

German in East Lorraine? Reflections on the status of the autochthonous varieties in Northeast France based on the character of near-standard speech

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Abstract: Sometimes a change of a language border is linked to a change in language status of a group of diatopic varieties. The assessment of language status relates, among other things, to the existence of a common norm (standard variety) and the language community members' adherence to it. For the germanophone varieties in East Lorraine (France), the status is unclear. Structurally, these varieties belong to the West Middle German dialect continuum. However, since the Second World War, the political and identificatory relations to the German language have been difficult. This article examines whether dialect proficient speakers from East Lorraine can (still) speak Standard German and, if so, how it can be characterised. The study is based on recorded interviews. Interviewees were asked to speak (Standard) German. The analysis of the speech data reveals demerging from the German language. Although being competent in the local dialect, only a minority belonging to the older generation can speak a variety that can be considered endoglossic and near-standard. One third speaks clearly regionally bound varieties, approximately 50% speak German just like a language learner (on various levels of proficiency). Interpreted within the framework of macrosynchronisation (Schmidt & Herrgen 2011), the classification of East Lorraine as belonging to the German-speaking area appears even more uncertain as the Lorraine people no longer align themselves with the common norm of the German-speaking area.

1. Introduction

A look at history shows that language borders are anything but rigid. The ways in which borders of (contiguous) language areas can change are essentially threefold. Firstly – and in the past mostly – as a result of migratory movements: In the case where speakers of a particular language find new settlements and succeed in establishing their language, there is an expansion of the language area. Through abandonment of the settlements (voluntary or forced), it gets confined. Secondly, through language shift: If in contexts of language contact speakers do not speak their heritage language¹ any longer, but shift for example to the state's dominant language, the latter gains territory whereas the other loses a part. Thirdly, through change of status of varieties: dialects can be “upgraded” to a language (which implies reduction of the territory of the language to which they formerly belonged); and vice versa, languages can be “downgraded” to dialects and possibly incorporated into another language (area). Even today we witness such changes in language borders. While the migratory movements of entire ethnolinguistic groups within Europe are indeed long gone, the other two processes still provide dynamics regarding the language borders.

It is against this background that the status of the autochthonous variety system of East Lorraine (in the northeast of France) will be discussed in this article. Since 1945, its speakers have constituted a border minority. The question now arises to what extent this categorisation is still applying to the community. As there are already a number of studies on the aspect of language shift to the national majority language French (see e.g. Rupp 1999; Stroh 1993), this article will investigate whether East Lorraine still belongs to the German-speaking area status wise, or if it is to be considered an independent language community. To this end, the form of the (near-) Standard German speech realised by dialect proficient speakers from East Lorraine will be analysed. The main questions are: What is its character and where on the continuum between dialect and the standard variety of German can it be located? Or does the analysis provide evidence that the varieties have actually demerged from the German language?

¹ Heritage language is here to be understood as “the language that has been used in the home for multiple generations” (Decker & Grummitt 2012: 10).

The empirical data stems from a project that documents and analyses the (socio)linguistic situation in German-speaking Lorraine comprehensively. Besides other data types (cf. Beyer 2020), interviews on language biographies and language attitudes were conducted by a speaker of Standard German. This format was chosen to elicit the informants' "best German" (in actual use).

In the following, the criteria for status assessment of varieties are discussed (Section 2) and the (socio-)linguistic situation of East Lorraine will be presented (Section 3). In section 4, the data and the method of the analysis are described in more detail, before turning to the results (section 5). Section 6 delivers an interpretation of the results in the framework of synchronisation (Schmidt & Herrgen 2011). The article is rounded off with a conclusion.

2. Language borders and status of languages

The location of a language border depends, amongst other things, on which dialect areas one (still) counts as belonging to a certain language area. In almost every European country and for almost every language in Europe, there is ongoing discussion regarding the status of particular varieties (e.g., for Kashubian as being a dialect group of Polish, and for Corsican as being a dialect group of Italian, or both being languages in their own rights). The question of which dialects are grouped together as one language or whether a dialect (group) d_x belongs to a language S_a (or S_b) requires thorough investigation, taking into account a number of aspects.

