Standardization as sociolinguistic change

When meeting her friend Johanne at a local town festival, 15 year-old Aja exclaims: ‘[vɔn ˈcøːð]’ (‘hvordan kører det?’, what’s up?) in the local Bornholmian dialect. Johanne, however, laughingly replies with a ‘bonjour’, apparently because she believes Aja to be greeting her in French. This incident illustrates several aspects of the dialect situation on the island of Bornholm. Aja grew up on the island of Bornholm, and so did her parents and grandparents. Both her parents and grandparents speak the local dialect and use it in their everyday communication. In Aja’s generation, however, local dialect is not used as an unmarked everyday register. Instead, the young people speak standard Danish and only use dialect in very specific contexts and with specific functions, usually highly stylized. The Bornholmian greeting deployed by Aja would be the norm in older generations, but among the 15-year-olds it is a marked choice, which explains why Johanne mistakenly takes the utterance for a French greeting. These changes in the use of the local dialect across the generations are not only a matter of quantity, with young people using less dialect than the older generations, but also a matter of changing functions and social meaning of the dialect. This is why in this paper I will argue that the development cannot be viewed only as linguistic change, but rather as sociolinguistic change (Coupland 2014, 2016).

The example above is taken from a recent study of standardization in three traditional dialect areas (Author fc.). The current paper offers an overview of the results from this study, analyzed within the frame of sociolinguistic change. The three areas are all situated in the geographical periphery of Denmark: Southern Jutland, Northern Jutland and Bornholm. While the areas share many sociological characteristics, the dialect situation and the level of standardization are remarkably different in the three places. In the paper I will argue that in order to understand how and why the linguistic situations have developed the way they have in the three places, the perspective of sociolinguistic change is particularly useful.

The point of departure of the argument are quantitative variationist analyses of the use of dialect variables in data collected among three generations in the areas. The quantitative patterns illustrate that in the Southern Jutlandic data all three generations use a high amount of dialect, in the Northern Jutland data the use of dialect has been steadily decreasing through the three generations under study, and on the island of Bornholm data show that while older generations have quite high frequencies of dialect variants, the youngest generation do not use it at all.

Through examples from family interaction, peer interaction in social media, and interview conversations, I will illustrate how geopolitical history, mediatization, and ideology all play a part in how standardization processes develop, and that dialect and standard do not have the same meanings across generations.

References