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Moin Moin is schon Gesabbel: Constructing Northern German Identity in Commercial Instagram Posts

Abstract

This paper shows how commercial Instagrammers construct a shared Northern German identity by employing the regional language Low German and other (visual) means. In today's mobile and globalised societies, the use and functions of regional or minority languages are changing. Besides communicative purposes and the construction of regional identities in multilingual societies, these languages are commodified as signs of authenticity and regionality. Challenged by High German and other dominant languages, Low German is still spoken in the domestic domain and by older generations. It has recently gained significance in marketing and as a marker of regional identity. The question of how commercial Instagrammers construct regional identity is answered using a multimodal corpus of 1,157 Instagram posts and a discourse analysis based, qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The findings suggest that the Instagrammers express regional identity through three strategies: 1) Using well-known Low German words and short texts; 2) portraying character traits and humour as key features of Northern Germanness, and 3) a clear distinction between an out-group and an in-group through meta-linguistic commentary. Together, these strategies construct a collective, generalised regional identity, reinforcing the Instagrammers' "Northern Germanness" and allowing consumers to express their regional identities through this content and products.

Keywords: *Instagram, Regional or minority languages, Identity, Low German*

1 Introduction

This article investigates how commercial Instagrammers construct a shared Northern German identity by employing the regional language Low German and other associated means. Languages are closely linked to how we perceive ourselves and how we are perceived by others. In times of globalisation, languages that have been stigmatised in the past become valuable tools of identity expression. Despite being decreasingly used in other contexts, regional or minority languages (RML) are employed for the expression of individual and shared group identities. As lives become increasingly digital, with the internet and social media facilitating the use and maintenance of RML, investigating language use and identity construction in online spaces is a logical step towards deepening our understanding of identity dynamics. This is similar to Androutsopoulos's (2015: 187) claim that "computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a rich site of multilingualism and code-switching" and thus relevant to the study of multilingual language use. Furthermore, how dominant languages and RML are used for identity construction is an interesting field of study, as dominant languages are also highly

influential in online spaces, which “should therefore be viewed as sites of language contact and possible conflict” (Cunliffe 2019: 453).

The construction of regional identity in (commercial) online spaces through the conscious use of RML has remained overlooked. Connecting people globally, Instagram enables people and companies to construct notions of the self and thus engage in identity construction and employ these processes as part of their commercial activities. The central research question in this article is which strategies Instagrammers use to construct a shared regional identity in a global online environment. Rooted in a discourse analytic framework, this article uses a mixed-methods approach involving quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

Low German has about 2.6 million speakers, is predominantly used in Northern Germany (Reershemius 2017), and is recognised as an endangered regional language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages (Reershemius 2024). The use and societal perception of Low German has undergone profound changes. From a prestigious *lingua franca* in the Middle Ages, its role changed in later centuries, and its speakers were commonly stigmatised as uneducated and poor people or farmers until the last decades of the 20th century (Reershemius 2011a; Wiggers 2017). Today, the use of Low German in everyday communication is challenged due to the dominance of High German and other languages in most domains of daily life. Additionally, intergenerational transmission of the language is rather infrequent, with fluent speakers often belonging to older generations, while other generations only have receptive skills (Arendt et al. 2017; Reershemius 2011a). Laakso’s (2011: 13) statement about Finno–Ugrian languages— “[t]oday, being in minority implies a practical multilingualism”—also applies to Low German speakers as they are all at least bilingual, speaking High and Low German. Low German is to some extent still spoken in the private sphere at home, with peers, and at cultural events (Arendt et al. 2017; Reershemius 2011b) and is increasingly utilised as a tool to express membership of a regional Northern German in-group (see e.g., Jürgens 2016; Reershemius 2009). Furthermore, among others, Arendt and Reershemius (2024), Reershemius (2010, 2017, 2024), and Schram (2023) show that Low German is used in various ways online. While some users advocate monolingualism (Reershemius 2010), other users use Low German in multilingual communication (Arendt and Reershemius 2024; Reershemius 2017; Schram 2023). Although the use of Low German for constructing identity in online spaces was addressed in previous research (see e.g., Reershemius 2017, 2024), the relationship between Low German, identity construction, social media, and commercial use remains unknown.

Focussing on identity construction in commercial Instagram posts, this research combines new domains of Low German usage, including online domains, identity construction, and commercial contexts. By investigating the strategies that the Instagrammers use to construct Northern Germanness and to promote products, this study contributes to our understanding of how RML are used to index regional identity and how they are employed in commercial online spaces.

This paper starts with an overview of language, identity, and RML, discusses Low German as a means to construct regional Northern German identity. This is followed by the data and methods section. The fourth section comprises the analysis, and the findings and conclusions are discussed in the final section.

2 Language and identity

Identities are complex constructs that change throughout life and depend on context. Bucholtz and Hall (2009) and Seargeant and Tagg (2014) describe identity construction as a socio-cultural and situation-based process in which people construct, co-construct, negotiate, and perform their identities using various means. How languages are used plays an important role in this process. The interplay of various linguistic features, such as “vowel quality, turn shape, code choice or ideological structure” (Bucholtz and Hall 2009:19), combined with other means, shapes identities while people communicate. Based on the way of speaking and influenced by ideologies, people make inferences about social categories, such as class, gender, or (regional) origin (cf. Bucholtz and Hall 2009). Through a specific language use, people can thus (sub)consciously affiliate with a certain group, express their belonging, and create a particular image of themselves. They can also be perceived by others as members of a certain group.

