

The use and maintenance of German in Manitoba

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Manitoba is home to many heritage speakers of German with origins in Europe, Mexico, Paraguay, and the former Soviet Union. Many of these German speakers are Russian Mennonites, Hutterites or Russian Germans. According to the 2006 census in Canada, the number of persons in Manitoba naming German as a home language increased to 24,440 in 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2007a) after a sharp decline between 1971 and 1991 from 37,635 speakers to 22,790 (Prokop, 2002, p. 75). The increase in the number of German speakers in Manitoba can be explained through immigration. Recent Canadian Census numbers indicate that Manitoba had overall 5.2% more inhabitants in 2011 than in 2006. Much of that increase is attributed to immigration to communities in southern Manitoba such as Steinbach, Winkler, Morden and Altona. Steinbach in particular has had a 22.2% increase in population, which means about 2,500 more people live in the area now than did prior to 2006 (Kirbyson, 2012). Many of the new immigrants are German-speakers from the former Soviet Republics. "Steinbach's largest immigrant group is composed of German-speaking families from the former Soviet Union, notably Kazakhstan, who had lived in Germany since the fall of communism" (Friesen, 2013). In addition to the Russian-Germans, "... Germans and Kanadier -- returning Mennonites from Mexico and Central and South America -- comprise the bulk of new arrivals" (Silvius, 2005, p. 4). They come to Manitoba because of better job prospects, because they have relatives or friends in the area, and because these German-speakers know they can find German-speaking communities in Manitoba (Friesen, 2013) (Silvius, 2005). With so many German-speakers in Manitoba, one should not be surprised that German is in the top five most common languages spoken by newcomers to Manitoba (Manitoba Labour and Immigration, Immigration Division, 2012).

For many of these new Manitobans, German is an integral part of their daily lives. German is also spoken by a sizeable number of established residents of Manitoba. But here we have to make a distinction between German, or Standard High German, and its related dialects. Hutterites in the province speak a language known as Hutterisch, " ... a Carintian German dialect, originating from the province of Carinthia in Austria" (Maendel L. , 2012). For the Hutterites, language is intertwined with identity. "They believe that retaining Hutterisch helps preserve cultural and religious singularity.... Hutterites hope that in the future Hutterisch will continue to be the primary means of conversation in their communities" (Janzen & Stanton, 2010, p. 147). For this reason, the preservation of Hutterisch is essential and actively fostered on colonies and in schools (with before and after school programs for example).

On the other hand, many Manitobans with a Mennonite background speak Low German, specifically Plautdietsch (Epp, 1993, pp. 8-10, 84). In fact, in Manitoba there are many societies and organizations (i.e., Mennonite Heritage Village) concerned with maintaining Plautdietsch. However, unlike in the case of the Hutterites, there is little societal framework to allow for Plautdietsch to be passed on systematically to children of Plautdietsch speakers.

Based on the linguistic make-up of Manitoba, it is not surprising then that the German program at the University of Winnipeg attracts many students from areas of Manitoba where German or Plautdietsch is spoken at home or in the community. These students enroll in German courses at university because they realize that the language is beneficial to them as members of their own communities where German (or a dialect such as Plautdietsch) is often spoken. In addition, many have older family members who speak German and/or Plautdietsch, and the students want to connect with this part of their background. Some of these students, however, are surprised to discover that the German they learn at university is quite different from the Low German they hear at home. These students do not realize that the Standard High German taught at university is not the same language as the Low German spoken at home, but merely a related language. Because of the history of German immigration to Manitoba by speaker of Hutterisch and Plautdietsch, as well as the current influx of (Low) German-speaking immigrants to the province, it is necessary to understand both the role of German and dialects of German in Manitoba and the need for formal university instruction in Low German, aside from the excellent tools already available for self-learning such as I. McCaffery's textbook (McCaffery, 2008), E. Neufeld's grammar book (Neufeld E. , 2010) or the dictionaries of H. Rempel (Rempel, 1995) and J. Thiessen (Thiessen, 2003).

