization, most often referred to in the literature, still serves as the basis for an extensive recent overview of modeling language standardization (Ayres-Bennett, 2021). Standardization begins with the selection of a variety, or at least forms (phase 1 - selection), which are described and, eventually, adopted into codes (phase 2 - codification). In the third phase (acceptance or implementation), the maximum spread of these forms throughout the language community (in the geographical, social and stylistic sense) takes place. According to Haugen, the cycle of standardization ends with elaboration (phase 4), in which new communicative needs of the community are met (for an application of the model to the Germanic languages, see Deumert and Vandenbussche, 2003). Haugen's model offers a general and historical perspective, which has been further differentiated.

Social actors of the processes in which decisions about standard are made and the substance of their actions have been attempted to be elucidated by Ammon (2015) in his model of social forces determining what is standard in a language. This model sheds light on sociocultural circumstances under which these processes take place as well as on networks of relevant social actors.

Negotiating a socially realistic form of standard language, according to this model, happens in manifold interactions among, and in networks of, codifiers, linguists, model speakers/writers, and norm authorities. The primary activity of codifiers consists in drawing up language codification (typically dictionaries and grammars). Language experts provide expert opinions. Model texts are texts produced by professionally trained language users (i.e. not only journalists and speakers in supra-regional media, but also people active in public administration, science, etc.). The status as models of these texts is significantly related to the extent of elaboration of the language used in them and the intensity of the language management that precedes their publication in final form (see the notion of *Sachprosatext* in Kloss, 1978). Norm authorities represent persons who are expected to evaluate and correct the language production of others. They are typically teachers or proofreaders in the media, scientific journals, or language consultants. A special category of these authorities is represented by electronic proofreaders. Automatic proofreading may be integrated into the software of text editors, or performed by artificial intelligence.

If all these actors reach a consensus, there are very convincing arguments for concluding that the explored variants (or language structures) belong to the standard variety. This means that such variants are codified, they are abundantly documented in model texts, their use is actively promoted by norm authorities, and there are further scientific arguments from experts confirming the compliance of these language structures with the standard. By analogy, an opposite example can be applied to the conclusion that other variants are not part of the standard language. Such variants are explicitly classified as non-standard in the codification (or, in more contested cases, they are not included in them) and their use is sanctioned by the norm authorities. Non-standard variants are not empirically documented in model texts (or in more controversial cases only with low frequencies), and linguists also have other arguments against their compliance with the standard. The majority of the population is situated in the background in this model. A more active role than that of a mere recipient of decisions about the standard of the four social forces mentioned is attributed to it by Hundt (2009), who categorizes this majority of the population as a so-called language sovereign. From a methodological point of view, however, it remains unclear how a language sovereign should act specifically in which social contexts, with how convincing arguments, and with how empirically demonstrable consequences. This consideration is rather related to the macro-level of these processes without thinking through the question of operationalization for data collection and further connection to the micro-level of interactions and empirical evidence.

An open question in Ammon's model is the social relevance and weight of the different actors in measuring their real impact. The symmetry of the model may lead to the assumption that these social forces exert equal weight on decision-making processes about standard. Here again, however, the social contexts of these processes need to be further differentiated. Some empirical studies lead to the conclusion that norm authorities play an important role, e.g., in educational processes, enforcing or sanctioning the use of certain variants, even regardless of codification or expert judgments (Dovalil, 2015). The weight of language experts and codification is not unequivocal to assess – it may come out as lower or higher in various contexts and interactions (Dufek et al., 2022). The impression that individual social forces are internally consistent in their opinions, beliefs, and actions is similarly problematic.

It is not only the language structures described according to the levels of the language system that become parts of standard varieties, but also the ways of using these structures in interactions (standard of politeness, of apologies, criticism, praise, etc. as expressed in spoken language, traditional letters, e-mails, text messages, etc., see Hagemann et al., 2013). Here, the pragmatic nature of the standard lies in the object that the standard aims at, i.e. communicative norms of language, not in the pragmatic nature of the way in which the standardness of language structures is negotiated in interactions.

