

## Chapter 5

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### The Unity of a Vernacular. Some Remarks on "Berliner Stadtsprache"

Und wenn da eena,vastehste,  
mit'm Auto ruffjeht,  
dit hat uff'm Damm zu stehn,  
den schlag ick uff t Jehürn.

#### 1. Measuring a cloud

When I was ten years old, I entered - for the first time in my life - a cloud. It was a small bright white oblong cloud, and one could clearly see it from the valley when we started to climb up that mountain in the Austrian Alps. But as we came closer, the shape of the cloud became less distinct, and eventually, there was only fog around us. It was very disappointing.

Like most speakers of German, I have a quite distinct feeling of what Berlin dialect is, and as a rule, I can easily recognize a speaker of that vernacular after a few words, such as those quoted above. I think this feeling is rather solid, and it would surely survive an empirical test. I have no doubt that there is something like "Berliner Schnauze". But as soon as one begins to have a closer look at it, it seems to fade away. Linguistic investigation shows that Berlin vernacular is apparently a quite heterogeneous phenomenon, composed of many variants, that many of the linguistic features which are generally thought to be constitutive of it appear in other dialects and vernaculars as well, and that its specific flavour may arise from features hardly ever mentioned and surely never carefully studied in the literature, such as speech rate, pause structure or pitch range. But this latter possibility is pure speculation, and as for the facts and findings, it seems that, as often happens in research, increasing detailed knowledge based on careful empirical studies annihilates the object under investigation.

Now, the fact that the cloud dissolved before our eyes as we approached it does not mean that there was no cloud, nor that it had no clear shape. We can take pictures of it, from all sides, measure its diameter, compare it to other clouds. It is an entity. And similarly, we have a clear feeling that a vernacular, such as the "Berliner Schnauze", is an entity. But what constitutes the unity of such a vernacular?

I am not in a position to answer this question. The project discussed here has brought together, in the first years of its existence, a great deal of the necessary bricks, and this breathing-spell before putting them together may be the right time to raise some general issues in connection with the question above. This is what I intend to do in the sequel.

## 2. Congruency of features

There are two ways of circumscribing a vernacular, just as any language or dialect: first, by referring to the people who speak it, and second by giving all the linguistic properties which characterize it, or at least those in which it differs from other vernaculars. Let us call these "external" and "internal" definition, and for a vernacular to be a unity, there must be a straightforward correspondence between external and internal characteristics.

Now, the problem is that both external and internal definition are compound, that is, each of them is based on a complex cluster of features. In general, it makes no sense to say, for example: "Berlin vernacular is that language spoken by the people living now in the (geographically or politically defined) area of Berlin". Apparently, there are other external characteristics that must be included in the definition, such as social class, the "nativeness" of the speakers, the geographical stratification within the city, etc. So, on the external side, we have a whole set of features  $s_1 \times s_2 \times \dots \times s_n$ , and the question arises of how we can cluster these features in such a way that they indeed constitute a unity rather than an arbitrary collocation. The unifying trait is apparently that the people in question speak Berlin vernacular - *not* that they regularly speak to each other and, in this sense, form a speech community. A speech community is a unity, and an important one, and in many cases, there is a one-to-one mapping between a speech community and a vernacular. But this is clearly not the case for the Berlin vernacular, where regular communication between vernacular and non-vernacular speakers is far from being exceptional. So,

if there is a unity somewhere, we cannot base it on the external features. It must be based on the internal, the linguistic characterisation.

A vernacular may be described on various levels, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon, specific types of discourse behavior, etc. Traditional research is mostly concerned with one or at most two of these domains, and most often with some isolated variables within them. This is perfectly understandable, given the mundane restrictions of all empirical research projects, such as time and money; but it obviously limits the scope of possible results. So, it is clearly one of the main merits of the present project "Berliner Stadtsprache" that it approaches its objects on various levels at the same time: phonology, structure of the lexicon, interactive behavior, attitudes of speakers. And with the rich data that are available now, it would not be difficult to include other areas, such as syntax or morphology. Now, the aim of the project is not to study a series of independent properties of Berlin vernacular, but *that vernacular*; and the investigation of all of these properties is a crucial prerequisite to that end. What this investigation buys us - and this is an important achievement in itself - is a series of linguistic properties  $f_1 \times f_2 \times \dots \times f_n$  on various levels. But this is not all we want. First, we must relate these properties to the external features mentioned above, and this leads to the problem of *congruency*, and second, we must relate them to each other, and this leads to the problem of *interplay*.

