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Report on the Symposium

„Language Biographical Approaches in Linguistics“ at the 36th Austrian Linguistic Conference (ÖLT), December 6 & 7, 2008

The „Research Group Spracherleben“, a Vienna-based network of researchers in the field of multilingualism, namely Brigitta Busch, Claudia Kral, Jan Mossakowski, Petra Pfisterer, Judith Purkarthofer and Nada Zerzer, hosted together with Hans-Jürgen Krumm, professor at the Department of German Languages at the University of Vienna, a symposium on „Language Biographical Approaches in Linguistics“ at the 36th Austrian Linguistic Conference (ÖLT – Österreichische Linguistiktagung).

The event consisted of two sessions: On December 7th, researchers from Austria, the Czech Republic, Italy and Germany presented individual papers and posters and subsequently discussed theoretical issues and methodological concerns. At the evening before, December 6th, the research group invited to an informal workshop where creative methods of language biographical work were explored and reflected on by some of the participants of the symposium. The following article reports on both sessions.

Workshop “Creative Methods in Language Biographical Research”

The session was held at the Department of Linguistics of the University of Vienna. Participants and hosts, 13 people in total, got to know each other in an informal and relaxed atmosphere over a common dinner the research group had prepared. Soon everyone shared some biographical information and told why he or she came to the workshop. And the hosts explained the ideas and goals of the get-together in detail. Brigitta Busch described how the research group had started to work with creative methods, using them both for language biographical research as well as in the field of language didactics.

A central impulse task for creative language biographical work consists in portraying one's linguistic repertoire (languages, varieties and dialects intertwining with one's biography) by means of colouring a pre-printed blank human silhouette. Language portrayals trace back to an idea used by Ingrid Gogolin and Ursula Neumann (1991) and have since been employed on a larger scale by Hans-Jürgen Krumm in primary school settings (2001).

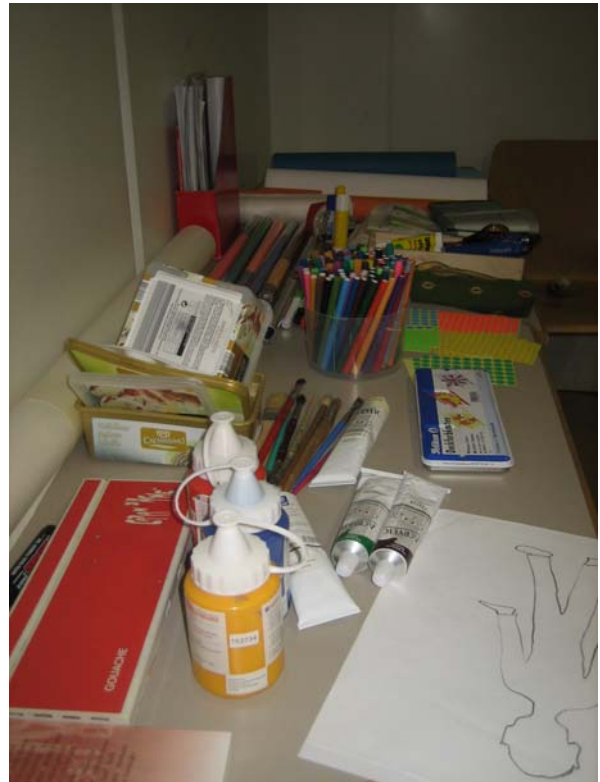
In this workshop we offered not only silhouettes in smaller dimensions – usually they fit on a sheet of paper - but also on-location drawn body-sized silhouettes of the participants. This version of language portrayals draws on a method used by gestalt therapy.

The participants were asked to reflect on how they communicate with different persons, how they express themselves and what codes and languages they use in different moments of their everyday life. While reflecting on features of their linguistic repertoires, participants associate colours with each of those and begin to portray their "linguistic self". The potential of this method, revealing the core issues that language learners/speakers are concerned with, lies within the shift from a narrative mode benefitting chronology to another creative mode allowing simultaneity and

spatial depiction of linguistic experience. As a result, the use of and attitudes towards one's languages, dialects or registers, as well as aspirations in language learning or imaginations of future language use can surface and become easier to grasp. The picture is never interpreted as such. Its methodological purpose is to initiate an account on language experience in which the participants describe and explain what they have drawn.

