

**“REGIONALSPRACHE.DE” (REDE):  
FROM DIALECT TO VARIATION SPACE**

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**Abstract**

The goal of the “Regionalsprache.de” (REDE) project is to fill two of the most trenchant deficits in the long history of the study of spoken German. Firstly, notwithstanding the intensive study of German base dialects over 180 years (Schmeller 1821), no comprehensive description of the “modern regional languages”, i.e., the spoken variety spaces which represent the everyday speech of most speakers, has ever been undertaken. Secondly, there is the absence of a suitable “information structure” which would allow the numerous research data and findings of the past to be directly compared and analytically integrated with one another and with modern regional-language data (yet to be surveyed). Hence, the aim of the project is the first systematic survey of the modern German regional languages. This comprehensive goal can be broken down into two parts:

1. The establishment of a research-centred information system about modern German regional languages, in which the immense amounts of existing dialectological, sociolinguistic and variation-linguistic data can be bundled, interrelated and made available to linguists for systematic comparative analyses and to the public as a comprehensive information resource.

2. The first survey and analysis of the variation-linguistic structure and dynamic of modern German regional languages. To this end it is necessary to investigate and analyse the variative space which makes out these modern regional languages, itself constituted through the elements of “regional accent” (pole nearest the standard), “dialect” (pole furthest from the standard), and an intermediary arrangement of varieties.

The technical basis and initial data for the project will be furnished by the “Digital Wenker Atlas” (DiWA) project, the internet publication of the oldest and, in terms of scale and density, to date the largest language atlas in the world. On the basis of DiWA (<[www.diwa.info](http://www.diwa.info)>), the “Regionalsprache.de” (REDE) project aims to comprehensively linguistically document the entire spoken language system of a major modern language in its vertical, spatial, and temporal dimensions.

**Key words**

language variation, German, dialect, dynamics

**1. The need to study the variety structure of recent spoken German**

The now completed DiWA (Digital Wenker Atlas) is both a digital publication of Georg Wenker's *Sprachatlas des deutschen Reichs* and a complex geographic information system (GIS) with which current linguistic data can be projected onto and compared with the historical maps. This makes an examination of linguistic dynamics possible, i.e., the historical changes in language in space. At the Marburg Research Centre "Deutscher Sprachatlas", work has now (2008) begun on a project which represents a significant expansion of DiWA, in terms of both content and data. This project will – together with others – decisively influence future research into areal varieties of German. This is the "Regionalsprache.de" (REDE) project.

Since the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a break has become apparent in the long history of German and its areal varieties. Although recognised by all German speakers, it has not been adequately described in the research literature. In contrast, what is generally known and well studied is the situation prior to this break. Via a long historical process the following system had arisen in German. The written variety took the form of a uniform literary language, whilst two types of spoken variety existed, firstly the local dialect and secondly a regionally differentiated Standard German which had arisen out of regional pronunciations of the unitary written code. This situation, established over centuries, has been subjected to a radical break since the 1920s at the latest. Beginning with the establishment of the *Bühnen-aussprache* pronunciation code (Siebs 1898), national pronunciation norms gradually developed in a protracted process in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, disseminated from 1923 on by radio, later television, and gaining general communicative presence from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The paramount prestige of these Standard German oralization norms led to a radical devaluation of the older regional standards and consequently to a completely new linguistic structure of spoken German. As recent studies (Lameli 2004) show, at least in Germany, across all regions only the standard pronunciation distributed by the media and a "colloquial standard" containing a very small number of inconspicuous

residual regionalisms are considered to represent the spoken form of the standard language. In contrast, the old regional standard language is perceived as regionally restricted and is increasingly disparaged as “colloquial” (in linguistic terms: substandard). But this process has not led to a simple replacement of the old regional standards by the new national standard. Quite the opposite: the erstwhile combination of dialect and former regional standard German continues to exist, in the form of a spoken language system which can be labelled as “regional language” (*Regionalsprache*). This remains the sole, albeit highly differentiated, spoken form for practically all speakers (linguistically) socialized within a region (= everyday speech for the majority of Germans). It has, however, been subjected to a striking transformational process, which is particularly marked by the development of the local dialects into regional ones.

As Kehrein (2006, 94) among other has shown, these tendencies towards change have resulted in a structure of varieties or styles in present-day spoken Central German, as shown in Table (1).<sup>1</sup>

Standard German	
Regional Accent	Regiolect
Lower Regiolect	
Dialect	

Table 1. Variety structure in central German

Research within the discipline has so far completely failed to take adequate account of this completely new (in comparison to earlier periods) linguistic reality, namely the emergence of modern, intrinsically complex, spoken regional languages which determine the everyday talk of most speakers. Factors linked to the history of linguistics have led to an exclusive focus on the poles of the full spoken-language spectrum. Hence, Germanistic linguistics was long fixated on the standard language, dialectology on the reconstruction of the dialects before the break point (only recently supplemented by the analysis of the processes of dialectal change), sociolinguistics on

<sup>1</sup> Whether or not further intermediate styles need to be added between regional accent and lower regiolect will only become clear with further research, according to Kehrein (2006). Also cf. Lenz (2003).

the contextual and group-specific linguistic variation to the exclusion of any consideration of the areal dimension. All in all, this led to the new linguistic reality being either blanked out or simply dismissed as inadequate mastery of the new norm (“colloquial speech” as “diluted standard pronunciation”) or a by-product of the decomposition of the old dialects. The new near-standard varieties, which for most German speakers represent their everyday spoken norm, have not been systematically investigated. It is true that a series of locality or small-area depth studies (*Tiefenbohrungen*) have in the meantime succeeded in mounting variation-linguistic investigations into particular German regional languages which do not slavishly conform to the traditional paradigm, but instead manage to examine the entire spectrum of locally confined varieties between dialect and spoken standard.<sup>2</sup> But as valuable as these analyses are, there remains to date a complete absence of projects which aim to investigate the areal-linguistic spectrum of variation between dialect and standard for larger German language regions or even for the entire language area.

