

# Can you speak less dialect, please? Phonetic modifications enabling understanding between members and non-members of a dialect community

Sarah Brandstetter

University of Vienna, Austria

There is a broad variety of dialects spoken in Austria which fall into two bigger categories: Bavarian and Alemannic dialects. Both groups pose a variety of difficulties for non-native speakers of German as dialects are widely used in daily life. When speaking to non-dialect speakers, dialect-speakers are likely to try to use a more standard variety of German in order to be understood. On the segmental level, these changes concern e.g. less laxing of the vowel and less diphthongization of the laxed vowel (Wiese 1996), another change that could be reversed is that in the Austrian standard variety the intervocalic /b, d, g/ is lenited to fricatives [β, ð, ɣ] (Moosmüller, 2007). The current study investigates segmental changes that occur in speakers changing their style from spontaneous dialect speech to learner-directed speech, focusing on the typical elements of the dialect e.g. the vocalization of liquids, the reduction of fortis consonants, the omission of lenis consonants, a change in the roundedness of vowels, a reduction or omission of vowels in unstressed syllables, an unclear pronunciation of <a> and additional diphthongs.

## Study

Communication difficulties of speakers of different languages or dialects are a common phenomenon in foreign language acquisition. Dialect speakers in Austria tend to try to speak less dialect when talking to non-dialect or non-native speakers, moving on the continuum from dialect to standard German in order to make themselves better understood. But they will not resort to “full” standard German, switching continuously back and forth. This is also one of the phenomena Berend and Frick (2016) found when investigating which elements of their dialect varied when members of the German minority in Russia who moved back to Germany were talking to members of their group as opposed to non-members. In the current study I hypothesize that the speakers will modify their articulation only if they themselves deem certain words “difficult” to understand whereas they tend to not change anything in the – as they seem to think – more “basic” lexicon. Furthermore, I expect that they change their articulation regardless of the fact if the word actually exists in the standard German lexicon.

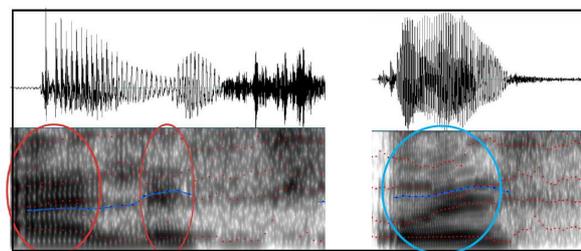
Based on these two assumptions, the present study explores which phonetic features of their dialect the speakers drop or substitute in order to reach an understanding and which ones will remain

nonetheless. How far do speakers of a specific Bavarian dialect in rural Austria change their speech when talking to non-dialect speakers who do not live in the same area?

Since dialect is used primarily in informal situations, it is difficult to elicit authentic dialect in experimental settings, or controlled communicative situations. To reach this goal two native speakers of Austrian German and two non-native speakers who speak German at a very advanced level visited Wankham, a small village in Upper Austria, during February 2017. Conversations with members of two families who have been living there for a couple of decades and most of the time only talk to other inhabitants of the village or the surrounding area have been recorded. The dialogues cover topics that are part of the daily lives of the people living in Wankham (e.g. work, gardening).

In a pilot study, major phonetic differences were found between the spoken standard variety of (Austrian) German and the dialect in question. The phonetic profile of the dialect has been established evaluating recorded spontaneous speech. The result consists of 7 main and a series of minor features (as described above). One very typical feature of the dialect can be seen below in Figure 1.

The main research part consists of recorded dialogues which are analyzed in-depth with regard to phonetic changes, e.g. in word codas. Modifications were collected and systemized in order to find strategies underlying the modifications. Phonetic analyses were made using Praat. Sample audio files underline the differences between the usual dialect the speakers use and the “modified” dialect that is used with people who are not members of their dialect community.



**Figure 1:** The utterance /alles/ (engl: “everything”) in the Austrian standard variety (left) compared to the dialect /ois/ (right).

In this particular dialect, liquid consonants tend to be vocalized

## **Relevance of the topic**

The dialects of German spoken in Austria are often a difficulty that people who learn German as a foreign or second language encounter during their stay in Austria. Learners struggle to understand what dialect speakers talk about, and this often makes it difficult for them to get in touch with Austrian native speakers. Yet there is not much that is done to address this issue in German as a foreign language (GFL) classes in Austria. The aim of my research is to collect experimental evidence of spontaneous speech data in order to reveal changes that occur when switching from dialect spoken to other dialect speakers to a variety that contains less elements of dialect but can also not be considered the standard variety. This allows learners of GFL to study the more persistent elements of the dialect in question which will empower them with respect to their receptive capabilities of spoken dialect.

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