Diachronic and diatopic variation in German requests: High-imposition contexts since the 19th century

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Variational pragmatics (Schneider and Barron 2008) investigates the effect of geographical and social factors on the pragmatic behavior of speakers within one language. Previous studies on multi-standard German (Auer 2021) primarily focused on the geographical dimension of intra-lingual variation in present-day language. These studies either compared national varieties, e.g. German German and Austrian German in request realization (Warga 2008), or examined intra-national variation, e.g. request strategies in Germany and German-speaking Switzerland (Ackermann 2021). However, a historical perspective has not yet been integrated into the analysis of diatopic pragmatic variation. Likewise, diachronic studies traced the development of pragmatic features in German, e.g. *bitte* 'please' (Ackermann 2023), without considering potential geographical variation in depth.

In our talk, we will discuss both diachronic **and** diatopic variation in German requests. Particularly, we are interested in the relation between present-day regional politeness norms and their diachronic development. By uttering a request, the speaker performs a directive speech action that is at the cost of the hearer and inherently shows face-threatening potential (e.g. Leech 1983, Brown and Levinson 1987). Thus, requests enable us to analyze the variation of politeness strategies such as deference, solidarity or tentativeness politeness across time and geographical space. We thereby draw on two empirical data sets: (1) a historical corpus of over 1,000 letters from the 19th century written by immigrants to the United States (Elspaß 2005), patients from psychiatric hospitals (Schiegg 2022) and soldiers (Neumann 2019) and (2) results from a present-day online study with more than 2,000 participants from Germany, Austria and Switzerland featuring Discourse Completion Tasks. All data were manually annotated for the expression of politeness (e.g. terms of endearment as solidarity politeness

markers and conventional indirectness as tentativeness politeness markers). In addition, socio-demographic data are available for each speaker (e.g. regional origin and social background). We limit our analysis of politeness-sensitive requests in German to high-imposition contexts only, which are typically attended by high social and psychological burdens. This covers, e.g. requests for financial support. Applying (geo)statistical modeling, these contexts will be explored for diachronic and diatopic variation. Regarding request strategies, for instance, conventional indirectness, e.g. by means of ability questions (*Can you VP?*), tends to occur more frequently in the present-day data compared to the 19th-century letters, irrespective of geographical factors, potentially reflecting a diachronic rise of tentativeness politeness in German overall.

By combining historical and present-day data, we aim to provide novel insights into how regional politeness norms change over time. This approach allows us to expand variational pragmatics research with a diachronic perspective. Finally, we will also address methodological challenges in aligning historical and variational pragmatics.

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