

The pursuit of language standardization research as a mission for true sociolinguists

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**The pursuit of language standardization research as a
mission for true sociolinguists**

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3 The pursuit of language standardization research as a mission for true sociolinguists
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8 Keywords: language standardization – historical sociolinguistics – Einar Haugen – language
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11 Abstract:
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14 Research on language standardization witnessed remarkable progress over the past two
15 decades. Building on the strong foundations laid by Einar Haugen, the scholarly canon on
16 the topic was renewed, while also addressing a number of shortcomings of earlier theory
17 building. As historical sociolinguistics gained momentum, standardization history faced the
18 challenge of including ‘voices from below’ as they appeared in new and socially inclusive
19 corpora of egodocuments from the past centuries. This implied an increased focus on the
20 formerly overlooked role and presence of non-standard varieties, but also on the ideological
21 driving factors behind many standardization efforts. The article makes a case for specific and
22 ongoing attention to the implementation phase of standardization measures, as well as for
23 the study of language conflicts from times past to help prevent imminent geopolitical
24 struggles (or, for worse, to inform our understanding of these conflicts in the near future).
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29 **1. Language standardization research: Desiderata from the past.**

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31 Some 20 years ago, Andrew Linn and Nicola McLelland organized a conference at the
32 University of Sheffield intended to take stock of standardization research in the realm of
33 Germanic languages (Linn and McLelland 2002). One main conclusion of that seminal event
34 was that splendid isolation continued to characterize many language-specific research
35 projects on standardization history, in spite of various stabs at so-called ‘comparative
36 standardology’ (Joseph 1987). The audience of intrepid young postdoctoral scholars equally
37 voiced the need to challenge the limitations of the prevailing theoretical approaches of the
38 time.
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41 In an impetuous move that would prove to be an instructive watershed for both our
42 careers, Ana Deumert and myself attempted to capture the conference momentum by editing
43 a volume intended to describe the standardization process of sixteen Germanic languages
44 (Deumert and Vandebussche 2003a). All authors were asked to structure their contribution
45 along the phases of Einar Haugen’s (1966a, 1966b, 1983, 1987) well-weathered
46 standardization model, detailing the selection, codification, implementation and elaboration
47 processes in the history of the assigned language.
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50 Haugen’s model was a stronghold in language standardization theory at the time,
51 along with Heinz Kloss’s (1978) work on the topic, keeping the focus on the mechanistic side
52 of the process. Yet the model also manifestly proved to obscure a number of key aspects,
53 including the role and opinions of average everyday speakers of the language (i.e. the majority
54 of the language community involved, as opposed to the numerically small faction of
55 grammarians), and the motivation behind – and overall ideological debates surrounding –
56 standardization efforts (Blommaert 1999; Milroy 1999). Issues of language regard (Preston
57 2010) tended to be eclipsed by Haugen’s deterministic four-stage model, just as the agency
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3 of individual language users got overshadowed by the prominence of language planning
4 authorities.

