

Chapter 15

Competing Concepts

The pluriareal concept against pluricentricity

1. Introduction

This chapter deals with the pluriareal model pluriareal model that contests the validity of the pluricentric model. Even though all publications concerning the pluriareal model refer to German, the model is presented here in detail, as it claims to be universally valid for all pluricentric languages. An extensive discussion and refutation of the claims by the pluriareal group can be found in Muhr (2020) and particularly in Muhr (2024).

2. The pluriareal concept– Origins and key arguments

The pluriareal concept has its origin in two publications by Wolf (1994, 2012) and Scheuringer (1992, 1996a, 1997), which were supported by Pohl (1997) and Wiesinger (1997). This was the first pluriareal-group, a second one formed itself around 2010 with Elspaß (2010, 2012). Elspaß/Niehaus (2013), Dürscheid/Elspaß/Ziegler (2015, 2017); Ziegler/Scherr (2023) provided descriptions of their concept.

The central claims of the pluriareal model:

- (1) The claim of linguistic “overlap” across the borders¹
- (2) The claim that “there are no state-national varieties” and “pluricentricity is not based on state-nations”²
- (3) The claim “nations cannot be linguistic centres.”³
- (4) The claim that the linguistic differences between AG and GG are only 2% and too small to establish a NV.⁴
- (5) The claim of the inconsistency of Austrian German⁵
- (6) The “non-existence-of-AG claim”
- (7) The claim that there are no NVs of German⁶
- (8) The claim that the pluricentricity model is a “purely political concept based on the based on the notion of *Überdachung* [umbrella function] of the language area by a political state”.⁷
- (9) The claim that “the pluricentricity concept supports language separatist activities”⁸,
- (10) The claim that standard language and gets levelled down in non-dominant varieties.⁹

The first three claims are central and constitute more or less the “theory”

of the pluriareal concept. The main argument is that in PCLs with a contiguous language area there is overlap in language use across the borders and because of that there are only very few "real" specific features of single NAVs. With regard to German, it is claimed that most Austrian (lexical) specific features are also used in areas of south Germany or Switzerland¹⁰ leading to the further claim that Austrian German (AG) only has about 4000 lexical items that are specific which is no more than 2% of the whole German lexicon. Derived from this it is claimed that Austrian German does not exist and there are no NAVs of German. This is underpinned by the additional claim (5) that AG is internally so diverse that this is another reason why AG does not exist as a separate variety. The claim that "nations cannot be linguistic centres" is also central for the pluriareal model as it is argued that there are several regional centres within a country and not just one. Finally a general and basic argument against the PLCM is that it is a "purely political" concept, which is "based on the notion of *Überdachung* [overarching] of the language area by a political state. This seems to be conceived as wrong, as with the dissolution of the former German Democratic Republic (East-Germany) the German language lost a whole NAV, a natural process when a nation state gets incorporated into another. Two further claims are that the PLCM supports language separatist activities and leads to the leveling down of the standard language in NDVs.

3. The "Variantengrammatik – Grammar of variants" as a failed attempt to empirically confirm the pluriareal model

The pluriareal group started a large scale research project on the grammatical variation in written texts (newspaper texts) in 2011 that lasted until 2019. It was superficially aimed at researching grammatical variation in German, but was in fact an attempt to empirically substantiate the claims of the pluriareal model and, above all, to achieve language political aims such as proving that there are no national varieties of German. This attempt failed as Muhr (2024) shows by thoroughly analysing 200 of 963 entries published on the website of the project.¹¹ The details will be presented in the next section.

4. The pluriareal concept– an evaluation

The pluriareal model does not have a "theory" in the true sense of the word. The framework of description is the German-speaking area as a geographical region that is subdivided into 15 regions that were taken from the *Variantenwörterbuch* [Dictionary of German lexical variants.]¹² It is highly arbitrary and unfounded, but established. The claims of the pluriareal model proponents are based exclusively on lexical and morphological data. Phonetic-phonological, syntactic and pragmatic data are completely absent.

