

Immediacy and Distance: Koch, Oesterreicher, and Digital Communication between Orality, Literacy, and Mediality

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Abstract

The digital era has brought with it a wealth of ever new modes of communication, media formats, and communication spaces. In German speaking countries the distinction of “language of immediacy” and “language of distance” is frequently used to explain certain linguistic and semiotic features of digital communication. This follows a concept first published in 1985 by German Romance philologists Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher, the core idea being that the question of written or spoken language is not only a matter of code but also of conception, and that the manifest features of communicative acts depend on the conditions of communication. This paper aims to introduce the concept and to explain why it seems to be ubiquitous in German speaking contexts, but is little known internationally. It connects the Koch-Oesterreicher-model to the similar works of Douglas R. Biber, discusses its limitations regarding affordances in digital environments, and finally shortly asks for its relevance in language didactics and especially foreign language teaching.

Keywords: digital communication, Koch-Oesterreicher-model, instant messaging, conceptual orality, media affordance

Introduction

It is rather rare that the anniversary of an academic paper is celebrated with an anthology. This can only mean that this paper must have had an enormous impact on the academic community. One might think of Herbert Paul Grice’s “Logic and Conversation” (1975) or on John Searle’s voluminous essay on *Speech Acts* (1969). Or of a paper that goes by the English title „Language of Immediacy - Language of Distance: Orality and Literacy from the Perspective of Language Theory and Linguistic History“, first published in 1985 by German Romance philologists Peter Koch and Wulf Oesterreicher (2012). The occasion of the 30th anniversary of the original publication was marked by an edited volume published in a prestigious book series and with the participation of prominent scholars from the fields of German linguistics and educational linguistics (Feilke & Hennig 2016). The success story of the “Koch-Oesterreicher-concept”, however, appears to be limited to German speaking countries. An English translation of the paper has only been published in 2012 - and that was in a German festschrift for one of the co-translators since the original publication plans in the late 1990s had failed (cf. Schaefer 2021, 15). So, in the year of the 40th anniversary the situation remains essentially unchanged: In German speaking academia the concept is very intensively received, especially in the field of language education, but it is little known anywhere else.

In the German speaking context, Koch and Oesterreicher's ideas are frequently used to discuss the peculiarities of digital communication, especially instant messaging. This means: A concept is used to analyse forms of communication that did not exist at the time when the theoretical concept was developed. This, of course, is a double-edged sword: It can prove the prognostic strength of a theory - like Einstein's prediction of gravitational waves or de Saussure's prediction of laryngeal consonants. Or it can be a hint that a concept might not be appropriate and can only be applied by compromising either the concept or the phenomena or both. Undoubtedly, the digital era has brought with it a wealth of new modes of communication, media formats, and communication spaces that challenges traditional dichotomies of spoken and written, private and public, personal and mass communication. It probably also challenges our notions of and our everyday dealings with immediacy and distance and it therefore might be fruitful to have a closer look at a theoretical concept that has immediacy and distance at its core.

The following sections of this paper will introduce the concept of Koch and Oesterreicher and attempt to explain why it is ubiquitous in German speaking countries but little known internationally before the relevance of the model regarding digital communication and (digital) communication in German as a foreign language will shortly be discussed.

The Concept of Koch and Oesterreicher: Two Dimensions of Orality and Literacy

The basic observation from which the concept derives is that written language is not just the transposition of spoken language into another media form (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 444-445). Apparently, there are linguistic features that we consider to be typical of spoken or written language and which therefore identify language for us as spoken or written. This can be seen by comparing these two descriptions of a writing tool (adapted from Fix 2008, 64-65):

Mein Füller

- (1) Also, ähm, also es handelt sich um ein Schreibgerät, des is' ungefähr 12 cm lang, ähm, und der besteht aus'm Füller halt und 'nem Deckel, also wie nennt man denn des?
Also, da wo man ihn hält, isser schwarz, ähm (Pause), 's is blaue Tinte drin, ähm, er is' grün, wie nennt man des - melliert? Der Deckel, der hat, ähm, 'n goldenes Ende.
- (2) Mein Füller ist blau und wird durch eine silberfarbene Schutzkappe verschlossen. Auf der Kappe hält ein blaues Drehköpfchen einen Klemmbügel, der den Füller an Taschen und Kleidern festhält. Im Innern der Plastikkappe ist ein Gewinde angebracht, durch welches der Füller mit der Schutzhülle fest verschraubt werden kann. Der eigentliche Füller besteht aus zwei Teilen.

