

New Language Norm Authorities in Germany: Ideological Roots and Social Consequences

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1. Introduction

As compared to the English, for instance, the Germans have been characterized as a remarkably normative and conservative language community (Durrell 1999). Discourses on language norms tend to gain a wide audience in Germany. The public outcries which followed the spelling reforms in the past (or just the attempts to reform the orthography) are just one prominent example (cf. Johnson 2007). In the long run, most people in Germany have always yielded to new spelling reforms imposed by the authorities in the educational sector. Orthography, however, is the only linguistic area in Germany in which codified norms were passed by political (and democratically elected) bodies and in which such norms are enforced by authorities, particularly in the educational sector. For pronunciation and grammar, however, definitive and ultimate codices do not exist, although codices from the Duden publishing house (and – to a lesser extent – also from other publishers, e.g. Wahrig 2002) have a quasi-official status. They are widely accepted as norm authorities, but rarely used by most people because they are taken to be difficult to access. In schools, students would ask their teachers, and the ‘ordinary’ adult user tends to consult professional speakers or writers rather than grammar books if in linguistic doubt.

It may therefore not come as a surprise that some of the best-selling books on language matters in Germany – apart from dictionaries – have not been written by linguists, but by journalists. In recent years, German linguists have been particularly irritated by the popularity of Bastian Sick and his book series *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* (literally: ‘the dative is the genitive his death’, Sick 2004-2009). The four volumes of this series and other books by the same author sold more than four million copies. Sick has given public readings in front of big audiences, he has regularly been invited by the German *Goethe*-Institute abroad, and he even had his own TV show.¹

In the first part of this paper, we will briefly portray the work of Bastian Sick and his rise to a new ‘language norm authority’ against the background of a long prescriptivist tradition in Germany. (The careers of journalists and freelance writers as new language norm authorities are, however, by no means a specifically German phenomenon, cf. Beal in this volume.) In the second part, we will analyse different concepts of norm and standard, which are at the heart of a controversial debate on the social and educational benefits (or rather damages) of this author’s books.

¹ Data source: Sick’s webpage on <<http://www.bastiansick.de/biografie>> [25 March 2011].

2. The Rise of a ‘Language Norm Authority’ and the Ideological Roots of the New Language Prescriptivists

Bastian Sick’s rise to a new ‘authority on language norms’ is a dubious success story. Sick has studied History and Romance Languages and Literature, was a proof reader and translator for a while and then moved on to the *Spiegel*, the biggest and most influential German news magazine, where he worked as a journalist and final editor for the online edition of the magazine. During this time, he created the *Zwiebelfisch*,² a regular column, in which Sick commented on what he saw as frequent linguistic ‘errors’ and ‘fallacies’. Due to the popularity of this online column, the texts were eventually published in book format. Altogether four paperback volumes of the series *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* have been published so far, and the success of these books might have taken the author and his publisher by surprise. As a result, Bastian Sick – along with figures like Wolf Schneider, a bestselling journalist writer of style companions – was hailed as a new authority on language issues, even as a ‘Sprachheld’ (‘language hero’).³ How was this possible?

In the beginning, Sick – in his own words – merely intended to “entertain” with his texts, indicating the unpopularity of many textbooks on German:

Lehrbücher über die deutsche Sprache gibt es viele. Aber nur wenige davon werden freiwillig gelesen. Das liegt vermutlich an ihrer Rezeptur: größtmögliche Akribie und pädagogischer Eifer, geringstmöglicher Unterhaltungswert. Dieses Buch ist anders.

‘There are many textbooks on the German language. But few of them are read voluntarily. This is probably due to their formulation: They combine greatest possible meticulousness, pedagogical zeal and the lowest possible entertainment value. This book is different.’ (Sick 2004: 9, our translation)

The subtitle of his books, however, already claimed that they were meant as ‘guides through the maze’ of the German language (“Ein Wegweiser durch den Irrgarten der deutschen Sprache”).⁴ In the meantime, Sick’s books have acquired a somewhat authoritative status on language matters, particularly on an (actually relatively small) number of notorious difficulties in the grammar of standard written German. As they make light reading, they are often used by school teachers in grammar lessons, which are otherwise considered as unpopular albeit mandatory in the curriculum (and thus likely to be taught in an uninspired and uninspiring way). Some school authorities have even accepted Sick’s books as compulsory textbooks for final exams. This new role Sick is playing, has certainly been promoted by his publisher. Given that he may not have intended to become a language norm authority right from the beginning, his career has without doubt changed his self-portrayal and self-esteem. Nowadays, he

² The name is taken from a word in the German terminology of printing, meaning ‘letter in the wrong font/typeface’.

