

How Speech Therapists in Swiss Diglossia Choose Varieties in Aphasia Testing

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References

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Introduction

Switzerland is one of the main national centers of the pluricentric German language, along with Austria and Germany. Besides using the national variety of Standard or High German (HG), German-speaking Swiss also speak Swiss German (SG), which is the generic term for all Swiss dialects. This phenomenon can be described as diglossia (Haas 2004; Ferguson 1959). A special feature of German-speaking Switzerland is thus the coexistence of SG and HG, with each variety being restricted to its own context of usage, and without an intermediate variety “Umgangssprache” (colloquial language). While HG is used in some formal or educational situations, e.g. at school, university lectures or sometimes for sermons in the church (Oberholzer 2018; Rash 2002), SG, on the other hand, is always preferred for informal communication, regardless of education level or social status—unlike other local dialects in Europe (Hove 2017; Christen et al. 2010). Furthermore, and also unlike other dialects, SG has very high prestige among Swiss-German speakers (Berthele 2004). Although the clear separation of dialect and High German may result in code switching (CS), CS is a relatively rare phenomenon in German-speaking Switzerland (Kropf 1986; Christen et al. 2010). However, CS is often found in formal institutional communication, which involves the use of HG (Christen et al. 2010; Oberholzer 2018; Widmer Beierlein & Vorweg 2017). In

particular, CS may be found in examinations of aphasia. Aphasia is an acquired language disorder that can affect all linguistic levels (Huber, Poeck & Springer 2013). During the examination, the speech therapist gives instructions, carries out the test correctly and ultimately makes a diagnosis. In Switzerland, tests for aphasia are usually performed using tests from Germany that have been standardized for High German (spoken and written) in Germany and do not take dialects or other German standard varieties into account (Widmer Beierlein & Vorweg 2015). Data from two single-case analyses (Widmer Beierlein & Vorweg 2017) and interviews with the therapists (Widmer Beierlein & Vorweg 2020) suggest that dialect seems to be the unmarked variety used whenever possible, while HG is switched to only sometimes for utterances related to or forming part of the test itself. The research presented aimed at establishing whether variety choice is a function of discourse function, comparing test items, test-related utterances (feedback, help) and other utterances.

Research Question:

Is variety use (HG, SG, mixed) a function of the communicative function of an utterance within an aphasia examination (such as test item, help, introduction etc.)?

Methods

- 10 aphasia examinations with two Swiss-dialect-speaking participants each were videotaped and all utterances were coded with respect to variety (SG, HG, mixed) and discourse function (conversation, transition, instruction, test, help, feedback/comment).
- Eight different therapists (TH) and ten persons with aphasia (PwA) participated. TH (7 women, 1 man) were between 28 and 50 years old (mean = 38.6, SD = 8.4).
- PwA (2 women, 8 men) were between 43 and 83 years old (mean = 60.1, SD = 13.8). They had severe to minimal aphasia according to the AAT (Aachener Aphasietest) (Huber, Poeck, Weniger, et al., 1983) or severe to minimal word-finding problems according to the BIWOS (Bielefelder Wortscreening) (Benassi et al., 2012).
- We used a mixed effects baseline-category logit model for categorical responses as implemented in the R package `mclogit`. Variety was used as outcome. Discourse function was included as fixed effect.

Example 1 for discourse function „test“ in SG:

TH: (ca 3) h° welles bild zeigt (-) was sie (-) bechunnt
[,welches bild zeigt (-) was sie bekommt']
[‘which picture shows (-) what she gets’]

Example 2 for discourse function „test“ in HG:

TH: (ca 1) eine tätigkeit (-) bei der man den erdboden mit nährstoffen anreichert
[(ca 1) an activity (-) in which one enriches the soil with nutrients']

Example 3 for discourse function „test“ mixed:

TH: sie (.) haben sich gerade in einander verliebt
PWA: die da (ca1) nei (.) moll (.) de [,die da (ca. 1) nein (.) doch (.) der']
[TH: they (.) have just fallen in love with each other
PWA: that one [HG] (ca 1) no (.)but (.) the one [SG]']