Both descriptions are presented in writing, but the first one has typical features of spoken German (e. g. discourse markers like *ähm*, elisions like *'nem*, contractions like *isser...*), the second one shows typical features of written German in terms of lexicon (e. g. *silberfarben*; *durch welches*), morphological completeness, and syntactical complexity. Spoken and written language apparently differ on various linguistic levels, and whether an utterance is considered spoken or written does not only depend on whether it was *actually* spoken or written. The question of orality and literacy has rather two dimensions, the first one being a matter of the medium or the code: Is it phonic or graphic? Do we hear something, or do we see something? The second dimension is a matter of conception: Was the utterance designed for an oral setting where the communication happens immediately in the situation

or for a setting where the communication partners are distant and which is therefore suitable for writing? And one can easily imagine that the first description would be intended for a situation in which the communication partners are present while the second description would be intended for a situation in which the communication partners are not. Koch and Oesterreicher illustrate the dimensions of medium and conception with the examples in Figure 1:

		KONZEPTION	
		gesprochen	geschrieben
MEDIUM	graphisch	dt. <i>das is ne wichtige Angelegenheit</i> fr. <i>faut pas le dire</i> e. <i>I've got a car</i>	dt. <i>das ist eine wichtige Angelegenheit</i> fr. <i>il ne faut pas le dire</i> e. <i>I have a car</i>
	phonisch	dt. [ˈdasnəˈvɪçtjə ˈʔaggəˌlɛŋhait] fr. [fopaˈdiːʁ] e. [aɪvˌɡɒtəˈkɑː]	dt. [ˈdas ˈɪst ˈaɪnə ˈvɪçtɪgə ˈʔaggəˌleːgghait] fr. [ilnəfopaˈlaˈdiːʁ] e. [aɪˌhævəˈkɑː]

Figure 1: Two Dimensions (Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 20)

What is kind of misleading in this chart is that the medial and conceptual distinctions appear to be on the same level and of the same kind - which they are not. The medial question of orality and literacy is a question of “either - or”: you have the phonic code and the graphic code. The codes may be combined, but they remain perceptibly separate. There is no code in between. On the conceptual level on the other hand the question of orality and literacy is one of “more or less”. The strategies used for verbalization depend on the conditions of the communicative situation, which can be described with lists of parameters such as the following in Table 1.

Table 1: Conditions of Communication

Parameter	Orality	Literacy
communication space	private	public
addressees	familiar	unfamiliar
emotional involvement	high	low
situational connection	embedded	detached
references	close	distant
spatiotemporal relation	close	distant
type of action	cooperative	non-cooperative
type of utterances	dialogical	monological
mode of action	spontaneous	reflected
thematic development	free	focused
...

(cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 445 & 450; Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 24)

With oppositions like these it can be explained why there is written text that looks quite spoken and spoken discourse that sounds quite written: The “more or less” in conceptual orality and literacy is determined by the extent to which the conditions of the communicative situation are more oriented towards the left column or to the right column. Imagine a lecture at an online conference: The lecture is public, although not generally

public. The speaker has some information about the audience but is not familiar with the addressees in the sense of knowing each of them personally. The lecture is hopefully enjoyable, but besides that the emotional involvement will be probably low. The speaker and the audience share a communicative situation in a virtual space especially designed for communication, so they are partially embedded. But the lecture will typically be about topics remote from the situation, so it's referentially distant. The speaker and the audience are co-present in terms of time but distant in terms of space. The possibility of cooperation via backchanneling is quite limited, and the typical lecture is going to be monologic, reflected, and thematically focused. The "literacy"-column clearly dominates, and that explains why online lectures sound so written - and are called *lectures* after all. The written notes most conference speakers use for their presentations are not the cause of conceptual literacy but rather a means to fulfil the standards and the expectations of the communicative constellation. If we think of instant messaging on the other hand, this communication format can certainly be characterized as mostly private with familiar addressees, potentially synchronous in time, dialogical, spontaneous and with free thematic development. There is a strong tendency towards the "orality"-column, and we therefore shouldn't be surprised to find linguistic features associated with spoken language in our chat histories.

Koch and Oesterreicher describe the relation of conceptual orality and literacy as a continuum between two poles, where communication forms or - as Koch and Oesterreicher call them - discourse traditions like interviews, diary entries, lectures or administrative regulations can be located by historical-hermeneutical analysis (see Fig. 2).