5 If John and Jane Doe's beliefs, actions and attitudes regarding language failed to percolate
6 into Haugen's analytical framework, the same applied to the intrinsic variability of their actual
7 language use. Haugen's focus on the construction and implementation of norms resulted in a
8 'myopic' observation of the actual linguistic landscape, discarding the continuous and ever-
9 present variation in actual usage, and erasing a large number of linguistic varieties from
10 academic language historiography. This focus on the standard was challenged by many
11 leading sociolinguists, who paraphrased this unequivocal focus as the tunnel (Watts and
12 Trudgill 2002) and funnel view (Watts 2011) of language change. Representing a further
13 challenge, attempts to apply the Haugen model to minority languages – or varieties stuck in
14 the earlier stages of the standardization process – only served to underscore the extent to
15 which Haugen's theory remained geared towards the description of fully-standardized
16 languages 'with an army and a navy'.
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20 None of these concerns formulated in hindsight, more than half a century after
21 Haugen's initial publication, are intended to discredit or diminish the massive and lasting
22 impact of the four-stage standardization model in any way. Designed to clarify the specific
23 case of a single language (Norwegian) and tapping into the well of scholarly knowledge
24 available during the 1960s, the model could hardly be expected to deliver the fantasy of a
25 perpetual one-size-fits-all explanatory account of the description of any other standardization
26 process. Various linguists standing on Haugen's shoulders generously embraced the overall
27 and enduring explanatory value of his selection/ codification/ implementation/ elaboration
28 framework, while simultaneously enriching it with new dimensions that addressed some of
29 the shortcomings listed above (Ager 2001; Clyne 1992; Cooper 1989; Joseph 1987; Le Page
30 and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Mattheier and Radtke 1997; Milroy and Milroy 2012 [1985];
31 passim). Applying Haugen's model to a wide variety of Germanic standard languages (as in
32 Deumert and Vandenbussche 2003a) equally bore witness to its longevity and ongoing
33 relevance, while also identifying a series of challenges for standardization research at the turn
34 of the twenty-first century. In a concluding overview of possible research directions in the
35 study of language standardization (Deumert and Vandenbussche 2003b), a call was made for
36 more attention to be paid to the transnational interactions between standardizing actors.
37 While this cross-border pollination may today be cultivated by 'sociolinguistics of
38 globalization' (Blommaert 2010), the reality of international communities of practice (Watts
39 1999) uniting linguists in previous centuries provided an equally interesting angle to take
40 standardization research beyond the monolingual-centred perspective resulting from nation-
41 state formation.
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47 The plea for including written documents stemming from all walks of society in
48 language historiography and standardization studies proper likewise resembles an early
49 manifestation of the present-day inclusive orientation of much scholarly research in the
50 humanities. The then-dominant perspective on language change which (almost exclusively)
51 favoured a focus on the written production of the social elite could rightfully be held
52 accountable for the highly biased account of standardization up until then. The intellectual
53 impact of the educated and powerful factions of society on language debates did not justify
54 ignoring the language of the metaphorical 99% below that upper crust, even more so
55 considering the fundamental and largely unaddressed question of linguistic knowledge and
56 skill transfer through time among the less prosperous masses. This required an intense effort
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3 to increase the number of socially inclusive text corpora available to scholars worldwide, as
4 well as a strategy to find and include texts from minimally schooled writers.

5
6 Three further sociopolitical issues stood out on the wish list of standardization
7 scholars in the early 2000s: the actual role and impact of purism in the formative phases of
8 standard language varieties; the position, nature and change of pluricentric languages in
9 times of nation-state formation; and the inherent power of standardization as a tool for
10 language preservation or actor against language endangerment or linguisticism.

11
12 On the technical side of the standardization process, the matter of destandardization
13 tendencies noted in a number of Germanic languages at the time offered a challenging
14 pathway for rebranding and updating traditional views on the links between standard and
15 dialect varieties once the established prestige language started to display shifts in social
16 recognition and form. The dynamics between regional and social language varieties in the
17 long walk towards the actual consecration of a standard language, and the role of focused
18 supraregional varieties in between, equally called for further scholarly scrutiny and
19 theoretical underpinning. The need to embed the understanding of any standardization
20 process in the fundamentally multilingual nature of European society throughout the past
21 centuries was a final crux on the scholarly bucket list for the years to come.

22
23 Looking back upon the suggestions and desiderata from the isolated book project that
24 *Germanic Standardizations* was at the time, it is striking how the overall tone fell in line with
25 the mainstream discourse and trends in macro-sociolinguistics as summarized in two agenda-
26 setting issues of *Sociolinguistica* from 2000 and 2007, respectively. Whether debating the
27 future of European sociolinguistics (*Sociolinguistica* 14) or 21st-century European
28 perspectives on sociolinguistics (*Sociolinguistica* 20), researchers across Europe advocated an
29 activist type of sociolinguistics at the helm of societal change, which would put speakers back
30 at the centre of linguistic research, while respecting and promoting diversity, and, most of all,
31 embracing multilingualism. Viewed from the standpoint of historical sociolinguistics, much of
32 this relates back to the research desiderata listed above.

33 34 35 36 37 38 **2. The state-of-the-art of language standardization research today**

39
40 Even when acknowledging all obvious shortcomings of any linguist's 'overview of the field'
41 (be they due to limitations in language mastery or focus on personal specialization areas), it
42 is safe to state that standardization studies has become one of the prominent and prolific
43 subdomains of European sociolinguistics over the past two decades. The fact that 2021 saw
44 the publication of the first fully-fledged handbook of language standardization by a top-tier
45 academic publishing house (Ayres-Bennett and Bellamy 2021) is more than anecdotal
46 evidence in this respect. The editors capture both the "state of the art of current work" and
47 "cutting-edge research on the subject" in five thematic clusters: models and theories of
48 standardization, questions of authority and legitimacy, literacy and education, borders and
49 boundaries and, finally, standardization in Late Modernity (Ayres-Bennett and Bellamy 2021:
50 1). In doing so, they provide us with the most complete catalogue of scholarly progress on
51 standardization matters to date, far beyond the restricted perspective on the Germanic
52 languages, and with a perfect touchstone to evaluate the extent to which the research
53 community has responded to the challenges identified in 2003. While it is evident that the
54 partial (Europe- and Germanic-focused) snapshot given below can only scratch the surface of
55 the many advances in standardization research, the selected references and topics should
56 allow for an appreciation of the reinvigorated nature of the domain.