Fortunately, there are three empirical studies that can be used to verify the allegations of the pluriareal model: (1) Firstly, by checking the maps provided in Jürgen Eichhoff's "Atlas of German colloquial languages"¹³ (1977/1978) (Muhr, 2020), (2) by checking of the results of the "Varianten-grammatik" (Muhr, 2024), and (3) by the results of Glauninger (1997) who researched the regional linguistic diversity within Austria. The results of Muhr (2020): 28 (23.14%) of the surveyed 121 expressions are used throughout Austria and are specific for Austria, a further 16 (13.22%) expressions are also used throughout Austria but not in the two western states Tyrol and Vorarlberg. 6 (4,96%) expressions are specific for the western parts of Austria, which sums up to 41,42% (50 expressions) that are specific for Austria.

The allegation that in the AG lexicon there are only 2% of specific expression is completely false. Eichhoff's maps also show that there is overlap with the neighbouring areas of Germany or Switzerland. The overlap with Switzerland is rather small with 7 expressions (5,79%). These and the overlap with Germany amount to 71 (58,68%) expressions and linguistic features. This is a ratio of 40:60. Since 40% of the analysed expressions and features are specific for Austria, it is clear that the national variety Austrian German exists and that substantially more than 2% of the AG lexicon is specific to Austria.

The study of Muhr (2024) checked 200 out of 969 items of the Varianten-grammatik (Grammar of variants) that were published as a dictionary on the web.¹⁴ This was done with a corpus that contained 19 billion running words, whereas the corpus of the VARGR-corpus contained only 600 mio. words.¹⁵ A major result was that 60% of the presented data could not be confirmed by the very large comparative corpus and are therefore simply wrong. It also turned out that, extrapolated, the values of 10 or more data fields are incorrect in 626 of the 969 entries. The claimed regional clusters are therefore either non-existent or false. The VARGR data are highly unreliable and not suitable for proving any of the language policy goals that were the actual aim of the VARGR project, as the following details show.

A further major result was that 34,44% of the variants of the VARGR are a national variant, which come close to the results of Eichhoff's maps with 40%. Of the 969 VARGR entries, 325 entries contain at least one national variant. The claim that the number of national variants amounts to no more than 2% of the Austrian German lexicon has thus been refuted once again.¹⁶

Finally, there is the so called *inconsistency claim* of Austrian German, which asserts that there are so many linguistic differences within Austria that it does not form a national variety. The VARGR-survey showed that 562 (58%) out of 969 AG entries are used homogeneously across the country, 242 (25%) are

used slightly inhomogeneously with peaks of up to 20%, and 155 entries (16%) show an inhomogeneous use of between 20-68%. The data clearly refute the pluriareal model claim of the inhomogeneity of AG and that it does not exist as a NAV. This means that Austrian German shows a high degree of conformity throughout the country.

This was also the result of Glauninger (1997) who researched the use of 181 lexical items using picture cards representing the lexicographic form that is used in German German in all nine capital cities of the 9 Austrian federal states. The result was that the agreement in the lexical usage in the 9 state capitals is nowhere lower than 76%. There is also no east-west divide as alleged by the pluriareal group. The inconsistency claim is also clearly disconfirmed by these data.

5. Summary

The details of the three empirical studies clearly show that there is no substance in the claims of the pluriareal model. Neither do the data show that Austrian German and the other NAVs don't exist, nor are the lexical differences only on the level of 2%. Instead they range between 30-40%. Although, there is overlapping between the NAVs of German, there are substantial linguistic differences that constitute them both systematically and in the awareness of the language community in Austria. The pluriareal model is also not based on a "theory" in the true sense of the word, it is moreover a return to linguistic concepts of the late 19. century, when dialect geography flourished and the "one-language-one nation concept" prevailed. The pluriareal model conceives the German language solely as a linguistic-geographical phenomenon, ignores the constitution of independent German-speaking nation states outside Germany and is attempting to restore the complete dominance of German German, which the representatives of the pluriareal model regard as lost. As such, it cannot be taken seriously and also not as it is not applicable to other pluricentric languages that cannot be described by this model.

Footnotes:

¹ Ibid. While some national variants do exist, in a lot of cases the *diatopic extension of Standard German variants is not limited to national borders*. They are not *absolute variants*, as terms such as 'Germanism', 'Helvetism' or 'Austriacism' may suggest. Rather, in many cases they are *relative variants*, i.e. they are employed in a part of the respective country or by a part of the members of the speech community only. Moreover, *diatopic standard variants do cross borders*, i.e. *their distribution is not restricted to one country alone*.

