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Central axioms of pluricentricity revisited. A validity-check beyond theory: the example of German

Abstract

The concept of pluricentricity as a scientific theory is based on a number of axioms; central ones are concerned with the aspects relevance, correctness and standardness of various dominant and non-dominant standard varieties and the respective speakers' perceptions of these varieties. This paper deals with these propositions and evidence of their validation. To achieve this, studies of the last three decades will be checked to see whether these central propositions of pluricentricity hold true or not, using the example of the German language and its dominant variety, German Standard German, and its non-dominant varieties, Austrian Standard German and Swiss Standard German.

1. Introduction

The term "pluricentric language" was initially applied by Kloss (1978: 66-67) to languages which have several interacting centres, each of them providing a national variety with their own (codified) norms to varying degrees (Clyne 1992: 1). A detailed outline of the history of the term is given in Ammon (1995: 42ff. and 1998: 331ff.). Especially Michael Clyne and later Ulrich Ammon refined the theory of pluricentric languages, applying it to the German language in course of the 1990s. Even though the pluricentric concept has been around for more than 30 years, it has not lost topicality, as the connection between nation, language and identity has always been given and is still relevant today, even with a reduced importance of borders in Europe.

As Spolsky puts it: "[N]ations have certainly not disappeared in the twenty-first century; in spite of globalization and the existence of supranational business and political unions, the pressure for symbolic identity controls their language policy, practices, beliefs, and management alike." (Spolsky 2009: 257)

One cornerstone in the theory of pluricentric languages is based on the alleged asymmetries between dominant and non-dominant centres of pluricentric

languages, as stated by Clyne (1992: 22) and Ammon (1995: 484-494). To a large degree, these asymmetries are found in the realm of language attitudes and language awareness. This article is going to examine the following assumptions made in the foundations of pluricentricity regarding the parameters “*relevance*” and “*standardness & correctness*”:¹

As far as “*relevance*” is concerned, it is stated in the framework of the theory of pluricentricity (following Clyne 1992: 459f.) that dominant nations seem to have difficulty understanding the notion of pluricentricity and tend to dismiss national variation as trivial. Dominant nations often confuse national variation with regional variation because of overlapping linguistic indices and are not aware of the status and symbolic character of the other national varieties.

As regards “*standardness & correctness*”, variants of the non-dominant varieties (such as Austriacisms and Helveticisms) are often considered to be less correct (and are generally less known outside their respective centres). Especially members of dominant nations are often not familiar with other national varieties, therefore convergence usually happens in the direction of the dominant variety when speakers of different national varieties communicate.

Generally, dominant nations regard their national variety as the standard and themselves as the keepers or representatives of standard norms, frequently considering national varieties of other nations as non-standard or even deviant and at the same time as exotic, cute and charming. Quite often national varieties are mistaken for dialectal varieties (Clyne 2005: 297).

The aim of this article is to show whether these theoretical assumptions have been confirmed in relevant studies on German of the last three decades, from the time shortly after the introduction of the theory of pluricentricity in German linguistics until the present.

2. From theory to practice: Attitudes towards national varieties of German

One of the first studies to investigate language attitudes towards national standard varieties of German was Ammon’s small survey in the early 1990s (Ammon 1995: 423-445) among Austrian, German and Swiss teachers. This survey examined the correction patterns among these three groups of teachers. Despite the fact that all three groups tended to correct non-national variants more than national ones, Ammon observed a general reluctance towards Austriacisms and

¹ Assumptions referring to economic and stereotypical aspects will not be dealt with due to the limited scope of this article.

Helveticisms – in spite of their standard character – among teachers of all three groups, but especially among German teachers. Ammon concluded that there was a connection between correction patterns and knowledge about national varieties. However, his results also pointed towards a “weak loyalty” among Austrian and Swiss teachers concerning their national standard varieties. Bearing in mind the fact that the study was carried out in the early 1990s when pluricentricity had only recently been introduced and applied to the German language, this result does not seem surprising.