³ Schreiber in his article “Deutsch for sale” in *Der Spiegel* 40 (2006: 185).

⁴ Note the language myth in this metaphorical subtitle (German as a complicated language), which implies, of course, that only people in the know like the author can act as guides.

identifies himself as “Sprachpfleger” (‘language purist’), “Sprachwächter” (‘language guardian’), “Grammaticus” and even “Grammatikagent mit der Lizenz zum Nachschlagen” (‘special grammar agent with the licence to look up’) or “Zentrale der deutschen Sprachpolizei” (‘headquarters of German language police’).⁵

Although written in a humorous tone, most of Sick’s columns make clear and uncompromising judgements about language use. Thus, contrary to what he stated earlier, Sick tells his readers what he thinks is the correct way of speaking and writing. One part of his judgements is merely subjective and cannot be confirmed by codices on grammar, lexis and pronunciation. For another part, he methodically uses (and misuses) information he finds in descriptive works like the *Duden Grammar* (Duden 4, 2009) by offering a prescriptive reading and presenting it as strict norms to his readers. In this respect, Sick’s columns and books are deeply rooted in a prescriptivist tradition that lives on under the banner of *Sprachpflege* (literally ‘language care’, but maybe best translated as ‘concern for the purity of language’). In Germany, prescriptivism mainly evolved in the late 18th and the 19th century, not coincidentally in the final stage of the standardisation of German. At the end of the 19th century, language guides specialising in grammatical questions and style appeared in great numbers with somewhat metaphorical or even polemic titles such as

Über Verrottung und Errettung der deutschen Sprache.

‘On the rotting and rescue of the German language.’ (Hans Paul Frhr. von Wolzogen, Leipzig 1880)

Allerhand Sprachdummheiten. Kleine deutsche Grammatik des Zweifelhaften, des Falschen und des Häßlichen; ein Hilfsbuch für alle die sich öffentlich der deutschen Sprache bedienen.

‘All kinds of language foolishness. A little German grammar of dubious, wrong and ugly language use. A guide for all those who use the German language in public.’ (Gustav Wustmann, Leipzig 1892)

Sprachleben und Sprachschäden. Ein Führer durch die Schwankungen und Schwierigkeiten des deutschen Sprachgebrauchs.

‘Language life and language damages. A guide through the variation and the difficulties of German language usage.’ (Theodor Matthias, Leipzig 1892)

Sick’s books are therefore nothing novel. They are to be viewed in a more than one hundred year old tradition of non-linguistic works which people would consult if they wanted to know how to express themselves correctly ‘in public’, which first and foremost means in formal *written* German.

Several long-established language ideologies and myths lie at the heart of such prescriptive works and have to be considered in view of their obvious success in

⁵ Cf. e.g. <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/zwiebelfisch/0,1518,397635,00.html>>, <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/zwiebelfisch/0,1518,258199,00.html>>, <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/0,1518,461366,00.html>> [25 March 2011].

Germany.⁶ Fundamental to language prescriptivism are linguistic conservatism, elitism, purism and the standard language ideology.

Language conservatism frequently expresses itself in complaints about language decay and notorious laments such as “children can’t speak or write properly anymore” (Milroy 1998). In the German case, this ideology is closely related to a teleological view on the rise of German as a standard language, which portrayed the language of ‘the best’ authors like classical Schiller and Goethe (or rather the 19th-century editions of their works) as the peak of all standardisation efforts.

Language elitism is the outcome of the conviction that the language use of some social elites is better/more correct/more valuable/nicer etc. than that of other social groups, irrespective of register and context. In popular language criticism, this ideology is employed to make non-professional speakers or writers believe that as a matter of course the non-standard use of language is worse/less correct/less valuable/uglier etc. than the standard (cf. Lanstyák 2011).

