Segmental features of Swiss German ethnolects

Stephan Schmid

University of Zurich

schmidst@pholab.uzh.ch

Abstract

'Ethnolects', i.e. language varieties that emerge among adolescents living in multicultural and multilingual neighbourhoods, have been observed in several countries of Western Europe. It has also been reported that stylised forms of such ethnolectal speech are sometimes imitated by outsiders, e.g. by comedians, mainly for hilarious purposes. In German-speaking Switzerland, similar phenomena have been documented by newspapers since the beginning of the new millenium. The present study analyses a number of segmental features which differ in the speech of second generation immigrants compared to speakers of traditional Swiss German, and also illustrates how these features are then exaggerated by non-immigrants.

1. Three types of ethnolects

In the last decade, a number of researchers have dealt with the way European languages are spoken by young people with an immigrant background. Studies from Norway [1], Denmark [2], the Netherlands [3], Belgium [4], Germany [5, 6] and Great Britain [7] have analysed forms and functions of particular features in the so-called 'ethnolects' (these references are by no means meant to be exhaustive; see [8] for additional bibliographical information). The bulk of research on ethnolects in Western Europe has tackled general sociolinguistic issues; a detailed phonetic analysis of an ongoing change in the vowel system of London English is given by Paul Kerswill and colleagues [7].

If originally the term 'ethnolect' referred to the English spoken by descendents of European immigrants in northern America [9], in Western Europe such language varieties seem not to be confined to particular ethnic groups. In fact, a number of scholars nowadays prefer the term 'multiethnolect' [2, 1], indicating that such forms of speech do not serve to express ethnicity in a strict sense, but rather the adherence to a multicultural group of immigrants who differentiate themselves from the traditional inhabitants of their country.

Nevertheless, since the term 'ethnolect' is now established in the scientific literature, I will continue to employ it in a critical sense. In particular, I follow the dynamic model proposed by Auer [5], which distinguishes three types of ethnolects, i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary ethnolects.

Primary ethnolects are spoken by immigrant bilinguals and reflect to a certain extent some features of their 'ethnic' languages. A possible interference from L1 may be detected at the phonetic level, while grammatical structures tend to undergo simplification processes [5]. Particularly salient is the frequent use of typical discourse markers, revealing that primary ethnolects also serve an identificatory function within peer groups.

Secondary ethnolects are created by the media, in particular by comedians who exaggerate some features of primary ethnolects [5]. The comic effect is achieved through a reduction of the features, which in turn are employed with a higher frequency than in primary ethnolects.

Finally, tertiary ethnolects appear as style shifts of non-immigrant speakers who imitate the mediatised representations of the secondary ethnolects. The latter phenomena can be regarded as instances of 'crossing' in the sense of Rampton [10] (cf. also [6]).

Auer's model [5] was originally developed to account for forms of communicative behaviour that emerged in Germany in the 1990s. As I will show, German speaking Switzerland has experienced the same transformational dynamics from primary to secondary to tertiary ethnolects. As already mentioned, ethnolectal speech is characterised by particular phenomena on different language levels (from phonetics to grammar to the lexicon and discourse), but for obvious reasons I will focus only on sociophonetic aspects (see [8] for further analyses of the grammatical and the discourse level).

2. Some phonetic features of Swiss German

In order to be able to grasp the typical features of ethnolectal speech in German-speaking Switzerland, we first have to enucleate some phonetic characteristics which distinguish Swiss German not only from Standard German, but also from the languages spoken by immigrants. We will concentrate on four particular phenomena, namely i) the opposition between 'strong' and 'weak' obstruents (*fortis vs lenis*), ii) the lack of *fortis*-fricatives in word-initial position, iii) the lack of a voiced labiodental fricative, and, finally, iv) the frequent consonantal assimilations due to external sandhi. As a point of reference, I use the 'standard' description of Zurich German published in the *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* [11].

The consonantal system of Swiss German lacks voiced obstruents altogether [11]. Still, homorganic stops and fricatives are differentiated by a phonological feature which we might label as [±tense] or, to put it in more traditional terms, by a binary opposition between *fortis* and *lenis* consonants. *Fortis* (or 'strong') obstruents display a longer duration (and, possibly, a greater intensity), whereas *lenis* (or 'weak') consonants are significantly shorter and may have a lower intensity. It is important to note that *lenis* consonants are articulated without any vibration of the vocal folds. According to the convention adoperated in [11], *lenis* obstruents are transcribed with the IPA symbols of voiced obstruents which are accompanied by the diacritic of voicelessness (e.g. [b̥], [ɡ̊]). Examples of minimal pairs from Zurich German are *Latte* [ˈlɒtə] 'lath' as opposed to *Lade* [ˈlɒd̥ə] 'store', or *hasse* [ˈhɒsə] 'to hate' as opposed to *Hase* [ˈhɒz̥ə] 'hares'.