The group of aspects most relevant to the present study are of a sociolinguistic nature (potentially intertwined with political matters). They include mainly writing/standardisation, *Ausbau* (development), 'roofing', and link to a state, which especially gained importance through the emergence of writing and the nation concept, respectively. During the standardisation process, a written language norm first develops. It is writing that in popular Western thinking "makes lects into *bone fide* languages" (Kamusella 2016: 169). A written language is ultimately only potent, i.e. usable for further communicative reach, if it is *largely* uniform and widely accepted. Thus, the first phase of standardisation is the selection "of some kind of model" (Haugen 1966: 932). This model can be either an existing vernacular or a newly constructed variety combining individually selected variants from various dialects. The resulting written language is the reference point for all varieties close to it, their "highest instance" (Barbour & Stevenson 1998: 13) and the variety of choice in asynchronous communication between members of the language community (especially between different dialect areas) – typically in written texts. At a later stage, this variety gains "plurivalence", i.e. it "extends into spontaneous oral speech, particularly in formal, out-group interaction" (Auer 2005: 16). Some authors claim this to be the crucial step for a variety to become a standard language (cf. Besch 2003). In the course of this, a standard-dialect structure emerges, the components (varieties) of which cover the entire range of functions of a language (expansion), whereby the standard is the least and the dialects are the most situationally constrained. With each additional function that a language can fulfil, it takes a step towards independence (*Ausbausprache*). The concept of 'roofing' (Kloss 1952: 20-22) serves to capture the hierarchical relations in the system of varieties. The "linguistically assigned cultural language" used as a written language, e.g. as an official or school language, forms the roof on which the predominantly spoken dialects are structurally dependent (and which protects them from foreign language influences). In roofing situations, "language" can be defined as precisely that complex system of varieties consisting of standard/written language and dialects. Standardisation is also closely linked to nation-states (and state-nations) in that a particular norm applies to the territory of a certain autonomous state (and an ethnolinguistic type of nationalism of this state exclusively), and is implemented through its system of public education and administration. This "normative isomorphism" (Kamusella 2009: 29) of language, nation, and state is typically reflected in the homonymy of state/country, people and language (Barbour & Stevenson 1998: 9). If a part of the state or language area then gains independence, it is possible for it to develop a separate language norm that serves as reference variety for the dialects spoken in this new state (as well as a new system

of varieties). Thereby a new language, including a new language border, evolves.² Generally speaking, when a language area is crossed by a state border (established in whatever way), this state border can become a structural border, i.e. split a language (into two). Political borders can also have the opposite effect if they enclose and integrate several varieties. Then structurally (more or less) distinct other varieties can be functionally downgraded to dialects of the dominant language in the state. Just like dialects, they are restricted to the private domain and have only limited prestige.³ The political centralisation of states, social restructuring, population shifts and the expansion of the sphere of action have an effect on communicative needs in such a way that the general or supra-regional intelligibility of the language becomes increasingly important. This development leads to the restructuring of the variety system, specifically to the reduction of dialects and increased use of standard varieties. In these situations, “language” can refer more to a single variety (i.e. the standard language) than to a set of related language forms (Coulmas 1985: 18). Lastly, but definitely not least, there are the subjective criteria like attitudes and identity, i.e. questions like “what do the speakers (in- and out-group) think what language or dialect they speak” and “what do they identify with” – which in democratic times can play a major role.

3. Introducing East Lorraine

In the previous section, the importance of political framework conditions and of (the course of) state borders for the status of a language clearly emerged. Accordingly, cases where language and state borders are not congruent are of particular interest. In Europe, this applies in particular to German. German is found in the so-called German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland). It is also present as a border minority in neighbouring states with (at least) one other (national) language (Denmark, Belgium, France, Italy, Czech Republic). Of the border minorities, East Lorraine appears to be particularly interesting; firstly, because the so-called Franco-German hereditary enmity suggests a special dynamic also on the linguistic level, and secondly, because it has been poorly studied so far (in contrast to Alsace).

Lorraine is a region in Northeast France, bordering Alsace, Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium. The Eastern part of the Lorraine region – or, to be more precise, of the department of Moselle – can, on the language-historical level, be assigned to the German-speaking area (border in red in fig. 1) or, in terms of dialect geography, to the West Middle German dialect region (marked in pink).

² Cf. the emergence of Luxembourgish as a new national language (Gilles 2019).

³ This is what happened, for example, to Low German from the 17th century onwards. Today, it is an officially recognized language by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, but still its status as a language is not entirely clear. The results of a recent survey, for example, have shown that the majority of the North Germans (59.2 %) think that Low German is a dialect (Adler et al. 2016: 28-29).



Figure 1: Location of East Lorraine/East Moselle (Source: IDS/Cuβler-Volz).

There is no robust data concerning the number of speakers, just estimations. According to these estimations, there are currently between 45,000 and 500,000 speakers.

