

Language use in Alsace from 1914 to 1919. Private texts between official legislation and individual identity construction

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This proposition aims to explore the interface between macro-historical processes, such as contact, linguistic prestige and language legislation, and micro-level responses in a GermanFrench corpus of private texts written during World War I by Alsatian soldiers and their families.

For Alsatian society, linguistic and cultural contact has been for centuries a constitutive element of their everyday life. Over the times, Alsatians were confronted several times with changing national languages, different linguistic prestige and varying language legislation. The main question that the paper seeks to explore is: How did macro-level processes such as official language legislation, language ideology and linguistic prestige influence the actual language use of the writers?

The texts, which have not yet been examined, are from two Alsatian families, the Jeandon family from Lapoutroie (*Schnierlach* in German) and the Braun family from Oberhaslach. In total, the corpus includes 162 German and 12 French postcards and letters as well as one French diary written by Auguste Jeandon who, like all Alsatians who had not fled their homeland, fought as a soldier on the side of the German Empire. The authors of the texts can roughly be considered as less-experienced writers as their everyday life before 1914 hardly required any writing practice.

In particular, the paper takes up the following questions raised in the description of the workshop.

The role of contact with regard to the complexity of speech communities is fundamental for this specific linguistic community. Depending on the place of residence, different language laws apply, speakers have different first languages that condition schooling, and religious confession influences language behaviour. Every factor depends on the specific circumstances of the locality and the legislation applied there: e.g. the number of German immigrants, the attitude of the local authority, the acceptance as francophone community (or not) and the self-representation of each writer. Moreover, the corpus shows not only contact between the normative standard varieties of German and French as well as between the Germanic and Romance dialects, but also contact of two different scripts in use in the two cultural spaces.

Social and political hierarchies as well as religious ideologies are crucial for the linguistic choices the authors make. Linguistic legislation in Alsace during World War I depends on the civil and military authorities who do not always follow the same lines. Catholic and protestant churches play an important role in the maintenance of French or in the support of the Germanization of the population. On a macrolevel there is a strong linguistic pressure for the Germanization, especially from the military authorities supported by Protestantism, but on a micro-level the writers show some resistance in the use of German because they maintain French and/or the dialects.

Linguistic prestige and language as a marker for identity construction are of essential importance in the negotiation of language use in this border region. However, the attribution of prestige to a particular language is not the same for all Alsatians, but depends on their specific context. Some Alsatian writers may respond explicitly to the changing political hierarchies expressing their political affiliation in the texts. The only use of French in a German-speaking context, such as keeping a French diary in the German army, could be seen as a political and ideological positioning.

The present proposition does not claim to be representative, but at least, it can contribute for this period to a broader view of the language use subject to the aforementioned constraints. The corpus shows exemplarily how Alsatian writers individually respond to the significant processes of the macro-level and which concrete linguistic forms result from this specific situation.

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