Language, combined with other means, is essential for creating and negotiating identity, including online settings. Online spaces allow people to affiliate with global communities, adapting their language use to various audiences and contexts. Users draw on their (often) multilingual repertoires, which “[serve] as a way of authenticating (trans)cultural identities and connectedness” (Leppänen and Sultana 2023: 179). According to Tagg (2015: 147), people use “largely text-based visual resources, including written language, typography, orthography and the creative combining of different scripts” alongside “photos, other images, videos and the embedding and sharing of hyperlinks to other sites”. Despite the rich semiotic toolkit available, Tagg (2015) notes that people often reproduce or emphasise offline identities for online identity construction. However, the multimodal nature of many online platforms allows users to challenge and renegotiate identities and language-related stereotypes by reassembling or layering video and audio data (Androutsopoulos 2013: 53–54; Tagg 2015). In sum, identity is

constructed, negotiated, and performed online using similar, but also different, means compared to offline, and users draw on established ideas and concepts from offline domains while also questioning them.

2.1 RML and identity construction

In today's globalised and multilingual societies, RML are often challenged by dominant languages and are used less frequently for daily communication. Many people use RML to consciously differentiate themselves from (monolingual) speakers of dominant languages, and in doing so construct authentic regional identities, and affiliate with specific (minoritised) communities (see e.g. Pietikäinen et al. 2016; Reershemius and Arendt 2024). In multilingual communication, RML are used to position oneself in a regional context while key information is often communicated in a dominant language. RML thus serve as a valuable resource for identity construction and carry symbolic value—representing cultural and regional identity and belonging—contrasted with the communicative value of dominant languages. Consuming music, books, or other media in RML and participating in cultural or traditional events also express regional identity.

A crucial aspect of this paper is the deliberate use of RML for the construction and performance of identity in professional contexts. RML are consciously used in the creative sector and in commercial settings to create a regional selling point, making different kinds of products and experiences stand out. Jongbloed-Faber (2018) studies the language use of a Frisian dialect pop band showing that the use of Frisian (varieties) to construct regional identity depends on the audience and context. However, the use of Frisian is linked to emphasising distinctiveness from other regions, particularly, from being Dutch (Jongbloed-Faber 2018). Atkinson and Kelly-Holmes (2011) describe how Irish is deliberately used in a comedy radio show to an extent that presents no obstacles to an audience with limited or no Irish skills. Like the use by individuals, RML here are not used to provide key information but to create regional identity. Furthermore, when RML are commodified through a process whereby languages get an economic value (Heller 2010), regional identity can be expressed by consuming goods that are related to a specific variety or region. Companies use RML in marketing to emphasise the uniqueness of their products, and consumers can easily express regional identity purchasing products with prints in the given language (see e.g. Pietikäinen et al. 2016). E-commerce allows shops to sell this kind of product beyond the given language area, and the shops' target audience grows from local to global (Beal 2013:181). Regional food or handicrafts thus offer unique opportunities for branding the promoted products and affiliating with a certain community in globalised times.

2.2 Low German and identity construction

Like other RML or regional varieties, Low German is used to express and highlight regional identity as opposed to global(ised) identities. Young people are less familiar with Low German than older generations and use it less for communication (Arendt et al. 2017; Neumann and Schröder 2023). Neumann and Schröder (2023) note that young (urban) people often associate Low German with the countryside, family, and older generations, and speak it in the context of cultural activities. They perceive it as a means of affiliating with regional identity linked to nostalgia and tradition rather than modernity and urban life (Neumann and Schröder 2023). Reershemius (2009, 2024) employs the concept of postvernacular language use to describe the linguistic and cultural practices related to Low German today. Reershemius (2024:192) states that Low German “increasingly serves symbolic or postvernacular purposes such as emblematic use of communicating about the language rather than in it”. Postvernacular language use in this context refers to the use of a limited set of words and phrases in specific contexts rather than in everyday communication and participating in cultural events and activities, such as theatre (Reershemius 2009, 2017) or discussing and collecting Low German words in online forums (Reershemius 2017). In the postvernacular language use contexts, positioning oneself as a member of a (language) community is a conscious choice (Arendt et al. 2017; Reershemius 2009). Reershemius (2009) illustrates how Low German is employed for constructing individual and group identities as Northern German and/or coming from the countryside. When expressing Northern German identity through Low German, people primarily communicate in High German but embed Low German words, phrases, and greetings in High German texts (Reershemius 2009). Through this token code-switching, an extensive active command of Low German is not required to express belonging to the community (Reershemius 2009). Additionally, it is common to express regional identity through participating in or attending cultural activities (Reershemius, 2009, 2011b). Regional identity is also constructed using a specific kind of humour that is linked to Low German (Schröder 1995). This often sarcastic humour is a connection dating back to the 17th century and was reinforced in the 19th century by the higher societal classes distinguish themselves from the Low German-speaking people of lower societal status (Arendt 2010; Schröder 1995). In recent decades, however, it has become a positive means to construct identity (Schröder 1995).

