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## Pluricentricity in Language Education: Representation of Language Varieties in German Students' Digital Language Portraits<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper first discusses the current state of research of pluricentricity in language education in Germany, followed by an analysis of exemplary textbooks for teaching and learning English, French and Spanish as foreign languages. Within the scope of a micro-study, 69 digital language portraits of German students were analysed with regard to the representation of language varieties. The analysis focuses on German as the native language of most of the students as well as English, French and Spanish as the most commonly learnt foreign languages. The analysis reveals what language varieties students include in their digital language portraits, how they illustrate them and the importance they have for them. On that basis, conclusions, and desiderata about pluricentricity in language educations are discussed.

### 1. Pluricentricity in language education in Germany

#### 1.1 Current state of research

Research on including language varieties into foreign language teaching and learning dates back to the 1970s. During that time, the predominant teacher-centred instruction changed and concepts focusing on fostering communication between students were integrated into language teaching. In Germany, this development is known as *kommunikative Wende* (communicative turn). In this context, researchers demanded that more language varieties, dominant and non-dominant ones, should be included into teaching and learning (foreign) languages. During the 1980s and 1990s, more specific initiatives

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were introduced into the research areas of intercultural learning and language awareness. Notably, the development and promotion of language awareness increasingly gained importance throughout the following years. Following the turn of the millennium, the perception of e.g., Spanish or English as pluricentric languages and their role in language education has become more important and concepts that integrate more than one standard language variety are on the rise. Textbooks also play an important role in the context of integrating pluricentricity into language education. Considering the aims of language teaching and learning, which are, primarily, promoting comprehensive communicative and intercultural competences including language awareness and language learning competence, it should be concluded that these aims are not yet achieved in current language education (Leitzke-Ungerer/Polzin-Haumann 2017:9f).

Taking recent contributions about pluricentricity in language education in Europe into consideration (cf. Spanish: Martín Zorraquino et al. 2001; Moreno Fernández 2017; Leitzke-Ungerer/Polzin-Haumann 2017, Polzin-Haumann 2010; Pustka/Bäumler 2021; English: Bieswanger 2008; Lopriore/Vettorel 2015; Schubert 2014; French: Bertrand/Schaffner 2007; Fauß 2012; Frings/Schöpp 2011; Polzin-Haumann 2010; Pöll 2000; German: Benzer/Yildirim 2019; Davies et al. 2017; de Cillia/Fink/Ransmayr 2017; de Cillia/Ransmayr 2019; Huber 2021), it can be concluded that until now the focus is still on teaching and learning (European) standard varieties.

For the three popular foreign languages English, French and Spanish, this means that especially UK English, French French and Castilian Spanish are taught in Germany. Other larger language varieties, for example Australian English or Canadian French, are only of marginal interest, and smaller language varieties, such as Puerto Rican Spanish, are non-existent, despite researchers' demand to integrate more language varieties into German classrooms (cf. e.g. Leitzke-Ungerer/Polzin-Haumann 2017:11; Reimann 2011:161ff / 2017:74; Schubert 2014:235ff; Thiele 2011:65ff).

The number and selection of language varieties included in language teaching and learning form part of main research questions about pluricentricity in language education. Predominantly, it is discussed whether students may acquire specific competences in different language varieties and if so, which ones, or whether they focus on only one language variety for language acquisition. There is increasing consensus that receptive competences, e.g., listening competences, are more relevant than productive competences in different lan-

guage varieties. Reimann (2011:123ff/2017:72ff) pleads for a receptive variational competence (rezeptive Varietätenkompetenz) focusing on listening competences in different language varieties and regional languages (cf. Leitzke-Ungerer 2017b:94ff; Meißner 1995:5). Muhr (1996:42) suggests establishing a useful coexistence of norms, meaning that learners would be able to handle different language varieties with the help of receptive competences, but focus on only one language variety for language learning. However, including more than one language variety in language learning may lead to uncertainties and mix-ups for both teachers and learners. This is why teaching may focus on one language variety especially in the first years of learning, whilst integrating more language varieties on a receptive level only (cf. e.g. Muhr 1996:42; Leitzke-Ungerer 2017a:65/2017b:93ff, 109; Reimann 2011:123ff/2017:72ff).