2. Historical Background of the German Language in Manitoba

German was introduced to Manitoba in the late 19th century by three communities of German-speakers. One group, the Russian Mennonites, formed during the Protestant reformation in 16th century Europe under the leadership of Menno Simons. As Anabaptists, they don't believe in infant baptism, but instead baptize adult believers, practice pacifism and social justice, and are traditionally noted for simplicity of living (Roth, 2012). Another group founded in 16th century Europe is the Hutterites, followers of Jacob Hutter, also Anabaptists and pacifists, and believers of the community of goods principle, where all material possessions are shared by the community as a whole (Maendel, 2012). Finally, the third group was made up of immigrants from various German-speaking regions, including Germany, Austria and Eastern European countries.

Hutterites and Mennonites have been concerned with preserving their languages since the beginning of their international migration. The Anabaptist tradition considers the preservation and teaching of the language of their forefathers essential, as it is inseparably connected to their religion and history. It creates an identity and is a constant value in their continually changing surroundings. For them, the German language functions as a "symbol of their unique background" (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 13). As Mennonites and Hutterites are the largest groups in Manitoba to communicate in dialects of German, one could claim that religion was the driving force behind the enduring role of German (including Plautdietsch and Hutterisch) in Manitoba.

2.1 Mennonites

The importance of the German language, specifically Low German or Plautdietsch, in the Manitoba Mennonite community cannot be understated. Prokop firmly claims that "for most Mennonite immigrants, maintaining their German language and their culture was of the utmost importance [...], a spiritual, cultural, or ethnic treasure" (Prokop, 2002, p. 76). For some Mennonites, their very Christianity is tied to the German language. In addition, German provides a means for the preservation of the Mennonite lifestyle, by insulating the community from external social influences. German, Standard or Low, has been used by Mennonites as "a dike against the encroachment of the world" (Neufeld, 1989, p. 209). However, since the 1970s, many Mennonites have been more interested in integrating into the wider Canadian society, meaning in part that their Low German language was less important as a mark of their identity than it had previously been (Urry, 2006, p. 243). Nonetheless, since Mennonites have settled all over the world, it is Plautdietsch that unifies them as a group, despite whichever other "home" languages they may speak and regardless of whether they speak it well or not.

However, the interest in the preservation of the German language has not been equally shared by all Mennonite groups and congregations. For some, the use of an immigrant language has been seen as a hindrance to the Mennonites' missionary work with their neighbors and other countries (Prokop, 2002, p. 76). Those Mennonites who preferred Low German over the majority language faced practical, social, and financial difficulties, such as in communicating with neighbors, with a doctor or with the bank. The relative isolation of Mennonites was reduced in the years following the Second World War, due to a number of factors, when activities such as seeking employment in larger cities and attending university made the use of (Low) German less desirable and the use of the majority language necessary. Modern developments, such as the availability of transportation even in rural areas, the widespread use of radio and television, the introduction of large composite schools, the decline of small farms and subsequent move of young people to big cities, also had a strong impact on the traditional Mennonite way of life. In Canada, these factors accelerated the change-over from German to English, just as the loosening of family ties and intermarriage with individuals of non-Mennonite heritage encroached on the common culture (Lohrenz, 1974, p. 43). Many conservative Mennonites who were apprehensive about assimilation emigrated from Canada to Central and South America, mostly Mexico and Paraguay in an effort to preserve their lifestyle (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 11) and in so doing also preserved the use of Low German.

All Mennonite congregations in Manitoba made a transition to English in the aftermath of the Second World War between 1945 and the end of the 1950s, leading to a decrease, and in the case of some groups, even abandonment of the use of German. A significant number of German-speaking people in Manitoba, Mennonites included, eliminated any perceived connection to Germany and its wartime history from their lives. Furthermore, German schools in Canada, as well as the teaching of German in Canadian public schools, were forbidden during the war. This further contributed to the linguistic and social assimilation of German speakers in Manitoba.