Ammon (1995: 480) and Muhr (1995: 96) argue that the restrictive “German Standard German-only” correction patterns among German teachers might be due to the fact that teachers have never heard otherwise. Moreover, the insecure or linguistically “disloyal” correction patterns among Austrian and Swiss teachers are probably due to the fact that they have never been made aware of this degree of standard variation during their teacher training. Later pilot studies (among Austrian teachers only) confirmed the correction pattern established in Ammon’s survey concerning insecurity regarding Austriacisms (Legenstein 2008, Heinrich 2010).

The first practical field, which the pluricentric concept found expression in what was the domain of teaching German as a foreign language. Even though a common resolution was made at the International Conference of German Teachers (*Internationale Deutschlehrertagung*) in Bern as early as 1986 that teaching material should include a pluricentric angle (Clalüna et al. 2007: 45). A lack of representation of the national varieties in teaching material for German as a foreign language was still evident 20 years later (Hägi 2006: 227).

A study by Ransmayr (2005/2006) investigated the status of Austrian German at universities abroad. In a large-scale survey (questionnaires, interviews), carried out at German departments at British, French, Czech and Hungarian universities², one of the research questions dealt with attitudes towards Austrian Standard German.

One of the questions tapped into was the university teachers’ perceptions of spoken Austrian German concerning categories such as “pleasantness”, “correctness” or “standardness”. The results (fig. 1) show that the most striking differences between groups as regards overall pleasantness (“nice vs. unpleasant”, “plump vs. elegant”) and “standardness” (“dialectal vs. standard”) occur between

² a total of 780 British, French, Czech and Hungarian university students of German and 129 university teachers of German from Britain, France, Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, Austria took part in the query.

Austrian and German university teachers: Germans assessed Austrian German as most dialectal, most plump and also rather old-fashioned, whereas Austrians gave the most positive ratings of all groups in these categories (Ransmayr 2005: 174).

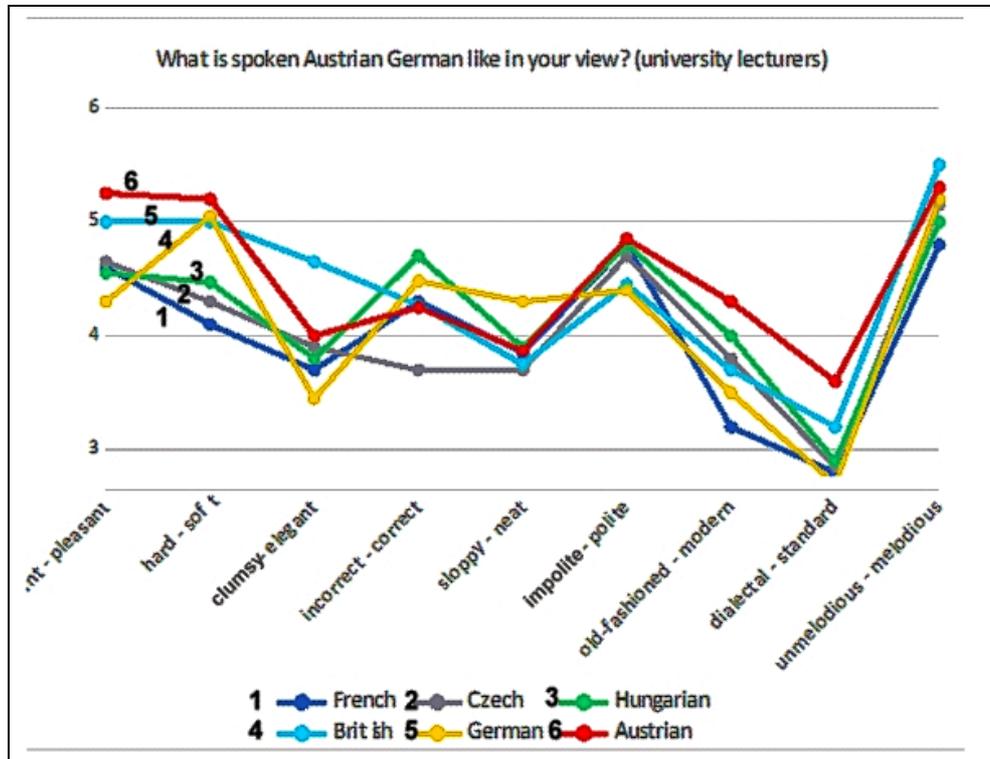


Fig. 1: What is spoken Austrian German like? (university lecturers)