Teacher training constitutes another research field as language teachers have to be prepared for integrating different language varieties into their classrooms. A microstudy by Reissner (2017:249ff) with 52 future Spanish teachers reveals that Spanish lessons at the schools of almost all interviewees only included Castilian Spanish. One sixth of students stated that sometimes references to Latin America were made, but only within socio-cultural topics. Furthermore, 60% of students chose Spain for their stay abroad; only 3.9% had travelled to Latin America. Therefore, students associated their experiences with the Spanish language and culture mainly with Spain. Regarding pluricentricity, students attribute language varieties as important, however they claim that concepts for integrating language varieties into teaching are still lacking. For a more comprehensive study with similar key findings see Pustka/Bäumler 2021.

In connection with teaching concepts and materials, textbooks have significant relevance and influence. Nevertheless, pluricentricity is not yet integrated sufficiently in recent textbooks as will be illustrated in the next section (cf. e.g. Huber 2021:117ff.; Montemayor/Neusius 2017:185ff; Leitzke-Ungerer 2017b:100ff; Reimann 2011:138ff; Stadie 2011:103ff).

## 1.2 Textbook analysis

In the context of language education, textbooks possess significant importance and influence in language teaching and learning. Several studies already reveal that language varieties should be integrated more in recent textbooks (cf. German:Benzer/Yildirim 2019; de Cillia/Ransmayr 2019; Huber 2021; Spanish:Leitzke-Ungerer 2017a/b; Montemayor/Neusius 2017; French:Monte-

mayor/Neusius 2017; Reimann 2011; Stadie 2011; Polzin-Haumann 2010; English:Bieswanger 2008).

In this section, the textbooks *Green Line* (English as a first foreign language), *Découvertes Série jaune* (French as a second foreign language) and *Encuentros hoy* (Spanish as a third foreign language) are briefly<sup>2</sup> analysed regarding language varieties. The textbooks are exemplarily chosen because they represent textbooks that are frequently used in Germany<sup>3</sup>. Hence, most of the students who participated in this study and created digital language portraits may be familiar with them.

The textbook series *Green Line* offers different units and volumes focusing on English-speaking countries and regions, such as the UK, the USA or Australia, which is beneficial in the context of English as pluricentric language. However, a closer look at the textbooks reveals that language varieties and their specific linguistic characteristics only play a marginal role. Generally, activities focus on differences in vocabulary, e.g. contrasting selected words from UK and Australian English (cf. in *Green Line* 5, Unit 3). Besides this, the main focus is put on intercultural characteristics and differences, for example discussing traditions such as Halloween or Thanksgiving, as well as differences in school systems or culinary stereotypes (e.g. in *Green Line* 4, Unit 1). The volume *Green Line* 5 focuses on Australia and the USA and includes the unit *The world speaks English* (*Green Line* 5, unit 1). This unit informs about three English-speaking countries (India, South Africa, Australia), presented with the use of categories including population, area, independent from UK since, interesting facts and student statements. Information about the number of languages spoken is given, but without specification. A vocabulary activity contrasts words and chunks typical for Australian English with UK English in two boxes. No further linguistic considerations about language varieties were found. In summary, the focus is still primarily on UK and American English; hence, different English language varieties are not integrated sufficiently and often reduced to vocabulary activities. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that texts for listening comprehension in different, larger Standard English language varieties are used

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<sup>2</sup> The limited extent of this paper did not allow in-depth analyses of the textbooks; thus, compare the respective comments in footnotes for more extensive analyses of textbook series.

<sup>3</sup> Due to the federalism in Germany, each *Bundesland* (federal state) and sometimes even schools independently decide which textbooks are used in their classes. Hence, there is a huge variety of textbooks from different publishers in use.

(e.g. UK or American English). Essentially, students get to know different English-speaking countries and their cultures.<sup>4</sup>