The linguistic influence of English on modern-day Standard German from Mennonite settlements is evident when we look at several examples. The groups themselves comment: "...our High German is not nearly perfect, particularly in speaking it" (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 17). Often English terms were incorporated into their Standard German (which was used for written

communication), and quite often English language structures were translated directly, whether or not they were used according to the original meaning or grammar. The result is a form of Standard German that has been influenced by many generations of Mennonite immigrants from different countries. For example, a German-English magazine for recent immigrants published in the city of Winkler, Manitoba, printed an advertisement for RBC Bank with the expression "Herausgeforderte Kredite", which does not exist in Standard German, but is a direct translation of the English "challenging credit" (International Family & Home, 2011). In some cases entire sayings are translated from English into German with the effect that the resulting German is no longer understandable to a native Standard German speaker from Germany. For example, in the same publication, in an article on buying an unreliable car, the sentence "[...] we concluded that we had bought a lemon" is translated as "wir kamen zu dem Schluss, dass wir eine Zitrone gekauft hatten" (Lescheid, 2011). Such a comparison (a bad car equals a lemon) is not found in Standard German and this example, along with the ad for bank credit, leave one pondering the interesting question of whether the German used in Manitoba should be considered Standard German subjected to loan translation, or whether it is developing its own rules of usage in the Canadian context.

What these linguistic examples do show is that German is still a vibrant language in Manitoba. Standard German is still used in publications, especially in the rural areas of Southern Manitoba. Another example comes from the Eastman Immigration Services located in Steinbach. They offer immigration brochures in both English and Standard German. In addition, their website advertises women's and men's groups, which are offered in Low German (Eastman Immigrant Services). Some Mennonites speak Standard and/or Low German. For many, Low German is considered part of their identity, and is seen as part of the Mennonite life. However, based on the authors' experiences with university students of German, there does not seem to be an effort among Low German-speaking to teach their language to the younger generation. Although young Mennonites understand a lot of German words (mostly Low), they are usually not able to speak the language themselves, although many express a desire to do so.

2.2 Hutterites

While many young Mennonites are not taught the Low German of their ancestors, the Hutterites make a concerted effort to maintain Hutterisch among their people. The first Hutterite settlement in Manitoba was established in the fall of 1918, when all 17 Hutterite communities of South Dakota immigrated to Canada. The Hutterites decided to leave the United States for Canada after they concluded that their religious and political beliefs were not sufficiently respected and safeguarded in the U.S. (Prokop, 2002, p. 77). Between 1918 and 1922 nine colonies were founded in Manitoba (Peters, 1958, p. 34ff.). Since then, the number of Hutterite colonies in Manitoba grew steadily. By 1957 an estimated 3,059 Hutterites were living in 25 colonies in Manitoba. By 1991 there were 90 colonies with a total population of 4,790 Hutterites in the province of Manitoba (Prokop, 2002, pp. 77-78).

Hutterite German originated as a mixture of dialects of neighboring areas of Germany and Austria, and is considered a "sprachgeschichtliches Denkmal" (lingua-historical monument) (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 14). Hutterites have been able to preserve their German linguistic heritage to a greater extent than Mennonites or other German-speaking immigrants, due to their relatively secluded way of life. Prokop comments that if one considers language maintenance ratio of .80 among young Hutterites, these numbers will guarantee a relatively small but persistent German-speaking presence in Manitoba (Prokop, 2002, p. 86).

But, of course, they have not been able to avoid contact entirely with their surroundings, nor avoid being linguistically influenced by English-speakers. This influence is most evident with respect to the Hutterites' primary occupation, agriculture, which introduced into the Hutterite dialect new terms related to technology and machinery, food, and agricultural methods. In most cases, the Hutterites adopted English terms and incorporated them into their dialect. In addition, the Canadian new school law of 1916, which prohibited the use of German as a language of instruction in the public school system, contributed to further Hutterite linguistic assimilation.