East Lorraine (including some neighbouring French parts) has experienced four changes in political affiliation over the course of the last 150 years as it was the bone of contention between Germany and France. It first became part of France in 1766. From 1871 to 1918, it was part of the German Empire. Subsequently it was under French rule. Since 1766, and especially in the period after 1789 as well as after 1918, there were efforts to impose French among the population. However, they showed only minor effects. From 1940 to 1945, Lorraine was occupied by the Nazi regime. Since 1945, the German varieties constitute a minority in France again. Since then, however, the conditions for existence have been more difficult than ever.

After the Second World War, the German dialect was widely stigmatised as the language of the enemy, Standard German as the Nazi language and French as the modern language of the future. The administration knew only the “language of the republic”, and in public life German was suppressed. The dialect (also called *Platt*) was outlawed and strictly prohibited in schools, which led many parents to give up their dialect at home in order not to hinder the social advancement of their children. There was a clear decrease in the intergenerational transmission of the heritage language. After all, the inhabitants distanced themselves from anything that could suggest a closeness to Germany and German culture.

In the 1970s, regionalist movements were launched in large parts of France, starting from the civil rights movement and the anti-nuclear movement of the late 1960s. They were often accompanied by a cultural renaissance of minority languages – as in Lorraine. However, stigmatisation of the local dialects based on their genetic relationship to German continued to be a problem in the region in question. In order to overcome this and make the dialects acceptable, some of the activists began to propagate the independence of the dialects in East Lorraine from the German language. Through the activities of language maintenance associations, not only the use of the dialects, but also the idea of a distinct language was promoted. According to their concept, the group of West Middle German dialects is one independent, autonomous language in the big family of Germanic languages. Consequently, they have nothing to do with German (especially the standard language) – at least not more than any other Germanic language. This concept allows for identification with the dialects and thus their use while maintaining a distance from German and Germany (Beyer & Fehlen 2019: 144).

Probably, knowing that a proper individual language has its own name, they labelled the group

of dialects: “Franconian”. The name is derived from the names of the subgroups of West Middle German. There is no agreement within traditional dialectology as to the exact subdivision. Most of the authors, however, assume a Moselle Franconian and a Rhine Franconian dialect group (as being subgroups of West Middle German), whose territories extend to Lorraine. Lorraine’s activists further specify one part of Moselle Franconian as Luxembourgish (Franconian). As all three groups have “Franconian” in their name, this “Franconian” – in French *Francique* – became, without further ado, the generic, summary designation of all dialects in Lorraine in the sense of a glottonym.⁴ Besides this and, traditionally, the term *Platt* is used.

Legally speaking, the Germanic varieties have gradually been gaining some recognition in recent decades – albeit in ambivalent rules and regulations particularly with regard to the relationship between local dialects and standard German. Most regulations are found in the area of school education. In 1991, under the name *Voie spécifique mosellane* (‘Special path of the Moselle Department’), the possibility was introduced to learn the German language from nursery school to the fourth grade of primary school via the dialect. Here, the dialects are seen as a “natural springboard” (Académie de Nancy-Metz 1990: 81) to “German” (presumably „Standard German“ is meant). At the same time, i.e., also in 1991, an optional subject “regional language and culture” was introduced at the Lycée, including the possibility of a voluntary additional examination in the Baccalauréat.⁵ This subject was offered for three different variants (Luxembourgish Franconian, Moselle Franconian and Rhine Franconian). In 1997, a bilingual (German and French) primary school opened as a result of an initiative of parents (ABCM) in Sarreguemines/Saargeminn/Saargemünd. In the annex to a 2007 decree on the teaching of regional languages in primary schools, the regional language is explicitly described (for Alsace and) for the département of Moselle. It states that there are two forms: on the one hand the (German) dialects, and on the other hand the German standard language. In a *convention cadre pour une vision stratégique commune de développement des politiques éducatives en faveur du plurilinguisme et du transfrontalier* (“Framework convention for a common strategic vision for the development of education policies in favour of plurilingualism and border crossing”) for the territory of the former Lorraine from 2019, German (which is not further differentiated) figures as the language of the neighbour, i.e. it is exogenised. Currently, there are several (“bicultural”) schools with increased (Standard) German lessons (3, 6 or 9 per week) as well as three Lycées offering the Abibac (combined final school exam for France and Germany).

Regarding language use, French is the language which has taken over the functions of standard, written, school and official language (Pitz 2003: 136). All official situations (e.g., with authorities) are handled in French nowadays. In private domains (or in the case of customer contact also in the professional sector), individual factors become relevant for the language choice, above all the (presumed) linguistic profile of the interlocutor (cf. Hughes 2005: 147). Many people from East Moselle watch German television and listen to German radio. There are no national or local TV or radio stations exclusively in (Standard) German or Platt and only very limited airtime for shows in Platt on regional stations. Additionally, the proximity to the border and digitalisation makes it possible to receive German channels, which many of the residents indeed consume. (Standard) German is orally only used on certain occasions (when shopping in Saarbrücken or in conversations with Standard German speakers).