Today, Low German words and phrases are part of the vernacular in Northern Germany and are used for identity construction (Elmentaler and Niebuhr 2017; Jürgens 2016). Individuals with receptive Low German skills often use these words to affiliate with a Northern Germany identity unaware of their Low German etymology. This usage is studied by Elmentaler and

Niebuhr (2017) and examined in greater detail by Jürgens (2016) in her paper on Low German in Hamburg's linguistic landscapes. Jürgens (2016) argues that Low German in Hamburg is enregistered. According to Agha (2007:81), enregisterment comprises "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population". The enregistered forms thus have additional (social) meaning and are seen as characteristic of a community or social group, validating identity in different social or regional contexts (Agha 2007). In Jürgens's (2016) study, enregistered Low German words and sentences are used to construct regional identity and emphasise belonging to an authentic regional community in Hamburg. Regional identity is also emphasised through the increasingly available range of products with imprints in Low German that are presented as typical for Hamburg (Jürgens 2016). Products with this kind of print are considered less common and purchasing them offers an opportunity to affiliate with a Northern regional identity. In line with Jürgens's study, Elmentaler and Niebuhr (2017) note that using enregistered Low German forms is a deliberate choice that enables the creation of a regional identity.

3 Data and methods

This paper draws on data from Instagram, one of the most popular social media platforms for sharing visual content (We Are Social et al. 2023). This research uses a multimodal corpus of commercial Instagram posts, developed for studies on different aspects of using Low German online (see Schram 2023).

3.1 Data collection

The collected posts were published between 1 March and 31 October 2021 and comprise posts by 86 Instagrammers. At the time of data collection, a post could consist of up to 10 images, gifs, or videos combined with a caption, hashtags, and a geotag. To identify Instagrammers who use Low German in a commercial setting on Instagram and collect their posts, searches were conducted with different hashtags that refer to Low German in Low German (e.g., #plattdütsch, #nedderdüütsch) or High German (#plattdeutsch, #niederdeutsch). After finding suitable Instagrammers, I went through all their posts and collected only those that included Low German in the caption. Therefore, the data set also contains posts without hashtags. Table 1 summarises the data in the corpus. It contains all captions ($n = 1,157$) of the corpus as, based on postvernacular language use and enregisterment, the use of Low German can be a means to constructing regional identity. Only visuals with written texts ($n = 819$) are included in the data

set. Visuals and captions are analysed as separate units in the quantitative analysis, while their dialectical meaning is considered in their quantitative analysis.

Table 1 Data used in the study

Category	Σ
Instagrammers	86
Posts	1,157
Captions total	1,157
- Captions included in this study	1,157
Visuals	1,753
- Visuals included in this study	819

The Instagrammers in this paper are small businesses run by individuals or small groups, who sell primarily products with Low German prints and decorative items, and a small number of restaurants and hotels. Their posts sometimes address their regional or linguistic background. The so-called bios (profile descriptions) might provide information regarding the shop locations, the Instagrammers, or other related aspects, but they seldom mention their Low German skills or relationship with the language and language area.

3.2 Data analysis

The study uses qualitative and quantitative data analysis against a discourse analytic background. The coding and analysis of the visuals followed Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), with a focus on the content and composition of the visuals. The coding was based on the salience of elements and the hierarchies present, for example whether the promoted products were the most prominent features, and how their salience was achieved. Moreover, the setting and context in which the objects were portrayed was considered, such as a rural or seaside setting or monochrome backgrounds. The analysis encompassed three stages. First, the Low German in the captions and in the written texts in the visuals was manually coded and categorised. This coding and analysis, originally conducted in previous work (Schram 2023), were reassessed. The Low German content was categorised based on whether the Instagrammers use single Low German words in otherwise High German texts or syntactically more complex structures, such as (short) texts. Furthermore, single words were grouped according to their popularity and parts-of-speech categories. The more complex Low German content was divided into texts formulated by the Instagrammers and fixed phrasings, such as sayings. Similarly, the written texts in the visuals were coded and categorised based on the use of Low German in either single words or complex structures and whether the Instagrammers posted their own wordings or fixed phrasings.

Second, the captions and visuals were manually coded and categorised based on how the Instagrammers address and construct regional identity. The concepts presented in the background section—postvernacular language use and enregisterment—combined with Wodak’s (2008) strategies to create in-groups and out-groups serve as the background for forming strategies that the Instagrammers use to construct Northern German identity. According to Wodak (2008: 62–63), “‘strategy’ generally means a (more or less accurate and more or less intentional) plan of practices, including discursive practices, adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal”. Wodak (2008: 63) names and describes the following strategies:

- 1) Referential or nomination strategies that construct or represent social actors (e.g., through membership categorisation);
- 2) Predicational strategies that categorise social actors linguistically and “aim at labelling [them] more or less positively or negatively” (Wodak 2008: 63) (e.g. through implicit or explicit evaluative attributions);
- 3) Argumentation strategies and *topoi* that justify positive and negative attributions;
- 4) Perspectivation strategies that help speakers clarify their positioning and “express their involvement in discourse” (Wodak 2008: 63);
- 5) Intensifying or mitigation strategies “sharpening [...] or toning [utterances] down” (Wodak 2008: 63).

The coding of the written and visual data followed the linguistic, stylistic, and discursive choices that the Instagrammers made in their posts, while also considering how these choices were reinforced or contrasted in the visuals. It focused on metalinguistic commentary about Low German, Northern Germany, and Northern Germans. Instances in which the Instagrammers used metalinguistic commentary, addressed regional identity, or contrasted Northern German identity with other identities were counted and grouped according to employed means and strategies. How the Instagrammers position themselves in discourse, (e.g., through perspectivation strategies) was also analysed. Moreover, the paper studies what the Instagrammers present and emphasise as typical aspects of Northern German identity, focusing on the attributions they use and how they describe Northern Germans in contrast to out-groups (e.g., using referential or nomination strategies or predicational strategies).