However, the Hutterites isolated lifestyle allows them to preserve their language better than the more dispersed Mennonites. Hutterites still use Hutterisch at home and the children are generally not taught Standard German and English until they start school. It is not at all uncommon for Hutterites to freely mix all three languages in one conversation (Janzen & Stanton, 2010, p. 148). "Our languages connect us to our history and our tradition. Tradition is important because we do not want to upset our ancestors. Even though they are dead, the preachers are not" (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 20). Thus, speaking Hutterisch - the original language of their ancestors - has a significant impact on the life of Hutterites (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 20). Such educational and religious ties make Hutterisch essential to the lifestyle and identity of the Hutterites. This systematic

preservation and transmission of their language makes losing Hutterisch as a means of communication and source of identity far less likely for the Hutterites than it is for other German speakers in Manitoba, especially the Mennonite Low German speakers.

3. Students of German in Manitoba

Many students of German at the University of Winnipeg remark upon inquiry that their reason for studying German is the Mennonite background of their family and their exposure to Low German. For this reason, we wanted to investigate the influence of family background as motivation for studying German in Manitoba. In addition, we wondered how our students used knowledge of Low German, if at all, in learning Standard German. We decided upon an informal, anonymous survey as a means to ask the students about their personal connection to Mennonite Low German in their experiences and in Manitoba in general. The survey was administered to students in the Introductory German and Intermediate German courses, as well as an advanced course for third- and fourth-year students. The survey contained general questions about Low German in Canada as well as questions about the personal experiences the students might have had with German in Manitoba.

Thirty students from the Introductory German group, in their second semester of German, completed the survey. Because of their burgeoning German skills, the survey was administered in English. Many of the beginning students indicated on the survey that they had a German and/or Mennonite background or some other connection to German (i.e., a German friend, girlfriend or boyfriend). Among the beginning students, 30% (9/30) indicated a personal connection to Low German, but only 13% (4/30) said they speak Low German themselves.

Members of the Intermediate German group were in their second semester of intermediate German, and many in the class had completed Introductory German at the University of Winnipeg as well. Others, however, were in their first year at the university, having come to the course from local German immersion school programs (where they had instruction in Standard German throughout grade school and up to through high school). Ten of these students completed the survey, administered in German. The vast majority of the intermediate students have a Mennonite background and have family (parents or grandparents) who speak Low German. Only two reported understanding Low German. Finally, the nine advanced students of German who participated in the German version of the survey made up a very diverse group. All of the students had taken several German courses at university and quite a number were either German majors or had German as their concentration. Prior to the administration of the survey, the advanced students had had a unit in their course about the origins of German dialects in Manitoba and Canada. A few of these students noted having a Mennonite background, but did not identify themselves as Mennonite. Of the nine advanced students, five claimed a personal connection to Low German, but none could speak or understand Low German.

With this survey, we wanted to get a snapshot of the ideas our students associate with German in Manitoba, in particular Low German, and if they identify themselves as Low German speakers. In the following discussion, we look at some of the questions from the survey and the answers given by the students.

3.1 Survey Results

One survey question enquired not only about which situations call for certain languages, but also if the students are aware of such situations. The students were asked to explain when Low German-speakers would speak their dialect, when they would speak Standard German and when they would use another language such as English, French or Russian. In their answers, students were able to identify certain contexts in which English or German, whether standard German or Low German, would be spoken. Based on their answers, it seems that Low German plays a well-defined role in the German-speaking Mennonite communities of Manitoba.

Some typical answers were:

„People speak Low German at home, in everyday life, in church. High German is read in church, also spoken everyday like English. English is used in more formal settings than Low or High German (St. 37, IntermGer).“

„In more casual settings and even at weddings Low German will be spoken. When learning German and how to write it, “High” German will be spoken. English is spoken when needed to do business with English-speaking people (St.18, IntroGer).“

"Hochdeutsch mit Oma/Opa, ihren Freunden. Englisch mit anderer Familie / (High German with grandma/grandpa, their

friends. English with other fami-ly)" (St. 45, AdvGer)

"Englisch am meisten zu Hause, manchmal spricht meine Mama mit mir Deutsch, aber öftermal spricht meine Oma/Opa Deutsch mit mir (sic.) / (English mostly at home, sometimes my mama speaks German with me, but once in a while my grandma/grandpa speaks German with me" (St. 47 AdvGer)

The survey also asked the students about their personal connections to Low German. Two questions in particular were interesting: "Haben Sie eine persönliche Verbindung zu Plautdietsch? / Do you have a personal connection to Low German?" and "Sprechen Sie selber Plautdietsch? / Do you speak Low German yourself?". In general, students indicated that mostly their grandparents and in some cases their parents speak Low German. Many students can understand some Low German, but only a few students surveyed claim to be able to speak it, and then only very little. However, most students stressed the importance of Low German to their heritage. Some students responded as follows:

„...my parents speak [Low German], I understand most of it, and come from a community where I am surrounded by it. ... I don't speak it very well, but it is important to me (St. 37, IntermGer)."

