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Speech accommodation by Moravians in Prague

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WILSON, James (2010): *Moravians in Prague. A Sociolinguistic Study of Dialect Contact in the Czech Republic*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 267 p. ISBN 978-3-631-58694-5.

Although sociolinguistics is a discipline of great interest to many linguistically oriented researchers in the world, there are still only few sociolinguists who are concerned with Czech. This could be ascribed to the development of Czech linguistics in the 20th century and its primary orientation on theoretical issues defined by the Prague Linguistic Circle in the 1920s and 1930s. A good illustration of this might be an article sub-title “Why is there no Czech sociolinguistics” (Starý, 1993) or several years older a statement “in principle there is no sociolinguistics in Czechoslovakia” (Nekvapil, 1986, p. 7). Nevertheless, in the 1990s and in the beginning of the 21st century, a group of younger linguists (e.g. Vít Dovalil, Tamah Sherman and Marián Sloboda, or Martin Havlík), under the leadership of Jiří Nekvapil, emerged who changed this unfortunate situation. Their concerns are primarily based in interactional sociolinguistics and in language management – however, the present book by James Wilson is an exception since it is variationist in principle. To my knowledge, it is the first empirical study oriented on the Czech language situation which uses modern methods of variationist sociolinguistics.

How do Moravians speak when they come to Prague?

In his book, Wilson is concerned with the general issue if and how do Moravians (i.e. people from eastern parts of the Czech Republic) accommodate to Common Czech (CC), i.e. the vernacular spoken in the western part of the Czech Republic (called Bohemia). This topic has been widely discussed in previous literature and Wilson is well aware of that. However, the older studies – with only a few exceptions – are non-empirical so there are almost no real data to build on. Wilson reviews the previous work and uses it to build hypotheses he can verify and questions he can answer in his own field research. One aspect of his study could thus be interpreted as an empirical response to previous “armchair” statements by various Czech linguists.

Two main “contact hypotheses” are formulated: 1. “Speakers of Moravian dialects living in Bohemia quickly reduce or avoid features of their highly-localized vernaculars and assimilate features of CC.” 2. “Speakers of Common Czech living in Moravia do not assimilate features of the highly-localized dialects of interdialects; instead, they support the spread of CC to Moravia.” These are based on two books by Petr Sgall as leading author (Sgall – Hronek, 1992; Sgall – Hronek – Stich – Horecký, 1992). In his book, Wilson is concerned only with the first hypothesis.

Wilson’s method could be identified as a variationist classic. The key concept for analysis is a linguistic variable and the data are gathered via informal interviews. Wilson identifies

six variables: 1. V-insertion, i.e. insertion of the prothetic /v/ before word-initial /o/ (e.g. *on* > *von*) or before word-internal /o/ that occurs after a morpheme boundary (e.g. *naopak* > *navopak*). 2. É-raising, i.e. raising of Standard Czech /e:/ to /i:/ in some positions (e.g. *dobré pivo* > *dobry pivo*). 3. Ý-diphthongization, i.e. Standard Czech (SC) vowel /i:/ is diphthongized to /ej/ in some positions. 4. Paradigm unification, i.e. unification of the third person plural forms of the fourth- and fifth-conjugation verbs (e.g. *prosej*, *trpěj*, *sázej*, *dělej*). 5. L-truncation, i.e. deletion of the word-final syllabic /l/ in the masculine past tense of some verbs (e.g. *nesl* > *nes*, *uběhl* > *uběh*). 6. Gender neutralization, i.e. no difference between masculine animate and inanimate hard adjectives and pronouns in the nominative plural forms (e.g. *dobří sportovci* > *dobry sportovci*, *velké hrady* > *velky hrady*). All those variables were treated as binary and categorized as either “CC” or “other” (this means the standard or Moravian dialect form of some sort).

For data gathering, Wilson uses two interviews. The first interview was unstructured and its purpose was to elicit natural conversational narratives. As a non-native speaker, Wilson himself did not participate in this interview – it was done by his friend Markéta, a native speaker of CC. The second interview was formal and it was oriented towards informants’ attitudes to Bohemia and CC and to their “life-style” as Wilson calls it. The latter intended to identify the frequency and intensity of informants’ exposure to CC, their level of contact with their native speech communities and their motivation for accommodating to CC.