Third, the patterns observed in the first and second stages were summarised into superordinate categories. Then, three strategies employed by the Instagrammers were introduced based on how they used Low German and other means to construct a shared Northern German identity. These overarching strategies extended beyond the level of the first

and second stage, Wodak’s (2008) strategies, and the division of written and visual text, shifting the patterns to another, more holistic abstract level. They thus serve as a solid basis for broadening our understanding of how regional identities are constructed in global online spaces.

4 Analysis

The commercial Instagrammers use different strategies to construct Northern German identity in their posts. Three interconnected strategies can be identified, and their distribution is illustrated in Table 2. Against the background of postvernacular language use and enregisterment, the first and predominant strategy is the use of Low German in multilingual settings (97% of captions, 87% of visuals). The second most common strategy is to emphasise the distinct character traits and humour of Northern German people (21% of captions, 25% of visuals). The Instagrammers’ third most common strategy is to establish a clear distinction between an in- and out-group for example, through metalinguistic commentary. For all the strategies, Low German plays an important role in positioning the Instagrammers and their audience in a regional context, although regional identity is also created in narratives in High German.

Table 2 Strategies to construct regional identity and their distribution

	Strategy	Occurrences captions	% of all captions	Occurrences visuals	% of all visuals
1	Use of Low German in multilingual settings	1,127	97%	714	87%
2	Distinct character traits and humour	239	21%	201	25%
3	In-group vs. out-group	134	12%	92	11%

Note: As strategy 1 does not include monolingual Low German texts, the table contains only bi- and multilingual written texts of the captions and visuals of strategy 1.

4.1 Strategy 1: Low German as a sign of regional background

In multilingual settings, combining RML with dominant languages indexes specific regional identities as opposed to using dominant languages only. In this study, all captions and most of the visuals with written texts (87%) include Low German to varying extents. Most captions (1,127 or 97%) are multilingual, with Low German often being embedded in High German sentences (see also Schram 2023). Since the use of Low German in non-monolingual texts fulfils different functions than in monolingual Low German texts, only these bi- or multilingual captions and visuals are considered for the first strategy: the use of Low German for identity construction. The following caption is an example of how the Instagrammers use Low German in most cases:

(The underlined parts, marked by the author, are in Low German)

(1) *Schreibt das erste Wort, das euch zu „Bangbüx“ einfällt in die Kommentare!*

😊💡 3,2,1...Los!

Write the first word you can think of for “coward” in the comments! 😊💡 3,2,1...Go!

The Instagrammer in Example (1) embeds the Low German word *Bangbüx* in a High German sentence and asks the audience to post their associations with the word in the comment section of the post. This use of Low German and the discussion of words and other linguistic elements is common in the data; as Table 3 illustrates, the Instagrammers prefer to use single Low German words in the captions and visuals rather than syntactically more complex phrases or longer sentences.

Table 3 Distribution of Low German in the captions and in the written texts of visuals

Kind of LG use	Captions (Σ 1,127)	% of captions	Visuals (Σ 714)	% of visuals
Single word(s)	865	77%	525	74%
- Moin	409	36%	285	40%
Texts	263	23%	189	26%
- Including Moin	65	6%	26	4%
- Sayings	101	9%	110	15%

In the captions, the Instagrammers predominantly use (well-known) Low German nouns, proper names of products or Instagrammers, and greetings to position themselves in a Northern German context (Schram 2023). Adjectives and verbs are less common and restricted to well-known easy-to-use words or forms in the present tense (Schram 2023). Of special importance is the greeting *Moin* ‘Hello’, which has a comparably high occurrence in the captions (42%) and the written texts in the visuals (39%). The Instagrammers not only use *Moin* as a greeting but also as a proper name for products or themselves (see Schram 2023). Additionally, they use Low German descriptions for people from Northern Germany and descriptions connecting them to the region. They draw on the common connection of Low German with the coast, for example through *Fischkopp* ‘fish head, someone from Northern Germany’ and *Stranddeern* ‘beach girl’, and the connection with character traits, such as *Klookschieter* ‘smart ass’. By using these kinds of descriptions, the Instagrammers follow Wodak’s (2008) referential and predicational strategies. They highlight their regional identity, indicate a specific Northern German group membership, and give their audience the opportunity to identify as part of a Northern German in-group. Moreover, Low German content is often placed at the beginning of captions (Schram 2023). Through this conscious use of Low German, attention is immediately drawn towards the posts in spaces in which dominant languages are mainly used. *Moin* in particular is extensively used as an opener for captions, followed by High German in most cases (Schram 2023). Low German thus serves as an eye-catcher making the

posts and promoted products stand out and easily positions them in a regional context (Schram 2023).

