Language Dynamics in a Panel Study of German Dialects

Abstract
Traditionally, research on language change has been a post-mortem activity, focused on isolated changes that are complete and often only documented in written texts. In the 1960s, the investigation of “changes in progress” adduced through patterns of intra-community linguistic variation correlated with external facts about speakers such as age and class. However, despite the many benefits of such work on “dynamic synchrony,” we still know relatively little about how language change unfolds over the lifetimes of individual speakers, that is, in real time. The logistical challenges of such research are, of course, considerable, and documenting changes in the verbal behavior of individuals over several decades is much less feasible. Nevertheless, present theoretical models of language change would be greatly informed by the results of real-time studies.

In this talk I will discuss the methodology and some preliminary findings from just such a research project on real-time changes in the spoken German of individual speakers. The database for this project is largely comprised of recordings of German dialects and regional colloquial German from the 1950s and 1960s from the Deutsches Spracharchiv (DSAv), Mannheim. A very useful tool to get material for analysis is the re-recording of German speakers.