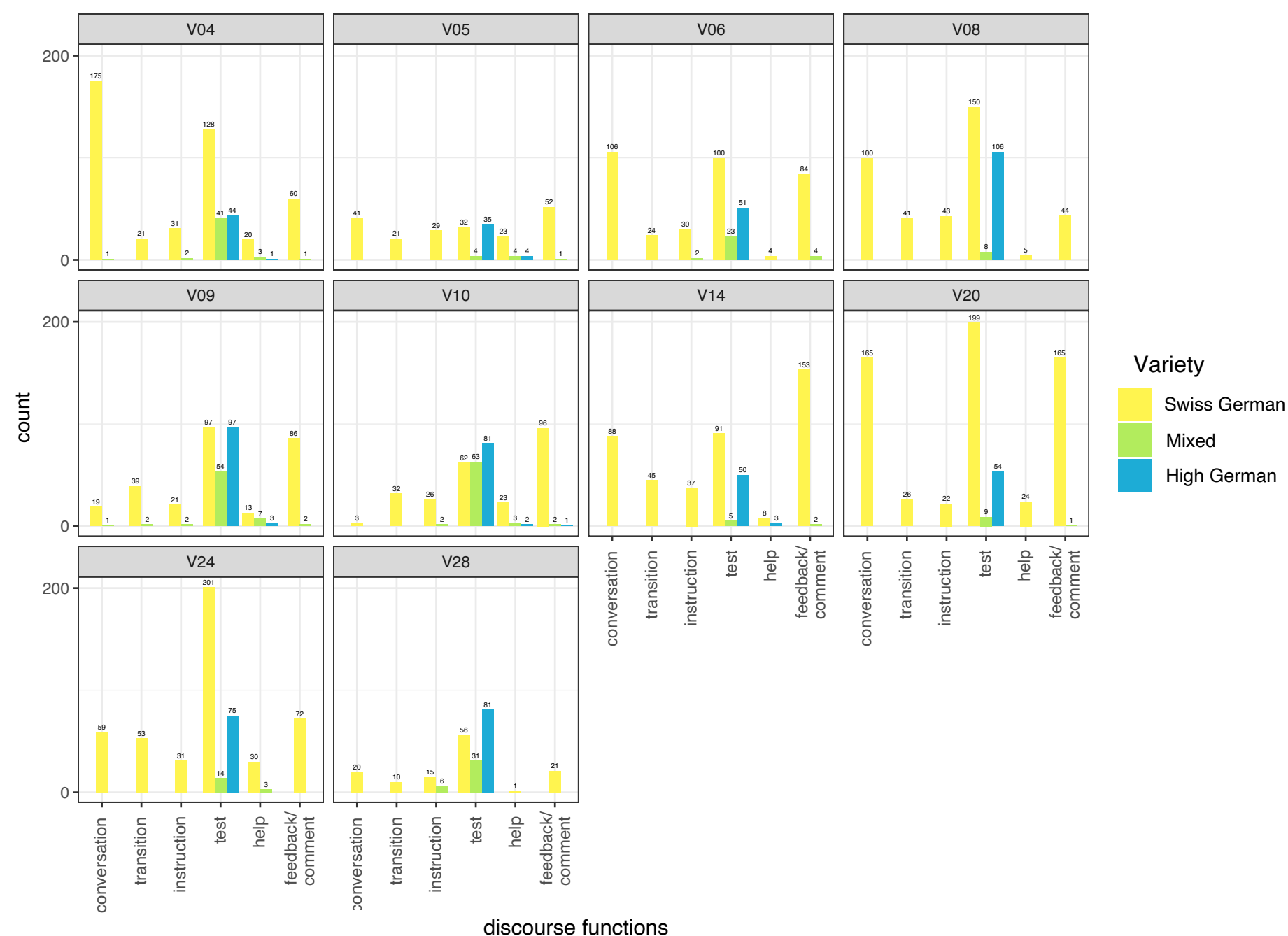


Fig. 1 Overview over count per discourse function (i.e. conversation, transition, test, help, feedback/comment) and variety (i.e. Swiss German, mixed, High German).

Results

A total of 4676 utterances were analyzed. The results show that SG (n = 3654) is the dominant variety in all functions. HG (n = 718), on the other hand, is – if spoken at all – most frequently used for the function “test”. Results are similar for mixed utterances (n = 302). Figure 1 gives an overview of the number of Swiss German, High German and mixed utterances per discourse function (i.e. conversation, transition, instruction, test, help, feedback/comment), broken down by video. The odds of an utterance being made in HG as opposed to SG for a test utterance were much higher than the odds of an utterance being made in HG as opposed to SG for the functions conversation, instruction, transition, feedback/comment or help. The

same associations held for mixed statements as opposed to pure SG. For example, the odds of a help statement being made in HG as opposed to SG were 87.6% lower than for a test statement (confidence interval between 92.4 and 79.7% lower). There were scant or no conversation, instruction, transition and feedback/comment utterances in HG. Mixed utterances occurred rarely in conversation and instruction utterances. It makes clear that the distribution of the varieties in all video recordings follow the same pattern. High German and mixed utterances occur most frequently in the test, whereas they are less frequently used in test-related functions (help and feedback) and hardly ever in other functions.

Discussion

- To date, aphasia in dialect speakers has only been studied anecdotally in research. To our knowledge, this study is the first ever to investigate communicative functions and variety choice in aphasia assessment beyond the individual case in a real communication situation.
- The aim of this study was if HG is used significantly more often in the formal communicative functions of the test compared to other communicative functions within an aphasia examination. Results show that SG is the most commonly used variety in all communicative functions, although HG assessment tests are used. Thus, parts of the test, regardless of their standardization, seem to be consequently adapted by the speech and language therapists to local conditions. To date,

there are no recommendations in the German-speaking world for dealing with tests that are standardized in a standard variety but used in a diglossic setting. This may lead to a very heterogeneous and individual approach in a formal setting, which is supposed to be standardized, and where language itself is the subject of assessment. Further studies should investigate whether there are specific parts of the test within a formal aphasia assessment, which will be predominantly used in SG or HG. Based on the results of this study, we recommend that in clinical work with PwA, diglossia should be more specifically considered in the diagnostic process to ensure that assessment will focus more on the dominant language variety.