A GERMAN DIALECT SPOKEN IN SOUTH DAKOTA: SWISS-VOLHYNIAN

by

CORA and MAURICE CONNER
University of Nebraska at Omaha

The year 1974 marks the centennial of the arrival from the former province of Volhynia, now a part of the Ukraine, of a group of German-speaking Mennonites in what is now the state of South Dakota. It is interesting to observe the language of these people whose ancestors settled near Freeman. Despite the lengthy period spent in foreign cultures and surrounded by other languages, the dialect of German spoken by the group before their migration to Volhynia has retained many of its original features. To be sure, Slavic words have crept into the language, particularly in the area of foods, and English, often in a Germanized form, has supplanted many native words and has supplied vocabulary for concepts which did not exist in 1874; but especially among members of the group older than about thirty-five years, the German dialect is native. For several reasons, including the advent of mass communication, a decline in the use of German in churches and schools of the community, and the increasing percentage of persons marrying outside their language group, German as the native tongue is undergoing a rather rapid decline among the younger people of the area. To examine briefly the status of the German presently spoken by the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonites near Freeman, South Dakota is a purpose of this paper.

Although the Mennonites discussed here are traceable to Switzerland historically, their language is not. They are, for the most part, descendents of a group that migrated from Switzerland to the Palatinate circa 1664, and to Volhynia by way of Galicia approximately a hundred years later.[1]

Those years in the Palatinate had a devastating effect on the Swiss dialect, (Note: these people still refer to themselves as *Schweizer*) yet a century in the Ukraine and another in South Dakota have influenced the language to a much lesser extent.[2]

It is understandable that one dialect of a language might supplant another if the first geographically surrounds the other, as was the case in the Palatinate. More interesting is the fact that the dialect has remained largely Rhenish Franconian in this country despite constant association of its speakers not only with speakers of another language, but also with members of other German dialect groups. In addition to the *Schweizer,* Mennonites who call themselves *Hutterer* and *Plattdeutsche* live in the Freeman community, and each group speaks a dialect of German distinct from the other two. While each of the three dialects is encroached upon by English, crossing among the dialects is hardly discernible. When intermarriage between speakers of two of the dialects occurs, the language of the new household is invariably English, not German. Some reasons for the lack of mixing of the various dialects in the Freeman area are that until fairly recently there was relatively little intermarriage among the groups; little mixing occurred in churches where German was used, for although all are Mennonites, each group had its own churches; and probably most important, the language which physically surrounds each dialect group is English rather than another dialect of German.

Personal interviews with native informants (using a tape recorder) are the basis for the following observations on the present-day Swiss-Volhynian dialect, for it is a spoken language only; to our knowledge no consistent written form exists. The informants represent two generations. They are of various occupational backgrounds, and (in varying degrees) all are familiar with Standard German, English, and isolated Slavic words. At the time of the interviews none had ever been in Germany, and none is an original emigrant from the

Ukraine. There are variations in pronunciation among families and even individual variations within families. In general, the vowels tend to be less tense than the ideal prescribed by Siebs. Long vowels have a tendency toward diphthongization. This may be an influence English has had on the sound system of the dialect, but the principal English influence is in the vocabulary.

When the original settlers arrived in Dakota Territory, legal, commercial, medical, dental, and governmental affairs were conducted by non-Germans. Almost without exception the Mennonites were farmers. Therefore, the German-speaking element had to use English to transact business, to see a dentist or physician, to go to the post office or to the county courthouse. The names of many staples are English because purchasing was done in English. English words were adopted for new concepts and objects such as electricity, furnace, refrigerator, and tractor. In some cases the English term is less cumbersome: [*mɛtʂ*] "match" and [*tɑol*] "towel" are shorter than *Streichholz* and *Handtuch,* or perhaps a nuance cannot be adequately expressed by using a German word: for example, [*flo:r*] "floor" usually refers to a wooden or tile floor; [*bɔdə*] "Boden" is a more general term referring to the ground or to a bottom as well as to the floor.

