Spatial Reference in Postcards

The project "The evolution of genres between standardization and variation: The case of picture postcards" uses the most recent methods that corpus linguistics offers to evaluate richly annotated texts in an automated manner. The project aims at empirically determining the general patterns of the text type "postcard" and the characteristics of spatial references within this type of text.

Heiko Hausendorf

In the last third of the 19th century, the trend began of no longer sending postcards in envelopes, but open. Already by the beginning of the 20th century, the "picture postcard" with an image on one side and text on the other had proved to be a successful innovation in the field of distance communication, namely commercially successful as well as in respect of its impact on everyday culture. The pattern of a not only readable, but also viewable "postcard" turned out to be the means of distance communication par excellence, especially at a time of emerging tourism: the front side with its photographic picture of the holiday destination (the "sight"), and the reverse side with its defined areas for the address, stamps, and messages of all kinds ("holiday greetings"). At the beginning of the 20th century, the area for messages did not yet exist, so that it was not uncommon to write a few lines on the image side. Finally, these texts got their own area on the reverse of the postcard, typographically separated from the other elements.

The project focuses on the linguistic manifestations found in these textual messages. Led by Heiko Hausendorf (UZH) and Joachim Scharloth (TU Dresden) and in cooperation with Noah Bubenhofer (UZH), the project draws on a text corpus of approximately 12 000 postcards, mostly provided by individuals and covering the years from 1898 to 2015. The messages are examined for recurring patterns from text-linguistic as well as corpus-linguistic perspectives. What do you write on a picture postcard? How do writers refer to space and which formulations are characteristic of these texts related to a (holiday) location? How did the general patterns of "holiday greetings" change over the decades? These are central questions to Kyoko Sugisaki, Nicolas Wiedmer (both UZH), Dewi Josephine Obert, and Michaela Schnick (both TU Dresden), further collaborators on this joint SNSF-DFG project.

www.spur.uzh.ch/en/postcards

The picture postcard emerged at the turn to the 20th century. Examining the holiday greetings on the reverse side is of great corpus- and text-linguistic interest.