⁴ Note that there is another dialect area in Germany (in the northern part of the federal state of Bavaria) which amongst German lay people is referred to as Franconian. This fact is apparently unknown to the Lorraine activists.

⁵ In the examination, according to a teacher of the subject, an aspect of regional culture had to be presented in French, (Standard) German, Luxembourgish or a Lorraine dialect, according to personal preference. Since 2008, the optional subject is limited to language and has a literary focus. The language of the examination is now mandatorily dialect. There is neither teacher training for the subject nor teaching materials. The (only) qualification required of teachers is dialect competence. The preparation of lessons and examinations is left solely to the teachers (P. Buisson, personal communication, November 5, 2017). So it seems that the subject – and thus the language – is not really taken seriously.

4. Research questions, data, and method of the study

4.1. Theoretical background and research questions

In this chapter, an empirical study will be presented. In this study, the actual language use by dialect proficient speakers will be looked at – in its oral realisation. Specifically, the focus will be on the form of their “best language”, which usually is the standard variety. The affiliation of dialects to a certain language (and thus to its language area) depends not least on whether the standard variety of this language is accepted as the reference variety. In this case, this means that the dialects develop structurally under the influence of the standard language and that the speakers – if the (speech) situation requires it – use their “individual concept” (Lameli 2010: 391) of this standard language. In cases where the affiliation to a language is at issue, it is therefore justified to deal with the actually observable standard language. As described in the previous chapters, for Lorraine the language status is indeed worthy of discussion.

The actual investigation should first be preceded by a few remarks on our understanding of standard language. In many dialect-standard constellations with an endoglossic standard variety, this standard variety can be defined, structurally speaking, as a bundle of co-occurring features that is not tied to a specific region; that is, as the oral realisation of the written language. In its codified form, this leads to a variation-free and norm-claiming stipulation. This initially results in “a regionally differentiated multilingual configuration that has been interpreted as diglossic” (Lameli 2010: 386, my translation). Typically, several varieties with varying degrees of regionalism, i.e. between the two poles of the basic dialect and the standard language, emerge over time (diaglossia/continuum of colloquial speech, see fig. 2). This is very much the situation in the Middle and Upper German area.

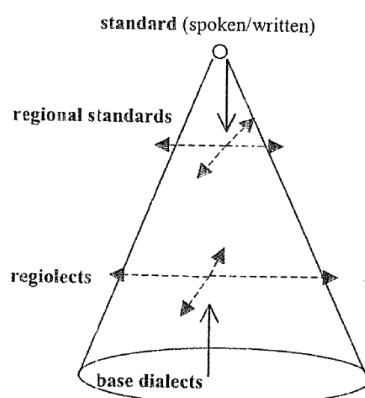


Figure 2: Varieties on the continuum of colloquial speech (Auer 2005: 22).

In formal contexts, speakers typically aim at a higher variety. However, the highest form is not always achieved (intentionally or not); instead, often varieties are used that contain regional variants to a smaller (regional standards) or greater extent (regiolects). But, again, this shifting is only possible for speakers of the particular language – especially for German since the standard language is the result of large-scale dialect-levelling, as are the varieties on the continuum.

Speakers of other languages, on the other hand, cannot gradually shift towards and away from the standard language. The structural distance of their language(s) is just too big. Instead, more features typical of foreign language acquisition appear. This means that the speakers start practically from scratch and approach the target language/variety via various developmental sequences, gradually building up more complex and more grammatical structures, becoming more fluent and successively discarding interference from their mother tongue.

The question for the East-Lorraine minority is now how they approach the standard pole: Viewed from a normative-based understanding of a standard language, it seems almost obvious that

speakers will not achieve the ultimate codified standard form. However, the interview provided data on their nearest approximation to it (spoken in the image of the continuum). While we are furthermore in a language contact scenario in which language mixing is to be expected in any case, what I am concerned with here are not individual instances of borrowing and interferences, but whether certain tendencies can be recognised in the basic character of the speech data, that is in the overall coinage.

The following questions will be discussed:

1. Can speakers of the East Lorraine dialects speak Standard German at all? Or are their competences in the field of Germanic varieties limited to the L-variety?
2. If they do speak a form of Standard German, how can it be characterised? What coinage does it have?
 - a. Is it possible to identify it as a form of dialect levelling⁶ in which standard advergence can be detected? Is the (structural) relationship to German strong enough to carry out internal linguistic accommodation? Is there, then, a shifting on the continuum of colloquial speech where standard deviant features can be identified as dialect interference (as it is found across the border in the Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate)?
 - b. Or is it more like a learner language of a foreign language learner, in this case a French speaker? In other words, are there characteristics of incomplete language acquisition, including a foreign accent?
3. What about intergenerational differences: are there any and, if so, what kind?