In the caption of Figure 1, the Instagrammer combines the greeting *Moin* and the High German–Low German compound *Schietwetter*, both commonly known to people with receptive language skills beyond the language area. The regional context established using Low German is further supported in the image through common connections with Low German, such as the seaside and specific places in the language area, and the bad weather, which is often presented as typical of the region. The image, presenting the advertised ‘cosy hoodie’, is set on a beach with cranes in a harbour in the background. In addition to this maritime setting, the print on the hoodie supports the connection to the seaside. With the person in the image wearing a hat and the grey, overcast setting created by the blurred background, the image mirrors the *Schietwetter* addressed in the caption (see next section for bad weather and Northern German character traits). By mentioning Hamburg in the caption and showing a beach recognisable to those familiar with the region, the Instagrammer further reinforces Northern Germanness in the post. Additionally, the ‘blue heart’ emoji 🇩🇪, which evokes associations with the seaside, and the weather-related emojis support the created regionality. The limited but meaningful choice of Low German combined with the place name and the setting allows the Instagrammer to easily position the post, the advertised product, and themselves in a Northern German context.

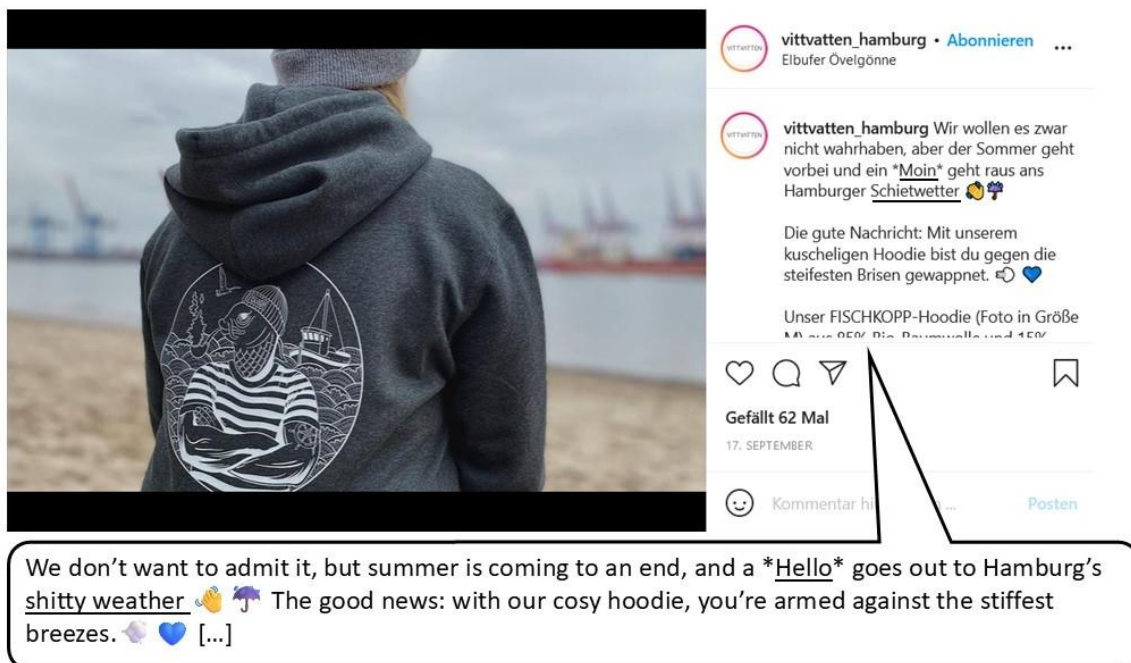


Figure 1 Post about *Schietwetter*. Post by @vittvatten_hamburg reproduced with permission.

The patterns observed in the Low German—the conscious use of a limited set of words and phrases and a limited variety of linguistic structures—, follow the postvernacular language use described by Reershemius (2009). Low German’s communicative function plays a marginal

role, whereas its symbolic function—the strong link with the language area or Northern Germany in general—is dominant. In the context of the prevalence of dominant languages on social media, the Instagrammers follow what Johnstone and Baumgardt (2004) and Johnstone (2016) refer to as feature-dropping, which allows them to position themselves as part of the in-group, claim expertise, or to enregister (linguistic) features. The deliberate choice to use a limited set of Low German words and phrases as opposed to monolingual High German content combined with common associations with the language serves as a clear and easily recognisable marker of Northern German identity.

Low German is not only used in the written texts in the captions or visuals but also as prints on products. While some products, such as souvenirs, might be more targeted at an out-group, products with Low German slogans are also an easy way to express belonging to a regional in-group. Well-known nouns (e.g., *Tohuus* ‘home’), sayings (e.g., *Wat mutt, dat mutt* ‘What has to be done, has to be done’), and adjectives (e.g., *plietsch* ‘clever’), and the greeting *Moin* are frequently used and allow the Instagrammers to affiliate themselves and their products with a regional identity, while giving customers the opportunity to position themselves as Northern Germans. In Figure 2, a small bag with an eye-catching *Moin* print is the centre of the image and stands out from the otherwise predominantly beige setting with its dark blue print and dotted fabric. The bag’s beige-coloured fabric is rather rough, reinforcing the down-to-earth perception of Northern Germans. The Low German brand name and the anchor on the bag’s label and, as discussed concerning the caption in Figure 1, the emojis further a connection to the region. *Moin* also appears in the word cloud illustrated as an anchor in the background, featuring seaside-related words. As a common greeting in Northern Germany also used by people not necessarily familiar with Low German (Jürgens 2016), it is seen as indexical of Northern Germanness beyond the language area and can be described as enregistered. By combining *Moin* with the maritime motifs and the rather rough canvas of the bag, the Instagrammer highlights different aspects connected to a Northern German identity and unites them in their post.



Moin & Ahoi ... You can never have enough little bags We sew practical 'helpers' for you in two sizes that fit perfectly in handbags so that you don't lose track of the little things. We are also happy to personalise them for you. Have a good start to the new week.