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3 The ongoing evaluation of Haugen's theoretical and practical legacy has culminated in
4 a number of review articles and editions (most recently Ayres-Bennet 2021; Rutten and
5 Vosters 2020) which shift the focus from his model's shortcomings and blind spots to the
6 many suggestions made for additions that address both historical and present-day challenges
7 in standardization studies. Among the remaining snippets of uncharted territory, Joseph et al.
8 (2020) highlight the need to keep challenging the 'directionality of standardization', by
9 combining traditional top-down 'standardization from above' with a 'from below' paradigm.
10 Assessing the 'effectiveness' of standardization measures requires a renewed focus on the
11 implementation/acceptance phase which could now be considered as a somewhat
12 underexposed or orphaned dimension of the overall model, an aspect we will return to in the
13 concluding lines of this contribution.

14
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16 Theory formation has also adapted to the fact that the very sociolinguistic context
17 within which current standardization research is embedded has fundamentally changed over
18 the past decades: as older diglossic situations have given way to new diglossic realities,
19 dynamics of destandardization, demotization and dialect loss have taken centre stage in
20 language change research (Auer 2011; Ghyselen 2016; Kristiansen and Coupland 2011). It is
21 noteworthy that these changes are equally prominent in folk linguistic debates on language
22 norms, language prestige and societal change at large, where they have rekindled the debate
23 on the position of sociolinguists as either descriptive scholars charting linguistic change, or
24 activist protectors of challenged norms for language usage.

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26
27 The field of standardization history has manifestly responded to the plea for socially
28 inclusive text corpora, both past and present, covering a wide range of genres and introducing
29 the voice of everyday language users in accounts of language history. Studies such as
30 Puttaert's (2016) linguistic analysis of small notes pinned on orphans' clothes, Auer and
31 Fairman's (2013) contributions on pauper pleas for financial relief, and Elspaß's (2012)
32 analyses of private letters and diaries have not only widened the base of lower-class corpora
33 across Europe (Vandenbussche and Elspaß 2007) but have also brought writers in from the
34 furthest invisible fringes of the lowest strata of society. Diachronic corpora of ego-documents
35 spanning various centuries now allow for a comparison of the impact of norms and actual
36 writing practices in everyday usage (Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg 2017 [2003]; Nobels
37 2013; Rutten et al. 2014; Simons 2013; Van der Wal and Rutten 2013).

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40 When it comes to exchanges between standardizers, not only has the international
41 networks of grammarians been identified and studied, but substantial attention has also been
42 paid to the correspondence, concertation and competition between prescriptivist scholars (as
43 illustrated by many language-specific case studies in Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Percy
44 2017). Many 'forgotten' scholars made their re-entry in the canon of standardizers, which
45 substantially thickened the plot of traditional norm overviews, and indicated that processes
46 of focusing 'from below' within the community of grammarians often prefigured the official
47 selection of one single norm 'from above' later on (Honings et al. 2018).

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50 In the case of pluricentric / pluriareal languages, corpus-based research on
51 prescriptive works and private, governmental and commercial texts has allowed scholars to
52 chart not only the development and use of regional norms (not always conforming to national
53 prescription), but also the swift effect of language legislation and the accompanying shift in
54 actual writing practices (Lismont et al. forthcoming; Vosters 2013; Vosters and Vila 2015). The
55 usefulness of the pluricentricity / pluriareality concept itself for the description of
56 standardization history was also tried and tested on empirical grounds (Van de Voorde 2022).

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3 The persistent impact of purism (Burke 2004; Langer and Davies 2005; McLelland
4 2009; Walsh 2016) on standardization debates has kept a prominent spot on the radar of
5 scholarly research in the language ideological sphere. Both the relevance and the appeal of
6 the topic – as well as the development of an apparatus to support it as a research domain of
7 its own – can be gleaned from the recent publication of two handbooks on purism-related
8 matters: a four-volume online *Handbook of language criticism* (Felder et al. 2017-2019) and
9 the *Handbook of language evaluation in the public sphere* (Antos et al. 2019) in de Gruyter's
10 flagship HSW series.
11