As regards fricatives, the *fortis vs lenis* contrast is phonemically exploited in word-internal position, but not word-initially. Indeed, a phonotactic constraint allows only *lenis* fricatives to occur at the beginning of a word, so we have *sie* [z̥iː] 'she' and *so* 'so' [z̥oː], but not *[siː].

At the labiodental place of articulation, Swiss German has a *fortis* and a *lenis* fricative, as shown in the minimal pair *offe* [ˈofə] 'open (adj.)' *vs Ofe* [ˈoʋə] 'oven'. In compliance with the overall pattern, a voiced labiodental fricative does not exist. Whereas many words of Standard German start with /v/ (e.g. the question words *wer* 'who', *wo* 'where', *wie* 'how', *was* 'what'), the corresponding consonant in Swiss German is a labiodental approximant [ʋ], as has been shown experimentally by [12].

Finally, a striking feature of Swiss German are the many consonantal assimilations occurring at word boundaries [11]. For instance, an external sandhi process leads to the fusion of the heterorganic sequence /t/#/ɣ̊/ into a homorganic affricate [kx]: e.g., underlying /nød ɣ̊oː/ 'not to come' is phonetically realised as [nø̥kxoː]. According to another sandhi rule, a sequence of two underlying *lenes* (e.g. /v̥/ and /d̥/) produces a fortition of the two phonemes, which are therefore neutralised and appear as *fortes* (i.e. [f] and [t]); for instance, underlying /uv̥ d̥ə/ 'on the' is phonetically realised as [uf tə] (cf. example (5) below).

3. Primary ethnolects

The speech of second generation immigrants differs from 'autochthonous' Swiss German with regard to the four above mentioned segmental characteristics. In fact, in Swiss German ethnolects we notice the occurrence of i) voiced obstruents, ii) word-initial *fortis* fricatives, iii) a voiced labiodental fricative [v] as well as iv) the lack of consonantal assimilations.

The following examples are drawn on the one hand from an interview with two second generation immigrants conducted in 2005 by Pascal Mora, and on the other hand from documentary videos on code-switching made in 2006 and described in [13], which portray young bilinguals during phone calls in public places. Basically, the examples are from two speakers, both living in the Zurich area: the label M01 refers to a young man interviewed by Pascal Mora whose origins I am unaware of, whereas F01 is a young woman whose parents are from Kosovo (data from [13]). Audio files of some of the examples may be found in the electronic publication of [14].

Regarding the first segmental feature, it is in particular the stops which are sometimes realised as voiced, as can be seen in example (1), pronounced by F01:

(1)   [ˈɒbər tsum ɡlykx ʋaiʃ | ˈɡømər nɒx ˈlondon] (F01)
         'but fortunately, you know, we go to London'

In this utterance, the stops are all fully voiced, if one compares the words [ˈɒbər] [ɡlykx] [ˈɡømər], [ˈlondon] with the traditional Swiss German items [ˈɒb̥ər] [ɡ̊lykx] [ˈɡ̊ømər], [ˈlond̥on]. Voiced stops are also produced by the second speaker (M01), at least intervocalically, for instance in the last word of example (2).

(2)   [sɪt fɒʃ tsʋæntsk ˈjɒːrə dɒː] (M01)
         'for nearly twenty years here'

An 'intense' realisation of voiced stops is noted also in a transcript in [15], which reports ethnolectal speech collected in eastern Switzerland, with speakers originating from Turkey and Macedonia (former republic of Yugoslavia); impressionistically, those occurrences are even compared to prenasalised stops.

The voiced realisation of Swiss German *lenis* plosives can be explained in terms of interference from the ethnic languages of the bilingual speakers, which probably do have fully voiced stops. The difference between voiced and *lenis* obstruents is not very salient from a perceptual point of view, the two categories being rather similar. Therefore, the difference might not be accessible to the phonological conscience of the speakers (the other way round, in fact, native speakers of Swiss German tend to replace voiced obstruents in their L2 French with *lenes*; cf. [16]).