The hypothesis for the study is:

When realising their “best form of German”, speakers of the older generation tend to stay on the continuum of colloquial speech (of German) and also reach higher speech levels – even if they have hardly had any school instruction in German, whereas younger speakers show instances of a learner language.

Note that in each case the speakers are proficient in the dialect. Differences are assumed regarding Standard German. A verification of the hypothesis would mirror the temporal development of the drifting apart of the East Lorraine dialects and Standard German or the ideological shift, respectively, in a kind of an apparent time method to study language change.

4.2. Data and Method

The aforementioned questions are to be answered on the basis of a collection of oral texts. These texts constitute a part of a bigger project that seeks to document and analyse the sociolinguistic situation in German-speaking Lorraine. As mentioned in section 3, there was a strong decrease in intra-family transmission of the heritage language after the Second World War; but still there are speakers – which are well worthy of consideration. For this purpose, extensive collections of audio data were carried out between 2017 and 2020 by the *Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache* (Leibniz Institute for the German Language) in Mannheim. The recording design follows current approaches of the New Dialectology (cf. Elmentaler et al. 2006). One of the tasks was to read aloud in Standard German “the wind and the sun” – an adaptation of a fable by Aesop (Boreas and the Sun). Also, informants were asked to orally translate the so-called Wenker’s phrases into the local dialect.⁷ The latter were

⁶ Dialect levelling can be understood as reduction of forms that are “unusual or in a minority” (Trudgill 1986: 98) amongst the totality of areal varieties in favour of form with wider geographical reach.

⁷ The sentences originate from a linguistic atlas project in the German Empire directed by Georg Wenker in the 1880s. They were composed in such a way that the typical phonetic and grammatical features of the respective dialects had to appear in the translation. In relation to the totality of these dialectal features, Wenker had assumed that the individual linguistic landscapes could be distinguished from each other.

collected taking into account the fact that there is a complex areallinguistic situation in German-speaking Lorraine. With the help of Wenker's sentences, the linguistic differences can be documented and preserved. In general, the data from this task are easy to compare between informants (e.g., also a comparison between generations), as the same sentences are always used. These two tasks focused on the more controlled way of speaking. All the informants' attention was directed to the language, more precisely to its form. Furthermore, guideline-based interviews were conducted by a Standard German-speaking researcher coming from Germany, i.e. from outside the Lorraine region. This setting was designed to elicit Standard German speech in free, functional interaction, i.e. in actual use. In case the targeted variety was not clear to a participant, the use of Standard German was explicitly asked for. Topics of the interview were the informants' language biographies, their current management of their linguistic repertoire as well as attitudes towards the different languages and varieties in their repertoire and measures of language maintenance. Finally, the parts of the survey with the freest design and the largest degree of naturalness were table conversations. They were held in the absence of the researcher with friends and/or family members who also spoke the local dialect. Thematically, no guidelines were given.

This broad range of recording contexts allows for different analyses: while all situations capture the intra-linguistic variation of the spoken language spectrum in German, the table conversations additionally provide insights into the coexistence of Lorraine Platt and French. The interview can be used in two ways: on the one hand, it provides evidence of the informants' nearest approximation to standard speech (his or her "best German"); on the other hand, descriptions of their own language experiences and language attitudes as well as lay linguistic knowledge.

Recordings were made with a total of 80 speakers. This resulted in audio material amounting to about 125 hours. The informants came from 36 different places. The oldest informant was a woman born in 1921; the youngest was a man born in 2000. 46 male and 33 female informants participated in the recordings.

	M	F	SUM
*1921-1954	28	17	45
*1955-2000	20	15	35
SUM	48	32	80

Table 1: demographic composition of the informants.

Some of the informants have – self-reportedly – only rudimentary or passive competences in German. According to Grinevald (2003), they can be considered terminal speakers, that is “speakers of the dominant language who may know some phrases, or simply words of the endangered language” (Grinevald 2003: 66). Since they are connected to the autochthonous language of Lorraine through their family history, they were included as well in the documentation project. After all, such terminal speakers or even ‘rememberers’ are also part of the picture of the overall sociolinguistic situation.

