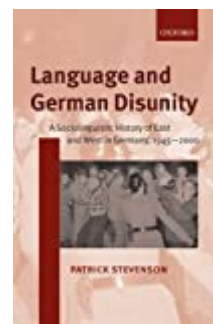


**Patrick Stevenson.** *Language and German Disunity: A Sociolinguistic History of East and West in Germany, 1945-2000.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. x + 275 pp. \$180.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-829969-1; \$105.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-829970-7.



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## “They Both Speak German, but East and West Still Don’t Understand Each Other”

Stevenson provides an authoritative exploration of the role of language in recent German history, and particularly since 1989, as two communication communities have encountered one another after a half-century of inhabiting two separate German states.[1] Writing as an “engaged outsider” (p. vii) about discussions hitherto largely conducted in German, Stevenson gives all German cited in English translation. He also hopes to be accessible for readers who are not trained linguists. He explains key concepts (for instance “speech community” vs “communication community”; “discourse”; social network theory), describes in straightforward terms the linguistic phenomena under investigation, and simplifies transcriptions of some of the data presented. Inevitably, though, in a work whose very strength lies in the author’s intimate knowledge of recent sociolinguistic research, a considerable number of linguistic terms are not explicitly defined for the lay reader, and I suspect that non-linguists will find it a challenging, though rewarding, read.

After a useful introduction (which is chapter 1), part 1 (“Language, Nation and State”) outlines how language has long been central to German cultural identity and—

since the nineteenth century—to conceptions of German nationhood. When Germany split into two states in 1949, study of the German language soon reflected the political divide. The question of possible linguistic differences between German in the Federal Republic and in the Democratic Republic was usually addressed from the perspective of the West, which assumed ownership of the norm and registered any differences in the GDR as deviations. The differences registered were in fact largely confined to about 5 percent of the vocabulary, especially terms needed to express the realities of different social and political institutions, while syntax, phonology and morphology remained largely unaffected. Still, the “conceit of a divided language” (p. 31), a threat to the integrity of German identity, was ideologized on both sides until calmer times in the 1980s.

Stevenson notes the tendency of much pre-1989 research to judge eastern German linguistic practice against implicit western norms, but his chapter 3 (“Building and Unbuilding the GDR”) suffers somewhat from the same flaw. I find little value in negative evaluations of public political discourse in the GDR (for instance, as

“lifeless prose,” p. 57) without at least some attempt at explicit comparison with FRG discourse (or indeed the discourse of western democracies generally). Perhaps there is a generational problem here. To those who were politically aware before 1989, it may be self-evident not just that the GDR state machinery was worse in many ways than that of the West, but that its political discourse was too. For younger readers, however, the case needs to be made, and the lack of explicit comparison with the West makes this chapter a rather frustrating read.

In part 2 (“Relocating ‘East’ and ‘West’”), Stevenson first looks at how linguistic differences were negotiated as east and west encountered one another after 1989. He notes the emergence of “public lexicography” (p. 121): columns in newspapers, materials published by companies for their employees, and language advice bureaux that sprang up to help speakers navigate in the new speech ecology—for example the memorandum of a Dresden company which instructed staff to avoid certain words which westerners would instantly recognize as eastern, often with negative connotations: *Kollektiv* (collective), *Brigade* (work team), or *Kader* (specialist, expert) (p. 124). Typically, it is easterners whose linguistic behavior is felt to be marked and who have to accommodate to western norms (cf. p. 215).

Importantly, Stevenson then goes beyond the observation of superficial, if salient, differences in vocabulary, to discuss numerous recent studies suggesting the existence of subtler east/west differences in linguistic practice after 1989, whether in syntactic constructions, stylistic features or patterns of discourse in a wide range of

discourse types: calls to advice lines, job interviews, speeches, readers’ letters, advertisements and so on. Unfortunately, the results of such research, relying on fine-grained analysis, are qualitative, rather than quantitative, and the samples studied are almost invariably too small to be generalizable. Stevenson is scrupulous in noting the danger of generalizing from rather anecdotal evidence in each case, but his accumulation of so many studies—each of which is, strictly speaking, inconclusive—nevertheless allows an impression to build up that there *must* be differences here which are, at least in part, attributable to eastern-/westernness rather than to other factors. Even though he highlights the methodological difficulties, Stevenson colludes in this impression somewhat when he cites just two “would-like-to-meet” advertisements from 1989 *as if* they might be representative: the one from East Berlin is more “factual and frank”; that from West Berlin relies on irony and seems to seek to stand out (pp. 136-137).

While there may be a lack of robust findings on real differences between easterners’ and westerners’ linguistic practice, Stevenson shows that there is no doubt that Germans (still!) *perceive* such differences, and believe that it is possible to identify speakers as either “Ossi” or “Wessi” on the basis of them. Easterners are believed to be more open and direct, westerners to be more waffling, for instance. Ten years on from unification, the *Mauer in den Koepfen* (“wall in our heads”) has not gone away.

Note

[1]. The title of the review is taken from a headline in *Die Zeit* (August 2000).

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