

# Attitudes towards and awareness of language variation in pre-school children in Austria

Irmtraud Kaiser

Presentation at the ViLA2 Conference 2014

Grenoble, 3 Dec. 2014

# The sociolinguistic situation in Austria



# Austrian-Bavarian: audio example

Heute Nacht hat's geschneit und der kleine Franzi will darum gar nicht gern in die Schule gehen. Schneemannbauen wär' doch viel lustiger! Aber der Vater und die Mutter geben nicht nach und schicken den Buben aus dem Haus. Auf dem Weg macht der Franzi mit seinen Freunden eine Schneeballschlacht. Knietief liegt der Schnee auf der Straße und die Bäume glitzern in der Sonne. Wegen der dicken weißen Schneedecke merken sie aber nicht, dass sie schon auf dem zugefrorenen Gartenteich von den Nachbarn stehen. Auf einmal kracht's und zwei von den Buben schwimmen im kalten Wasser! So ein Pech! Mit einer großen Leiter zieht der Nachbar die Buben wieder heraus und sie rennen schnell heim. Der Vater hört die Haustür und fragt: „Was ist los? Musst du noch was holen?“ Der kleine Franzi zittert zwar vor lauter Kälte, aber eine Antwort hat der Lauser parat: „Nein, aber die Schule ist heute ins Wasser gefallen!“



# Individual language variation in Austria

## Online-survey Ender/Kaiser (2009):

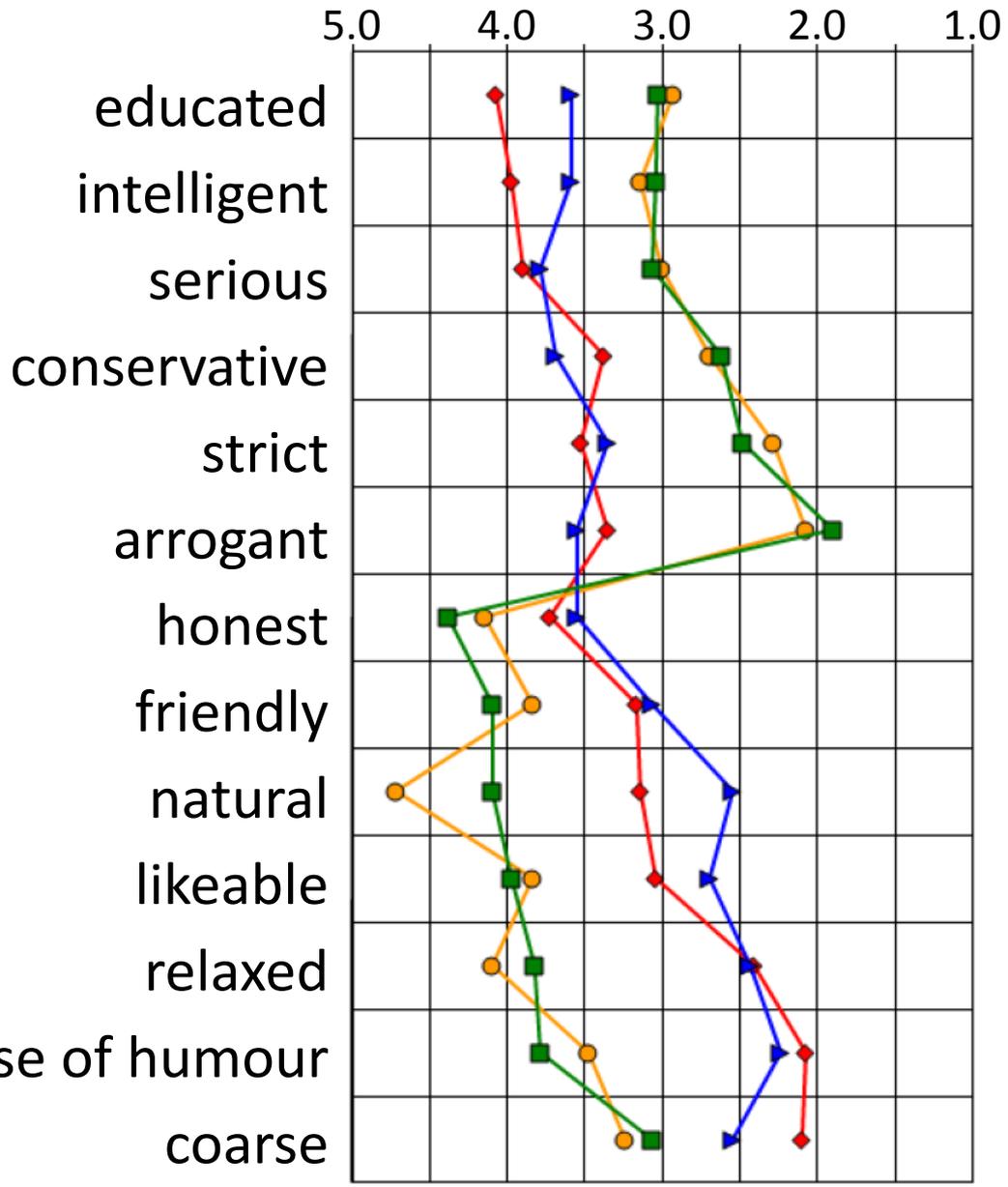
- 72 % (n=82) of Austrian-Bavarian adult speakers report having „good“ or „fairly good“ proficiency in **both** dialect and standard German
- Situational language choice typically depends on the formality of the situation and on the (variety spoken by the) interlocutor

