

Some (critical) notes on the notion of pluricentricity (particularly with regard to German)

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It can hardly be disputed that some standard varieties of languages (such as the German, Swedish or Dutch standard varieties, to give just a few examples) appear in different shapes in the states in which they have the status of a standard language. It is not always trivial to capture precisely this variation between the standard varieties of a language, even more so as it sometimes is of a statistical, non-categorical nature. In addition, what the speakers consider to be salient features of their own national variety (and that of the others) can vary, and the most frequent 'objective' differences may not be identical to the most salient ones. I have therefore argued in a previous paper that it might be more interesting to analyse the processes of enregisterment through which certain features (whether they may constitute 'objective' structural differences between these varieties or not) are combined and become symbols of national unity and difference.

In this presentation I would like to go one step further and suggest that the notion of pluricentricity is based on ideological premises which could be taken for granted in the 1970s (when Heinz Kloss included the term in his second edition of "Die Entwicklung neuer germanischer Kultursprachen seit 1800") from where it made its way into international sociolinguistics), but cannot be taken for granted in the same way today, after some decades of intensive sociolinguistic research on what a standard language is. It needs to be asked why pluricentricity as a notion that tends to essentialize (standard) languages and their relationship with nation states is becoming increasingly popular in an era in which nation state ideologies have otherwise been 'deconstructed' by academics as well as lay people.