Language ideologies and individual constructions of multilingual spaces in Germany and Canada

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Whereas a heritage language ideology – i.e. the idea that the language of one’s immigrant forefathers should be maintained – is a well-established notion in Canada, Germany has long struggled with its status as a multilingual and multicultural country. By comparing two different corpora of interviews with immigrants to these two countries, this paper wants to explore in how far these language ideological systems are constructed in the interviews.

Our data consist of two corpora: Interviews with Canadians of German heritage and interviews with Germans of Vietnamese heritage. It will be argued that the interviewees construct different kinds of sociolinguistic spaces (cf. Liebscher/Dailey-O’Cain 2013) and take up different positions within these spaces in terms of centre and periphery (cf. Miller 2012). Drawing on a conversation-analytic approach, we analyze how the Canadian heritage language ideology and the German monolingual ideology are brought about in the interviews as moment-to-moment constructions of multilingual spaces. Our analysis shows that these spaces are constructed differently with regard to linking heritage language ideologies with public or private spaces, family members’ constructions of cultural identities etc. In addition, our comparison offers insights into problems that are shared in both communities: Despite the different language ideological conditions, both the German-Canadian and the Vietnamese-German interviewees point out their troubles in passing on their heritage languages to the next generations. This comparison also contributes to a “sociolinguistics of globalization” (Blommaert 2010) in that it shows how the different kinds of language ideologies prevalent in the different places are reconstructed as influential parameters in the interviewees’ display of different attitudes towards multilingualism.


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