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Language Economy and its Implications for Language Teaching: Data and Evidence

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Abstract. In the following paper we are going to elaborate on a lately less-researched topic, the language economy, the ever-evolving nature of languages and their pursuit for simplicity. Our analysis conceptualizes how language economy leads to seemingly "ungrammatical" forms that are still widely accepted and used by native speakers, and we discuss the possibility of their inclusion into foreign language teaching. Our data are from the German language; however, in our reasoning for a less "perfect-grammar" centered way of teaching, we are going to use Japanese and Chinese examples as well.

Keywords: *Language, Economy, Implication, Language Teaching*

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1. Introduction

The present paper aims to highlight an important problem in linguistics and language didactics: for many naïve (i.e. linguistically unskilled) learners, the native speaker is a pinnacle of linguistic perfection. Yet, how many times we professionals experienced awkward situations, when we had given our articles (and big bucks too…) to native speakers of English, and received something back …that had to be proofread *again*, due to the more-than-obvious grammatical errors in the text. In some cases, even native speakers just do not seem to be able to differentiate between 'while' (referring to time) and 'whereas' (referring to contrasts). They just forget about anteriority / posteriority (something happened earlier or later), or the most banal example of them all: that we do not have double negation in (standard) English ('he *doesn't* eat *no* meat'). Thus, the question is: Who is right – the naïve speaker or the books of grammar? Well, a little bit both of them. Books of

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grammar generally follow either one of the following approaches (or a mixed one): (1) They might be *prescriptive*. In this case, a board of senior language scholars / linguists at universities or other scientific institutes decide which forms are acceptable and which are not. Then, more often than not, the decision to label a particular form as correct / wrong is based on individual preferences, not on very objective criteria. (2) The other – for many more favorable – approach is to have the notion of linguistic correctness established on the language community's *preferential attitude* towards one form or the other. A good example would be that of /r/ in German: many speakers in Southern Germany pronounce /r/ as a voiced alveolar trill [r]; however, the voiced *uvular* trill [ʀ] and the voiced *uvular fricative* [ʁ] are also widely used in other parts of Germany (especially in the North), and, depending on the region, other pronunciations can be heard as well. From the plethora of choices, the voiced uvular fricative [ʁ] is the most prevalent in Germany (cf. Krech / Stock / Hirschfeld 2009: 85); thus, it has been codified as the standard pronunciation of /r/. This mere fact, of course, does not mean that other native pronunciations would be "wrong"; ultimately, attempts at standardization are solely reflections of linguistic *tendencies* that *nolens volens* change over time. (Hundred years ago, the voiced alveolar trill [r], the "rolled r" counted as noble; hence, it was the standard.) The question arising is thus whether forms that are not codified in, or are contradictory to those in the books of grammar in a certain sense, can be regarded as "correct" or are they completely reprobate? In our opinion, *standard* is nothing else but (1) a proteiform stability coefficient, an ideal to which other elements of the system converge, and (2) which can be understood and reproduced by the members of a language community. In this sense, non-codified elements of the system or their combinations are not necessarily wrong as long as they are intelligible (i.e. suitable for the purpose of oral or written communication) and as long as native speakers do not object to them. Evidently, this set of possible utterances is going to be close to infinite and many of them will be ungrammatical (i.e. contradictory to the rules in the reference books of grammar). Yet, there are some underlying rules that govern these grammatical "errors" and they are definable, e.g. many native speakers of English use 'do' instead of 'does' in third person singular, often combined with double negation: 'she *do* not speak (no) English', 'he *do* not eat (no) meat', etc. Although these sentences are *prima facie* ungrammatical, they are still used by many *native* speakers of (mostly American) English and they are *predictable*, i.e. systemic. These speakers do not realize that these sentences are "wrong" (at least according to the books of English grammar), unless reminded. In fact, grammatically well-formed sentences like 'she *does* not speak English' or 'he *does* not eat meat' would unequivocally identify the speaker as an outsider to some members of the community. Similar phenomena can be observed in other languages as well. Thus, a less rigid interpretation of grammar and a greater emphasis on its dynamic nature would be imperative in language didactics; pre-eminently on intermediate level (B1 – B2) and above (C1 and C2), where language learners already know and are able to use the structures of grammar, yet they

sound stilted and unnatural. To make their language production more natural, advanced learners of any given foreign language should be exposed to (1) potential grammatical "errors" that native speakers make and to (2) dialectal differences to the standard.

