

Book Review

Markus Schiegg. 2022. *Flexible Schreiber in der Sprachgeschichte. Intraindividuelle Variation in Patientenbriefen (1850–1936)* (Germanistische Bibliothek 75). Heidelberg: Winter. ISBN: 9783825349554 (hardback)/ISBN: 9783825385750 (eBook), pp. 609, €78.00 (hardback), Open Access eBook.

Reviewed by **Marko Neumann**, Institut für Germanistik, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Otto-Behaghel-Str. 10 B, 35390 Gießen, Germany, E-mail: marko.neumann@germanistik.uni-giessen.de

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In third-wave sociolinguistics, historical speakers are no longer viewed as stable bearers of a particular linguistic variety, but as versatile agents who use different styles and registers to express and construct multiple identities (cf. Conde-Silvestre 2016). In order to pursue this individual-centred approach, it is necessary to reconstruct the socio-historical contexts in which people were embedded, gathering as much biographical information as possible. In recent years, Markus Schiegg and his research group have shown that letters written by patients from psychiatric hospitals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are a suitable and intriguing source for the study of ‘Flexible Writers in the History of Language’.¹ Their project was funded by the Elite Network of Bavaria from 09/2017 to 08/2023; the list of publications contains more than 20 titles in German and English. Schiegg’s monograph *Flexible Schreiber in der Sprachgeschichte. Intraindividuelle Variation in Patientenbriefen (1850–1936)* [Flexible writers in the history of language. Intraindividual variation in patient letters (1850–1936)], which is based on his habilitation thesis at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, can be considered the magnum opus of this extensive research.

The study of nine chapters is best presented by pursuing the four main objectives stated in the introduction (Chapter 1). The first objective involves identifying the conditions of writing in early psychiatric institutions, describing the archival status of patient texts, and discussing the types of texts found in medical records (Chapters 2 and 3). Among the factors relevant to writing, Schiegg outlines schooling in the nineteenth century and educational opportunities during long-term institutionalisation, using examples from Bavaria and the Kaufbeuren-Irsee mental hospital. (All texts examined in the study are from this institution). Schiegg emphasises that reading newspapers was an important everyday activity, as patients not only gained political information, but also learnt about personal events at home (e.g., through

¹ The website of the research project “CoPaDocs–Corpus of Patient Documents” is available at <http://copadocs.de>.

wedding announcements and obituaries). Chief obstacles to writing were illness and weak mental condition, disciplinary measures and medical treatments, poor writing instruments, and – when writing letters – postal censorship. According to Schiegg, censorship existed officially and served primarily to protect the institution, the other patients and the addressees. Sometimes letters were also used as a diagnostic tool to assess the mental state of patients. Schiegg demonstrates that many patients were aware of censorship, which occasionally led to clandestine writing and smuggling of letters. Censorship is the main reason that letters were kept in medical records and are still available today.

The archival situation of patient texts, however, is difficult to assess due to insufficiently itemised finding aids. Schiegg has done important work in this regard by accurately documenting the results of his bibliographical review and his own findings in Kaufbeuren-Irsee and many other national and international archives (Appendix A). In Kaufbeuren-Irsee, Schiegg discovered about 600 medical records with at least one private letter. The writers of these letters were men and women from all social classes with varying levels of writing experience. Their records also included official letters (e.g., to doctors and political figures), biographies (written mostly at the psychiatrists' request), handwriting samples (e.g., first and last name, date of birth), and indirect evidence of speech (e.g., transcripts of patient statements in medical reports). Schiegg explores the linguistic potential of these text types, but focuses his study on private and official letters as he attempts to reveal different language uses depending on the type of addressee (audience design model). The other documents are used to validate and contextualise the results while reflecting the vulnerability of the patients.

The second, methodological objective is to develop and validate a linguistic model for measuring intraindividual variation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century letters (Chapters 4 and 5). To this end, Schiegg draws on a theory introduced by the German Romanists Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher in 1985 (published in English in 2012). While little noticed in English-language linguistics (cf. Schaefer 2021), Koch and Oesterreicher's (2012) approach of distinguishing between 'spoken' and 'written' language with regard to the conception (or style) of a discourse has been a topic of ongoing discussion in German and Romance linguistics for many years. The authors assume a conceptual continuum between two poles, which they define as 'language of immediacy' (i.e., unplanned discourse in a dialogic setting) and 'language of distance' (i.e., planned formal discourse for a remote audience). In order to precisely locate a text within this continuum, Ágel and Hennig (2006) have designed a model to operationalise the theory of immediacy and distance. They presuppose that the universal semiotic and structural nature of syntactic constructions can be used to assign them to the domain of either immediacy or distance. By this means, Ágel and Hennig establish a catalogue of linguistic features associated with different

parameters (e.g., role, time, situation) and use it to quantify and compare the occurrence of such features in different types of discourse.