Figure 2 Low German prints on products. Post by @luettje_lev reproduced with permission.

In sum, the Instagrammers use primarily single Low German words to index regional identity. Because most of these words are well-known, they are comprehensible for speakers with varying degrees of knowledge and can be identified as Low German by people from other regions or without knowledge of the language. This allows the Instagrammers to easily index the Northern Germanness of their products and themselves. The use of Low German draws attention to the content, standing out in multilingual settings where other languages are predominant. Using single nouns, greetings, and basic verb and adjective forms, Low German content does not necessarily fulfil communicative functions. It mainly has a symbolic function of expressing the Instagrammers' regional background and serves as a way for their audience to feel a sense of belonging or exclusion.

4.2 Strategy 2: Character traits and humour

The Instagrammers also employ means of identity construction other than the mere use of Low German. In 239 captions (21%) and 201 visuals (25%), the Instagrammers present different character traits and a drastic humour as key features of Northern Germanness. The Instagrammers use different direct and indirect strategies to address character traits and humour. They range from open and explicit comments about Northern German character traits in Low



German and High German to Low German words and sayings that highlight certain character traits and position the content in a humorous setting. All of the strategies have in common that they portray Northern German people in a stereotypical manner. Using predicational strategies, the Instagrammers present typical Northern Germans as tough, relaxed, enduring, direct, or even impolite, taciturn, and having a hands-on mentality. In the following examples, the Instagrammers emphasise different character traits in the High German excerpt of a caption (Example 2) and in Low German (Examples 3 & 4). When using Low German, the Instagrammers often use direct or rough words and sayings that highlight Northern Germans' straightforwardness and toughness. The Instagrammers apply intensifying or mitigation strategies to make this sometimes sarcastic content more positive. The use of *Schiet*-‘shit’ in different compounds (*Schietwetter* ‘shitty weather’, *Schietbüddel* ‘shit bag, affectionate expression for a toddler or children’) or as a part of short texts is also common.

(2) *Unwetterwarnung! Oder wie wir sagen: Feinstes Strandwetter*

Severe weather warning! Or as we say: perfect beach weather

(3) *Echte Emsländer und ihr „Schnack“... ☹ Wat de Buer nich kennt, dat frett he nich. Das bedeutet „Was der Bauer nicht kennt, isst er nicht.“ Man sagt, wir Emsländer sind stur. Stimmt. Meistens muss man tatsächlich erst von neuen Produkten überzeugt werden.*

Real people from Emsland and their “Sayings”... ☹ What the farmer doesn't know, he doesn't eat. This means “What the farmer doesn't know, he doesn't eat.” They say we people from Emsland are stubborn. That's true. You usually have to be convinced of new products first.

(4)  SABEL NICH, DAT GEIHT AL   WEITERE TOLLE DESIGNS GIBT ES
HIER: [shop link]

 DON'T TALK, IT'S ALL POSSIBLE   MORE GREAT DESIGNS CAN
BE FOUND HERE: [shop link]

In Example (2), the enduring nature of Northern German people is presented in a humorous way, playing with the perceived bad weather in the region. Example (3) links the associated character traits to the Instagrammer's products and emphasises their knowledge of the regional mentality. In contrast, Example (4) promotes a product with a Low German saying printed on it, using capitalisation to emphasise its meaning. Both Low German examples draw on and support the idea that Northern German people are stubborn, taciturn, and straightforward.

Like the use of Low German printed on products, Northern German character traits are presented as prints on products. In Figure 3, the Instagrammer promotes a mug with an imprint. The picture's focal point is the mug as it is the most salient feature with its bold print and being brighter than the other objects in the picture. A smiling person holds the mug, which ironically contradicts the message of the product and supports the humorous context. The text on the mug

combines the capitalised exclamation of astonishment *Oha* with the humorous explanation *Norddeutsche Panikattacke* ‘Northern German panic attack’ in parentheses and a smaller font. This slightly exaggerated print emphasises the stereotypical calmness of Northern Germans and the idea that nothing can disturb their calm.