2. Theoretical background, terminology and goal

Moser (1971: 90) states that every human being and humans in general has / have the tendency to want to become different from others or the previous generations, and this is the propelling force of development – also in languages. This development is perpetually connected with the pursuit for simplicity. (This is why we use *small and portable* mobile phones today, not *heavy* phones with landline network.) It is crucial to mention that linguistic development is inevitably faster than the publication of grammar textbooks; changes in the language system are always one step ahead of those codifying them. This is one of the reasons why there is an inevitable gap between the language that we use for daily communication and the language in the books of reference ('standard'). In regard to the *standard*, Bussmann (2006: 1117) points out that it is the language associated with the upper strata of the society, hence the carping term '*high* variety'. The fact is though that this variety draws its legitimation from history (ibid.). The compilation and the publication of these standardizations oftentimes require years of tedious teamwork that can focus only on a short period in the life of languages, and, perforce, the authors can take note merely of *yesterday's* developments. Furthermore, grammar books are common denominators among diatopic (territorial-dialectal) and diastratic (social-stylistic) variations, and they serve, advise and unite professional language users and learners alike. According to Moser (1971: 92), the continuous change, for the lack of better term, "structural simplification" in languages, the so-called *language economy* is a "conscious, unconscious and partially conscious" (our translation from German) pursuit that has a quadruple aim: (1) To economize and (2) to minimize expenditure of energy (both on the physical and the psychical level), (3) to increase efficiency and (4) to balance between different norms. Regarding this principle of economy, Zhou (2012: 100) talks about "the maximum effect with the least input". Moreover, he (ibid.) connects the term to indolence and inertia inherent to human beings that manifest themselves in language as well. This means that, over time, language communities *generally* tend to reduce effort to convey the very same message – what eventually leads to simplifications in the system. These simplifications might appear on multiple levels of the language: in phonetics-phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and in lexis as well.

Our aim in this paper is hence twofold: On one hand, we would like to show that grammars represent solely a snapshot of the current usage of any given language at a time, and that their "axiomatic" character hardly lives up to the temporal dynamism inherent to languages. Although some works of standardization (and sometimes even language textbooks) discuss common (!)

"ungrammatical" forms or dialectal phenomena, they commonly highlight them as substandard, forms that learners are not supposed to use. This is more so a problem, because these forms represent the daily reality of language use – without them, learners aiming for "close-to-native" skills just sound too "perfect", unnatural. On the other hand, we would like to showcase such "ungrammatical" forms in the German language, and to observe their systemic character (i.e. that their occurrence can be predicted in certain contexts), and to see whether they are always "wrong", and, furthermore, we will argue for their inclusion into language teaching.

3. Method

In the upcoming part of our paper we are going to demonstrate words, expressions and sentences that are common in the German language (both in its written and spoken varieties), yet they contradict rules as stipulated in grammars or textbooks. These examples are based on our very own observations of some daily media, conversations with native speakers (i.e. with individuals who were born and raised in a German-speaking environment); in certain cases, they are even subject to linguistic jokes, debates, or have become object lessons to language learners. Thus, we starkly believe that, by this way, our limited set of examples can serve the purpose of being an authentic and valid corpus. To escape the academic risk of doubting the advisedness of standard setting bodies' / major language scholars' opinion, we are going to recede from quoting specific publications or grammar(ian)s (language, its use and change *per se* are a sensitive topic); however, the rules in question here are matters of course to natives or learners, and can be looked up in any grammar of choice, online and printed as well. We are going to structure our examples of linguistic economy in German in the following fashion: (1) The first tier explains a grammar rule, or a particular phenomenon in detail, (2) the second tier gives an example with a word-by-word English translation in square brackets *in the standard language*, and (3) the third tier reflects *the actual language use*. Here, too, we are going to provide a detailed English translation. Although it poses a challenge to give equal consideration to every language level, for the simple reason that they are not equally affected by economizing processes, here we are showcasing examples in phonetics-phonology, morphology, and in syntax as well.

4. Result

4.1. Tendencies in phonetics-phonology

(1) The German word 'haben' [to have] should be pronounced as

(2) [ˈha:bm]. However, in fast(er) speech, it will be often reduced to

(3) [ˈham(n)] (mostly in Berlin) or to [ˈho(:)m] (as in Bavaria). In this case, the consonant cluster of a voiced bilabial plosive [b] (with a partial release into the next segment) and a

voiced bilabial nasal [m] will be reduced to the latter to reduce articulatory efforts / to ease the pronunciation.