The sample consisted of 39 informants: 14 from eastern Moravia, 13 from Silesia, 10 from central Moravia and 2 from western Moravia. Most of them were undergraduates at the Charles University.

Wilson’s handling of the data is quite knowledgeable. At first, he presents the overall, coarse-grained results. He shows that paradigm unification of the fifth conjugation is the most accommodated variable (CC score: 56.21%), followed by É-raising (in neuter singular predicative: 51.84%; in inanimate plurals: 48.31%; in masculine/neuter oblique adjectives/pronouns: 47.80%) and Ý-diphthongization in desinence-final position (41.02%). The lowest CC score has the V-insertion (in pronouns: 23.70%; in prepositions: 14.84%; in prefixed lexical words: 11.70%; in non-prefixed lexical words: 4.48%). However, Wilson is aware that these scores are problematic because the group of participants is not homogeneous. Therefore, he tries to determine which social variables influence the rate of accommodation of the Moravian speakers to CC.

He finds almost no correlation between the level of accommodation and the region of origin in Moravia. In other words, there were no significant differences in the scores of participants from central Moravia, east Moravia and Silesia (i.e., part of the Czech Republic north-eastern from Moravia). However, there was a difference in the É-raising in the oblique cases of feminine adjectives if the Eastern Moravians and Silesians were counted as one group and were compared to Central Moravians (the latter accommodated significantly less: 15.09% vs. 25.31%; $F = 4.688$, $p < 0.05$).

Interestingly enough, Wilson finds significant differences in the use of CC variants based on sex of the speakers. Females had higher scores in É-raising (total: 43.65% vs. 21.61% by males) and in paradigm unification (total: 50.02% vs. 36.81% by males), however, other variables were not sex-influenced.

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Next social variable which Wilson analyzes is length of residence in Prague. At first, he distinguishes three groups of participants – those who lived in Prague only shortly (0–2.5 years), those who lived there more than five years and those who lived there between 2.5–5 years. Only significant differences are found in V-insertion (total scores: 0–2.5 years: 3.08%; 2.5–5 years: 7.40%; over 5 years: 32.63%). Because of that, Wilson does a different calculation (Spearman rank order correlation) based on correlating of the linguistic scores with exact length of residence in Prague. Significant differences were found in V-insertion and also in Ÿ-diphthongization this time.

The last social variable examined is the network integration. This variable was counted based on the second interview (see above). Three groups were distinguished: participants who scored 0–4 points (little integrated), these who scored 5–9 points (semi-integrated) and these who scored over 10 points out of 16 (highly integrated). This variable turned out to be the most important one because there were significant differences between the groups in almost every measured variable (in terms that the little integrated had lowest and the highly integrated highest CC scores). Only for the Ÿ-diphthongization variable there was a significant difference only if the variable was in the desinence-final position. In word roots and in desinence-initial positions the differences were only by chance.

Wilson also analyzes the interaction between social variables. He then concludes that participant's region of origin does not influence accommodation, that sex-related differences in accommodation are only minor, that the length of residence is important but that there is an important interaction between this variable and the network interaction. The most important social variable according to Wilson's findings is thus the network integration – Wilson even says that this variable supersedes the others. High network integration, however, does not guarantee accommodation alone – higher length of residence is an important condition, too.

Critical comments

Wilson's work should be appreciated. Nevertheless, there are some problems which should be noted here. I would *not* say that these could be solved easily and it is fair to say that Wilson in his book is *explicitly aware* of most of them.