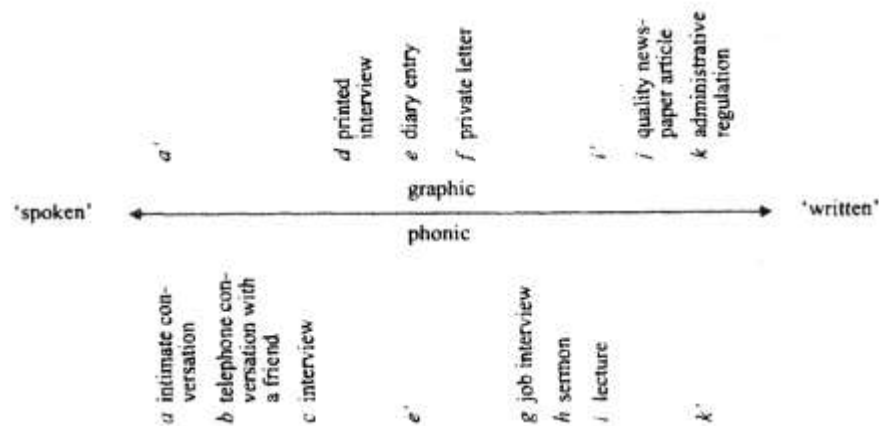


Figure 2: The Continuum (Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 444)

Written messages in WhatsApp, Line, or Signal would probably show up far on the left side above the distinctive line between the graphic and the phonic code. And linguistic features may resemble those of the forms of oral conversation just below the line. That's because the specific conditions of communication lead to specific strategies of verbalization, and this leads to two idealized forms of communication which Koch and Oesterreicher call "Language of Immediacy" and "Language of Distance" (or "Sprache der Nähe" and "Sprache der Distanz"). Both are characterized by certain linguistic features that according to Koch & Oesterreicher are universal to "all historical languages" (2012, 454), but have specific characteristics in each language.

This is, of course, a reduced version of the concept, and possibly not a hundred percent accurate. But this may be quite fitting, since the concept was generally received in a reduced version and not a hundred percent accurate, and with great success in German speaking countries.

The Reception of the Koch-Oesterreicher-Model

A Success Story: The Reception in German Speaking Countries

The editors of the 30th anniversary volume call the reception of Koch and Oesterreicher's core ideas "a success story unparalleled in linguistics" ("eine Erfolgsgeschichte, die in der Sprachwissenschaft ihresgleichen sucht"; Hennig & Feilke 2016, 1), and the anthology presents various approaches to explaining this success. Three factors shall be highlighted here: the continuum, the basic terms, and a didactic gap.

The Continuum

The ideas of Koch & Oesterreicher are not overall new. As the authors themselves note, they didn't come out of nowhere (Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 16-22). The core ideas of the distinction between medium and conception as well as the influence of the conditions of communication on different linguistic forms have been traced back to Karl Bühler (Raible acc. to Feilke 2016, 115), to the 19th century (Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 17; Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 443) or even to Aristotle (Maas acc. to Feilke 2016, 114)., and the original version of the four field chart in Fig. 1 was not designed by Koch & Oesterreicher, but was taken from a book by German Romance philologist Ludwig Söll, published in 1974 (Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 443; Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 12-13, 19-20).

What is new in this form and clarity is the "continuum of degrees of conceptual possibilities" (Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 444), the "conceptual continuum between the two poles 'spoken' and 'written'" (ibid. 445). And it may have been this combination of an absolute and binary opposition (phonic / graphic) with a gradable and scalar opposition that has been decisive for the success of the concept since it defines a space in which every kind of communication, be it as a single entity or as an idealized discourse tradition, can seemingly be localized (Knobloch 2016, 77; cf. Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 29-31), even more since "the communicative continuum cannot be seen as purely *linear*" but "must [...] be seen as a multi-dimensional space between [the] two poles" (Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 447). In this way, a space is opened for everything and everyone, without being too specific on actual localizations or actual methods of localization.