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- 2 Wolf (1994: 74): the additional question is whether the situation of German standard language is actually characterized by "pluricentricity" ... or whether this term can adequately describe the situation of the standard German language at all."
- 3 Wolf (1994: 74): With this choice of words however it would have to be clarified whether states at that time there were still four could be called "centres" of a language and whether only one such centre was active in the Federal Republic of Germany at that time whether this was Bonn or Munich or Stuttgart or Hamburg whether this was Vienna in Austria whether the people of Vorarlberg with their pronounced self-confidence attach themselves to this centre or even subordinate themselves to it.
Auer (2013:42): 'for the construction of the varieties ... the real usage conditions are therefore not relevant.
- 4 Elspaß/Niehaus (2014: 50): One can argue that less than two per cent of variation in standard German lexis and pronunciation and even less variation in grammar does hardly make a 'variety'. Also Wiesinger (1995: 63): "These well-recorded lexical Austriacisms are distributed over various subject areas and, according to their combination by Jakob Ebner in his dictionary "Wie sagt man in Österreich?", amount to about 4000 words. In contrast, Duden's "Großes Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache", including the derivations and composites, lists over 200.000 keywords. In comparison, Austriacisms make up about 2%, or in other words, an average of 2 Austriacisms are found in a text of 100 words, although the actual occurrence varies according to subject area and content due to the different distributions."
- 5 Wolf (1994: 75): "... there is no such thing as 'Austrian German' a uniform variety but that within Austria - as in the entire German-speaking area - several linguistic landscapes must be differentiated."
- 6 Elspaß/Dürscheid/Ziegler (2017: 20): What can the results so far contribute to the question of 'pluricentricity' or 'pluriareality'? In none of the cases shown here is it the case that grammatical variants only apply in one nation and otherwise in no other region of the German-speaking world, i.e. along the lines of 'x is a Deutschlandism, y is a Helvetism and z is an Austriacism': 'x is a Deutschlandism, y is a Helvetism and z is an Austriacism'.
[Was können die bisherigen Ergebnisse nun zur Frage ‚Plurizentrität‘ oder ‚Pluriarealität‘ beitragen? In keinem der hier aufgezeigten Fälle ist es so, dass grammatische Varianten nur in einer Nation und ansonsten in keiner anderen Region des deutschen Sprachraumes gelten, also etwa nach dem Muster: ‚x ist ein Deutschlandismus, y ist ein Helvetismus und z ist ein Austriacismus‘.]
- 7 Elspaß/Niehaus (2014: 50): Firstly, it is an entirely political concept, based on the notion of *Überdachung* [umbrella function] of the language area by a political state. As for the recent history of German, this would have had the somewhat odd consequence that on 3 October 1990, the German language has lost an entire national variety, namely GDR German, literally overnight.
- 8 Wolf (1994: 67): The foundation of the Austrian Dictionary after WWII (issued in 1951) is considered as an act of "a strange restorative cultural policy after WWII" and led by a separatist ideology."
- 9 Wolf (1994: 69): ...dialectal and colloquial elements in this primarily arealinguistic sense have no place in a standard language dictionary, they are also not elements of a "state-national variety" ...of German."
- 10 It has to be noted that there are hardly any references to Switzerland in the pluriareal model. They are almost all the time arguing in respect to Austria.
- 11 https://mediawiki.ids-mannheim.de/VarGra/index.php/Alle_Artikel [acc. 02.04.2025]
- 12 Ammon et. al. (2004) and (2016). The German-speaking area is divided into 4 Austrian regions, 6 German regions, Switzerland, Belgium, Liechtenstein and South Tyrol are treated as a single region.

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- ¹³ “Atlas der deutschen Umgangssprachen”.
- ¹⁴ https://mediawiki.ids-mannheim.de/VarGra/index.php/Alle_Artikel [acc. 02.04.2025]
- ¹⁵ Muhr (2024: 115ff): Among others, it turned out that the text corpus is heavily biased. Only 17.07% of newspapers make up half of the German sub-corpus of the VARGR. Three newspapers account for 66.89% of the articles in the Austrian sub-corpus. At the same time, half of the articles in the Austrian sub-corpus are assigned to the AT-SO area, while only 6.87% of the articles are assigned to the AT-East area, which is the most populous. The Swiss corpus comprises only 7 newspapers, which represents only 2.44% of all 287 newspapers in Switzerland.
- ¹⁶ For many other details see chapter 4 and 5 of Muhr (2024).