What is also quite striking is the result that *all* respondents rated spoken Austrian German as rather dialectal (but note that Austrian respondents perceived Austrian German to be the most balanced between standard and dialect). The interviews confirmed this result: A lecturer from France stressed that only “*Binnendeutsch*” was taught in France – Austrian texts should only be used if they were “mostly High German”. A German lecturer describes Austrian German as “rural” and yet another lecturer equates Austrian German with dialect while questioning the existence of Austrian German altogether:

“What do you call Austrian German? Is it all the different dialects or is there a predominant dialect? Maybe it doesn’t exist at all, this Austrian German.” [translation JR]³

When university students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement “Austrian German is a dialect of German”, there was a large

³ „Was nennen Sie das österreichische Deutsch? Also sind das diese verschiedenen Dialekte oder gibt es einen vorherrschenden Dialekt? Vielleicht gibt es das gar nicht, dieses österreichische Deutsch.“

number of university students, especially from Britain (nearly 60 %), who stated that they agreed with this notion (310). Not surprisingly, the majority of students said they refrained from using Austriacisms in exams, with the highest numbers found among French and British students (fig. 2):

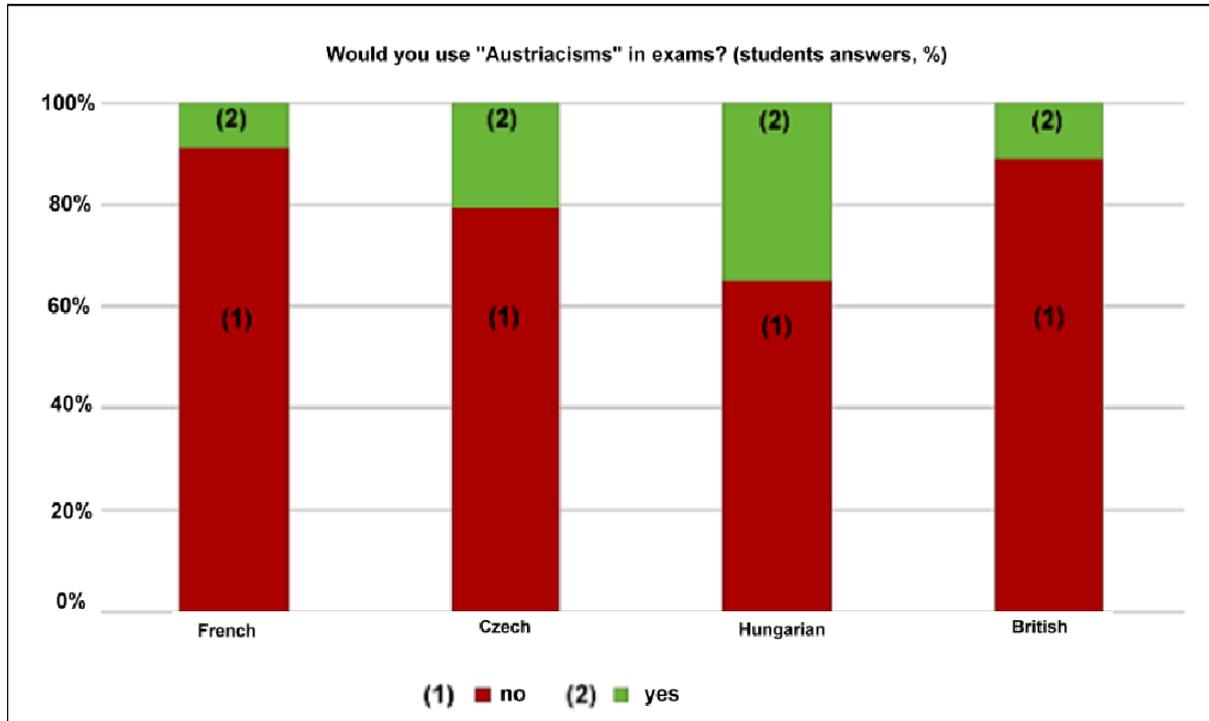


Fig. 2: Would you use "Austriacisms" in an exam? (Student's answers, %)