The second segmental feature of primary ethnolects is illustrated in example (3), pronounced by F01:

(3)   [jɒ fol iŋ fɒl] (F01)
         'yeah, fully the case'

In this utterance, two words begin with the fortis fricative [f] (instead of [jɒ ɣ̊ol iŋ ɣ̊ɒl], which would be the 'native' pronunciation). The same feature is present also in the speech of M01:

(4)   [ˈʋæmːər sɪx soː fəˈhɒltət ʋɪ siː] (M01)
         'if one behaves like them'

Here, we notice no less than four *fortis* fricatives in word-initial position ([sɪx], [soː], [siː] and [fəˈhɒltət] instead of [z̥ɪx], [z̥oː], [z̥iː] and [ɣ̊əˈhɒltət]); moreover, we have already seen an utterance-initial voiceless sibilant produced by M01 in example (2). Again, the same feature has been observed also in eastern Switzerland where, according to [15], fricatives undergo fortition even in intervocalic position.

Turning to the third segmental feature of primary ethnolects, we find a voiced labiodental fricative in example (5):

(5)   [uf tə vælt] (F01)
         'on the earth'

Indeed, the first consonant of the last word – which in traditional Swiss German would sound like [ʋælt] – has a duration of 73 ms that exceeds by far the average values measured in [12]. Note, however, that a labiodental approximant is produced by the other speaker, M01, in the first word of example (4).

Finally, example (5) does exhibit an instance of the fourth segmental feature mentioned above. Here, an external sandhi process is operating on the underlying forms of the first two words /uv̥/ and /d̥ə/. However, F01 does not always apply sandhi rules, as becomes evident from example (6):

(6)   [tɒ si nøt ˈxøməd̥] (F01)
         'that they don't come'

Actually, this utterance contains both typical features of Swiss German – e.g, the final *lenis* in [ˈxøməd̥] and the fortition of word-initial fricatives as a result of a sandhi rule: /dɒs z̥i/ –> [tɒ si]; /nød̥ ˈɣ̊əməd̥/ –> [nøt ˈxøməd̥]. Nevertheless, in the second case the appropriate sandhi rule would go a step further

and yield the affricate [kx], appearing in the speech of a mono-lingual as [tʊ‿si nø‿ˈkxømə̯d]. In a sense, the 'intermediate' solution adopted in (6) avoids a particularly 'opaque' sandhi rule of Swiss German, instead producing an output which is more 'transparent' (or, to put it in OT terms, more 'faithful' to the underlying representation).

Summarising the observations made so far, we find that our two speakers do not always behave in the same way with respect to the four segmental features under analysis. We thus may expect primary ethnolects to exhibit quite an amount of non-systematic variation, where rules of the target variety typically alternate with (multi-)ethnolectal patterns.

4. Secondary ethnolects

Quite similarly to what has been observed in Germany [5], primary ethnolects are used as a source for parody and mimicry by a number of Swiss comedians. Here, I will comment on a TV sketch of Mike Müller, who appears under the name of "Mr. Berisha" (a typically Albanian surname) as a specialist in youth language. Additionally, examples are drawn from *Kleshtrimania*, a short series created by *YouTube* dubbers; its male protagonist "Sputim" is also supposed to be Kosovar (thus a native speaker of Albanian). The differences between "Mr. Berisha" and "Sputim" lie not only in the communicative medium (TV *vs* Internet), but also in the fact that Mike Müller is a professional comedian of Swiss nationality, whereas "Sputim" has been invented in the spare time of an anonymous creator with an immigrant background. Again, some of the examples are available as audio files in the electronic publication of [14].

Secondary ethnolects stage a mimicry which clearly exploits the segmental features of the primary ethnolects described in the previous section. For instance, the first feature is produced by Mike Müller in example (7):

(7)   [xɒʃ fol gɒs gɛː mɒn] (Berisha)
        'you can step on the accelerator, man'

In [gɒs gɛː], Mike Müller clearly pronounces voiced stops instead of *lenes* ([ˈg̊ɒs g̊ɛː]).

Müller alias "Berisha" also exhibits the second segmental feature of primary ethnolects, when he articulates *fortis* fricatives in word-initial position:

(8)   [jɒː ˈsixər ʃo mɒn] (Berisha)
        'yeah, of course, man'

The unmarked pronunciation in Zurich German would sound like [jɒː z̥ixər ʒ̊o].

The third segmental feature of primary ethnolects, i.e. the substitution of the labiodental approximant /ʋ/ by a voiced labiodental fricative [v], is characteristic of the speech of "Sputim" and of his interlocutor:

(9)   [dʲu væiʒ gɑnts geˈnaṷ] (Sputim's interlocutor)
        'you know exactly'

Not only is the labiodental approximant replaced by a fricative in [dʲu væiʒ], but this utterance also contains instances of the first segmental feature, as is evident from the three voiced stops in [dʲu], [gɑnts] and [geˈnaṷ].