As an alternative we proposed to make a drawing or a collage of one's linguistic self which does not necessarily refer to the body-metaphor. Most of the participants who chose this created a "landscape" of their language-biography in which they not only visualised the particular layering of their languages, varieties and dialects at different points of their lives, but also changes and shifts over time.

Materials we offered for all these tasks were different colouring tools (acrylic paint, water colours, felt pens, wax crayons) as well as various kinds of paper, stickers and snippets from news papers and magazines.



A third option consisted in relating an event or a situation from one's own linguistic experiences through a text or a collage. This task is inspired by Frigga Haug's "memory work" (1999), which originally aimed at a group-analysis of self-written short stories. For those who were less interested in self-reflexion, we offered short pieces of autobiographical literature (e.g. by Elias Canetti, Eva Hoffman) which were then supposed to be expressed in a creative way, too.

After a one-hour working session, the participants shared their works by means of describing, explaining and interpreting the particular meanings of their products. In which way the various languages are brought into relation and arranged with different body parts, landscapes, other spacial metaphors and certain colours is a highly individual outcome, rooted in both, unconscious and precise ideas about the diverse functions and affective meanings of the participants' languages but also in his/her

social experience, namely processes of learning, valorisation, discrimination etc. Together we reflected on the processes that had been stimulated by the intensive and creative engagement with our own and other individual lingualities.

At the end of the workshop, many participants expressed the wish to continue the discussion on the character, suitability and applicability of creative language biographical methods in linguistic research. We take this as a work assignment and are looking forward to continue this kind of activity, which is always very promising and leads to even more interest.

Symposium “Language Biographical Approaches in Linguistics”

The aim of the symposium was to bring together linguists as well as people working in the field of language didactics or language politics from Austria and its neighbouring countries to discuss various approaches to language biographical research. While the biographic turn in social science took place in the 70s and 80s, linguistic research based on biographical approaches emerged about ten years ago and is still not yet an established field of linguistics.

The keynote was held by **Rita Franceschini**, a highly respected linguist across Europe who we were proud to win for the symposium. She approached the topic “**Language biographies of multilingual people: the emergence of a topic**” (*Sprachbiografien mehrsprachiger Personen: Emergenz eines Themas*) by telling her autobiographical way to this research field. Later on, she stated general reflections on the opportunities and challenges of biographical approaches.. For her, language biographies can be seen under four different angles: from a socio-historic, narratologic, typologic or conversation analytical point of view. All of those may reveal different layers of the biography and link it to the environment of the speaker, the collective history and the discursive contexts established in a society. Rita Franceschini was also insisting on the interactive dimension of the biographical narratives and stressed the fact, that recalling a language biography is not part of everyday social practice. But when given the possibility to explain one’s own language biography, many people tell their stories voluntarily as was shown through some anecdotes of the field workers’ everyday experience.

While Rita Franceschini focused on interviews and narratives, **Brigitta Busch** was turning to “**Multimodality in language biographical research**” (*Multimodalität in der Sprachbiografieforschung*) and presented ways how creative methods can be used complementarily to verbal or written biographical narratives. Depending on the situation of the participants (their age, status, language skills etc.) the drawings, collages and other creative products can be more accessible and hence lead to a different set of meaning. However the interpretation of the choice of colours and forms has to be done in close cooperation with the person to understand his/her motivations. The participant has to be seen as an expert of his/her own life and is invited to share this expertise with the researcher.

Hans-Jürgen Krumm, who had started working with language portrayals in Austrian elementary schools, talked about “**Language portrayals as a key to the linguistic identity of children (and adults) with migrational background**” (*Sprachenporträts als Schlüssel zur Sprachidentität von Kindern (und Erwachsenen) mit Migrationshintergrund*). He focused on the link between language and identity and the importance of including every single language into the linguistic self. In a society

that is still driven by a hegemonic monolingualism (especially visible in schools and institutions) even the talking about mothertongues can be difficult. To make use of the portrayals in a fruitful way, Hans-Jürgen Krumm introduced some important rules, among them the strict voluntariness of drawing, the omission of reglementation (i.e. 'this is not a language') and the publication in the group including the possibility to explain one's thoughts and motivations.