# (Adults') attitudes towards dialect and standard language

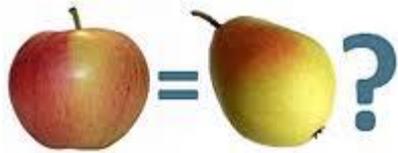
results from:  
Soukup (2012) and  
Soukup (2013)

- ◆ standard male
- dialect male
- ▲ standard female
- dialect female

good sense of humour  
coarse



# When do children acquire awareness of and attitudes towards L1 variation?



Discrimination between varieties/accents:

- Studies point at the age of 4 to 6 as an important age range for the development of discrimination abilities (cf. Rosenthal 1974; Girard/Floccia/Goslin 2008; Häcki Buhofer/Burger/Schneider/Studer 1994)
- Häcki Buhofer/Burger/Schneider/Studer (1994): more than 90 % of the first-graders (6 year-olds) are able to distinguish between their own Swiss-German dialect and standard German

# When do children acquire awareness of and attitudes towards L1 variation?



Attitudes towards and preferences for varieties/accents (correctness and likeability):

- Research results are contradictory as to the age at which children acquire society's attitude patterns towards varieties (ranging from 3 years to 8 years); results seem to depend on study design and sociolinguistic situation (Rosenthal 1974; Day 1980; Cremona/Bates 1977; Kinzler/DeJesus 2013; Barbu/Nardy/Chevrot/Juhel 2013; Häcki Buhofer/Burger/Schneider/Studer 1994)
- Most studies point at an enormous influence of schooling
- Häcki Buhofer/Burger/Schneider/Studer (1994): 6-year-olds do not show any preferences for either Swiss German dialect or standard German, first graders prefer standard German, second graders prefer dialect (similarly to adults)

# What about Austrian children?



large research gap!

→ Project:

## **“Pre-school children’s varietal competence in Austrian German“**

- awareness of variation
- attitudes towards varieties
- receptive and productive proficiency in both varieties

### **Research questions regarding awareness and attitudes:**

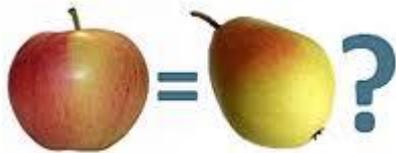
- What do Austrian preschool children know about language variation in Austria?
- Are they aware of varying their own speech?
- What are their attitudes towards (speakers of) dialect and the standard language?
- Are there any significant differences between 4-year-olds and 6-year-olds?
- And which are the most influential variables in shaping knowledge and attitudes (parents, kindergarten teachers, peers, media, etc.)?