In the textbook series *Découvertes Série jaune*, France, and hence French French, are the main focus. In the third volume, the unit *Bienvenue en francophonie!* introduces students to different French-speaking countries and regions, such as Canada, Burkina Faso, and Morocco. Besides intercultural, socio-cultural, geographical, and historical knowledge, one activity also focuses on *Mots et expressions du Québec* (words and expressions from Quebec). After translating a short story about weekend activities with typical expressions from Quebec French into French French, the question *Qu'est-ce qu'on peut dire sur le français du Québec?* (What can one say about the Quebec French?) may initiate a reflection process about Quebec French and perhaps more French language varieties. Apart from this activity, linguistic characteristics of other French language varieties were not discussed explicitly. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that references to Creole languages, e.g. from Martinique, in form of greetings were found (*Découvertes Série jaune* 3, unit 5). Throughout the textbooks, several activities refer to regional languages spoken in France (e.g. *Découvertes Série jaune* 5, unit 4), Creole languages (e.g. *Découvertes Série jaune* 3, unit 5) as well as youth language (e.g. *Découvertes Série jaune* 3, unit 4). Only a few listening comprehensions include different French language varieties; the principal focus is evidently on French French. In the most recent *Découvertes*-volumes published since 2020, France is still the focus, but in the third volume, which is not yet available, units about Quebec (unit 3) and the Antilles (unit 4) have been planned. In conclusion, similarly to the *Green Line 5* textbook, *Découvertes Série jaune* dedicates one unit to the variety of the French-speaking world and introduces students to different French speaking countries, cultures, and contexts. Furthermore, references to regional French language varieties, Creole languages and youth languages were found, but may be substantiated in the future. Overall, France and teaching French French are clearly the primary focus.<sup>5</sup>

The textbook series *Encuentros hoy* focuses on Spain, but also includes units about Mexico, El Cono Sur and Peru. In the first volume, various students

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<sup>4</sup> These results coincident with the study of Bieswanger (2008: 39ff), who analyzed previous *Green Line*-volumes.

<sup>5</sup> For more comprehensive analyses with similar results compare for *À plus!* Montemayor/Neusius (2017: 187ff), for *Découvertes, À plus, Tous ensemble* and *Passages* Polzin-Haumann (2010: 666f.), for *À plus!* and *Découvertes* Stadie (2011: 103ff) and for *Tous ensemble, Tout va bien, À plus!* and *Découvertes* Reimann (2011: 138ff).

present themselves on a map, which provides initial information about Spanish speakers worldwide. In the Mexico-unit, students get a short introduction with different information about Mexico, such as official name, capital, population size, etc. – similar as to the unit *The world speaks English* in *Green Line 5*. In the rest of the unit, Mexico is approached from different perspectives, including texts and activities about famous people, food, traditions, and history, for example. In addition, linguistic characteristics are scarcely included (*Encuentros hoy 1*, unit 6). In the *Algo más*-section at the end of the textbook, a text about Spanish as a pluricentric language informs about different Spanish language varieties and their specific characteristics taking lexis and morphosyntax into account. Unfortunately, the text loses this focus and ends up with the discussion on whether Spanish is a difficult language to learn (*Encuentros hoy 1*, 146). The El Cono Sur-unit in *Encuentros hoy 2* also focuses on cultural, historical, and geographical aspects. A reference to Argentinian Spanish exists in the text *Intercambio en Buenos Aires* (exchange in Buenos Aires), in which a student talks about her experiences throughout her gap year. She explains that she had difficulties to understand Argentinian Spanish, e.g. because of the pronoun *voseo*, having learnt and used Castilian Spanish before. Additionally, a table contrasts Argentinian and Castilian Spanish words and verbs (A: *acá* – C: *aquí*; A: *vos* – C: *tú*; A: *necesitás* – C: *(tú) necesitas*; A: *Che* – C: *tío*) (*Encuentros hoy 2*, unit 3). In the *Algo más*-section, a matching activity further discusses lexical and morphosyntactic differences between Castilian and Argentinian Spanish (*Encuentros hoy 2*, 130). The Peru-unit in *Encuentros hoy 3* follows a similar concept to the other units about Latin American countries and regions, meaning that linguistic characteristics are only of marginal interest (*Encuentros hoy 3*, unit 4). To conclude, students get to know different Spanish-speaking countries and become familiar with their cultures and traditions. In selected texts and activities, references to Spanish language varieties are made, but linguistic characteristics are still only marginally included, especially when it comes to pronunciation.<sup>6</sup>

The exemplary textbook analysis reveals that linguistic and cultural differences within the language varieties are included, even though the topic needs further implementation. In general, differences within language varieties and speaking communities are reduced to typical examples referring to lexis, morphosyntax and cultural differences as illustrated in the examples. A

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<sup>6</sup> These results coincident with the studies of Montemayor/Neusius (2017: 185f, 189) and Leitzke-Ungerer (2017a: 61ff), who analyzed previous *Encuentros*-volumes, and Polzin-Haumann (2010: 668f.) who analyzed several volumes of *Encuentros*, *Línea verde* and *Puente nuevo*.

desideratum can also be seen in offering more listening activities with speakers from different English-, French- and Spanish-speaking countries. The focus is mainly centred around larger language varieties, and smaller language varieties are non-existent in the textbooks, although several activities also include youth language or regional language varieties.

