

Vorwärts und nichts vergessen. Sprache in der DDR: Was war, was ist, was bleibt

Ruth Reiher, Antje Baumann (Hrsg.)

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The title to Ruth Reiher and Antje Baumann's collection, *Vorwärts und nichts vergessen- Sprache in der DDR: Was War, Was ist, Was Bleibt* captures the curious blending of dichotomies that East Germans have faced since the fall of the Wall. It beckons one to look ahead, while simultaneously inciting an oft-suppressed past to come forward. One eye is kept on the ostensibly bright future, and another on the conflicted past (One cannot help but think of Benjamin's storm-driven angel!). But this past contains blind spots that require negotiation. There are many gaps where information has simply been lost, or does not exist. The resulting impasse provides an inadequate historiography, whose snapshots are too often overly superficial—ranging from a condemning focus on socialist totalitarianism to the celebratory fetishism of archaic commodity cultures. Studies of linguistics in the GDR suffer similarly. As a result, our ideas of past language usage are skewed, and over-simplified. In the light of this lack, Reiher and Baumann offer a collection devoted to providing more. Through the subtle altering of Brecht's refrain in the *Solidaritätslied*, (*Vorwärts und nicht vergessen*), the editors uncompromisingly establish the stakes of their project: Too much about language usage in the GDR has already been forgotten. Everything possible must be remembered. This drive is reflected in the scope of their project: Twenty-nine different researchers come together to analyze diverse facets of language-use (*Sprache*) in the former German Democratic Republic.

The primary problem linguistic historians of the GDR have, and the impetus for this project's marked urgency, is that more than fifteen years have passed since any viable sample of authentic "GDR German" has been spoken. As time elapses, it becomes increasingly harder to ascertain how people spoke in the GDR. Studies or recorded material are scarce. Each former resident's meta-awareness of previous speech patterns becomes more suspect with each year they assimilate into West German linguistic habitude. As a result, our ability to understand how the East German *really*

spoke *every day* diminishes daily, and the gaps in our knowledge widen. Indeed, the golden thread that permeates almost every research topic, particularly in the second chapter, is an attempt to recapture this *Alltagssprache*. This is not a simple task. Reams of SED bureaucracy have monopolized the historical record. Pejoratives dominate our perceptions: ‘Es ist die Sprachform, die Stephan Heym...als “Hoch-DDRsch” bezeichnete, als “gepflegt bürokratisch, voll hochtönender Substantive, die mit entsprechenden Adjektiven verbrämt werden.” ’(9) Yet, the authors maintain that a more dynamic language once existed: ‘Das Deutsche in der DDR war jedoch eine natürliche Sprache wie das Deutsche in der Bundesrepublik, in Österreich oder auch in der Schweiz.’ (10) After the abundance of evidence they provide, one marvels at the naivety of contrary assumptions.

This evidence is contained in the researcher’s diligent reliance on a wide variety of textual output. Everything is considered, from surprising comparative explications of the Constitutions of the BRD, GDR, and the Weimar Republic, to anticipated *Ostalgie* films such as Wolfgang Becker’s *Goodbye, Lenin* or Thomas Brüssig’s *Sonnenallee*. Multiple reference materials, such as *DDR Wörterbücher* and *Lexika* are also open to examination. It is this diversity of records, and the creative approaches that the authors implement to analyze them, that makes this a fascinating and rewarding collection. The reader is treated to the rare occasion in which an apparent vacuum of historical materials is filled with an abundance of sources. And this collection negotiates these manifold realia while deftly avoiding overdetermination and redundancy.

The editors divided the book into three sections. The first, ‘Was die Kommunikation in der DDR prägte’ contains four essays that are marked by their largely theoretical/global approach to both language usage in the GDR and current approaches to it.

The book’s first essay, ‘Thema erledigt—oder doch noch nicht? Was bleibt zu tun bei der Erforschung des DDR- Sprachgebrauchs?’ establishes two theses early: The linguistic assimilation period following the Wende is over, and as such, the topic of language usage in the GDR is a historical one. As a result, Hellmann proposes a seven-point plan that focuses on East/West cooperation in studying this particular time period. This is encapsulated in his final paragraph, which is reprinted in the book’s introduction:

Lassen wir nicht zu, dass die Geschichte der DDR, auch ihre Sprachgeschichte, marginalisiert wird, als habe sie—wenn überhaupt—irgendwo im Ausland stattgefunden. Auch die Sprachgeschichte der DDR ist zu dokumentieren, zu kodifizieren, zu beschreiben und zu erinnern als Teil unserer gemeinsamen deutschen Geschichte. (23)

This paragraph's isolation and reduplication in the introductory essay underscores its status as a 'call to arms'. The editors themselves recognize it as an *Appell* (13). Ultimately, it is the guiding light the other essays follow.

In 'Was die Kommunikation in der DDR prägte', Wolfdietrich Hartung disavows stereotypes of GDR linguistic simplicity by reminding the reader that language usage, and the concordant selection of register, are dependent upon social situations, as well as the social status of the speakers. If this sounds intuitive to those familiar with German, it should. As Hartung notes: 'Eine *Sprache der DDR* hat es...nicht gegeben. In der DDR wurde Deutsch gesprochen, wie in den anderen deutschsprachigen Staaten auch....' (35) Hartung does note many unique aspects of language usage in the GDR, and attributes their evolution to post-war redistribution of settlements, as well as the development of a socialist state, which radically altered German society's pre-war class stratification.

