International Symposium

People of Faith, Voices of Tradition:
Germanic Heritage Languages among Christians and Jews

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Presenters and Abstracts

Joshua R. Brown
Associate Professor of German, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire

Heritage Language Literature and Literacy

This presentation discusses the role of literature published in heritage languages for Old Order sectarians, specifically Amish and Hutterites. The publication of books in a heritage language piques the interest especially of linguists, as attempts at codification of largely oral languages are often the first steps in reversing language shift to build the ethnolinguistic vitality of a group and strengthen the meaning of the language for group identity. This presentation analyzes the role of heritage language literature among the Old Order Amish and Hutterites. Importantly, the presentation focuses on genre and author as indicative for uncovering the purpose of heritage language literature. Finally, the reception and extent of literacy in the heritage language are examined to understand the viability of ventures in heritage language literature.

Christopher Cox
Assistant Professor of Linguistics, Carleton University (Ottawa)

Little Differences, Big Stories:
What Linguistic Variation Has to Tell Us about Canadian Plautdietsch

One consequence of the recurring migration that has characterized Plautdietsch-speaking groups over the past four centuries is a remarkable degree of linguistic variation among speakers. Within individual settlements, one often encounters considerable differences in the ways that Plautdietsch is spoken: some community members may have distinctive pronunciations of certain sounds or use particular words or sentence patterns that set them apart from others, even while having lived in the same community (or even the same household) for much of their lives. As common as these differences may be, relatively little attention has been given to understanding how they relate to the range of social, geographical, and historical factors that distinguish Plautdietsch-speaking individuals and communities from one another today.

This presentation considers what we may learn about Russian Mennonites' social and linguistic practices from small but pervasive linguistic differences such as these. This follows from collaboration with Plautdietsch-speaking groups in the Saskatchewan Valley, an area of western Canada that served as a crossroads of Russian Mennonite migration in the Americas throughout the twentieth century. By visualizing how linguistic features are distributed across individuals, groups, and regions in this area, it is possible to observe how linguistic differences are rooted in the particular history and social structure of local communities. In turn, these observations offer a clearer perspective on what sets these differences apart from patterns often found in "major" languages, thereby suggesting ways in which linguistic differentiation in smaller, close-knit religious communities such as these might contribute to our general understanding of how languages vary and change.

Jürg Fleischer
Professor of Germanic Linguistics, Philipp University of Marburg, Germany

Yiddish in the West and Yiddish in the East: A Story of Loss and a Story of Maintenance

Yiddish, the heritage language of the Ashkenazi Jews, was widespread in both Western and Eastern Europe in the 18th century. Beginning in the 19th century, Western Yiddish began to decline and persisted only in rural areas and on the periphery of where it had once been spoken. This loss of Western Yiddish was due to the assimilation of German Jewry to the cultural and linguistic norms of the majority society. In Eastern Europe, on the other hand, Yiddish thrived in the 19th and early 20th centuries and a secular Yiddish culture was also brought to and further developed in the US. However, in most immigrant communities Yiddish was usually given up in the second or third generation. One important exception is provided by certain Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish communities, in which Yiddish is a spoken (and sometimes written) means of communication. In these communities speaking Yiddish serves as a means of expressing group identity, thereby ensuring that it is passed on to the next generation and is likely to survive as a living language.

Miriam Isaacs
Fellow, National Yiddish Book Center, Amherst, MA

Language Shift and Dialects in Yiddish:
A Discussion of Books and Audio Materials for Hasidic Children

This study examines Yiddish language shift and language variation in books and audio materials for young children. The intent is to explore possible trends in present-day Yiddish. It is important to understand present-day variation in order to better understand boundaries of communities. What may appear to be subtle or trivial differences may be markers of "us" or "them" status. Jewish languages function in a radically changed context since the Second World War. While Yiddish has all but disappeared from most Jewish communities, it has continued to fulfill a vernacular function in areas of the orthodox world. The language differentiates in-group talk from out-group, non-Jewish languages and continues a living tradition of an important heritage Jewish language.

Steven Hartman Keiser
Associate Professor of English, Marquette University

Change in Pennsylvania Dutch: With and Without English

Like the Amish and Old Order communities in which it is in robust use, Pennsylvania Dutch is not rigidly unchanging. The language and attitudes toward it vary across workplaces and different groups of Plain people as they continue to negotiate life in 21st-century North America.

• Factory employees in a 200-year old Amish community in Ohio show relatively more openness to English if they are in clerical positions as opposed to working on the factory floor.