The first issue I can identify is the problem of representativeness of the sample. First of all, the chosen participants are mostly undergraduate students of Charles University. Although Wilson did not include students of humanities there (with one exception) we cannot infer anything on the Moravian population as such. Wilson knows this and he explicitly says that his results are representative only of the linguistic behaviour of students from any part of Moravia studying at any institution of higher education in any Bohemian town and also of the graduates who have set up home in Bohemia. Second, the number of informants is very low for the purposes of his research. The groups he distinguishes (as in the region of origin, in the length of residence, or in the network integration) are not much bigger than 10 people each and it is highly questionable that the obtained results were not biased because of that. A larger sample would definitely increase the reliability of the research. Third, the construction of the sample is questionable. It is surely tough to get informants for this type of research but the data could be strongly biased if there is not much control over who participates and who does not. In Wilson's sample, 16 informants were recruited by the friend-of-a-friend approach, 8 informants replied on posters at the Kajetánka hall of residence, 10 were Wilson's own

friends or acquaintances and 5 were recruited by chance. I find the participants recruited thanks to posters most troublesome because these people could have a specific reason to participate. For example, this reason could be to demonstrate a true Moravian identity – this can be seen extremely on one such participant, Marek, who did not utter a single CC form in the first interview, as Wilson writes. This method-of-recruitment bias could be seen from Wilson’s comparison of the results of people who replied to the posters and other groups. If we have a look at the numbers, in V-insertion, informants who replied on posters scored 0.50% (which is even less than the group of informants who lived in Prague for 0–2.5 years which scored 3.08%), whereas people who were Wilson’s friends 26.23%. In É-raising, the situation was similar: people recruited via posters scored 13.13% whereas Wilson’s friends 47.33%. In other words, those who responded to posters had the lowest accommodation rate from all. This does surely affect the results seriously and we could only speculate what the results would be if the sample would be constructed more rigorously.

The second problem lies within the linguistic variables per se. Wilson is aware that the variables may behave differently in different positions and he distinguishes various subtypes of the variables (as for example Ÿ-diphthongization in (a) desinence-final forms (as *velký* > *velkej*), (b) desinence-initial forms (as *velkých* > *velkejch*), (c) word roots (as *týden* > *tejden*), (d) prefix *vý-* (as in *výlet* > *vejlet*)). However, we cannot be sure if those subtypes are “socially real”, so to speak. In other words, it is questionable if we could say for example that the *-ý-* would vary the same in all the word roots of Czech words. It could be so that there is a great difference of variation between *-ý-* and *-ej-* in different words – in some of them, it might be very unusual to use *-ý-* in CC and in others, it might be really strange to use *-ej-*. We could hypothesize that there are “phonolexical sets” (see e.g. Milroy, 1987, p. 129–130) in Czech and that we have to observe which words do behave similarly in CC to be able to form a descriptively efficient variable. This relates us to a more general issue: we could say that the problem of Wilson’s work is that he does not have strong empirical data on CC and that he operates based on the beliefs of older, “armchair” researchers. Because he does not have the empirically based knowledge of CC, he cannot be sure if his interpretation of the accommodation data is correct. The idea that there is no big difference between the level of accommodating in É-raising and in V-insertion might seem crazy considering the above quoted overall results. But if it is so that the V-insertion in Common Czech is also quite low (as is suggested by the results of Wilson’s interviewer, Markéta, who alone had a V-insertion CC score only 47.29%), it is possible that the low V-insertion score of Wilson’s participants could be very relevant in the end. To sum up, what is needed is to compare collected results of Moravian students to empirical data on CC as spoken by native Czech (i.e. non-Moravian and non-Silesian) population.

The third problem is closely connected to the second one. To determine the rate of one’s accommodation we need to know what his native variety looks like. We do not have much empirically rigorous data on the contemporary Moravian speech. Often quoted descriptive works (such as *Český jazykový atlas*) are based on decades old data. For example, it is possible that the paradigm unification of the fifth conjugation has the highest CC score because the same form as in CC is being normally used in some parts of Moravia nowadays. In other words, we need a detailed analysis of contemporary speech of younger Moravians living in Moravia to determine the rate of their accommodation too.

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Conclusions

The problems I mentioned above, especially the second and the third one, are not easy to be solved. Rather, I brought them in to outline the current boundaries of the research possibilities. Wilson is not responsible for that there are not any high-quality variationist researches on the contemporary Czech language use and he did what he could (considering the book is his Ph.D. thesis). Perhaps, the only thing he could have done better is the construction of the sample which somehow shades the otherwise first-rate methodological proceeding of his work.

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