Language purism can be defined as “the manifestation of a desire on the part of a speech community (or some section of it) to preserve a language from, or to rid it of, putative foreign elements or other elements held to be undesirable (including those originating in dialects, sociolects and styles of the same language)” (Thomas 1991: 12). Purism frequently goes hand in hand with nationalist ideologies. Primarily, it affects the lexicon. In Germany, puristic tendencies can be traced back to the early modern age, but have become particularly forceful (and at times fierce) as from the 19th century onwards (cf. von Polenz 1999: 264–293). At present, they are mainly directed against the influence of anglicisms on German (cf. Busse 2005).

The *standard language ideology* is inextricably connected to homogenism, i.e. the belief that a standard language should be uniform and without variation. This ideology set off in the wake of modern nation state building. As for German, it is clearly related to the “creation of national myths in nineteenth-century Germany” (Durrell 2000). Although standard languages are “an idea in the mind rather than a reality” (Milroy and Milroy 1985: 23) and people have only a vague notion of what they might look like and who produces or which texts represent the standard, most people in Germany take it for granted that such a thing actually exists.

Prescriptive works which are both inspired and fostered by these ideologies lead to stigmatisation of (non-standard) varieties and (non-standard as well as certain standard) variants. The major social effects of this stigmatisation are segregation and discrimination. Segregation is manifested by separating those ‘who know’ the standard variety best from those who never had and will never have the chance to gain full competence in the high variety – and probably will never need or desire to master it. Particularly the conservative factions of the educated bourgeoisie (the so-called *Bildungsbürgertum*), creators and upholders of the standard language ideology in Germany (cf. Durrell 2000), were presumably not keen to share their newly acquired social power with the masses. By establishing an ideal of correctness and connecting ‘correct’ speech and writing with cognitive abilities, prescriptivism has served as a

⁶ Wustmann’s *Sprachdummheiten*, for instance, saw fourteen editions.

language barrier to put members of the lesser educated classes ‘in their place’. Furthermore, stigmatisation of non-standard varieties such as regional dialects and their speakers has – at least in Germany (not in Switzerland) – been one major factor for the dramatic decrease of dialect use in the 20th century. The discriminative force of stigmatising language varieties and language variants will be explained in more detail in the next section, using examples from Sick’s columns.

3. Different Concepts of ‘Norms’, their Sociolinguistic Implications and Social Consequences

Large parts of the linguistic community, except sociolinguists, usually refrain from getting involved in public language debates. Sick’s books, however, have triggered a major response among linguists. Some prominent German grammarians published articles not only in linguistic journals, but also in newspapers (e.g. Eisenberg 2006) or in blogs (e.g. Ickler⁷ and Stefanowitsch⁸). Meinunger (2008) even wrote a book entitled *Sick of Sick?*, in which he compiles short texts on linguistic phenomena in the manner of Sick’s columns, taking an opposite position to Sick’s, of course, and clearly mocking Sick’s style. In different articles, Schneider (2005, 2008) and Topalović/Elspaß (2008) provided an analysis and critique of Sick’s prescriptivist approach. In the magazine *Informationen Deutsch als Fremdsprache* (‘Information on German as a second language’) Maitz/Elspaß (2007) published an article, in which they argued against the (actual) use of Sick’s books in language teaching. This article sparked a debate mainly between a (former) official of the German Academic Exchange Service (Roggausch 2007, 2009) and a group of linguists (Ágel 2008; König 2008; Maitz/Elspaß 2009) on the understanding of ‘language norms’ in Sick’s books and on the nature and the role of language norms in general and in language teaching, in particular. In the following paragraphs, we will try to give an overview of the main arguments in this debate.

At the centre of the dispute is the question what language norms are. The main advocate in favour of Sick’s position, Roggausch, strongly defends Sick’s intentions as well founded, timely and useful (Roggausch 2007: 527).⁹ In Roggausch’s view, language norms and their enforcement are necessary. In that he denies the fact that native speakers follow linguistic rules in the sense of norms of usage when they speak or write, it becomes obvious that he has a very definite idea of what ‘norms’ are:

Wer den realen Sprachgebrauch von Kindern und Jugendlichen, von Abiturienten und Studierenden kennt, auch von Erwachsenen außerhalb der intellektuellen Milieus, selbst von Journalisten und Fernsehmoderatoren anschaut, der sieht wahrlich überall deutliche sprachliche Defizite. [...] die muttersprachliche Ausbildung von Kindern und Jugendlichen sowie die Ausbildung von Deutschlehrern sind längst Felder, auf denen von homogener Muttersprache nicht mehr die Rede sein kann.