"...nicht ich [spreche Plautdietsch], aber meine Eltern und unsere alte traditionelle Kirche (I don't speak [Low German], but my parents [do] and [the members of] our old traditional church [do] (St. 46, AdvGer)."

„...my grandparents speak it and my dad picked up some of it. It's not important for me speak or learn Plautdietsch because not many people speak it anymore (St. 34, IntermGer)."

"I speak a little bit of Low German. It's important if I want to connect with and speak with my extended family (St. 18, IntroGer)."

The answers to these questions point to the idea that Low German does play a role in the language landscape of Manitoba. In total 43% of our students (21/49) have family members who speak Low German, but only 12% (6/49) claim to speak the dialect themselves, and they admit to having very limited ability.

3.2. Discussion of survey

Many students of German at the University of Winnipeg have a Mennonite back-ground and want to learn German at the university in order to better communicate with their family, especially older family members. One explanation for the limited transmission of Low German from the generation to generation of Mennonites, is offered by the students of German themselves, who note that their parents wanted to protect them from being "looked down on" and "laughed at," the way they, the parents, were for using Low German (Intermed. German, German in Manitoba, 2012). Many students considered the Low German language to be a very important part of their Mennonite identity. The younger generations are raised with the awareness of being Mennonite and are told to be proud of their background. But they are not systematically taught the language that is such a big part of their identity, despite the tools available to them, as noted in the introduction of this article.

Regarding the topic of identity, it was revealed in our informal survey that the younger generation faces challenges regarding the idea of being Mennonite. One young woman with Mennonite background said: "Even in Canada, when I'm asked where I'm from, I often say from Russia so that people ask no further questions. When I give the answer "Mennonite", people don't understand that it is not only a religion, but an entire lifestyle, a very different mentality from average Canadians" (Intermed. German, Attitude towards background, 2012). The Mennonite back-ground provides a support structure for its community members, but it doesn't seem to support the preservation of their Low German dialect.

4. Conclusion

Because the idea of identity is so closely associated with language, further study in addition to the informal survey discussed in this article is needed in order to better understand the situation among the Mennonites and the Hutterites in Manitoba. Many of the students in the informal survey noted that Low German is an important marker of belonging to a group (i.e., Mennonite), but often these same students re-marked that they cannot speak Low German. This leads to the question of whether there is any contradiction between the use of Low German for communication in Manitoba and the use of the dialect for determining membership in a group such as Mennonite. On the other hand, speakers of such a dialect may use their

common language (German) as a unifying factor against the Canadian English environment around them (Dailey-O'Cain & Liebscher, 2011, p. 129). Because the students surveyed expressed a sense of identity connected to Low German, a dialect that most of them reported not even understanding, it is important in further studies to establish the role of Low German and other German dialects for determining identity among these groups of German-speakers in Southern Manitoba.

In sum, a more formal survey is necessary so that we can better understand the current status of language preservation among speakers of Low German as well as Hutterisch. It has been argued that Hutterites, with their stricter views of religion and stronger sense of group identity, have preserved their dialect better than Mennonites, who tend to have more diverse views of religion and the world (Bräutigam, 2003, p. 13) (Prokop, 2002, p. 85). But is that really the case in Manitoba? Are Hutterites more successful than other groups at preserving their language? And do so few younger Mennonites know Low German, as indicated in our informal survey? Further, a wider-reaching survey (not just a survey of university German students) would be useful to find out more about the current use of the German language in Manitoba and determine the necessity of introducing a university course in Low German, in order to support the Low German as a heritage language of this province.

5. References

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