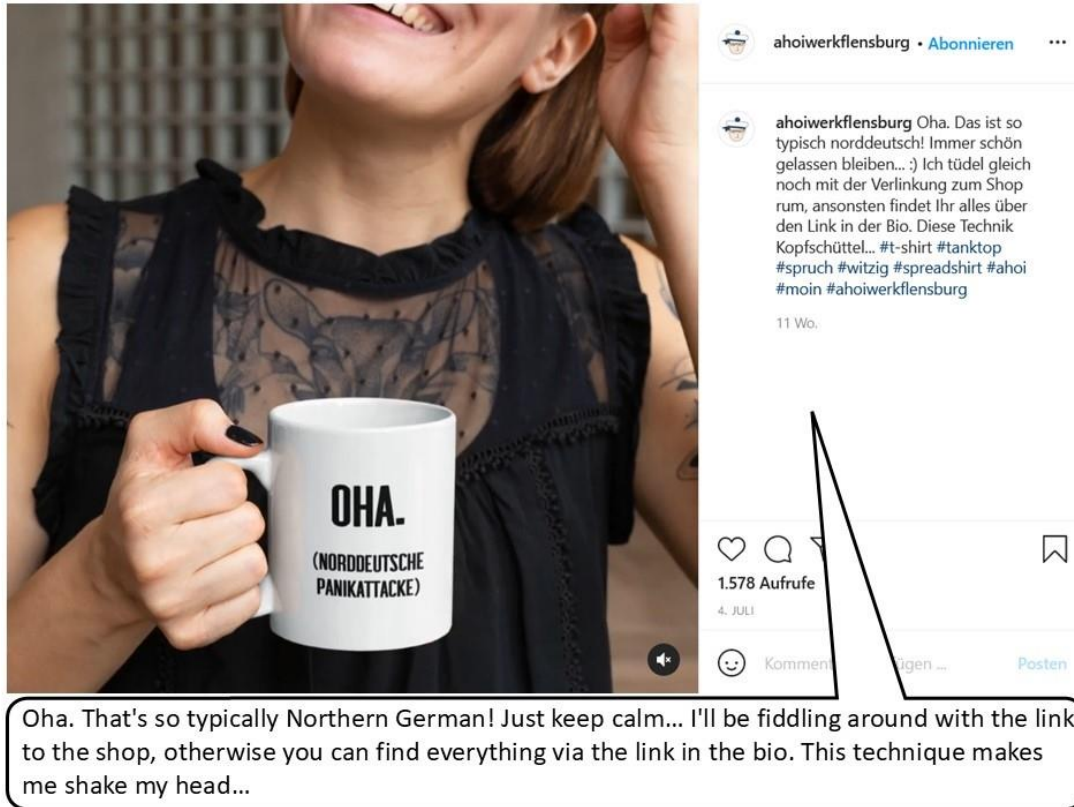


Figure 3 Northern German character traits on products. Post by @ahoiwerkflensburg reproduced with permission.

To conclude, the Instagrammers highlight various character traits and a specific kind of humour as important markers of Northern Germanness. By combining these stereotypical generalisations with Low German, they create a recognisable and distinct Northern German identity with which their audience can identify and that can be commodified. In the posts’ commercial context, such generalisations facilitate “efficient, manageable, reliable, and repeatable” (Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen 2014: 519) marketing strategies that are important for the economic success of the Instagrammers. These strategies, in turn, reinforce the stereotypes they rely on. By consuming the Instagrammers’ content and buying their products, the audience can affiliate with the concepts and ideas of what Northern Germans assumed to be like.

4.3 Strategy 3: In-group vs. out-group

The third major strategy for constructing a shared Northern German identity is the clear distinction between an in- and an out-group. This strategy, the least common of the three, is

employed in 134 captions (12% of captions) and 92 visuals (11% of visuals). The distinction is made not only by using Low German but also through metalinguistic commentary about Northern Germans, Low German, and the “other”. Three ways of distinguishing between a regional in- and an out-group can be identified in the data: metalinguistic commentary using wordings such as “as we say here” or “typical Northern German”, discussions about the right way to speak, and tutorials on being Northern German or understanding people from the region.

The first category is not limited to Low German or the discussion of what Northern German people are supposed to be like, it includes ideas of specific ways of speaking High German. As Androutsopoulos (2013) shows, people consciously combine regional varieties with metalinguistic commentary to establish a regional in-group on platforms such as YouTube, a pattern the Instagrammers follow. The Instagrammers often use referential and perspectivation strategies (Wodak 2008) to distinguish between an in-group and an out-group, highlighting their in-group membership. In the caption in Figure 4, the Instagrammer claims ownership and expertise of the region using the wording “around here we say” and the greeting *Moin*. They also acknowledge that the audience might have a different linguistic background by asking them about words and features that they associate with their region. Additionally, a



Figure 4 Tutorial for understanding Northern Germans. Post by @kuestenperle reproduced with permission.

Translation of the text in the image: 3 things a Northern German would never say: 1) Servus (regional greeting used, e.g., in Bavaria), 2) It’s windy today, 3) Eww, it’s raining. Northern German saying.

general regional context is established through the image's colouring and the illustrated crab, linking it to the seaside. The Instagrammer emphasises regional identity by mentioning the earlier addressed bad weather and associated character traits thus applying predicational strategies.

A second category, related to the first, focuses on the discursive practices that the Instagrammers promote as the correct and authentic way of speaking as a member of a Northern German in-group. This includes distinctions between themselves and people from other regions as well as different speaker groups in Northern Germany. As online communities often draw on existing values and norms while creating and negotiating their own (see Seargeant and Tagg 2014), the Instagrammers' posts often mirror offline discussions. Like the first category in this section, referential, predicational, and perspectivation strategies are commonly used to emphasise membership of the regional in-group. In Example (5), the Instagrammer combines the discussion about *Moin Moin* with Northern German character traits and the promotion of their product. Using the repeated greeting is considered babbling that is neither 'correct' language use nor suits Northern German people's taciturnity. Additionally, the affiliation with a regional identity is reinforced by the description *Fischkopp* 'fish head, someone from Northern Germany', which is used as a positive identity marker by the in-group but has a negative connotation when used by an out-group. The shirt's target audience is likely to be from the in-group that takes pride in its origin, even when wearing a shirt with a potentially derogative print. The Instagrammer links expertise and authenticity with being sufficiently eligible or true for the advertised product.