One assumption in the pluricentric concept concerns knowledge about varieties. Fig. 3 shows the results on the question of how much university lecturers reported to know about Austrian German (195). While (not surprisingly) Austrians stated to know quite a lot about it – followed by Czechs –, Germans were nearly at the opposite end of the spectrum. Even though the answers represent self-estimations by the respondents, the results seem to strongly support one of the assumptions in the pluricentric theory: As stated by Clyne in 1992, speakers of the dominant variety do not know a lot about the other national varieties.

A study by Markhardt (2005) carried out among EU-translators and interpreters confirmed that German speakers from Germany know much less about Austrian German than vice versa. Furthermore, translators and interpreters said to avoid using Austriacisms (except for those laid down in Austria's EU-treaty amendment, Protocol no. 10, which must be used) because they considered Austrian German a non-standard variety of German, even though they claimed to be generally aware of the existence of variation within German.

Davies/Langer came to similar results concerning the connection between

knowledge and norm tolerance: They point out that despite the general acceptance of the pluricentric model in Great Britain, teachers of German as a foreign language simply did not have enough knowledge about other national standard variants and consequently corrected forms like *vergessen auf* (Austriacism: to forget something) or *Trottoir* (Helvetism: pavement) as errors – according to a survey among British teachers in 2004 (Davies/Langer 2014).

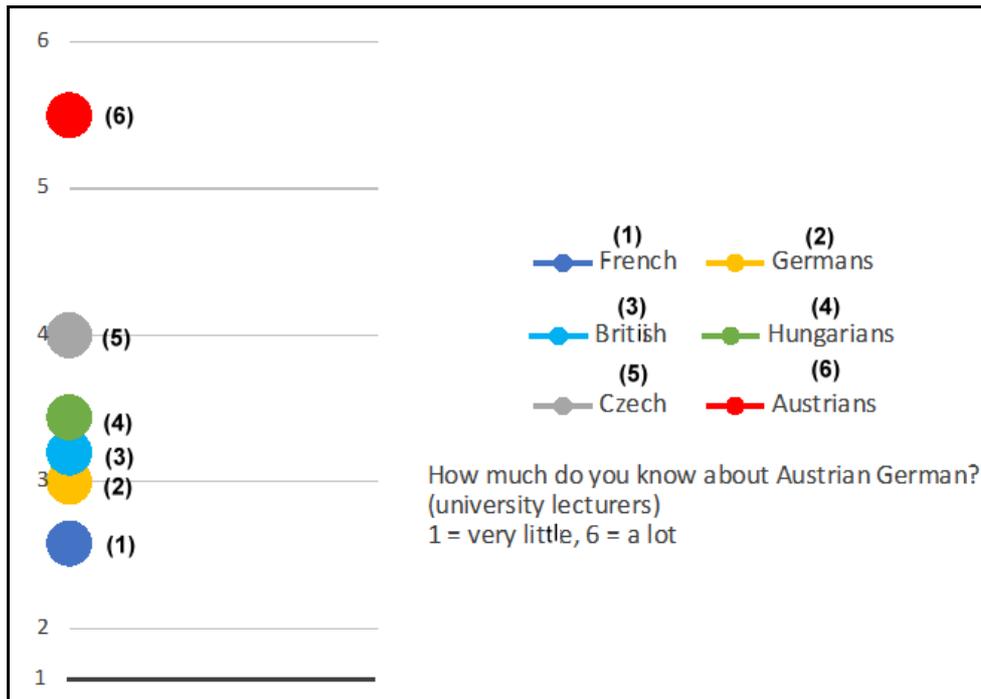


Fig. 3: How much do you know about Austrian German? (University lecturers)

However, even Swiss people themselves seem to have a rather tentative loyalty towards Swiss Standard German, as shown in a study by Scharloth (2005: 39): When asked to rate German Standard German and Swiss Standard German forms, the Swiss respondents rated more than half of the Swiss forms presented as “bad” or “flawed” German. Yet, in spite of their negative assessment of Swiss Standard German words, they still perceived them to be standard – and not dialectal.