Horst Dieter Schlosser's article, 'In einer alten, uns vertrauten, immer noch unendlich reichen Sprache', takes an excerpt from a Peter Härtling quote in which Härtling supposes that Christa Wolf and other DDR authors maintained a connection to a traditional German that the West has lost. Schlosser posits concurrent post-war evolutions of language usage in the East and West, attributing many of the differences to a driving capitalist competition in the West, in which language was needed that could accomplish more, with greater efficacy, in a shorter period of time. Quantitatively, the West German spoke more. But whether this created a qualitative difference remains inconclusive. The essay is most intriguing when it establishes a continuum of language practices that spans the Weimar Republic to the GDR. This theme is reiterated in the first essay of the second chapter "Deutschland ist eine unteilbare demokratische Republik" Zur gesamtdeutschen Tradition und zum Wandel von Verfassungsformeln in der DDR', in which morphological and syntactic similarities within the Constitutions of the three modern German states (Weimar Republic, BRD, GDR) are compared.

The book's second section, *Sprache und Sprachgebrauch in der DDR* contains the majority of source material in the collection and provides the most rewarding analyses. The primary texts include transcripts from the *Runder Tisch Gespräche* that shortly predated the Wende, *FDJ- Texte*, or correspondence sent to elementary school teachers. Hard-to-find results of studies on regional dialects and slang are also included. This is of particular note, as most of these studies were terminated due to state policy.

Two articles focus on textual samples hardly known outside the GDR. The first, ‘“Dann schreibe ich eben an Erich Honecker!” “Eingaben” und “Stellungnahmen” im Alltag der DDR’, focuses on the unique status of the *Eingabe*, a direct letter from the citizen to the local government that was written to affect change. (Many in the West saw this for the first time in Wolfgang Becker's comedy, *Goodbye, Lenin!*, in which the protagonist's mother was so adept at writing them, the entire *Wohnblock* came to her for assistance.) As the author comments on their popularity, she notes:

Wie erklärt es sich dass ‘Eingaben’ in solcher erstaunlichen Häufigkeit und Vielfalt geschrieben wurden? Ein Grund könnte in der formalen Unverbindlichkeit dieser Texte liegen, die auch weniger Gebildeten einen Zugang ermöglichten ... Trotz dieser formalen und sprachlichen Vielfalt, um nicht zu sagen Buntheit, wurde der Text von der Behörde als eine Art institutioneller Text anerkannt. (198)

In this reviewer's opinion, it is this very duality between the intimate letter and formally public address that makes the *Eingabe* such a fascinating source for this project. Where better to find glimpses of personal, *Alltäglich* affectation than in the *Buntheit* of these letters?

Similarly, Angelika Wolters' ‘*Herzliche Grüße ■ von deinem Lada*’ uses the *Brigadetagebuch* to demonstrate bursts of personal flair in the public minutes of the socialist workers' collective:

Die Brigadetagebücher enthielten bei weitem nicht nur Texte offiziellen Charakters...Daher enthalten die Brigadetagebücher zwar keine spontanen Alltagstexte, aber sie können als ein Reservoir bewusst geformter alltagsnaher Einzeltexte angesehen werden, in denen sich offizieller Sprachgebrauch der DDR vermischen. Deshalb bieten sie auch eine unschätzbare Fundgrube für den Sprachgebrauch in der DDR. (217)

The problem one may have with both of these selections, which is evident in many of the examples found in the book, is that the excerpts in which this *Alltagssprache* purportedly exists are often political in nature, or serve a dual personal/social function. These are not family members speaking over dinner. In order to maximize the amount of material containing this *Alltagssprache*, many researchers selected texts that existed in the murky spaces between the official/political and the personal. As a result, the essays often examine a hybrid language that is at times both personal and informal as well as publicly and politically motivated.

This should not discount the *Eingaben/Brigadetagebuch*'s usefulness as evidence. The contrary is true. Even though the casual *Alltags-* conversations between neighbours cannot be captured, something far more fascinating occurs. Through the continual shifting and blending of linguistic register that is evident in these texts, the dynamism and depth of German in the GDR shines through. This is the verbal playfulness and complexity that the editors' argue for all along, and the ultimate negation of Stephan Heym's derogatory supposition.

The final section, 'Kein Thema mehr? Zum gegenwärtigen Umgang mit DDR-spezifischen Sprachformen', focuses on the reception of the GDR within Germany today. Five articles concern themselves with the need for dictionaries and other lexica that archive and explain the exceptional in GDR language. Some articles continue the concrete, realia-based focus of the second section. This can be seen in a chapter that traces the evolution of *Neues Deutschland* from state-sponsored mouthpiece of the governing SED to a marginalized daily newspaper that nonetheless maintains a devoted readership. Others offer a meditation on the semiotic function of artifacts from the DDR, and their role on language, such as in Andreas Ludwig's 'Die Sprache der Dinge':

Die Beispiele verdeutlichen, dass die materielle Kultur des Alltags keine rein ästhetische, sondern darüber hinaus eine textliche ist, die sich auf verschiedenen Ebenen zeigt: Angefangen von schriftlichen Äußerungen am Objekt selbst bishin zur 'Sprache der Form', auf die hier nicht näher eingegangen wurde, beinhalten materielle Sachzeugen direkte und indirekte Elemente von Sprache. (301)

In addition to the three book sections and twenty-eight articles, the book contains an appendix with thirty-four pages of scanned primary source material.

This collection of research into language usage in the GDR stems from a 2003 Symposium and the subsequent discussions it inspired. The demand and interest in the theme is evidenced by the amount of contributors who submitted their research. Its breadth is remarkable. Although there are twenty-eight different articles, the quality of research is highly maintained throughout. This book should be invaluable for anyone concerned with language use in the GDR.