The following analyses are based on the language used in the interviews, namely its structure.⁸

⁸ On content-related aspects, see Beyer (fc.) and Beyer & Dück (ms.) amongst others. Content analysis regarding the language status has shown that answering the question of language or dialect represents a particular challenge for the speakers. On the one hand, it is evident in their terminology used to describe the dialects in Lorraine. The informants provide inconsistent labels when it comes to naming these dialects. Their statements exhibit terminological ambiguities, showcasing a significant lack of agreement not only among themselves but even within the same speaker's remarks. On the other hand, the described difficulty is also noticeable in the underlying concepts. The concepts that can be deduced from the speakers' statements exhibit considerable conceptual vagueness regarding the nature of “Franconian” itself and its relationship with German, including neighbouring dialects, Standard German, and the German language as a whole. The speakers' utterances are characterised by ambiguities, disagreement as well as inter- and intraindividual contradictions (see Beyer & Plewnia 2021).

The speech of 71 informants was analysed regarding its realisation. Some of the 76 interviewees⁹ had to be excluded for different reasons. One informant explicitly refused to speak (Standard) German. There was insufficient material from two informants (short interview, only very short answers, bad articulation, etc.). Three informants had a clear and primarily French socialisation. Thus they did not have a solid basis for the development of dialect competence. Their prerequisites for speaking (Standard) German are therefore not comparable with the other speakers.

For the 71 informants mentioned, the basic character of the (near-) Standard German was analysed. No statistical evaluation was carried out, but the general auditory impression conveyed by the realisations was assessed. At the same time, it is well possible to name a few features that gave some indication when listening to the speech. These include the following:

- Prosody: placement of word stress
- Phonetic/Phonology: presence of vowel reduction in non-stressed syllables, tension of vowel (in German lax vowels [ɪ], [ʏ] and [ʊ], in French only tense vowels), realisation of palatal/uvular fricative ([ç/χ]), glottal fricative ([h]) & glottal stop (absence speaks for French coinage)
- Morphosyntax: apocope of *-n* (omission of inflectional final element; typical of dialects, atypical for learner varieties of German), obligatory verb second order (leading to a shift of the subject when adverbs are topicalised), tense forms, sentence complexity
- Lexis: different variants of ‘speak’ (*schwätzen, reden, sprechen*), of ‘not’ (dialectal *net* vs. standard *nicht*), etc.
- Hesitations/slowed flow of words
- Creation of new words: e.g., “da hatten wir Probleme [...] für jemand zu haben, der, die sie ööhm.. **aufbewacht**” (‘We had problems finding someone to **upguard** her’) (KG-w2) instead of *betreut* (‘take care’)
- Difficulties in word formation and inflection: e.g., the ungrammatical formation of the past participle of *bleiben* (‘remain’) as “**gebleiben**” (SB-m1) instead of the canonical form *geblieben*.

5. Results

Firstly, it can be observed that there are indeed two different coinages of the way the informants speak when they are in a situation that requires their highest variety of German: one that can be described as shifting on a continuum of colloquial speech (between dialect and standard) and one where German appears rather as a learner language. Of the 71 persons analysed, 38 informants show a shift on the dialect-standard continuum, and 33 are – more or less obviously – speakers of German as a foreign language. In relation to each other, the distribution is virtually almost 50/50. Interestingly, there is a correlation with age: the first group has an average age of 70.2 years (median age 71); the second of 57.4 years (median age 60). This correlation is highly significant as $p = .00006$ (Mann-Whitney U Test).

⁹ For different reasons not everybody participated in the interview.

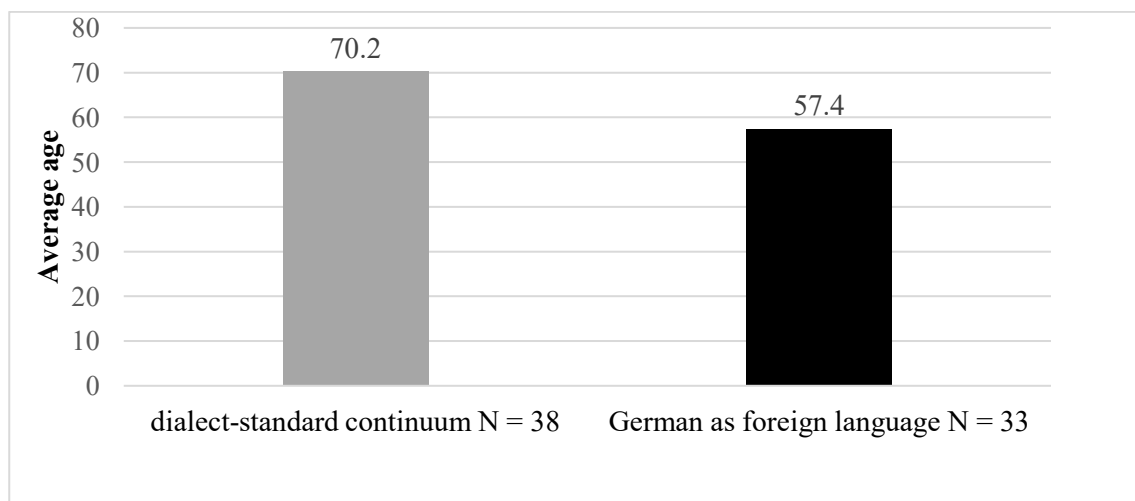


Figure 3: Results of the standard speech analysis.