⁷ <<http://www.sprachforschung.org/index.php?show=thorheiten&id=107#289>> [25 March 2011].

⁸ <<http://www.iaas.uni-bremen.de/sprachblog/2007/10/15/sinnesfreuden-iii/>> [25 March 2011].

⁹ “Ich halte Sicks Intentionen für begründet, aktuell und nützlich!”

‘Looking at the real language use of children, adolescents, high school graduates, university students and adults outside the intellectual milieu, even of journalists and TV presenters, one can see significant linguistic deficits everywhere. [...] the education of children and young people in their mother-tongue and the training of German teachers have for long been areas of which we can hardly speak of a homogeneous native language anymore.’ (Roggasch 2007: 528f, our translation).

Two misconceptions become evident in this quote: Firstly, what people like Roggasch have in mind when they write of linguistic deficits here and elsewhere are certainly imperfections with respect to the (formal) written language use of a small social elite, which he presumably identifies with the language norm. This strict meaning of norm, in fact, coincides with prescriptive norms of the written standard language. Linguists, however, would make a clear distinction between prescriptive norms of standard varieties and norms of usage of standard as well as non-standard varieties. It is evident to linguists that the ‘real language use’ includes much more than just the formal written standard language variety and that norms of usage are inherent to all language varieties (e.g. dialects and other non-standard varieties, spoken and informal registers of the standard etc.). Moreover, it is an axiom in linguistics that a native speaker of a language variety usually is a perfect speaker of this variety (cf. Beal, in this volume).

Secondly, all varieties and registers of living languages are variable and open to change. Not even formal written standard language varieties are standardised to the degree of total uniformity (“the only fully standardised language is a dead language”, Milroy and Milroy 1985: 22). The concept of a “homogeneous native language” is an artefact of the standard language ideology, and the belief that some such homogeneous language had existed in the past is undoubtedly a manifestation of linguistic conservatism.

Different concepts of language norms and on the variability of language have always been central to misunderstandings between linguists and non-linguists. The views on the German language situation that Roggasch¹⁰ aired in this article are not singular, but reflect a wide-spread conviction, particularly among intellectuals in Germany who care much for language issues. And these views are certainly also accepted by the majority of native speakers of German, who believe that their use of the standard language is somehow deficient. In fact, by way of language education they have fallen prey to the standard language ideology, which has been so influential that “virtually every speaker now subscribes [to it] in principle” (ibid.: 36). A language situation in a modern Western country like Norway (cf. Jahr 1997), in which people write in one of at least two accepted standard languages and in which everybody speaks his or her own dialect (and teachers are prohibited to ask their students to give up their dialect in class), would be unimaginable in Germany (unlike Switzerland!). It is these convictions

¹⁰ It has to be remembered that Roggasch was a high-ranking official responsible for international academic exchange (*Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst*) and that he was in charge of the selection of German language lecturers abroad and the support of the corresponding lecturer program.

that are the breeding ground for Sick's columns, and we will now turn to the arguments of Sick's critics in the debate, which boil down to two main issues.

Firstly, linguists doubt Sick's linguistic competence. Two main characteristic shortcomings of Sick's *Zwiebelfisch* columns were identified:

- (a) Sick apparently believes in the homogeneity of a standard language, he does not take into account language variation and language change as essential features of living languages, and he fails to notice variation as a central factor of language change.
- (b) He neglects the difference between the language use in spoken and written language and he only distinguishes between standard language and dialect, ignoring other varieties of German – and the fact that even the standard variety is open to variation.¹¹

These shortcomings can be illustrated with two examples from *Zwiebelfisch* columns in which Sick addresses the missing use of the genitive, which in his opinion leads to incorrect grammar.¹²