(1) The neuter definite article ‘das’ [the] should be pronounced as
(2) [das]. However, in fast(er) speech, the open front-central vowel [a] will become
(3) an open-mid and more front vowel [ɛ] (i.e. the mouth is less open). Although in isolation [dɛs] would indicate the genitive case / possession or ownership, in the continuum of the sentence, if there is no genitive ending ([-s], [-n], [-ens] on the subsequent noun, it does not alter the meaning.

(1) Word-initial plosive-fricative clusters of the segments p and f, i.e. affricates as in the word
(2) ‘Pfirsich’ [peach] generally have the tendency to be shortened to
(3) the fricative element only: [ˈpfɪʁzɪɐ̯] to [ˈfɪʁzɪɐ̯] (cf. Huszka / Kudriyah 2011 and Huszka / Aini / Kudriyah / Stark 2018). This process is called ‘Deaffrizierung’ in German / deaffrication in English, and it is a subtype of articulatory effort reduction.

4.2.Tendencies in morphology

(1) In German, there are regular (“weak”), irregular (“strong”) and mixed type verbs. Regular verbs are relatively “easy” to put in simple past as they follow the distinct pattern *stem* + *te*: ‘spielen’ – ‘spielte’ [to play], ‘kochen’ – ‘kochte’ [to cook]. Irregular verbs have their often quite different, less-predictable simple past tense though:
(2) ‘fahren’ – ‘fuhr’ [to travel / to drive], ‘messen’ – ‘maß’ [to measure].
(3) Interestingly, a number of previously irregular verbs have developed co-existing regular simple past tenses: ‘melken’ [to milk] – ‘molk’ / ‘melkte’, ‘backen’ [to bake] – ‘buk’ / ‘backte’. Even though these regular forms can be already encountered in dictionaries, their irregular counterparts still represent a higher stylistic level.

(1) For nouns with the masculine definite article ‘der’ [the] and the neuter definite article ‘das’ [the], the expression of possession / ownership follows the following pattern: possessed (article and noun do not change unless required by a verb) + possessor (‘der’ and ‘das’ change to the genitive form ‘des’ and the noun receives an -s / -n / -ens suffix according to its type):
(2) ‘das [the] ‘Auto’ [car] ‘des’ [the, in genitive] ‘Lehrers’ [teacher + genitive suffix] [the teacher’s car].
(3) For many learners of German, the sophisticated rules of the genitive is a hard nut to crack; and, surprisingly, numerous native speakers are not very fond of it either, and rather prefer the simpler dative case: ‘dem’ [the, in dative] ‘Lehrer’ [teacher] ‘sein’ [his] ‘Auto’ [car] [lit. to the teacher his car, i.e. the teacher’s car].

(1) German has three definite articles (and, of course, their derivatives): the masculine definite article ‘der’ [the], the feminine definite article ‘die’ [the] and the neuter definite article ‘das’ [the], and the vast majority of the nouns can have only one article. Although it is possible to indentify certain rules that will determine the gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) of a specific noun, these rules are, however, so complex, many and hierarchical (natural gender, material, syllable structure, etc.), that beginner learners are advised to memorize the nouns *together with their article*. If a new / foreign noun will be introduced into the system, the rule of thumb is to use this noun with the article that its German translation would have:

(2) message – *die* Nachricht – *die* Message.

(3) Nevertheless, in many cases multiple articles are possible: ‘die’ or ‘das Nutella’ [Nutella] (sometimes even ‘der’ can be heard), ‘der’ or ‘das Joghurt’ [yoghurt], and their usage is fully optional. There are publications though suggesting one or the other article.

4.3. Tendencies in syntax

(1) In principle, German is an SVO language. However, after a few conjunctions, the word order changes to SOV; one of them is ‘weil’ [because]:

(2) ‘Ich’ [I] ‘schlafe’ [to sleep, conjugated], ‘weil’ [because] ‘ich’ ‘müde’ [tired] ‘bin’ [to be, conjugated] [I am sleeping, because I am tired.].