After these general talks, the rest of the presentations were dedicated to examples of practice from various fields of language learning and language experience. **Doris Reininger** started with „**Cause biographical - that's me!**” **Oral biographical narrating as a didactic activity in the teaching of German as a foreign/second language for adults** („*Weil biografisch, das bin ich selbst!*“ – *Mündliches biografisches Erzählen als Unterrichtsaktivität im fremd- und zweitsprachlichen Deutschunterricht mit erwachsenen Lernenden*). As a teacher in adult learning groups, she experienced oral narration as being an essential as well as attractive part of the learning process. Through the personal and emotional involvement, the task became more meaningful to the narrator but also helped building a group identity.

The second example for the application of biographical approaches was given by **Verena Plutzar**, who presented „**I'm more than the languages I speak**” („*Ich bin mehr als die Sprachen, die ich spreche*“ *Das Sprachen- und Qualifikationsportfolio für MigrantInnen und Flüchtlinge (SquP) als Beispiel für das sprachdidaktische Potential eines biografischen Ansatzes*). This initiative for migrants and refugees shall not only foster the knowledge of German but also empower the participants to recognise their own potentials and possibilities with regard to the Austrian labour market. Key qualifications such as flexibility are explained and are to be linked to the participants own experiences.

The needs and requirements of specific language classes were also the topic of **Barbara Haider: On the investigation of linguistic requirements in occupational contexts** (*Zur Erhebung von Sprachbedürfnissen im beruflichen Kontext*). Her study was an investigation among nurses who had migrated to Austria, dealing with the professional situation and their special need for adequate language education. This includes some knowledge of non-standard varieties of German as well as highly specific vocabulary from the field of hospital care and documentation.

The next presentation by **Sophia Simon** on „**Prima di tutto mi sento algherese**“ – **Language biographies from Alghero (Sardinia)** („*Prima di tutto mi sento algherese*“ – *Sprachbiographien aus Alghero, Sardinien*) focused on the linguistic identities of inhabitants of a Sardinian town, where apart from Italian and Sardinian, Algheres, a dialect of Catalan is spoken

Closing the range of presentations and showing again an other way of dealing with language biographies, **Ivo Vasiljev** talked about his language autobiography describing it as being **Between a Life Story and a Manifesto of Multilingual Education**. After having studied languages during his lifespan, he decided to proof that even elderly people are capable of learning another language. Therefore he started to learn Hungarian and to write a documentation on this process.

Four more presentations were given in the form of posters: **Ursula Doleschal** from the University of Klagenfurt discussed “**Multilingualism in Carinthia – Presentation**

of a research focus" (*Mehrsprachigkeit in Kärnten - Vorstellung eines Forschungsschwerpunkts*).

Jan Mossakowski presented reflections "**On the methodological dialectics between language biographies and metalinguistic discourses**" (*Zum methodologischen Zusammenhang von Sprachbiographien und Metasprachdiskursen*).

Nada Zerzer focussed on one aspect of her doctoral thesis "**When telling me about your languages: Narratives of minority languages and publicity**" (*Wenn du mir von deinen Sprachen erzählst: Erzählungen von Minderheitensprachen und Öffentlichkeit*) and **Judith Purkarthofer** gave some ideas on "**Language biographies and media biographies – entanglements and obstacles**" (*Sprachen, Biographien, Medien. Verschränkungen und Hindernisse*).

The main topics in the concluding discussion were on the one hand the ideologies behind scientific approaches and on the other hand the strong focus on speakers that is highlighted by the biographical approach. Through this person-centered approach it is possible to reflect on a speakers language repertoire on an affective level. Not only emotional factors in language learning and use, but also influences of particular discourses that play a deeper role in the speakers everyday life can be taken into account. Rita Franceschini highlighted the fact, that for example children are extremely sensitive to possible/impossible utterances and languages. These experiences can affect the learning (or not-learning) of a language or a certain variety. More cooperations (with psycholinguists, etc) could help to end monocausal explanations and to deal with the complex realities of everyday life.