The question of whether (and if so, how) constructions can be clearly identified as linguistic features of immediacy or distance has been the subject of critical debate, especially for historical texts (cf. Löttscher 2010; Neumann 2019: Ch. 7). To apply the model to his purpose, Schiegg has to make thorough revisions and adjustments: he adds, eliminates, or combines numerous features; he strengthens the levels of lexis, pragmatics, and text structure; and he also considers regional features, recording them with a simplified scoring system. By adapting the model to a specific historical discourse, Schiegg has decisively refined it both theoretically and methodologically.

Nevertheless, the rigid classification of linguistic features based on immediacy and distance remains problematic. Self-corrections made by patients during the writing process are evaluated as features of immediacy, even if they indicate an intended language of distance (pp. 214, 242, 538). Similarly, the omission of subject pronouns and auxiliary ellipsis in subordinate clauses are considered features of distance (pp. 241, 244), but may as well be seen as violations of written language norms, which are otherwise classified as examples of immediacy (cf. pp. 224, 229). Certainly, the evaluation of linguistic features depends on various factors, such as the writer's intention, background, context, and audience. Therefore, it might be more useful to focus on concepts with a clear and stable reference point, such as the degree of orientation to written language norms, for statistical analyses. Schiegg's study raises important questions and contributes to the ongoing debate on immediacy and distance in historical settings.

The third objective of the study is to reveal the intraindividual linguistic flexibility of the writers (Chapters 6, 7, and 8). The textual basis for this is formed by 191 private and official letters from 28 writers (22 patients and 6 relatives) written between 1850 and 1936. Chapter 6 focuses on variation between the different texts of individual writers. Based on the obtained immediacy-distance scores, the writers are first categorised into three groups ('immediacy writers', 'immediacy-distance writers', 'distance writers'). Evidently, the immediacy writers were mainly blue-collar workers, while the distance writers had jobs that required advanced writing skills. Then the conceptual profile of each writer is examined individually, incorporating their biography and the progression of their illness. This qualitative approach allows Schiegg to differentiate his initial quantitative classification. He argues, for example, that high immediacy scores are not necessarily due to low writing experience, but can also result from deliberate deviation from written language norms (e.g., to express linguistic creativity). Also, private letters do not necessarily correlate with language of immediacy and official letters with language of distance; rather, the writers were able to tailor the conception of the letter to the individual

degree of familiarity with the addressee. Although less experienced writers often failed to express formality (their letters show hypercorrections, anacolutha, and outdated formulae), many of them had remarkable linguistic skills considering their social and educational background. Therefore, all writers, whether they had much or little writing experience, show evidence of linguistic flexibility, revealing that intraindividual variation was an integral part of their writing.

Chapter 7 addresses variation within individual texts and examines its functions. Three case studies are presented, namely expressions of linguistic creativity through codeswitching and poetic language, the occurrence of appeals (e.g., requests, demands) in the course of the letters, and the distribution of correct and incorrect orthographic variants. For the day labourer Martin B., Schiegg is able to show that orthographic errors accumulate in the second half of B.'s letters, which he explains with the loss of concentration due to haste or fatigue. Chapter 8, on the other hand, deals with diachronic phenomena, such as the influence of age and deteriorating health. Although no linear trend between language and disease progression can be identified, the cases investigated reveal that graphomotoric abilities (fine motor skills) decline toward the end of life and features of immediacy and regionality tend to increase. Life-changing events (e.g., admission to or discharge from a mental health facility) may also have a linguistic impact. Thus, in the case of patient letters, the physical and mental condition of the writers is an important factor in intraindividual variation. Finally, Schiegg explores the question of how language changes in society are reflected in the letters of individual long-term patients. In the case study of Georg S., Schiegg demonstrates that the patient, who worked as a servant for a miller, gradually adapts to modern orthographic norms as a result of intensive newspaper reading. The effect of educational opportunities on patients' writing should therefore not be underestimated either.

The main outcome of Schiegg's study – that both experienced and less experienced writers have a 'range of linguistic possibilities' (Macha 1991) that they use in an addressee-specific way – is certainly not limited to patient letters and can be applied to other types of discourse as well. By focussing on psychiatric patients as a marginalised group, Schiegg offers new perspectives on a 'language history from below' (Elspeß 2012) and thus fulfils his fourth and final objective, namely, to situate patient letters within a framework of an 'inclusive language history'. Due to his innovative research questions and the successful mix of quantitative and qualitative analysis, Schiegg's study is a valuable contribution to historical linguistics. Particularly noteworthy is the methodological ingenuity through which intraindividual variation (as a notoriously tricky matter) can be effectively investigated and illustrated in a neat and comprehensible way. In an overview of future research (Chapter 9), Schiegg refers to forthcoming dissertations by members of his research group; hence, it can be certain that patient texts will continue to be the subject of linguistic

research, making the lives of these long disregarded people tangible and retroactively giving them a voice.

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