## **2. First project goal: Investigation of the variety structure of present-day spoken German**

Against the background of this research desideratum, the goal of the Marburg “Regionalsprache.de” (REDE) project is to systematically investigate the new linguistic reality as an independent object for the first time (“establishing a basis”). The aim is the very first mustering and analysis of the variation-linguistic structure and dynamic of the modern regional languages of German. This will involve, firstly, the systematic investigation of that segment of the modern regional languages which to date remains completely unexamined: the regional accent, i.e., the old regional standard German, still persisting and developing. Secondly, the complete linguistic structure of the various new German regional languages among representative groups of speakers will be analysed (i.e., the regional variation spectrum between regional accent and evolving dialect). The results from this part of the planned project will be a picture of the German variation spectra across space. Speaking figuratively, at the end we will have a language atlas which maps the entire variation spectrum for every survey location, not just the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Lenz (2003).

local dialects. In actual fact the data will not be collected in the form of a map, but rather in an internet-based variation-linguistic information system. This part of the project will be led by Dr. Roland Kehrein, Marburg, who has presented the concept for discussion in various fora. The most important points can be summarized as follows:

The fact that up until now – in contrast to the deepest dialects of sedentary speakers – everyday spoken language, especially speech in the upper levels of the regional variation spectra, has effectively never been able to be collected and analysed, is essentially due to methodological problems. For one, there is the general problem often referred to as the “observer paradox”, i.e., how to systematically observe speakers – e.g., via sound recordings–without evoking the (distorting) effects of observation. Then there is the more specific problem of how to identify a suitably stable context for the broad-range collection of everyday speech, in which the largest number of extralinguistic variables can be kept constant. But this is the only way to glean data with guaranteed comparability.

Solutions to both methodological problems have been found, so that we now have a research design with which the upper stretches of the regional language variation spectra can be explored: a representative social group has been selected, whose members can be observed in a particular and constant communicative context oriented towards the spoken standard. This context is found right across the board and is already being recorded for nonlinguistic purposes: it is the answering of emergency phone calls by police officers working in the emergency call centres at German police stations. This method offers clear advantages. Firstly, the speakers form a clearly defined social group: middle-ranking and senior police officers, i.e., members of a group with intermediate social status. Second, the speech context represents an everyday situation for the informants, and thirdly, the conversations are routinely recorded and archived for criminal investigation purposes: telephones and headsets through which the recordings are made are part of the everyday work setting for police and thus do not affect their speech behaviour in an uncontrolled manner.

Since emergency call centres are distributed across the entire German language area, it is possible to construct an evenly spread net of 150 survey locations. Three informants are taken for each location, two from the ranks of the police officers and one from the so-called “NORM” group (i.e. “non-mobile, old, rural, male” speakers). In order to be able to analyse the variation spectra of the speakers, all informants are

observed and recorded in four additional communicative contexts held constant across space. These situations are:

- Test of competence in standard spoken German (= informants' closest phonetic/phonological approximation of the standard).
- Guided interview with a speaker of the standard. This speech context is representative of usage in *face-to-face* communication with strangers and tends to require the speaker to accommodate towards standard pronunciation.
- Conversation with a familiar conversation partner from the locality or region. In this speech context, an (everyday) communication constellation in which the informants shift towards the local dialect (or the pole of their individual regional language variation spectrum nearest to dialect) can be surveyed
- Test of dialectal competence. Informants are asked to render sentences presented in Standard German in the deepest dialect (= determining (residual) dialectal competence).

The results will thus consist of stringently comparable speech data from a broad net of 150 locations for two relevant social groups in four (or five) different communicative contexts. This newly collected data will bring the goal of a systematic investigation of German variation spectra between local dialect and spoken standard within reach. A central aspect of current linguistic variation which has been systematically ignored in studies to date will thus become investigable.

### **3. Second project goal: Establishment of a research-centred information system**

This major new collection of linguistic data is not the sole goal of the REDE project; the second major aim has a linguistic-cum-IT orientation: the newly collected data are to be linked with existing data within an internet-based GIS-style information system. The aim is to establish a comprehensive, research-centred information system for German regional language. The voluminous research findings and material about this object of study that have been won in the past (atlases, sound documents, monographs, dictionaries, research apparatus) and those to be collected in future research (see above) are to be bundled in an interactive information system, related to

one another and thus rendered available for study. The project will not just offer the academic community and the general public the results of regional linguistic research; it will go much further than providing this “service”. The systematic interlinking of data from what is already more than a century of regional linguistic research will build a research tool that can furnish the empirical underpinnings for the emergent linguistic subdiscipline of “language dynamics”. In that widely disparate types of regional linguistic data can (and will) be superimposed upon one another, it becomes possible to not just cross-validate differing classes of data, but also to examine language simultaneously in its historical and areal dimensions, and thus comprehend its spatial and temporal dynamicity. With regard to this second project goal, REDE will be able to build upon the experience and results gained from the DFG-funded DiWA project.<sup>3</sup> For details of the technical realization of REDE, one can in essence refer to DiWA, even though a far more comprehensive undertaking is involved, which will of course require new programming and technical solutions.

In 2007, the Union of German Academies of Science elected to fund REDE and work commenced in January 2008

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. in future: <<http://www.regionalsprache.de>>; and currently: <<http://www.diwa.info>>.

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