The problem of congruency is simply that internal features do not coincide in their relation to external features. It may be that the use of some specific lexical items is typical for an externally defined population a, the occurrence of a phonological feature for a different and only partly overlapping population b, a special type of discourse behaviour for a third population c, and so on. In a sense, this corresponds to the traditional problem of isoglosses in dialect geography, where - to take a classical example - the boundaries of p, t, k versus pf, ts, ç do not or not fully coincide. But the traditional case, although not different in principle, is relatively straightforward when compared to the congruency problem in the present case - first, because in the isoglosses example, only one external correlate is considered, namely geographical space<sup>1</sup>, and second, because the linguistic variables are closely related, part of the same process and

<sup>1</sup> Geographical space, of course, reflects other features, such as communication channels and barriers. But these are only indirectly related to the linguistic characteristics. Isoglosses in the traditional sense are not between social classes or religions, but between countries and villages.

thus show a related distribution: p is compared to t with respect to the same phonological process and its results, but not p to same lexical or syntactical feature, or even to discourse behaviour. This is quite different in the case of Berlin vernacular and the various linguistic variables which characterize it. Thus, the use of a word such as "Keule", the change from "g" to "j" in many positions, and a specific kind of interactive behavior (which I won't try to specify here) are three variables which are generally felt to be, and have actually been shown to be, constitutive for this vernacular. But apparently, their distribution with respect to external factors is totally different. It is different already with respect to geographical space, and it is the more so, if one includes other external variables.

In other words: Relating all the linguistic features which characterize Berlin vernacular<sup>2</sup> *individually* to external features does not buy us anything with respect to the question what constitutes the unity of this vernacular. Hence, we first must somehow bring these features together before we can take the step into the external world. Note that this is not to say that there is no point in studying the distribution of individual variables. If it can be shown that the specific type of interactive behavior displayed by speakers of "Berliner Schnauze" shows up everywhere, in Mannheim, Hamburg or Vienna, where specific conditions of early socialisation or family structure obtain, then this is a highly interesting finding in itself. But it does not answer the unity question.

### 3. Interplay of features

A language, and so a vernacular, is not an agglomeration of independent linguistic features but a system - at least to a large extent. If a language, for example, drops final plosives, such as "d" and "t", then this is a phonological feature of that language. But this phonological feature may have dramatic consequences for inflectional morphology: tense marking or case marking may be made impossible, unless other expressive devices are used of a particular intonation, and vice versa, or of a specific lexical particle etc. etc. I think no more examples are needed: the case is obvious, or at least should be obvious, and if it is not always taken into account in empirical research, then this is mainly due to real world restrictions of research projects such as those mentioned above.

<sup>2</sup> We could have, for example, a "full account" of the linguistic characteristics of say 10 speakers which everyone feels to be typical of "Berlin vernacular".

This obvious fact seems to give us a handle on the unity question: what we have to look for is a specific *clustering* of linguistic properties. I indeed think that this is the most promising step to take. I give this advice for free. But as with so much free advice, this suggestion solves one problem and creates another - namely the problem of identifying principles on which this clustering can be based. How can we proceed from a mere collocation of linguistic properties to a meaningful interrelationship?

There is no straightforward answer. In the examples of interplay considered above, there was an implicit assumption that there are certain expressive needs which, when not expressible in one way, must be expressed in some other way. Thus, if reference to the past cannot be expressed by some other construction, and similarly, if sentence mood cannot be expressed by syntactic means, such as inversion, then it must be expressed by intonation, or by a tag, etc. All of these cases may be arguable, because we cannot be sure which expressive needs are really indispensable and therefore necessitate compensatory devices, if not expressible in a specific way. But in principle, it seems plausible that there is such a balance between various possible expressive devices, and the specific clustering of linguistic features in the Berlin vernacular may be based on this sort of communicative compensation.

There is another possibility. Consider the consequences which the replacement of /g/ by /j/ in at least many positions may have: it is not just the local replacement of one sound by another but the entire phonemic system may be affected, since the phonemic distinction between /g/ and /j/ is lost. It has been argued, especially in the structuralist tradition (MARTINET), that such "gaps" in the system lead to changes in other parts of the system. Now, it is surely disputable whether this is always true; but it is at least possible that specific features in one *subsystem* (such as phonology) may lead to adaptations in other parts of that subsystem. This would be another type of non-arbitrary clustering of linguistic features.