In a column entitled “Das Verflixte dieses Jahres”, Sick (2004: 90) marks the common use of phrases like *Anfang diesen Jahres* ‘at the beginning of this year’, *Ende diesen Jahres* ‘at the end of this year’ etc. as wrong. He explains that *dies-* is a demonstrative pronoun and should therefore have the ending *-es*, thus *Anfang dieses Jahres* etc. Briefly, he considers that the genitive ending may change one day into *-en*, but insists on the *-es* ending in this particular case by referring to apparently analogous cases like *Zauber dieses Augenblicks* (‘magic of the moment’), *Ende dieses Liedes* (‘end of this song’) and *die Mutter dieses Kindes* (‘the mother of this child’). What Sick fails to perceive is analogy as a driving factor in language change. The *-en* ending is a correct ending in the adjective declension paradigm in German. In this particular case, the phrase structure allows for the substitution of *diesen* with words like *letzten* ‘last’ or *nächsten* ‘next’:

<i>Anfang/Ende/...</i>	+	<i>diesen</i>	+	<i>Jahres/Monats</i>
		<i>letzten</i>		
		<i>nächsten ...</i>		
‘at the beginning/end/...’	+	of this	+	year/month/...’
		of last		
		of next ...		

Obviously, *diesen* stands in a semantic opposition to adjectives like *letzten/nächsten/...* and is thus not interpreted as a demonstrative pronoun, but as an adjective (cf. Strecker 2006) – if it is not used anaphorically (cf. Heringer 2010). This reading is supported by the fact that the Austrian German standard variety has the adjective *beurig*

¹¹ For regional variation of standard German cf. VWB (2004) on lexical variation, König (1989) on variation in pronunciation, and Dürscheid, Elspaß and Ziegler (2011) on grammatical variation.

¹² For more examples cf. Ägel (2008).

‘of this year’, which can be used as a synonym for *diesen* in a phrase like *Ende diesen Jahres* (= *Ende heurigen Jahres*, literally ‘at the end of this year’s year’¹³). Thus, in phrases like *Anfang / Ende diesen Jahres*, the *-en* ending of *dies-* must be judged as perfectly correct standard German, and though restricted to such contexts for the time being, it may point to a transition of article declension to adjective declension in German (ibid.).

Another prominent example is Sick’s column on the use of the preposition *wegen* with the dative. A passage at the beginning of this column may illustrate Sick’s style and also his sometimes condescending tone.

Bedenklich wird es erst, wenn ‚wegen dem‘ [dative] Dialekt die Hochsprache verflucht. [...] ‘Wegen dir [dative]’, sang die bayerische Sängerin Nicki 1986. Das Lied war damals ein großer Erfolg und erlangte Berühmtheit weit über die Grenzen Bayerns hinaus. Ein deutscher Schlager, der nicht auf Hochdeutsch getextet war. Die Bayern, das weiß man, haben’s net so mit dem Wes-Fall (Woos is des?), sie lieben den Dativ wie das Weißbier und die Blasmusik. Daher verzieh man der Sängerin auch gerne den dritten Kasus im Zusammenhang mit dem Wörtchen ‘wegen’.

‘Things become alarming when the standard language deteriorates just because of the dialect. [...] “Because of you”, the Bavarian singer Nicki sang in 1986. The song was a great success at the time and gained fame far beyond the borders of Bavaria. A German hit, which was not written in Standard German. The Bavarians, as we know, are not very comfortable with the genitive case (what is that?¹⁴), they love the dative like their wheat beer and their humpa bands. Therefore, people have forgiven the singer the use of the dative with the word “because”.’ (Sick 2004: 15, our translation)

Sick takes the use of the dative with *wegen* (‘because of’) as an example of a declining use of the genitive as a prepositional case. He considers the use of *wegen* with the dative as a non-standard form and – from his viewpoint as a born and bred ‘northerner’ – regards it as a variant which has originated in Bavaria and spread further from there since the 1980s.

Again, Sick’s judgements cannot be confirmed by the linguistic facts. The loss of the genitive as a case with ‘old’ prepositions and particularly the increasing use of *wegen* with the dative as from the 17th and 18th century onwards is well documented for German, even in literary German (for *wegen* cf. Davies/Langer 2006: 200–208). The dative after *wegen* is far from being a dialect feature in present-day German, but has been the default case in colloquial German in almost all German-speaking regions for some time, as is confirmed by data from 19th century letters (cf. Elspaß 2005a: 323) and a map from the ‘Atlas on Colloquial German’ (AdA).¹⁵ Nowadays, it is certainly accepted in formal spoken German and frequently even used in the standard written variety. At any rate, the incriminated song lyrics were not meant to be standard

¹³ What at first glance seems to be a semantic redundancy, is a well-known phenomenon, see e.g. French *aujourd’hui*.