• Beachy Amish church-goers self-consciously use English in worship services as a means of welcoming non-Amish, alongside of the widespread use of Pennsylvania Dutch before and after the services.

• Speakers in the Midwest preserve earlier patterns of pronunciation of sounds like /r/ and /l/, while speakers in Pennsylvania have shifted to English-like pronunciations—and pushed those changes further.

• The completion in 2012 of a translation of the Bible into Pennsylvania Dutch has provided a new data set for investigating change in the functions of the auxiliary verb *duh/"do"*.

These and other examples demonstrate that contact with English is a catalyst for some change in Pennsylvania Dutch, but much change in the language proceeds independent of English.

Mark L. Louden
Professor of German and Director, Max Kade Institute, University of Wisconsin–Madison

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This World is Not My Home:
Heritage Language Maintenance in Christian and Jewish Faith Communities

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This presentation considers some of the common characteristics underlying the successful maintenance of Germanic languages among Anabaptist Christian and Haredi Jewish faith communities. Most of the world's approximately 7,000 languages are linked to one or more of the following social categories: nation-state, region, or ethnic group. Yet all the languages explored in this symposium are in a robust state of health despite – or in fact precisely because – of the fact that they are *not* associated with politically, regionally, or ethnically defined speech communities. Their sociolinguistic health is linked to spiritual identities that transcend the barriers of politics, geography, and genealogy. In the face of globalization and the rapid loss of smaller languages, especially in the Americas, the Christian and Jewish groups who maintain heritage languages while also using the language(s) of their neighbors offer a quiet lesson to the rest of society on the value of balancing tradition and change.

Lynn Marcus Miller
Member of an Old Order Amish community near Arthur, Illinois

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The Care and Feeding of German in Amish and Old Order Mennonite Communities

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Long-term maintenance of a minority language requires commitment and effort. This presentation discusses how Amish and Old Order Mennonite groups seek to maintain German through formal instruction to ensure literacy in the language for the next generation. Various approaches have been used over the years, such as short-term Winter German Schools for teens and Summer German Schools for children, as well as Sunday School lessons for children and adults. The advent of Amish and Mennonite parochial schools has resulted in a new opportunity to teach German alongside the 3 Rs. The curricula include German primers and readers from the late 19th century as well as various texts and workbooks written expressly for Amish and Mennonite schools. In recent years there has been an effort to produce a curriculum that uses modern teaching methods while staying aligned with the traditional usage, syntax, and *Fraktur* script used in religious texts. This presentation discusses some of the challenges of bringing fresh new educational approaches to a language steeped in tradition.

Guido Seiler
Professor of Germanic Linguistics, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich, Germany

Language Structure as a Mirror of Social Structure?
The Case of the Shwitzer Language of Adams County, IN

The Shwitzer language is spoken by the descendants of 19th-century Anabaptist immigrants from Switzerland. Linguistically, Shwitzer is most closely related to Bernese Swiss German dialects. Shwitzer diverged into two varieties, distinct both structurally and sociolinguistically: Mennonite Shwitzer is linguistically relatively conservative and is a moribund heritage language spoken by just a few elderly speakers. Amish Shwitzer, on the other hand, is not only fully vital, it has undergone significant change in comparison to both Mennonite Shwitzer and European Bernese. Whereas Amish Shwitzer retains typical Bernese linguistic features mainly in vocabulary, its grammatical structure has almost entirely converged with Pennsylvania Dutch. Therefore, we categorize Amish Shwitzer as an example of a so-called grammar-lexicon mixed language, i.e., a mixed language where lexicon and grammar can be traced back to two different source languages. After a short overview of the linguistic structure of Amish Shwitzer we will show that the sociolinguistic circumstances under which Amish Shwitzer probably emerged fit the known patterns of development of other grammar-lexicon mixed languages only to a limited degree. We will argue that the close genetic relationship of the two parent languages made mixed language emergence possible even under partly untypical circumstances.

Heinrich Siemens
Independent scholar and publisher, Tweeback Verlag, Bonn, Germany

Plautdietsch Past and Present

Plautdietsch was originally the variety of Low German spoken in West Prussia, however today it is spoken only by the descendants of Mennonites who settled in the southern Russian Empire (today's Ukraine) at the end of the 18th century and from there was brought by immigrants to North and Latin America. In Russia, faith and language were intertwined such that Plautdietsch became increasingly identified with Mennonites, as reflected in the alternate name, "Mennonite Low German." Today, Plautdietsch reveals the traces of various forms of language contact over a 500-year period.