(3) In spoken (and slowly also in written) German, the word order after ‘weil’ is becoming SVO: ‘Ich schlafe, weil ich bin müde’. Firstly, adhering to the SVO word order makes the sentence construction easier as there is no difference in the arrangement of the words in the main clause and in the subordinate clause. Secondly, beside ‘weil’, there is another word to express reason: ‘denn’ [because] with the word order SVO. As this conjunction is wearing off, losing frequency in daily use, ‘weil’ takes over its functions, including its word order.

(1) If there are a pronoun complement in accusative and a pronoun complement in dative in the German sentence, the first is going to precede the latter:

(2) ‘Ich’ [I] ‘zeige’ [to show, conjugated] ‘es’ [it, in accusative] ‘dir’ [you, in dative] [I show it to you.].

(3) Although the above rule is a strict one, it is losing its importance; depending on what the speaker wants to empasize on, the position of the two personal pronouns might change: ‘Ich zeige dir es’. Theoretically, this sentence is erroneous; however, it carries a deeper meaning [I show it to you (but not to others).], and is frequently used by native speakers for the purpose of emphasis.

(1) The structural arrengement of present perfect in German is as follows: Subject + auxiliary verb + rest + past participle. Although the subject and the rest (e.g. the object) can change

positions, the position of the predicate is fix: The (conjugated) auxiliary verb occupies position 2, whereas the the past particple is at the very end of the sentence:

(2) ‘Ich’ [I] ‘habe’ [to have, conjugated auxiliary verb] ‘in der Pause’ [in the break] ‘einen Kaffee’ [a coffee] ‘getrunken’ [to drink, past participle] [I drank a coffee in the break.].

(3) The everyday usage contradicts the above mentioned rule though; if an informaton bears lesser importance, it will be excluded from the sentence bracket, e.g. ‘Ich habe einen Kaffee getrunken in der Pause’.

5. Conclusion

The examples listed above clearly fall into the “grey zone” of German grammar, and their frequent usage can earn minus points to any language learner in an exam context. As they are not part of the so-called standard or are on the fringe in grammars, they are better to be avoided, at least according to the almost unanimous consensus of language teachers. Nonetheless, these controversial forms show the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of language that cannot be properly captured in grammars. Books of reference require long years of research, compilation and writing (mostly by a team), and the most recent developments cannot find their way into them. Even so, these forms exist and will continue to exist – even if they are labelled as “wrong” or “substandard”. Furthermore, one should bear in mind that these forms are used by many native speakers, not only by a small number of people. In addition, language is a means of communication; hence, until the message to be delivered does not become distorted or misunderstood, its *gestalt* (form) is secondary, especially so that the underlying structures are predictable, systemic (i.e. grammar-like) – and native above all. Thus, intermediate and advanced learners should be familiarized with this “grey zone” in grammar. Firstly, because these “ungrammatical” forms will pop up in listening (and eventually in reading) exercises and they might confuse them. Secondly, if and when these learners have the opportunity to go to the target country, they will hear (and read) such forms anyway. Thirdly, the moderate occasional and situational usage of these forms can make learners sound less stilted and more natural. We are thoroughly aware that this essay is limited in its corpus (German) and findings; however, similar phenomena can be observed in other languages as well. In spoken Japanese, for instance, eliminating the syllable -ra- (ra-nuki, lit. ra-removed) is common: ‘taberareru’ – ‘tabereru’ [can eat], ‘nerareru’ – ‘nereru’ [can sleep] and ‘karirareru’ – ‘karireru’ [can borrow]. A similar reduction can be observed in ‘sentakuki’ – ‘sentakki’ [washing machine] or in ‘suizokukan’ – ‘suizokkan’ [aquarian]. ‘I am totally fine’ is commonly ‘zenzen daijyoubu’; however, it is “wrong” as after ‘zenzen’ a negative form has to follow, but ‘daijyoubu’ is an affirmative form. In Chinese, ‘bu’ or ‘mei’ is placed before the verb to change the verb to be in the negative. Thus, ‘bu yao’ means ‘do not want to’ and ‘bu yao shou’ means ‘I do not not want to speak’. Today, instead of ‘bu yao’, ‘biao’ is widely used by natives (predominantly on the Internet), although it has nothing to do

with ‘do not want to’ – its usage is based on phonetic similarity and it conveniently reduces two characters to one. Based on the above, we can say that language economy (changes and simplifications) exists in many languages and affects them on a grand scale; thus, incorporating these seemingly “wrong” elements into the modern language teaching is an absolute necessity.

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