These results are underpinned by the fact that the two oldest female speakers as well as the oldest male are in the dialect-standard group (group 1). Moreover, the two youngest participants are in the other group – however, with very different levels of competence. In both groups, however, there are statistical outliers. Thus, in the first group there are two speakers whose age is well below the average of the others. Both were 42 at the time of data collection (whereas the average age is 70.2). One of them (NL-w2) is married to a German from bordering state Saarland and works in a German hospital. The other (BL-m11) lives in a very rural area and has strong dialectal interferences in his speech. He is married to a French speaking woman, but has decided to pass on the Lorraine dialect to his children. Conversely, in the group of speakers whose German resembles the speech of foreign language learners, there are two speakers whose age is well above the average of the others. Both were 80 at the time of data collection (whereas the average age is 57.4). What stands out in the biography of one of them is the fact that she had French speaking grandparents. The other worked as a railway employee in Metz for many years. These biographical factors might have had the pivotal impact on the character of their Standard German. When we further compare the socio-biographical conditions of the informants in the two groups, especially their language biographies, we can see that the parental language of the members of the first group was almost 100% autochthonous dialect exclusively, and the languages spoken with their own children encompass French and autochthonous dialect. The parents of the members of the second group, in contrast, also spoke French during the informants' childhood; the language spoken with their own children is to a relatively larger extent French. Lastly, all informants from the area south of Luxembourg (border triangle) are to be found in the second group.

So far, we have only looked at the two groups without further differentiation of levels of competences. Assignment to the first group, for example, only means that this person is somewhere on the continuum of colloquial speech, but not exactly where. But as already mentioned for BL-m11, the form of German varies also within a group. Speaking with a foreigner, a researcher coming from another corner from the German-speaking area, would usually trigger the use of a variety on the aforementioned continuum of colloquial speech with less regionally bound features – to an extent that the informant is able to. However, indeed, approx. 60% from group 1 do not get beyond the regiolect (see fig. 4), and here we find no significant differences concerning the age of the informant: the average in both groups is approximately the same (70.4 and 72.3). Furthermore, of those who speak recognisably intended standard (the shaded part of the left bar), most show French interference – sometimes more, sometimes less - whereas regiolect and dialect speakers (the lower part of the left

bar) have less French influence. Turning to the second group (coinage of German as a foreign language), it can be stated that approximately 60% of them have a very good level of German (middle bar). Another finding is that almost 70% of this group (so again of all 33 speakers of the second group) also have dialect features when speaking German.¹⁰