Interestingly, the fourth segmental feature of primary ethnolects, i.e the lack of external sandhi assimilations, is not used in the parody created by secondary ethnolects. It seems to be the case that the realisation or suppression of these postlexical processes is not easily perceived; normally, even native speakers of Swiss German are not aware of them.

Instead, there is a fifth segmental feature of secondary ethnolects, namely the realisation of /r/ as a retroflex approximant [ɻ], as appears in examples (10) and (11):

(10)   [ˈʋidəɻ mit miəɻ] (Sputim)
        'again with me'
(11)   [di ˈgɻøʃti ɒːfikəˈɻei] (Sputim)
        'the greatest provocation'

For the time being, retroflex rhotics have not been documented in the sources of primary ethnolects at our disposal. Note, moreover, that it is not "Mr. Berisha", but only "Sputim" who displays this particular phenomenon. Now, a retroflex realisation of /r/ is attributed to some varieties of Albanian [17], a fact the inventor of "Sputim" (who appears to be of Bosnian origin) seems to be aware of. This reveals a sort of 'insider advantage' in the perception of primary ethnolectal features, which then can be exploited for the imitation of a particular ethnic group. Mimicry, here, is not 'multiethnic', but rather 'interethnic'.

So far, the phonetics of secondary ethnolects are made up of a few very salient features, which are reproduced in a stereotypical and sometimes exaggerated manner. A reduction of the number of ethnolectal types is counterbalanced by an increase of token frequency. In their choice of ethnolectal features, authors are influenced by the degree of acquaintance with particular primary ethnolects and by their metalinguistic awareness of specific features.

5. Tertiary ethnolects

In German speaking Switzerland, research on the communicative behaviour of adolescents living in urban multilingual areas has shown that many Swiss youngsters are familiar with some lexical items of Albanian, which they may even actively use in circumstances favouring this sort of 'crossing' [18]. It is not clear to what extent primary ethnolects also exert covert prestige, such that some features may be adopted in general youth language, but there is evidence that elements of secondary ethnolects are employed in language games among peer groups, quite similarly to the sociolinguistic mechanisms reported in Germany [5, 6].

A good example of such a tertiary ethnolect comes from a corpus of conversational data which was gathered within a research project on youth language granted by the Swiss National Research Foundation and located at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences [19]. The conversation was recorded by the youngsters themselves while travelling in a car on a Saturday evening; the speakers are non-immigrants living in a rural area of central Switzerland (see [8] for an excerpt of the conversational transcript; again some audio examples are available in the electronic publication of [14]). At a certain point of the communicative interaction, two male participants (possibly under the influence of alcohol) engage in a competition of verbal virtuosity which includes the use of a tertiary ethnolect. Among the expressions used we note the following:

(12)   [di ˈgɻøʃti ɒːfikəˈɻei]
        'the greatest provocation'

It becomes immediately clear that (12) involves the recycling of an expression of "Sputim" (11), faithfully reproducing the segmental features of the original, i.e. the retroflex approximant and the voiced stop in [ˈɡɹøʃti].
The first and the third segmental feature of Swiss German ethnolects also appear in example (13):

(13)   [ix væi̯z̥ ə̯z̥ ˈɡɒnts ɡeˈnau̯]
        'I know it exactly'

The phrase [ˈɡɒnts ɡeˈnau] contains two voiced stops and is taken from Sputim's interlocutor (9); the labiodental fricative in [ix væi̯z̥] also belongs to a lexical item used in (9). Note, however, that utterance (13) as a whole is not simply a quote; rather, the speaker adapts the intertext to the actual communicative setting and re-elaborates the lexical items and its segmental features in a creative manner.
In line with the theory proposed in [5], Swiss German tertiary ethnolects can thus be regarded as style shifts of non-immigrant speakers who imitate the mediatised representations of secondary ethnolects. On the basis of examples (12) and (13), we may hypothesise that *YouTube* dubbings have a greater impact on the language games of young people than comedy sketches known from television.