Some loan words are only partial; they are hybrid compounds, one part of which is English and the other German: [*'bʊtʂərmɛsər*] "butcher knife", [*'gʊdbæ sə:*] "to say goodbye", and [*'lɔntʂtsæt*] "lunch time". Also in this group are words such as [*'ʊfpɪkə*] "to pick up", [*'ʊf fo:nə*] "to telephone", [*'ʊf kli:nə*] "to clean up", [*'ɪnkænə*] "to preserve by canning", and [*'ɑosgəpæst*] "passed out". Others are loan translations, native words used with the meaning that the same etymological stem has in English. The pronunciation shows that the word is German and not English; for example, *Karre* for "car," *Krippe* for "corncrib." Both words retain the feminine gender with the English meaning. Other examples of this phenomenon are *Weg* meaning "way" in expressions such as

[dɛn ve:K] "in this manner," *Acker* for "acre", *Trubel* for "trouble", *Stock* for "haystack", the phrases *ein Jahr zurück* meaning "a year ago" and *frisch werden* referring to "a cow ready to give birth." Also included are the verbs *gleichen* for "like" in expressions such as [das glaeç ɪç nɛt] "I don't like that", *gucken* meaning "to appear" or "seem," *kurzlaufen* for "to run short of" and *nehmen* sometimes used where *dauern* or *bringen* would normally be employed.

As might be expected, the dialect has retained a number of archaic German words. Examples of these are *Schmant* instead of *Sahne* ("cream"), *Grundbeeren* instead of *Kartoffeln* ("potatoes"), *Freundschaft* instead of *Verwandtschaft* ("relatives"), and the verbs *strählen* and *hocken* instead of *kämmen* and *sitzen* for "to comb" and "to sit", respectively.

Formerly, Slavic loan words were more numerous than they are today. Some, however, are still in common use. In addition to names of foods, many of which have been retained, ['bʊrjən] or the alternate form ['bʊr'jən] "weeds" is heard more often than the German *Unkraut.* Also heard among the *Schweizer* are [bʊr'sʊK] "raccoon" in place of *Waschbär,* ['gətʂgɪ] "ducks" for *Enten,* [mə'dɛrgə] "screw nut" instead of *Mutter,* ['tʂɛnɪK] "teakettle" rather than *Teekessel,* [prə'gadɪ] "gambol" for *Luftsprung,* and [ɔb'dʒɪŋ gɪ] "harvest celebration" instead of *Erntefest.*

The following anecdote, related by a 65-year-old man, indicates the extent of English encroachment upon the dialect. To facilitate reading, it is transcribed into Standard German, retaining the word order, idioms, and vocabulary of the spoken original.

> Ich habe noch immer gern Hasenfleisch gegessen, aber weil ich ein schlechter Jäger bin und die Hasen schlecht treffen kann mit Schiessen, habe ich mir müssen einen anderen Weg suchen für die kleinen Häschen zu kriegen. Zum Glück ist von unserem Hof hier nicht weit ein *culvert,* und hier kriechen die kleinen Häschen im Winter 'rein, überhaupt wenn es

recht kalt ist und viel Schnee auf der Erde. Dann muss ich mir noch jemanden kriegen, und dann gehen wir. Eins hält den Sack, und ich nehme mir einen langen Stecken und tue am anderen Ende dort herum-*poken* drin im *culvert*, und das Häschen läuft in den Sack 'rein. Danach habe ich keinen *job* es zu kriegen.

So mal eines Winters, mal an einem kalten Tag, war eine von meinen *nieces* gekommen mich besuchen, und gerade jener Morgen habe ich gesehen, war ein kleines Häschen dort im *culvert* drin gewesen. "Nun", sag' ich zu ihr: "gehen wir mal auf die Hasenjagd, ich und du." Habe ich ihr einen Sack gegeben, und ich habe einen langen Stecken genommen; habe ihr gesagt, sie soll den Sack dort an einem Ende halten, und ich werde mit dem Stecken dort drin 'rum= [ɡuzlə], bis das Häschen in den Sack kommt. Ich hatte aber nicht gewusst, dass in jenem Sack ein Loch drin war. Also habe ich dort 'rumge*poked*. Wirklich, das Häschen in den Sack. Aber auch wie der Blitz aus dem Sack, durch das kleine Loch durch, und läuft dort ein Stückchen, guckt sich um und lacht zu uns, denkt sich: "Ich werde mich nicht so leicht von euch fangen lassen."