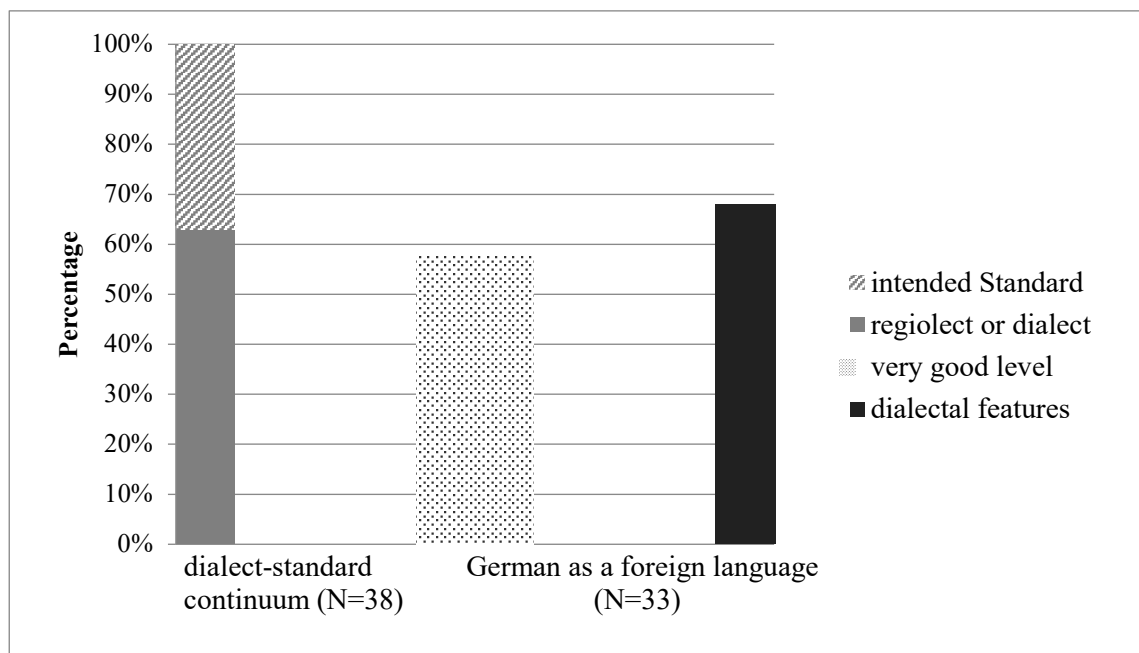


Figure 4: Levels of competences.

Considering all 71 informants together, it can be stated that most of them do speak some form of (Standard) German. However, it seems that they nevertheless fall into three different groups:

- Only 20% (of all 71 informants) speak German as a form of dialect levelling with clear standard advergence.
- 34% speak only regionally bound varieties or the L-variety, respectively.
- Approximately 50% (of all 71 informants) speak it as a foreign language.

6. Interpretation

The different realisations of (Standard) German might be partly due to the changes in school, the language of instruction and also in media. In the current context, what is of greater interest are the implications of the results regarding the question of dialect or language. This question can be further discussed on the basis of Schmidt & Herrgen's (2011) framework of language dynamic, and more precisely of synchronisation. According to the authors, synchronisation is to be understood as the alignment of one's own speech with that of the communication partner(s). In an act of synchronisation, that is when faced with another person's speech, speakers stabilise existing commonalities of individual linguistic knowledge and, at the same time, modify their individual linguistic knowledge in the face of existing differences. There are different levels of synchronisation acts. For the linguistic status of varieties, it is not the microlevel, i.e. the encounter with one or few individuals, that is decisive, but the meso- and especially macrosynchronisations.

¹⁰ This result, in particular, seems to underpin a typical Lorraine attitude. This attitude is well summarised in an informant's quote: 'Platt probably helped as a student to learn German, already the words, also grammar'. (*"Platt hat wahrscheinlich geholfen als Schüler, Deutsch zu lernen, schon die Wörter, auch Grammatik"*) (DE-m2).

Macrosynchronisations are acts of synchronisation with which members of a whole linguistic community align themselves with a common norm. The overall norm is in many cases the standard language. Macrosynchronisation tends to be carried out by all members of a linguistic community or members of large groups, between whom personal contact is not required. Viewed from another perspective, the limits of common macro-synchronisations define the limits of an *Einzelssprache* (Schmidt & Herrgen 2011). In the case of Lorraine, we have seen, then, that only a minority of the informants analysed (belonging to the older generation) can speak a variety that can be considered endoglossic and near-standard. Generally speaking, the speakers of the autochthonous heritage language (considered as a whole) do not align themselves with the norm of the German standard language (anymore). That means they no longer take part in the macrosynchronisation of (Standard) German. From this perspective, they can be viewed as not being members of the German language community (anymore).

7. Conclusion

This article has dealt with the overarching question of whether East Lorraine, or more precisely the eastern part of the department of Moselle, still belongs to the German-speaking area – or not. Generally, whether a group of diatopic varieties belongs to a given language depends (among other things) on whether the standard variety of this language is accepted as reference point. Therefore, an empirical study of audio data from East Lorraine was carried out, analysing the form of speech in a situation that (typically) requires Standard German.

The results point towards demerging from the German language. Despite being competent in the local dialect, only a minority belonging to the older generation can speak a variety that can be considered endoglossic and near-standard. One third speaks only regionally bound varieties, approximately 50% speak it as a foreign language (on various levels). Viewed from the concept of macrosynchronisation (Schmidt & Herrgen 2011), the people of Lorraine cannot be viewed as members of the German language community (anymore) as they no longer align themselves with the common norm of the German-speaking area.

However, there are many other factors to look at in relation to a status question. An unequivocal answer cannot be given on the basis of only one perspective. Rather, all of the various factors and the interplay between them need to be considered. Therefore, further research is necessary to assess the status of Lorraine's varieties, and sometimes there is just no clear answer as has been shown regarding the subjective evaluation by the speakers themselves (Beyer & Plewnia 2021). But it is precisely then that research has its place in being able to systematically break down unclear situations into individual components and thus make such complex situations more accessible.

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