6. Conclusion

To date, our observations are based on data occasionally gathered from different sources. Obviously, the collection of large corpora is necessary in order to verify how widespread the examined features are. Nevertheless, the preliminary results of the present study prove that the dynamic model outlined in [5] provides a viable explanation of the forms and functions of ethnolectal speech.
Also, a number of segmental characteristics of Swiss German ethnolects has been identified. From a strictly linguistic point of view, these features involve the non-adherence to 'marked' structures of Swiss German such as *lenis* obstruents and external sandhi assimilations. It is possible that the feature list be extended to include additional segmental items, e.g. the frequent occurrence of a strongly rounded back vowel [ɒ]. Also, unstressed vowels appear to be less reduced in primary ethnolects than in traditional Swiss German, which might be a cue to the alleged syllable-timing of ethnolectal Swiss German [8].

7. Acknowledgements

8. References

[1]   Svendsen B. and U. Røyneland. 2008. Multiethnolectal facts and functions in Oslo, Norway. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12. 63-83.

[2]   Quist P. 2008. Sociolinguistic approaches to multiethnolect: Language variety and stylistic practice. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12. 43-61.

[3]   Nortier J. 2008. Ethnolects? The emergence of new varieties among adolescents. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12. 1-5.

[4]   Jaspers J. 2008. Problematizing ethnolects: Naming linguistic practices in an Antwerp secondary school. *International Journal of Bilingualism* 12. 85–103.

[5]   Auer P. 2002. 'Türkenslang' – ein jugendsprachlicher Ethnolekt des Deutschen und seine Transformationen. In Häcki Buhofer A. (ed.). *Spracherwerb und Lebensalter*. Tübingen/Basel: Francke. 255-264.

[6]   Deppermann A. 2007. Playing with the voice of the other. Stylized Kanaksprak in conversations among German adolescents. In Auer P. (ed.). *Style and social identities. Alternative approaches to linguistic heterogeneity*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 325-360.

[7]   Kerswill P., E. Torgersen and S. Fox. 2008. Innovation and diffusion in the London diphthong system. *Language variation and change* 20. 451-491.

[8]   Tissot F., S. Schmid and E. Galliker. 2011. Ethnolektales Schweizerdeutsch: soziophonetische und morphosyntaktische Merkmale sowie ihre dynamische Verwendung in ethnolektalen Sprechweisen. In Glaser E. *et al.* (eds.). *Dynamik des Dialekts – Wandel und Variation*. Stuttgart: Steiner. 281-302.

[9]   Carlock E. and W. Wölck. 1981. A method for isolating diagnostic linguistic variables: The Buffalo ethnolects experiment. In Sankoff D. and H. Cedergren (eds.). *Variation Omnibus*. Edmonton, Alberta: Linguistic Research, inc.. 17-24.

[10]   Rampton B. 1995. *Crossing. Language and ethnicity among adolescents.* Longman: London.

[11]   Fleischer J. and S. Schmid. 2006. Zurich German. *Journal of the International Phonetic Association* 36. 243-253.

[12]   Nocchi N. and S. Schmid. 2006. Labiodentale Konsonanten im Schweizerdeutschen. In Klausmann H. (ed.). *Raumstrukturen im Alemannischen*. Feldkirch: Neugebauer. 25-35.

[13]   Häberli A. and J. Wollensack. 2006. *Code-Switching*. Master Thesis, Zurich University of the Arts.

[14]   Schmid S., F. Tissot and E. Galliker. 2010. "S Beschte wos je hets gits" oder wenn sich Schweizerdeutsch und Migrationssprachen treffen. *SchweizerDeutsch* 1 (10). 11-14 (http://ch-spraach.ch/ethnolekt).

[15]   Schön S. 2010. *Form und Verwendung von ethnolektalem Deutsch unter Jugendlichen in der Schweiz*. University of Zurich, unpublished Master Thesis.

[16]   Schmid S. 2010. Voiced obstruents in L2 French: the case of Swiss German learners. In Dziubalska-Kołaczyk K., M. Wrembel and M. Kul (eds) *New Sounds 2010. Proceedings of the 6th International Symposium on the Acquisition of Second Language Speech*. Poznan. 403-408.

[17]   Manzelli G. 2004. Italiano e albanese. Affinità e contrasti. In Ghezzi C. *et al.* (eds.). *Italiano e lingue immigrate a confronto*. Perugia: Guerra. 151-196.

[18]   Bader B. 2006. *Albanischsprachige Kinder und Jugendliche in der Schweiz*. Zürich: Pestalozzianum.

[19]   Werlen E., E. Galliker and F. Tissot. 2010. Konzeptuelle Zugänge zu intralingualer Variation: Dialekt und Standardgebrauch in Gesprächen Deutschschweizer Jugendlicher. In Normann Jørgensen N. (ed.). *Vallah Gurkensalat 4U & Me! Current Perspectives in the Study of Youth Language*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang. 229–244.