(5) *Moin Moin ist schon Gesabbel für dich? Dann ist dieses Shirt genau das richtige für dich... ...denn als Fischkopp bist du immer der coolste [sic] am Strand. Für alle Meerliebhaber und Küstenkinder*

Hello is already babbling for you? Then this shirt is just right for you... ... because as a fish head/someone from Northern Germany you are always the coolest on the beach. For all sea lovers and kids of the coast

A third way to create a distinction between an in- and an out-group is through posts that contain content resembling tutorials. In posts such as Figure 4, the Instagrammers explain, often in a humorous way, Northern Germany and especially the behaviour of Northern Germans to an out-group. Using primarily referential, predicational, and perspectivation strategies, they indicate that Northern Germans and people from other regions are so different their behaviour needs to be explained. The Instagrammer plays with the linguistic differences between Northern Germany and the South, again highlighting characteristic greetings with *Servus* as opposed to *Moin*, which are similar in function and used as a greeting throughout the day. Moreover, the

connection between bad weather and the tough, enduring nature of Northern German people is employed again. This creates and reinforces the image of Northern German people who, according to the Instagrammers, speak (Low German) in the authentic and correct way and share the described character traits. Alongside the tutorial in the image, the previously discussed caption of the post makes an even clearer distinction between them—people from other regions or outside the language community—and an in-group.

In summary, the Instagrammers use various means to create a clear distinction between an in-group and an out-group. Through their wording and other discursive means, they emphasise how they as a group are or speak in opposition to other groups, stating what constitutes the correct way of speaking as a Northern German. Tutorials explain typical Northern German behaviours, further presenting the Instagrammers as authorities who decide on in-group membership and establish hierarchies. Nevertheless, Northern German identity is presented as something that can be learned or expressed through the promoted products. Identity is thus not stable nor depending on being from Northern Germany; people moving to the region or tourists can belong to the in-group if they behave suitably.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This paper analysed the construction of Northern German identity in commercial Instagram posts. It answered questions about the strategies employed by the Instagrammers in their captions and visuals to position themselves in a regional context and offer a platform for their audience to affiliate with a Northern German identity. Three strategies were identified: 1) Low German in bi- or multilingual texts, 2) highlighting regional character traits and a specific kind of humour, and 3) establishing a distinction between an in- and an out-group. Whereas the first and second strategies are more concerned with highlighting how Northern German people (are supposed to) speak and the characteristics that they share, the third strategy concerns how the Instagrammers discursively distinguish between an in-group and an out-group.

Regarding the first and second strategies, the Instagrammers use a small repertoire of Low German words and phrases in a uniform way and, similarly, a limited set of generalised character traits and humour to construct a regional identity. They reinforce normative ideas of how Northern German people speak and the kinds of character traits they share. The Instagrammers predominantly apply referential, predicational, and perspectivation strategies (Wodak 2008), to support their claims about authentic and normative language use and typical character traits, while relying less on intensifying/mitigation and argumentation strategies.

As discussed by Reershemius (2024) and Schram (2023), the Instagrammers communicate in Low German to a limited extent, often using commonly known words and

phrases and the greeting *Moin*. Low German's symbolic value and the function of indexing regional identity or membership of an in-group is foregrounded and outweighs its actual communicative function. The Instagrammers also deliberately use Low German combined with rough wording and other means to make general character traits, such as straightforwardness or taciturnity appear as typical and unique features of a Northern German in-group. They convey a certain image of Northern German people with which their audience—potential consumers—can identify and, in turn reinforce the associated features.

The Instagrammers use different discursive means as a third key strategy to distinguish a Northern German in-group from an out-group, related to the created image of Northern Germans. Through metalinguistic commentary, normative statements regarding the 'correct' way of speaking, and tutorials that explain Northern Germans, their behaviour and character traits in humorous ways, the Instagrammers discursively construct Northern Germans as distinct from people from other regions. Using Wodak's (2008) referential, predicational, and perspectivation strategies, the Instagrammers present Northern Germans as clearly distinct from an out-group of the societal majority, creating a greater perceived difference than may actually exist. Previously negative stigmatised features are now positive and a way to become part of a Northern German in-group; for example, the humour and character traits looked down on earlier are consciously employed with pride to affiliate with a regional community (c.f. Reershemius 2009; Schröder 1995).

The concepts of postvernacular language use and enregisterment can be applied to describe how the Instagrammers employ (the Low German) language for constructing and highlighting Northern German identity. The Instagrammers' postvernacular Low German use in the corpus is supported by its limited use outside daily communication, its symbolic role in expressing group membership, and its use for economic purposes (see Reershemius 2009). However, as the Low German content used in the data is not necessarily understood as being of Low German origin but seen as characteristic of Northern German identity together with content in regional High German varieties, the concept of enregisterment also applies (see Jürgens 2016). Although social media platforms offer great potential for the use and maintenance of RML, the use of Low German in the commercial posts can be described as a further step away from everyday language use, also because it is no longer recognised as an index of a Low German speaker community, but of Northern German identity in general (see Elmentaler and Niebur 2017; Jürgens 2015). The Low German words and phrases employed in limited but specific contexts in postvernacular language use are linked to regional identity in the context of enregisterment without requiring knowledge of Low German. Furthermore, the

audience aligns with the language use and features that the Instagrammers present as typical of Northern German identity by sharing their posts and reproducing them offline by buying the advertised products with (Low German) prints. This aligns with Johnstone's (2009: 172) observation that "dialect enregisterment is both a precondition for and an outcome of dialect commodification". The key feature shared by postvernacular language use and enregisterment and central in the corpus is that Low German primarily has a symbolic function for identity construction with its communicative function being relatively limited.

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