A survey by Schmidlin (2011: 282-284) confirmed the result that Swiss speakers find specific Swiss German (standard) expressions to be standard, while Germans in the border regions in the South of Germany assess these expressions as dialectal. The same was found to be true regarding Austriacisms. Moreover, German speakers in the very South of Germany did not prove to be much more familiar with specific Austriacisms than Germans from the North of Germany. And – again confirming one of the asymmetric characteristics of pluricentric

languages – German speakers from the South of Germany assessed cross-border variants (i.e. words which are found and known in all three countries along the state-borders in the South of Germany, the Western parts of Austria and the North of Switzerland) as dialectal, whereas Austrian and Swiss speakers rated them as standard.

Similar results were derived from a study by Peter (2015: 139) concerning the assessment of texts by 150 university students universities in Switzerland, in Austria and in Germany: Not only were the norm concepts among the three nationalities generally very different, but their respective norm concepts and the prestige they associated with the varieties also influenced their preference of variety.

Pfrehm (2011) looked at how native speakers from Austria and Germany rated the standardness of 36 Austrian Standard and German Standard lexical items, investigating whether and to what extent “the concept of coexisting standard varieties of German can be validated by the perceptions of non-linguist native speakers from Austria (N=115) and Germany (N=104)”. Pfrehm presents empirical evidence for the validity of the pluricentric model. He finds a “dual standard awareness” among Austrians: Austrians apparently rated both the Austrian Standard items and the German standard items as “standard”, while Germans rated only the latter as such.

Pfrehm’s results also show that the rater’s nationality – as determined by which nation, Austria or Germany, the respondents reported to have grown up in – mattered most in forming their perceptions of the standardness of the Austrian or German standard words. And – similar to Schmidlin’s study – Austrians perceived the Austrian standard lexical items as suitable for using them “in a school essay”, while Germans regarded the Austrian standard items as colloquial or nonstandard, and their own national variants as standard.

An interesting result concerning the perception of standard and dialect among German Swiss and Austrian student groups was presented in a study by Herrgen (2015). The respondents were asked to rate speech samples such as Austrian, Swiss and German news presenters speaking standard varieties and dialect speakers speaking traditional dialects. One of the results that needs to be pointed out was that German students from Marburg were apparently either not able to distinguish the Austrian standard and the Austrian dialect speech samples or considered Austrian Standard German not to be standard, but a dialect.

While Austrian and Swiss respondents mainly rated all standard varieties as standard, German respondents rated only the German standard news speaker as

“pure” standard and gave the Austrian (and to a slightly lesser degree) the Swiss standard news speakers ratings of dialect speakers in Herrgen’s classification (Herrgen 2015: 155). This, yet again, supports the assumption that speakers of the dominant variety are often not quite familiar with the varieties of non-dominant nations and do not consider them to be standard.

Even though, as outlined above, empirical evidence has shown that speakers of non-dominant varieties of German (Austrians, Swiss) are more familiar with the standard of the dominant centre than vice versa and despite the fact that German Standard German appears to carry the most prestige in some sociolinguistic categories, these findings do not imply that speakers of the non-dominant varieties follow the dominant nation’s standard in their own language production (Peter 2015: 144). Nor does it allow the conclusion that all standard variants which speakers, i.e. Austrians, are familiar with, are perceived to be equally acceptable or appropriate.