Consequently, for the digital language portrait analysis it can be assumed that learners are only familiar with the contents presented in the textbooks, unless the teacher adds information on language varieties that are not taken from the textbooks.

## 2. Pluricentricity in German Students' Digital Language Portraits

### 2.1 Research context: data collection for this microstudy

In the scope of my ongoing dissertation project, I undertook a feasibility study, in which one of the main objectives was finding ways on how to foster students' individual plurilingual competences (cf. Korb 2019). In this context, I taught a subject about plurilingualism at three German schools in senior classes with students aged 17-19 from 2017-2019. Drawing language portraits was one of the first activities and, thus, the students were not influenced by previous lessons when thinking about their linguistic repertoire.

### 2.2 Methodology: digital language portraits

Language portraits initially aiming at promoting language awareness in primary schools have evolved into an established method for language biographical research. Often enough, students are not aware of their own and their classmates' linguistic repertoire. Language portraits help to make all their languages visible and initiate reflections about their language learning processes. Hence, they are used to promote language awareness and to raise awareness for linguistic and cultural diversity.

In order to create a language portrait, the learners first reflect on their linguistic repertoire and their communication strategies. In the second step, they visualize the languages and their respective meanings in a body silhouette or on a blank sheet. Lastly, they add an explanation to it (e.g. Busch <sup>3</sup>2021: 40ff.; Caspari 2006; Krumm 2002).

The language portraits of the students involved in this microstudy were expanded by the digital dimension using *Microsoft PowerPoint*. Their task was to create their language portrait including the multiple possibilities of digital media for visualization, e.g. pictures, posts, hyperlinks, videos, etc. In this way,

students included languages that play a role in their real and virtual life. Subsequently, the students wrote an explanation and reflection of their digital language portraits and presented them to the class.

### 2.3 Analysis: representation of language varieties

This analysis begins with a brief general explanation about the students' digital language portraits, followed by research questions and the representation of language varieties for German, English, French and Spanish.

69 digital language portraits are part of this analysis. Altogether, 24 different languages were illustrated including German as a native language for most of the students (except for five), English, Spanish and French as the most popular foreign languages, other foreign languages (e.g. Italian, Japanese, Portuguese) and family languages (e.g. Arabic, Italian, Bosnian, Kurdish). Some students also illustrated German regional varieties.

It should be mentioned that the students were not asked to think about language varieties as such, just about the languages that play a role in their lives. As a general result, it can be said that students tend to identify more with the countries, cities, cultural aspects, and stereotypes than with the languages and/or language varieties themselves. A parallel to the contents of the textbooks can clearly be detected.

The following research questions that will be addressed in this analysis are:

- How and to what degree do German high school students consider different language varieties when creating their personal digital language portraits?
- How do they explain their language choice and illustration?
- What importance do language varieties have for students?
- What does this indicate for pluricentric languages and (foreign) language learning and teaching?
- What are possible consequences for (foreign) language learning and teaching?

#### 2.3.1 German as a native language

German as a native language or foreign language was illustrated in 67 out of 69 language portraits. 64 students associated German only with Germany, one student with Germany and Austria and two students with Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. The students used either a map of Germany or the German flag as one major way of illustration, followed by stereotypical associa-

tions (e.g. soccer, *Wiener Schnitzel*, beer, white socks in sandals, Berlin) as well as family and friends. Austria was associated with holidays and job perspectives.

The illustrations lead to the conclusion that students strongly connect German with Germany and perceive it as language of family and friends. Other German language varieties are of marginal interest, which may be explained by the fact that German is the mother tongue for the vast majority of students.

### 2.3.2 English as a foreign language

English as a foreign language was visualized in 65 out of 69 language portraits. 39 students associated English only with the UK, two only with the USA. 14 students included the UK and the USA, one student the UK, the USA and Canada. Five students illustrated English using a map of all English-speaking countries, which reflects their awareness for English as a global language. For four of the students an association was not discernible as they referred to social media or music. For illustration, students also used maps and flags, followed by stereotypical associations (e.g. London, Tower Bridge, the Queen, tea time, English breakfast, New York, hamburgers), holidays, school exchange, job perspectives and music.