¹⁴ In the German original (“Woos is des?”), Sick tries to imitate the Bavarian accent.

¹⁵ Cf. <http://www.philhist.uni-augsburg.de/de/lehrstuehle/germanistik/sprachwissenschaft/ada/runde_0/karten/wegen_des-dem.jpg> [25 March 2011].

written, but colloquial German (with south-eastern features) so that *wegen dir* is perfectly acceptable in this genre.

Here, as in many other columns, Sick concentrates on grammatical phenomena which are old favourites of prescriptivists. It is noteworthy that some of these have been targeted by language critics for more than two centuries, but have lived on and had their fixed place in everyday colloquial German – certainly for good communicative reasons (e.g. economy).

This leads to the second main line of argument of Sick's critics, which focuses on the sociolinguistic implications and social consequences of his columns and books. One of the early critical reviews of Sick's *Zwiebelfisch* columns was actually not written by a linguist, but by a fellow journalist and writer (who coincidentally publishes in the same publishing house as Sick). In his article "Der Zwiebelfisch stinkt vom Kopf her" ('the *Zwiebelfisch* rots from the head down'¹⁶), Seidl (2006) accuses Sick of acting as a pedant and know-all, while at the same time demonstrating a lack of linguistic competence and being contradictory in his statements on linguistic or stylistic norms. Seidl's main point, however, is Sick's condescending attitude towards people who do not belong to the educated middle-class:

Was hat denn so ein armer Dönerbudenbetreiber, der seine Speisekarte mit allzu vielen Apostrophen schmückt, eigentlich getan, daß Sick ihn dem Spott seines Publikums aussetzt? [...] Oder der Fußballspieler Thomas Häßler: Was hat der denn getan, daß er sich schon wieder zitieren lassen muß mit dem Satz, wonach er „körperlich und physisch topfit“ sei? Bringt dieses Zitat [...] irgendeinen Gewinn? Oder bedient es nur das Klischee, wonach Fußballer nicht ganz so gut Deutsch können wie professionelle Schlußredakteure?"

'A poor kebab booth owner who has adorned his menu list with too many apostrophes – what has he actually done wrong to make Sick expose him to the ridicule of his audience? [...] Or take the football player Thomas Häßler: What has he done to deserve being quoted again with the sentence that he was "physically [*körperlich*] and physically [*physisch*] in top shape"?¹⁷ Does anybody benefit from this quote? Or does it just employ the stereotype that German footballers do not master the German language quite as well as professional final editors?' (Seidl 2006, our translation)

The linguistic faction in the debate partly pursued this line of argument. In that Sick measures all grammatical and lexical phenomena which he targets in his texts against the prescriptive norms of the written standard variety, he exposes to ridicule not only non-native speakers of German, but also millions of native speakers who would use the incriminated variants in informal registers or non-standard varieties of German. The point is that, firstly, Sick cannot know which variants people like a pop singer or a football player would actually use when they were to write a formal letter. Secondly, when people write (e.g. in private letters, in song lyrics or poetry imitating oral registers) or speak in informal contexts – which in quantitative terms

¹⁶ Seidl obviously plays with the polysemy of *Zwiebelfisch*, which not only refers to 'letters in a wrong font' but is also a German term for the bleak (*alburnus alburnus*).

¹⁷ Obviously, German has a native word and a borrowing for English 'physical'.

for most people outweigh formal contexts –, they have no need to follow the inflexible norms of the written standard. In fact, some of the variants and the formal written standard and their style, e.g. of some genitive or subjunctive forms of German), would seem very out of place, if not unacceptable, in everyday communicative situations.