12
13 Multilingualism and language contact have become factors of substantial importance
14 in the analysis of European standardization history, both at the language-external and
15 language-internal levels, well beyond the classic traditional case studies of multilingual
16 countries and regions like Belgium, Luxembourg, and Catalonia (Hüning et al 2012). From a
17 sociology of language point of view, both the interplay between various languages in the
18 process of nation-state formation (Rindler-Schjerve 2003) and the instrumentalization of
19 standard language varieties for national propaganda purposes (Péporté et al. 2010) have
20 spurred a river of scholarship. The spread of lingua francas and their intricate interaction with
21 local varieties of national languages has also been well documented (Brown 2022; Offord et
22 al. 2018; Van Strien-Chardonneau and Kok Escalle 2016). In the study of heritage languages,
23 the linguistic attitudes of migrants speaking the L-variety from a diglossia-governed country
24 or region in the 'old world' are now taken into account as a potentially influential variable in
25 language shift in their 'new world' (Crombez et al. in press). This abandonment of the
26 'monolingual paradigm' has also percolated into studies of the linguistic standardization
27 process itself, where systemic language contact and transfer are now included among the
28 variables that may have impacted the selection, spread and development of specific norms
29 (Rutten et al. 2015; Verheyden and Van Ongeval 2022).
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35 **3. Pathways and priorities for future research on language standardization**

36
37 Leaving aside the facile suggestion that each of the aforementioned domains qualifies for
38 ongoing and further analysis, is there any fresh ground left to break in language
39 standardization research? Most certainly, in my opinion, although suggestions for the most
40 pressing matters will depend on the individual researcher's agenda and agency. As a firm
41 believer in the need to study the social history of languages in Europe to better understand
42 the cultural background of immanent conflicts, I am inclined to make a plea for in-depth
43 analyses of the specific social environment in which standardization debates are embedded,
44 both in the past and the present.
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47 In a contribution on the standardization of Pacific creoles, Mühlhäusler (2003: 357)
48 noted that "standardization is not a technical matter to be carried out by linguistically trained
49 experts, but an ecological one", especially regarding the "cultural conditions that promote
50 acceptance of linguistic standards." This observation has lost none of its relevance, and
51 captures the essential precondition of a broad base of societal support for any successful
52 attempt at language planning at large, and at language standardization in particular.
53 Implementation is today still "the Achilles heel of the standardization process", made or
54 broken by a combination of rational deliberation and social influencing (Deumert and
55 Vandebussche 2003: 7); it likewise remains the phase most clad in speculation when
56 assessing the evaluation of a standardization measure in times past. The impact on the
57 implementation process of power brokering, the symbolic representation of identity, and the
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dynamics of inequality thus remain crucial factors for a sound understanding of the compromises and tensions that constitute the ongoing legacy of language standardization measures. The standardization of minority languages in present-day Europe (Darquennes and Vandebussche 2015; Lane et al. 2018), and the erasure (Irvine and Gal 2000) or invisibilization (Havinga and Langer 2015) of these varieties in the history of European prestige languages, are but two contexts that carry a historical sociolinguistic load with the potential for imminent and overt conflict. Nelde's law – "there is no language contact without conflict" (Nelde 1987) – equally applies to the fundamentally multilingual environment across Europe where language varieties with various degrees of prestige continue to undergo standardization attempts, engendering mutual influence, competition and patterns of unequal socio-political, economic and cultural stratification.

As such, standardization research is always indebted to the observation that "the true environment of a language is the society that uses it as one of its codes" (Haugen 1972: 325). This ecological perspective brings us back to Einar Haugen (1972, 1987), be it to the ecolinguistic turn during the later phase of his career (Eliasson 2013), or the fundamental question of whether language standardization can be a force for the common good, contributing not only to the preservation of language diversity, but also to respect for this very characteristic of (not just) European society at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While the answer to this perpetually relevant question may only be found in the interdisciplinary borderlands between sociolinguistics proper, European sociopolitical studies, and scholarly introspection and agency, it remains very much a matter that channels the enduring motivation behind the foundation of *Sociolinguistica*. It was Klaus Mattheier's (1999) conviction – overtly shared by his fellow founding editors Peter Nelde and Ulrich Ammon – that European society in all its regional diversity had been shaped by a number of shared societal, political, economic and cultural processes (including linguistic ones), and that sociolinguists had the unique ability and opportunity to contribute to a better understanding of that evolution. Language standardization research in the thirty-five years since the launch of *Sociolinguistica* in 1987 has most certainly honoured the spirit of that view. The challenge to renew this mission in the years to come is more important than ever.

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