# What about Austrian children?

**Methods** (still in fine-tuning!):



preference task



discrimination task



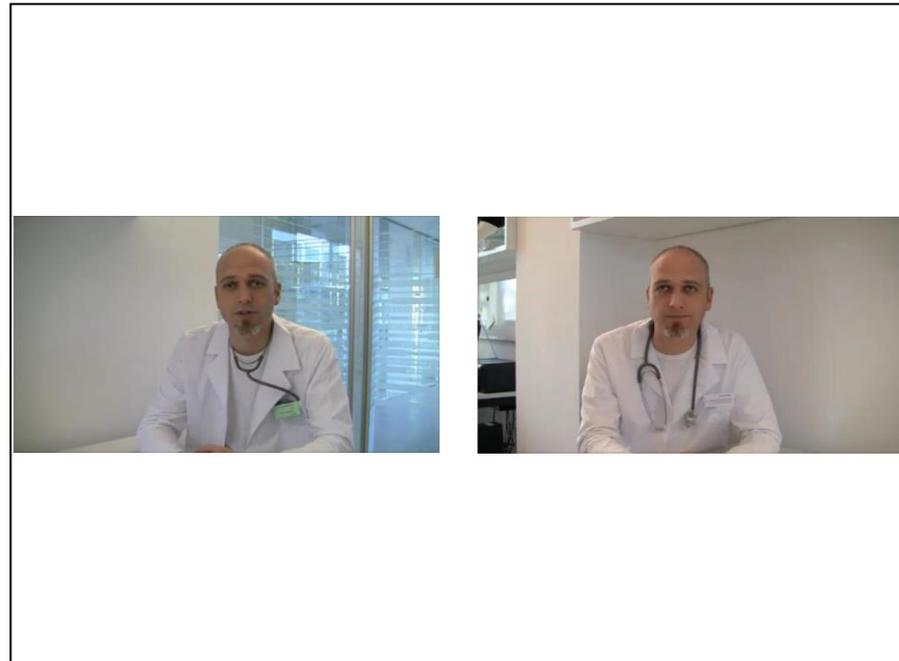
interview

# Preference Task

- puppet is ill, child should pick a doctor
- videos of two female and two male doctors: doctor A speaks in dialect, doctor B (same actor/actress) speaks in standard German
- (almost) same text

## Questions:

- ***Which doctor should the puppet go to?***
- ***Which one is nicer?*** → social attractiveness
- ***Which one can make the puppet healthy more quickly?*** → competence



# Discrimination Task

## Precursor:

- two puppets („Susi“ and „Lotta“) talk to each other – one in dialect, one in standard German (spoken by the investigator and an assistant)



## Task:

- children hear audio messages from the puppets' friends, "which got mixed up in the computer"
- ***Does the friend speak like Susi or like Lotta?***

# Interview



## Questions:

- ***Do you know the words „Dialekt“ and „Hochdeutsch“? – What do they mean?***
- ***Do you know anybody who speaks „Dialekt“/ „Hochdeutsch“?***

### ALTERNATIVELY:

- ***Do you know anybody who speaks like Susi or Lotta?***
- ***Do they always speak like that or do they switch sometimes?***
- ***What do you speak like (Susi or Lotta)?***
- ***Do you always speak like that or do you switch sometimes?***

# What about Austrian children?

Tentative results from a pilot study with five children (ages 4-6; all dialect speakers; medium to high SES)

## Preference Task:

- no clear preference pattern so far (4/5 prefer the female standard-speaking doctor; 3/5 prefer the male dialect-speaking doctor)  
→ methodological reasons?
- children do not distinguish along the dimensions “competence” and “social attractiveness” – preference is total or none



# What about Austrian children?

Tentative results from a pilot study with five children (ages 4-6; all dialect speakers; medium to high SES)



## Discrimination Task:

- all of the children had significant difficulty discriminating the varieties (maximum 4/6 correct)
- older children were not better than younger ones



→methodological reasons?

# What about Austrian children?

Tentative results from a pilot study with five children (ages 4-6; all dialect speakers; medium to high SES)

## Interviews:

- children do not know the words „Dialekt“ and „Hochdeutsch“, except the oldest one who attends school
- most of them indicate they do not know anybody who speaks like either puppet
  - methodological reasons?
- the younger ones „don't know“ what the other children in kindergarten speak like
- the older ones do report differences in language use (“some speak like Lotta, some like Susi“)
- the younger ones report speaking like „Lotta“ (standard German) – when in fact they don't! – or they „don't know“ what they speak like
- only the oldest (school girl) correctly reports speaking like „Susi“ (dialect)

# Conclusion and Outlook

- further methodological fine-tuning is necessary to prevent producing artefacts!
- large-scale data collection to start mid-January in kindergartens
- in addition to data on awareness and attitudes, project aims at insights into the proficiency in the different varieties and into the competence to switch between them with different interlocutors
- ideally: matching our data with data from language development screenings done in kindergartens (compulsory for 5-year-olds and for all children with language problems)

**THANK YOU! – DANKE! – DONG SCHE!**