The Basic Terms

Another advantage of Koch-Oesterreicher-model are the attractive basic terms *immediacy* and *distance* or rather the German *Nähe* and *Distanz*. The German *Nähe* has several possible equivalents in the English language: *vicinity*, *closeness*, *nearness*, *proximity* - to name a few. There will have been good reasons for choosing *immediacy* for the translation which is normally not listed as a literal equivalent of *Nähe*, but far more than *immediacy* the German *Nähe* is an everyday word. And far more than *immediacy*, *Nähe*, like *closeness*, is relative and gradable. So, with *Nähe* and *Distanz* the naming of the poles lays the focus on the conceptual continuum between them (Feilke 2016, 123). And being an everyday word means that *Nähe* (like *closeness*) as well as *distance* can be used for different kind of relations: One can be spatially and temporally close, but also emotionally and socially. This contributes strongly, as Clemens Knobloch states, to the interdiscursive fitness of the terms (Knobloch 2016, 75-78), and this fitness can be considered a main factor why the Koch-Oesterreicher-model won the prize over other conceptualizations of the relation of orality and literacy emerging around the same time in German speaking academia, namely those of Konrad Ehlich and Utz Maas (cf. Feilke 2016, 116-118; Knobloch 2016, 80-81). Maas's double distinction of spoken and written text on the one and orate and literate cognitive

form on the other hand, first published in 1984, is particularly interesting since it not only anticipates the dimensions of media and concept by Koch and Oesterreicher: it also comes from the field of German language didactics - where Koch and Oesterreicher instead received the greatest response.

The American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce considered it to be “an indispensable requisite of science that it should have a recognized technical vocabulary, composed of words so unattractive that loose thinkers are not tempted to use them”; and he called this “the moral aspect of terminology” (quoted in Knobloch 2016, 75). But obviously, ignoring this moral aspect can be a factor of success.

A Didactic Gap

The main success factor for a theory, model, or concept, however, will always be that it fulfils a need. Since the study of language at German universities mainly takes place within the framework of teacher training it is probably the filling of a didactic gap which led to the intensive reception of the model.

According to Helmuth Feilke, in the 1980s the field of first language didactics in Germany was conceptually starved and felt largely abandoned by linguistics, especially in the area of language acquisition and language learning. Research had been focused on early language acquisition but refrained from the topic of the development of literate language skills that schools and teachers have to deal with - precisely *because* schools and teachers *are* dealing with it. Didactic action interferes so that linguistic matters cannot be studied independently from administrative influences (Feilke 2016, 132). Here, the Koch-Oesterreicher-model fitted in quite fine. Koch and Oesterreicher stress, that the model is not meant to be read in terms of higher and lower value of certain communicative forms or in terms of temporal development. But it *can* be read in that way, just by following the reading direction from left to right, and therefore it was adapted for describing the development of language skills, from the phonic to the graphic, from conceptual spoken to conceptual written and from close to distant forms of communication and discourse traditions.

And since in texts written by school students traces of “conceptual orality” are quite common, the model can be used as a framework for diagnostics and as a basis for constructive feedback. Mastering the “language of distance” in written as well as in spoken form appears to be the ultimate goal of language education (cf. Feilke 2016, 129), and whenever this goal is mentioned a reference to Koch and Oesterreicher is quite likely. Their model therefore has become ubiquitous in German linguistics and especially German educational linguistics, and from this restricted perspective it is hardly conceivable that there has been almost no international reception.

Non-Reception: The International Resonance of the Model

The “success story unparalleled in linguistics” (Hennig & Feilke 2016, 1) is indeed rather a success story unparalleled in *German* linguistics or even more specific in German *educational* linguistics. In media linguistics the reception was intense but far more critical (Feilke 2016, 127). Interestingly, reception is missing in the area of conversation analysis (ibid.). In German educational linguistics the model was highly acclaimed in contexts of acquiring German as L1 or L2 but widely ignored in foreign language learning, that is, in English studies and even Romance studies where it actually originated (for explanations see ibid., 113, 128-130).

In describing the “success story” of the model in the anniversary volume the German (or Germanistic) focus is indeed so strong that the international reception is simply not an issue. Only in a short remark on applied linguistics and educational linguistics in English studies (Feilke 2016, 113) and a footnote on Anglo-American internet linguistics (Dürscheid 2016,

376) is it even mentioned that there is none. It is Ursula Schaefer, co-translator of the founding text, who gives a detailed account on the (non-)reception of Koch and Oesterreicher in English-speaking linguistics in 2021. Her conclusions are essentially about language dominance, Eugenio Coseriu, and American empiricism.

First: the language dominance. International recognition in academia nowadays almost inevitable means: recognition in English speaking academia. So, the most obvious reason for the international non-reception of Koch and Oesterreicher might be that the foundation text of 1985 did not appear in an English translation until 2012 (Schaefer 2021, 15) and then in a German publication.