In that Sick presents the norms of the standard language as the better or even the only valid norms and does not account for varieties and register variation, he openly stigmatizes large parts of the language community. Being born and raised in the north, Sick reveals a particular dislike or even intolerance towards regional forms of German which are different from his own. This attitude becomes obvious in the *wegen dir* example, and it is apparent in many other columns in which he sneers at German accents or at regional grammatical variants,¹⁸ mostly (or allegedly!) from Central Germany or Southern Germany. Examples from volume 3 of his book series are his commentaries on widespread phenomena such as the use of the possessive dative (“‘Wem-sing’-Fall”, attributed to speakers from the ‘Rhineland’, Sick 2006: 16), the use of the preposition *auf* with a direction verb and a name of a country, e.g. *Ich fahr auf Polen* (in ‘Thuringia’, *ibid.*: 49), double negation (in ‘Bavaria’, *ibid.*: 58), the relative adverb *wo* (in ‘Baden-Württemberg’, *ibid.*: 142) or the (standard German!) use of the copula verb *sein* ‘be’ with the present perfect forms of the verbs *stehen* ‘stand’, *liegen* ‘lie’ and *sitzen* ‘sit’ (in ‘Southern Germany and Austria’, *ibid.*: 222).

As Sick’s columns have gained an immense popularity and as he has been portrayed as a new authority on language norms, it will not have escaped his attention that through such texts he feeds stereotypes about certain shibboleths and nourishes prejudices against people using stigmatized language variants. Moreover, such stigmatization openly promotes linguistic discrimination, which happens every day in Germany when people’s job applications are turned down because of their regional accents (particularly when they ‘sound East German’ or ‘Southern German’), when candidates with ‘dialect-free’ accents are sought in job advertisements etc. (cf. Maitz/Elspaß (in print) for case studies). One illustrative example was given by Roggausch when he frankly admitted that he himself had helped to reject a candidate (a native speaker of German) for a lectureship sponsored by the German Academic Exchange Service because of the candidate’s strong Bavarian accent.¹⁹ It has to be noted that such actions are justiciable, as they violate basic (linguistic) human rights (cf. Skutnabb-Kangas/Phillipson (1994) and Maitz/ Elspaß (in print) for case studies), such as guaranteed by the German constitution. It clearly states that “no one may be

¹⁸ On standard variation in German grammar, which has gained attention in recent years only, cf. Elspaß (2010); cf. also Eichinger/Kallmeyer (2005) and Elspaß (2005b) on general aspects of standard variation in German.

¹⁹ During a plenary debate between Roggausch, Sick and one of the authors (Maitz) on 9 December 2010 at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor Park (Annual Conference of *Lektoren* of the German Academic Exchange Service in the UK and Ireland). Needless to say, his accent did not prevent the candidate from obtaining a university degree. In public, by the way, Roggausch – like Sick and the other author (Elspaß) – speaks with a Northern German accent.

disadvantaged or favoured because of his sex, his parentage, his race, *his language ...*” (our emphasis, S.E. and P.M.).²⁰

4. Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to characterise the work of the entertainer Bastian Sick in the context of the prescriptivist tradition and his unplanned and involuntary public promotion to a (supposed) new language authority. This example was used to identify some major language ideologies that constitute the breeding ground for such works of popular language criticism, but which presumably also lie at the heart of widespread beliefs about language in the present-day German language community. We then examined the different concepts of ‘norm’ used by language critics and by linguists respectively and argued that some of the misconceptions and value-judgements about language in public discourse are guided by the notion of an authoritative status of the prescriptive norms of the written (formal) standard language variety – irrespective of language use in (more formal or informal) registers and situational contexts. Subsequently, many of the judgements or pieces of advice given by Sick in his columns and books are not only grammatically, but also sociolinguistically inadequate. Moreover, they often stigmatise varieties and variants used by millions of native speakers, hence fostering linguistic inequality and eventually social discrimination on the grounds of what are no more than judgements of taste. In effect, this kind of language criticism, which trades under the banner of “Sprachpflege” (‘language cultivation’) is by no means problem-solving work, but it presents a linguistic problem of its own, which needs to be addressed urgently – not least by the linguistic profession (Maitz/ Elspaß in print). It is plain that the many linguistic ‘errors’ and ‘fallacies’ that are discussed by self-declared ‘language cultivators’ usually cause no communication difficulties for the speakers. They rather pose a problem only insofar, as they are declared as ‘errors’ and ‘fallacies’ by linguistically incompetent and/or intolerant authors (Maitz 2010: 16-17).

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²⁰ “Niemand darf wegen seines Geschlechtes, seiner Abstammung, seiner Rasse, seiner Sprache [...] benachteiligt oder bevorzugt werden“ (article no. 3.3 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany).

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