Language Standardization and Its Dynamics in Light of Language Management Theory

According to language management theory, the process of standardization can be adequately analyzed and interpreted not only in relation to the actions of norm authorities and other social actors, but also in relation to the actions of individual social actors (Nekvapil and Sherman, 2015; Dovalil, 2022, or Dovalil, 2013a). This theory further refines the activities of individual social actors outlined above and links their actions at the macro and micro levels. An important contribution of this theory is that by structuring this dynamic process into phases, it allows the identification of those moments when these processes are interrupted. This explains, for example, why norm authorities may not always achieve their goals. Referring to the management of model texts that would not take

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place after their publication, the standard can be understood *ex negativo* as containing all language variants whose use in these texts is not critically questioned, at least not by any social actors with relevant power and status in public discourses.

Apart from a procedure-based perspective, language management theory also considers the socioeconomic/sociocultural and communication circumstances involved in shaping and using standard varieties. The question of the intentions with which the actors manage standard language production is a value-oriented question (see already Joseph, 1987; Daneš, 1987). Probably only through a follow-up interview would it be possible to examine the actors' intentions to cultivate the linguistic expression or to increase the quality of language production in terms of spelling, pronunciation, morphology, vocabulary, or style. This is reflected, for example, in how carefully some language communities elaborate terminology. Another issue concerns economic motivation to acquire standard varieties and to take advantage of their social prestige. When applying for a job, one submits the documents in the standard variety. When students take a language exam, they are also tested on their knowledge of the standard variety. These situations exemplify how the standard variety can function as a gatekeeper.

Language Destandardization and Demotization

When management processes cease to be (more or less) systematic and uniform, or when they take a different course based on different expectations, language destandardization and/or demotization may set in. According to Kristiansen (2021, p. 671), "[w]e shall talk of *destandardization* only if we find that *the very belief in the existence of (or need for) a 'best' language is being weakened*" (italics in original). In other words, the established standard language loses its prestige as the 'best language', which goes hand in hand with eventual abandonment of the standard ideology. Yet another feature of language destandardization is the pluralization of standards. It consists in the formation of new standard varieties that are not subsumed under the existing ones (Auer & Spiekermann, 2011).

In contrast, demotization is "revalorization, an ideological upgrading of 'low-status' language to 'best language' status", the 'standard ideology' as such staying intact (Ayres-Bennett, 2021, p. 49. For more details see Dovalil, 2020, or Kristiansen, 2021). The variation of the original standard variety increases noticeably, because this variety is penetrated to a greater extent by elements that were previously non-standard. The socio-cultural preconditions of these processes may be summarized as follows: Awareness and legitimacy of the binding character of norms acquired in educational processes is declining in postmodern societies. Media are considered to be the main social actor in these processes. The need for unifying language norms, relevant in the whole society, is no longer felt. The language used by the majority of current speakers has moved too far away from the codification of standard languages, which took place during the modern period and was carried out by intellectual elites of that time (Nekvapil, 2008).

Further efforts to capture more subtly the foregoing conceptual differences may lead to coining yet another term, e.g. neo-standard (Auer, 2021). Neo-standard is characterized by being 'more relaxed', 'more personal', 'more subjective', 'less formal', 'less distant', but also 'more creative' and 'more modern' than the traditional standard of the modern period.

Conclusion

The process of formation of standard varieties involves multiple metalinguistic discourses. Therefore, quantitative approaches that rely solely on (written or spoken) texts as language-object appear to be methodologically inadequate. Even simple results of descriptively oriented corpus-based analyses containing conclusions about which variant is standard represent examples of just such basic metalinguistic claims. Approaching a language standard as if it were "objective", or independent of the metalinguistic activities of relevant social actors, is misleading. This applies to both corpus-driven procedures and to large language models, which are obviously valuable sources of usus (language use), particularly in terms of data quantity and identifiable patterns. For methodological reasons, value-neutral language use (usus), as it can be explored by means of technological tools, should not be simplistically confused with a value-oriented standard.

Regarding the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative approaches to standardization, it can be concluded that both approaches reject the simplistic equation "standard language = norm formulated in codification". However, the quantitative approach can be framed within the qualitative approach, which encompasses a broader range of research questions. When projected onto Ammon's model, this means that the quantitative approach is represented by the line connecting (model) texts and codification (under criticism), or by a triangle extending this link to include the discourse of language experts. Note that the quantitative approach does not systematically include the activities of norm authorities. This fact can significantly distort the investigation of standard varieties. Similarly, the quite fundamental question of the normative force of facticity, which is (at least partially) taken into account as a de facto given by the quantitative approach, can only be answered in qualitative research, which systematically takes into account the phenomenon of power and social inequality of the actors involved in the processes of standardization.

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