There are surely other kinds of necessary - or at least non-contingent - linkage between various variables, and the general strategy must be to look for these. But still, it seems highly unlikely that *all* features of Berlin vernacular could be mutually related in a meaningful way. Thus, the occurrence of some specific lexical items, which are felt to be so typical for Berlin vernacular (cf. section 2 of the project report) can hardly be related to phonological or syntactic features. But they belong crucially to what constitutes for us "Berliner Schnauze". Hence, the specific clustering of linguistic properties which makes up the unity of that vernacular cannot be exclusively based on non-contingent relations in the sense outlined above. There must be other ingredients.

#### 4. Flavour

So far, we have assumed that the unity of a vernacular, if at all, can be based on a specific clustering of linguistic properties. And I think, this is true. But it may well be that our feeling of a vernacular being a unity - and this feeling was our starting point - is much less based on this specific cluster of linguistic properties, which the vernacular objectively has, but on *some* of them whose taste is particularly salient. They are the curry in the dish, which gives it its particular flavour, although there are other and even more substantial ingredients. So, it may be that we *identify* Berlin vernacular just by means of a few cues, which may be a minor component amongst the objective properties that characterize the whole vernacular.

At this point, the "flavour hypothesis" is obviously a mere speculation. The only way to find out whether there is some substance to it is to isolate some features which look like good candidates for the "curry", and to test whether Berlin vernacular sounds like Berlin vernacular without them. In any event, it seems clear that a speaker is usually more sensitive to some properties of a dialect he does not speak than to others. I think most Germans would consider the substitution of /j/ for /g/ to be a particularly salient characteristic of Berlin vernacular. But it can at best be but one of the spices, since it also appears in other German dialects. Another good candidate are lexical items which are known to be specific to Berlin vernacular. But again, this can't be the whole story, since some of the most typical words are rare in everyday communication, and usually identification of a speaker as a representative of "Berliner Schnauze" does not hinge on the appearance of these specific lexical items - although they are a good cue *if* they show up. If I may trust my own weighting of features, prosodic properties are most important. This is evidenced by the following somewhat anecdotal observation which is shared by several speakers. When reading through the various texts transcribed and analysed within the Berlin project, one does not have the impression that these texts are typical for Berlin speakers. Often, one could easily imagine them to be collected in Mannheim or Köln (barring some occasional idiosyncrasies, as those just mentioned). This totally changes if one then listens to the original recordings: they are clearly identifiable as Berlin vernacular. This cannot be due to the phonetic properties alone, because at least some of the phonetic properties - actually quite many - are maintained in the transcription. What is totally lost, however, are prosodic properties. No one seems ever to have tested the relative weight of

prosodic features<sup>3</sup> for the identification of a dialect. But, just as a guess, I am quite convinced that the small text quoted as a motto at the beginning of this chapter, when read with Köln intonation, would not be identified as Berlin vernacular but as a sort of Köln vernacular which - depending on the real knowledge about that vernacular - is felt to be somewhat odd.

This last remark has carried us into realm of pure speculation, and so, it seems time to leave the arena. Before doing so, however, we will have a brief look on what the "flavour hypothesis" implies for the question of unity. Our central argument for the assumption that something like "Berlin vernacular" indeed exists as a unity was the fact that every German speaker could identify it. I still think that this observation is correct, albeit with some qualifications. But the flavour hypothesis could easily account for this fact without the assumption that there is indeed a unity such as "Berlin vernacular". There might be an agglomeration of language varieties which are quite different in a lot of essential linguistic properties but which still share the same "curry". But this is an open question, and only further empirical investigation can help us here.

## 5. The more we know the less we know

About many things in life, we have a quite stable everyday knowledge which is not based on methodological scientific investigation but on experience, tradition and the remarkable intellectual capacities generally attributed to us. It gives us a clear and consistent picture of the world without which we could not exist. This knowledge also includes knowledge about linguistic facts, sometimes quite detailed, sometimes quite global and gross. And so, some of us feel tempted to check, to explore, to extend and to refine this knowledge. And indeed, linguistic research has taught us a lot - a gigantic amount of facts. On the other hand, the clear shape of the phenomena from which we started dissolves, and we are left in the fog of truth. But it may be that the mountain is higher than our present position, and when we continue climbing, we may see the cloud from the other side. But from here, we don't know, of course, how high the mountain really is<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> I am not sure what the relevant prosodic features in the present case are. It seems, however, that it is not the basic course of the pitch contour, i.e. of intonation in the narrow sense of the word. What seems more important are speech rate, "timbre" and the specific way in which pitch changes are realized within a segment.

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful to Jane Edwards for stylistic comments.