But one might also ask why there was no English translation published earlier and in a more prominent place. Peter Koch uses the model in a prominently published English language article in 1999 but without resonance in anglophone academia (Dürscheid 2016, 376). So, Schaefer gives a complementary explanation that concerns the theoretical foundation of Koch and Oesterreicher. Schaefer states that this foundation had been “alien to American linguistics” (2021, 16). It was provided by Romanian born linguist Eugenio Coseriu who was the academic teacher of Koch and Oesterreicher and generally very influential in German speaking academia and in the Romania. Coseriu was multilingual - but did not publish in English and avoided speaking it (Lehmann acc. to Schaefer 2021, 16). But the crucial point is, that linguistics in the US in the tradition of Leonard Bloomfield had separated itself from what was considered “European philosophizing” (ibid., 18). In the 1950s linguistics in the US had forgot about or negated the influence of European thinkers like de Saussure and Trubetzkoy (ibid.) and developed its own schools of thought, such as behaviorism, cognitivism, and sociolinguistics. Coseriu meanwhile in South America challenged de Saussure’s distinction of *langue* and *parole* with a triad of *system*, *norm*, and *speech* (ibid., 21), and came to Germany as a poststructuralist of his own kind at the same time when structuralism was just arriving there (ibid., 25). The questions Coseriu dealt with and that Koch and Oesterreicher took up were essentially the same as those of leading American linguists: How can languages work as a system and be open to change and variation at the same time (ibid., 20-21)? And how can variations and varieties be explained (ibid., 22)? But the approaches could hardly have been more different: conceptual and hermeneutical on the European, empiristic on the American side.

This is illustrated by the example of Douglas Biber. At about the same time that Koch and Oesterreicher were developing their concept, Biber was comparing spoken and written English using large corpora. Biber identified specific linguistic features and found them in specific genres, which could then be located on scales very similar to Koch and Oesterreicher’s continuum between conceptual orality and literacy. What Koch and Oesterreicher develop from theory, Biber develops from data (Schaefer 2021, 35). What on Koch and Oesterreicher’s scale are idealized forms of communication are for Biber genre specifications taken from his corpora (ibid., 35-36). The identical result is that one cannot adequately capture the variation of linguistic forms in written and spoken language by contrasting “literacy” and “orality” as a whole (Biber 1986, 385). Instead, linguistic features can be identified that occur frequently together and can therefore be assumed to have a common function. Originally Biber identified three main functional dimensions: interactive vs. edited text, situated vs. abstract content, and immediate vs. reported style (ibid., 393). He later published revised versions of the dimensions but apparently did not take any notice of Koch & Oesterreicher. On the other hand, Wulf Oesterreicher’s reaction to the corpus-based *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* of 2007, which Biber co-authored, shows the differences between the approaches to be rather irreconcilable. The *Longman Grammar* “describes the actual use of grammatical features in different varieties of English, mainly conversation, fiction, newspaper language, and academic prose” (cit. Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 52). Oesterreicher calls this selection of varieties “absolutely too simple” (“absolut unterkomplex”) and their distinction lacking any discriminatory power as he calls

for a ban of such short-sighted methods (“kurzschlüssige methodische Optionen”) and for hermeneutical approaches (ibid.). Nonetheless, an attempt has recently been made to statistically substantiate Koch and Oesterreicher’s model and to compare the data with Biber’s results (Emmrich 2025).

The Koch-Oesterreicher-Model and Digital Communication

But what about the applicability of the model for digital communication and especially for instant messaging? Can a concept be used for analysing communication forms that did not exist at the time it was developed? Koch & Oesterreicher’s answer is a clear “yes” (Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 53-54). This comes as no surprise since the continuum between ‘Nähe’ and ‘Distanz’ is thought to be an anthropological condition (Koch & Oesterreicher 2012, 454) and furthermore is multidimensional enough to accommodate practically everything. Other scholars, especially from the field of media linguistics, have been more sceptical (cf. the discussion in Dürscheid 2016), but Koch and Oesterreicher see chat communication as an excellent example for “the possibility of an *approach to dialogic, spontaneous language of immediacy* in the graphic medium.” (“die Möglichkeit einer im graphischen Medium vollzogenen *Annäherung an dialogische, spontane Nähesprachlichkeit*”; Oesterreicher & Koch 2016, 53). The attractiveness of the model for describing and explaining chat and messenger communication is evident, indeed. This can be shown with examples from a WhatsApp group chat (s. Fig. 3).