In a large-scale research project⁴, “Austrian German as a language of instruction and education”⁵, de Cillia/Ransmayr (2019) investigated norm concepts regarding the German language among Austrian teachers and students and the role of pluricentricity in the Austrian educational context. In an Austrian-wide survey, teachers were presented with a (constructed) student text (a story by an 11-year-old pupil about Christmas, approx. 200 words) containing a large number of Austrian Standard German and German Standard German items, lexical as well as grammatical or morphological ones.

The teachers were asked to correct the text. Apart from the highly interesting result that the spectrum of “errors” or items marked as “inappropriate” corrected in this text varied from zero to 25 (note that the text did not contain any orthographic or grammatical “errors”, but simply contained a large degree of standard variation), a certain correction pattern emerged. Some of the Austrian German items were more prone to be marked than others and this

⁴ FWF-funded research project “Austrian German as a language of instruction and education” (2012-2015, University of Vienna): Using methodological triangulation, this project investigated the role of Austrian German and other varieties of German in the context of German school teaching in Austria by creating different corpora and consequently varying research angles. In one project module, documents relevant for school teaching were analysed (school curricula for German from primary to upper secondary level, teacher training curricula and the most commonly used German school books). In a second project module quantitative and qualitative means of research were employed: An Austrian-wide survey looked into the language attitudes and conceptualisations of German among German teachers (of all school types, n=165) and upper secondary school students (n=1253). 21 interviews with German teachers, two group discussions with teachers and students for communicative validation of the survey results and seven participatory classroom observations were carried out. The survey data were analysed using statistical means (SPSS), interviews and group discussions were recorded, transliterated and analysed using discourse analysis.

⁵ <https://oesterreichisches-deutsch.bildungssprache.univie.ac.at/home/>

concerned words which are on the brink between standard and colloquial language (e.g. *fladern*: to nick or steal).

Others would be more commonly used in speaking than in writing (but are also found in Austrian newspaper texts, as shown in a corpus analysis in the Austrian Media Corpus, AMC). If teachers marked such Austrian German forms as errors or inappropriate, they did so because they perceived these words to be too “informal”.

In other words, they were not sure about their standardness. Dollinger (2019: 78) refers to this phenomenon as “linguistic insecurity”. If, however, German Standard forms were marked, it was done because these words did not seem to “fit” and teachers were – as articulated in the group discussions – often rather irritated by German Standard words or constructions in an Austrian text.

And even though Austrian teachers ranked spoken German Standard German better in the categories “correct”, “educated” and “fast”, Austrian teachers favoured Austrian Standard German in all other categories such as “likeable”, “melodious”, “soft”, “pleasant”, “familiar”, “natural”, “beautiful”, “comfortable”, “polite” and “indirect” (see fig. 4) (Ransmayr 2017: 202).

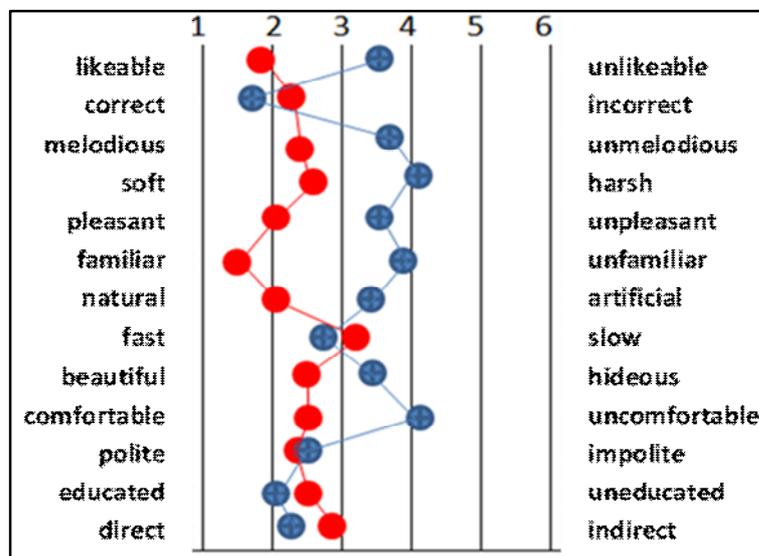


Fig. 4: Language attitudes of Austrian teachers towards spoken ASG and GSG

Linguistic insecurity as mentioned above can be found among all non-dominant German-speaking states to varying degrees. While in de Cillia/Ransmayr’s study Austrian teachers were both partially insecure and partially “loyal” regarding Austriacisms, studies in other centres of the German-speaking world showed more striking levels of linguistic insecurity:

A master thesis by Gatta (2017) investigated Swiss teachers’ correction

habits concerning Helvetisms. Her results fully confirmed Ammon's pilot study of 1995: Just like the Swiss primary school teachers in Ammon's study, Swiss secondary school teachers in Gatta's study corrected Helvetisms to a large degree. Syntactic Helvetisms were frequently corrected as grammatical errors, lexical Helvetisms were often found to be stylistically inappropriate (Gatta 2017: 389) and replaced by German Standard German or "neutral" expressions instead.

This does not come as a surprise, given that Swiss school curricula contain contradictory information about Swiss Standard German and its place in German lessons in Swiss schools: An analysis of Swiss and German school curricula by Davies (2017) looked at terminology used in these documents to refer to the standard variety. Explicit reference to "correct Swiss Standard German" is made in a Swiss curriculum (for Bern) (quoted after Davies 2017: 130). However, the same curriculum states that Helvetisms should be overcome ("*sollen überwunden werden*") by students – again, an indication of ambivalent linguistic self-esteem in a non-dominant centre.

On the other hand, Davies states that curricula in Germany use only the terms "standard language" or "High German" without further (national) specification (ibid., 135). Furthermore, Davies' results showed that German teachers knew very little about variants from other German-speaking countries, did not perceive any other variants but their own to be correct standard German and did not see the relevance of pluricentricity in their work as teachers. This attitude seems to reflect the fact that German curricula display widespread ignorance of national standard variation. Moreover, it seems to indicate that other standard varieties than German German are most probably not dealt with in teacher training courses at German universities.

In Hofer's recent survey among German teachers in Italy's autonomous province South Tyrol German Standard German was attributed by far the highest prestige, followed by Austrian Standard German. The South Tyrolean variety of German was ranked the lowest, especially concerning correctness. Linguistic insecurity and feelings of linguistic inferiority among South Tyrolean L1-German speakers were found to be overtly present (Hofer forthcoming: 181f.) – a manifestation of the phenomenon of asymmetric linguistic self-esteem, as described, par excellence, in the pluricentric theory.

5. Conclusion

It was the aim of this article to scan studies published since the development of the theory of pluricentric languages and its application to the

German language for evidence of validity of the theory.

Certain axioms are central to the theory of pluricentricity, such as the axiom of varying degrees of perceived relevance of national varieties and consequently varying degrees of perceived correctness and standardness of the varieties among speakers of dominant and non-dominant centres.

One common thread in all studies analysed is that a lack of knowledge about the non-dominant varieties was evident among speakers of the dominant variety. Speakers of the dominant variety were also found to mistake standard variation of a non-dominant centre for a non-standard/dialectal variety, that cross-border variation was perceived differently among speakers of the non-dominant and dominant centres – the latter not being aware of the difference in status and relevance of national variants in different regions: Some variants were perceived non-standard in Germany but standard in Switzerland or Austria.

A second thread relates to perceptions of standardness and correctness: All studies confirmed some degree of linguistic insecurity as far as the correctness of some national variants was concerned among speakers of non-dominant varieties. Speakers of non-dominant varieties were found to be aware of the existence of more than one standard variety. On the other hand, a certain notion of “one-standard-only” was common among speakers of the dominant centre. In all of this, knowledge seems to be key: There appears to be a clear connection between knowledge or lack thereof and the acceptance of other varieties as standard.

In the present article, central axioms of the pluricentric theory were tested for their validity, using the German language as an example. The relevant studies on the above-mentioned propositions of asymmetry between dominant and non-dominant varieties of pluricentric languages have confirmed these axioms to be true.

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