Aber ich habe noch nie das Ende von der Geschichte gehört. Fast noch alle Winter *phoned* meine *niece* mich auf und sagt: "Nun, Onkel, was denkst du? Sollten wir nicht wieder gehen ein Häschen fangen?"

Again using transcription into Standard German, the following conversation among three women (ages sixty-nine, sixty-seven, and twenty-five), discussing the menu for an evening meal, includes English as well as Slavic influences on the dialect.

1. Nun dann, was werden wir heute abend auf *supper?*

2. Nun, ich hatte ja hier Bohnen abgekocht, und dann werden wir die Bohnen dann haben.
1. Nun, ich hatte gedacht, man könnte ja auch mal [*bə'rogɪ*];[3] wir hatten schon so lange nicht. Oder hättest du nicht Zeit heute nachmittag noch [*bə'rogɪ*] machen?
3. O, ich denke, ich hätte auch noch Zeit. Man brauchte ja auch nicht so viel machen; und bis sie ja versorgt haben und bis was; und [wenn] du mir noch ein bisschen hilfst, dann denke ich, täten wir noch fertigwerden. Oder tätest du vielleicht lieber Borschtsuppe oder [*nənəs'nɪgɪ*]?[4] Sonst ich könnte auch das machen, wenn du willst, noch solange wie du daheim bist.
1. Nun, wenn so kalt ist wie heute, dann *sure* täte auch Suppe gut schmecken.
2. Nun ja, und ich hatte ja doch auch eine Huhn geschlachtet, und das gibt ja auch so gute Nudelsuppe von den alten Hühnern, und [da] wäre ja auch jenes gut.
1. Nun, da tun wir auch heute dann Nudelsuppe.

Although the dialect seems to be receding with the passing of the older generation, efforts have been made to preserve other elements of the culture. A growing museum in Freeman houses a number of artifacts brought by the original settlers and others acquired by them during their early years in this country. In an effort to retain identity with their Russo-German heritage, a number of family genealogies have been traced and published. And each spring the community stages a *Schmeckfest* at which native foods are prepared and served to thousands of patrons, and historical handicrafts such as spinning, weaving, and basket-making are demonstrated.

A century in this country has had an effect on the dialect spoken near Freeman, to be sure, but this does not diminish

its value as a vehicle of communication in Freeman and elsewhere. A number of speakers of the dialect have traveled to Germany in recent years. Upon their return they commented on their ability to communicate with their European contemporaries (especially in the Palatinate) without experiencing serious difficulties in the use of their dialect.

It is useful to study a dialect (such as the one discussed here) for several reasons. Because a transplanted dialect is not affected as strongly by the language of the host environment as is its counterpart in the native country, it remains purer, thereby providing insight into the development of the language. To examine a language other than English which is spoken in this country is beneficial, too, because it points up the fallacy which holds that ours is a monolingual society. And finally, in an age where frantic efforts are being made to establish and preserve traditions, and where anything over fifty years old is considered antique, it is helpful to identify and retain a linguistic heritage which transcends in importance any material artifacts which may be preserved.

NOTES

1. The migrations of the various Mennonite groups are well-documented. See, for example, Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., **An Introduction to Mennonite History: A Popular History of the Anabaptists and the Mennonites** (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1967); Cora Anne Miller, "A Phonological and Morphological Study of a German Dialect Spoken near Freeman, South Dakota," Master's thesis (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1966); Martin H. Schrag, "European History of the Swiss-Volhynian Mennonite Ancestors of Mennonites Now Living in Communities in Kansas and South Dakota," Master's thesis (Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1956); C. Henry Smith, **The Story of the Mennonites**, 4th ed. (Newton, Kansas: Mennonite Publication Office, 1957); Emil J. Waltner, **Banished for Faith** (Freeman, S. D.: Pine Hill Press, 1968).

2. See Miller, pp. 91-96, where the dialect is identified as mostly Rhenish Franconian.

3. Pirog, a cheese or sauerkraut-filled pocket of dough which is boiled or pan-fried.

4. A thin pancake filled with rhubarb, which is served with sour cream.