Figure 3: WhatsApp Group Chat (own material)

If we think of the parameters of communication, we can consider that this chat is relatively private, the addressees know each other, they refer to something close to them from their social environment (a school function), and the communication is temporally

close, cooperative, and dialogical. These are all characteristics that this group chat has in common with a spoken conversation in a familiar context. And not surprisingly the language in this chat “looks” spoken, too, which means we find linguistic features associated with spoken German, namely elliptical constructions (*15.30 müsste gehen*), omissions of articles (*noch freien Platz*), apocopes & clitics (*schreib ichs*), or extra-syntactic particles (*ok; dankeschön*). Other features that are typical for spoken German as well as for messenger communication in German are regionalisms, syncopes (*goldenes* → *goldnes*), assimilations (*haben* → *ham*) or modal particles. So, in fact, there may be no better example to illustrate the idea of conceptual orality in medial literacy than instant messaging.

But this could also be too tempting and therefore misleading. Media linguists are rather critical of the use of the Koch-Oesterreicher-model to analyze digital communication. Ulrich Schmitz criticizes the reductionism of the model since especially in technical mediated communication there is “a multitude of different features [...] that cannot be transferred to just two dimensions without loss” (“eine Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Merkmale[...], die man nicht ohne Verlust auf nur zwei Dimensionen abtragen kann”; Schmitz 2015, 43). Another of Schmitz’s criticisms is that it remains unclear what the linguistic features of conceptual orality and literacy exactly are. They are not really defined, and they are not secured by an empirical base. Furthermore, the model is not really fit for multimodality where communication is visual, but not necessarily verbal - or visual and verbal codes are combined (cf. *ibid.*, 43-45). Christa Dürscheid adds the question of synchronicity (2016, 371-372). The Koch-Oesterreicher-model cannot differentiate between actual synchronicity in interactive speaking and potential (or quasi-) synchronicity in interactive writing. The difference can be seen in the WhatsApp group chat in Fig. 3 (and in most chat histories): Between two almost synchronous interaction episodes there is an overnight pause. And finally, the model doesn’t take into account the so-called media affordances, meaning how much the material conditions of media, the possibilities and restrictions provided, determine how we communicate with them (cf. Androutsopoulos 2023): Do we use a keyboard as interface? Do we have auto-correction? Do we see backchannel signals like ‘received’ or ‘read’ or ‘online’? What other graphic repertoires as emojis or GIFs are at hand?

The last point becomes quite clear when applying the idea of conceptual orality to messenger communication. Obviously, there are peculiarities in instant messaging that cannot be explained as conceptually oral in the sense of a derivation from spoken German: the use of typography, the iteration of characters, the use of inflectives or, of course, emojis. It is easy to see that these phenomena do *not* generate from medially spoken language but rather from the possibilities and restrictions of interactive writing, using different graphic and other visual codes. The good thing is that this is so obvious that the model in showing its limits provides an opportunity to focus on the role of media affordances in computer mediated communication. And this may be an interesting point for German as a foreign language, too.

The Koch-Oesterreicher-Model and German as a Foreign Language

At first glance one may regard the Koch-Oesterreicher-model as an oddity of German-speaking academia, with a reception history that is either strange or remarkable, depending on one’s point of view. But there are some possible uses in the area of German as a foreign language for which the model could prove fruitful and which I would like to briefly mention in conclusion:

Firstly, the model can be used for highlighting the differences between spoken and written German and for explaining them: What kinds of elliptical constructions do we find in spoken German and what kinds of elisions? Why are modal particles hardly used in written German and synthetic subjunctive forms hardly to be found in face-to-face conversation?

With the Koch-Oesterreicher-model learners cannot only consider or describe these differences. They also can be provided with the opportunity to understand them. Lists of parameters like the one in Tab. 1 can be used for describing the conditions of communication, and this can shed a light on the differences between different text types or discourse traditions. Orality is gradable: The standards and expectations of a job interview are different from those of a familiar conversation. Addressing an entire class is linguistically different from addressing an individual student, and fictitious oral language, such as that found in written dialogues, is different from actual spoken conversations (cf. Storrer 2018, 233-237).

And German in messenger communication is different from text book German. While similarities to spoken German can be detected, more obvious are the similarities (and differences) between messenger communication in German and in languages that learners actually already use for instant messaging. In translingual analysis the model can be used to distinguish which features of messenger communication can be explained by the conceptual continuum and what depends on the media affordances. The Koch-Oesterreicher-model is certainly not a general solution to theoretical or practical problems of foreign language learning in the digital age. But with its reductionism and the fundamental simplicity of its core idea, it can perhaps help to reduce the distance between the learning content and language practice.

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