To sum up, the students seem to have a strong focus on UK English, followed by both UK and American English. Other English language varieties are essentially scarcely included. English is also perceived as a global language. These findings coincide with the textbook analysis where the focus was also put on UK and American English. Still, it is interesting that students did not include Australian English, even though several units included Australia.

### 2.3.3 French as a foreign language

French as a foreign language was included in 44 out of 69 language portraits. All students associated French only with France.

For illustration, students once more mainly used flags and maps as well as stereotypical associations (e.g. wine, cheese, frogs, Paris, baguette, croissant). Seven students also associated French with school and learning; some others expressed their dislike for French for example by using the thumbs down. Furthermore, three students included the supermarket Cora, which is located close to the German border and a popular shopping destination for people living in Saarland. It is interesting to observe that none of the students included another French-speaking country.

Overall, French French is in the centre of the digital language portraits. Possible explanations for this may be found in the rather France-centred French teaching and learning tradition, which is also reflected in the textbooks. Therefore, the influence of textbooks is clear in this context. In addition, it is noticeable that students seem to have a negative association with learning French, which could partially be caused by the contents of the textbooks. On a more positive note, it should be mentioned that some students included the closeness to France, showed awareness for France as neighbouring country and saw relevance in speaking French as a neighbouring language.

### 2.3.4 Spanish as a foreign language

Spanish was illustrated in 32 out of 69 language portraits. 24 students associated Spanish only with Spain, followed by seven students who included Spain and Latin America. One student connected Spanish with Latin America in general. Again, ways of illustration included flags and maps, stereotypical associations (e.g. Flamenco, Paella, Torero, Mariachi, burrito) and holidays.

To sum up, three quarters of the students associated Spanish only with Castilian Spanish, which may be related to the fact that most of the students had been learning Spanish for one year at the time of data collection. Once again, the influence of textbooks is obvious as they mostly focus on Spain and Mexico in the first years of learning. The students who associated Spanish with Spain and Latin America did not distinguish further as to which Latin American country they referred to. Some focused on Mexico, but most of the students did not specify which language variety spoken in Latin America they referred to, or which country they considered. They seem to assume that there is only one Latin American Spanish language variety.

## 3. Conclusion

The synopsis of the current state of research, the exemplary textbook analysis and the digital language portrait analysis show that larger, especially European, standard language varieties are in the centre of language education in Germany. Other language varieties are increasingly included, but still with a focus on inter- and sociocultural factors and only little reference to linguistic characteristics. According to the state of research, fostering receptive competences (especially listening comprehension) in different language varieties should be developed further. Textbooks do not consider this desideratum sufficiently up to now and additional teaching and learning contents on language

varieties are necessary. Nevertheless, the textbook volumes and units dedicated to different English-, French- and Spanish-speaking countries raise awareness for pluricentricity and introduce students to new speaking communities, even though further implementation is needed taking the findings of the digital language portrait analysis into consideration. Another remarkable finding of the analysis is that awareness and relevance of language varieties seem to differ from language to language. English was connected more often with its language varieties than Spanish, while French was only associated with French French. Taking this into consideration, it may be argued that the research findings indicate that the students' language awareness may also illustrate dynamics of language and power, e.g. when thinking of colonial times.

Throughout the paper, it became clear that current language education does not prepare for interacting in a pluricentric world and that research is not yet transferred sufficiently into school practice. The findings now raise questions about what this means for pluricentricity in language education and what possible consequences for (foreign) language learning and teaching there might be?

First, it is essential to highlight the importance of pluricentricity in language education in research, didactics, and school practice. Secondly, it is important to raise awareness for language varieties and their specific characteristics. This concerns future teachers as well as students. Thirdly and lastly, it is necessary to provide ideas and materials to enable (future) teachers and educators to integrate pluricentricity into their classrooms.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The 04/2022 volume of the journal Hispanorama, which is directed to Spanish language teachers and researchers, will include a thematic focus (organized by Polzin-Haumann and Korb) about pluricentricity in Spanish language teaching and learning providing insights into the classroom and teaching materials.

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