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***Mr reda kà richtiges Dietsch*¹—“Bad language”: Self-stigmatization in German Heritage Dialects**

1. Introduction

German dialects brought to the United States in the 19th century are now mainly spoken by a steadily decreasing older generation and are expected to disappear within the next twenty years (Boas 2009).² The heritage speakers of these immigrant dialects often regard their ancestral variety as somehow “not correct.” Boas (2009: 267) notes that “the negative label attached by many Texas Germans becomes apparent when they refer to themselves or other speakers as ‘*Deutschverderber*’ (literally, ‘someone who corrupts German’).” Similarly, in my study documenting an Alsatian variety in Texas, heritage speakers often prefaced interviews by excusing their “bad” German or declined an interview because their German was not “good enough.”³ This article explores possible causes for apparent self-stigmatization in German⁴ immigrant varieties in the U.S. Can we identify certain characteristics speakers perceive as not correct (“bad”)? Is one variety perceived as better than another? Did a written Standard (*Schriftdeutsch*) taught in many U.S. community schools and churches during the 19th century influence the immigrants’ perception of their own variety? These are difficult questions to answer given the diversity and number of German immigrant varieties. A cursory look at various data samples taken from speaker narratives during sociolinguistic interviews provides initial insight into possible answers:

(1) Castroville, TX (Roesch 2012: 82)

“ . . . the Alsatians tell us we speak the old Alsatian here and that’s all we knew . . . so there’s some words that I never heard of before

- . . . so I'm still learning . . . because we always fill in the English word if something doesn't come to mind right quick"
- (2) Amana, IA (Webber 1993: 20)
„*Wir haben nichts neues seit unsere Eltern rübergekommen sind, und alles was neu war, ist Englisches...Our German is a hundred years behind.*”
'we have nothing new since our parents came over and everything that is new is in English . . .'
- (3) Indianapolis, IN (Roesch interview 3/11/2015)
“I asked mother if the two sets of grandparents ever spoke German to each other. She said they did, but that Grandfather F. said that Grandmother G. spoke “bad” German. So what does “bad” German mean? Her fluency would have been in dialect—Bayrisch—or was her ‘High German’ corrupted with Anglicized words such as *Itze Kraeme* ‘ice cream?’”⁵
- (4) Castroville, TX, #249 (Roesch interview, 2007)
“When we were over there [Alsace], I was talking about our little town back home and called it a “depot.” They didn't understand what I meant! That's what my father had always said, but I found out later that *Dorf* was the Alsatian word for “town.” I always thought “depot” was the Alsatian word for “town.” I was so embarrassed.”
- (5) Haysville, IN (Nützel 2009: 64)
“*Ich hob dengd, des muss aus a Buch kumma . . .*”
'I thought it had to come from a book'
- (6) Amana, IA (Webber 1993: 7)
“*Ich probiere so viel wie möglich zu schwätzen wie ich daheim schwätze hier in Amana, aber wenn ich woanders bin, wo die Leute sind von Deutschland, dann probiere ich besseres Deutsch zu schwätzen, ein bissl mehr Hochdeutsch*”
'I try as much as possible to talk as I talk at home here in Amana, but whenever I am somewhere else where there are German people from Germany, then I try to speak better German, a little bit more High German'

To be noted is that most heritage speakers have no academic knowledge of linguistics and cannot determine how or why the variety they speak is different, i.e., speakers are unable to identify particular structures related to morphology, phonology, or syntax. This preliminary investigation necessarily falls into the area of *folk* or *lay linguistics*. Niedzielski & Preston (2000: xviii) define *folk* as “those who are not trained in the area of investigation,” which

does not refer to associations of “rustic, ignorant, uneducated . . . isolated, marginalized, or lower status groups . . .” The term *lay* is preferred here as a more neutral term.

This essay constitutes a first attempt to collect and compare metalinguistic data from a variety of U.S. German immigrant language studies in order to document self-stigmatization. The goal is to show that these are not isolated cases, but instead common to many, regardless of variety. As most studies focus on only one language variety, I hope to enlist the interest and participation of other scholars in this search.

2. Methodology

This essay specifically investigates characteristics of German heritage varieties that speakers identify as incorrect or “bad.” I begin my discussion by providing a general sociohistorical description of 19th-century German immigrant communities in the U.S., followed by a brief discussion of similarities and differences between the linguistic situation in Germany and the United States. Using Davies’ and Langer’s (2006) list of motives for stigmatization, I compare their findings with metalinguistic comments from speakers. Finally, I introduce one particular community of speakers in Texas and discuss how this self-stigmatization has been both reinforced and partially lifted. The general stigmatization of German language and culture experienced during WWI as belonging to the “enemy within” is only referred to in this paper, but not discussed due to its scope and complexity.

Recent linguistic studies on U.S. German immigrant varieties⁶ such as Kansas Volga German (Berend 2003), Pennsylvania German (Louden 2006), Texas German (Boas 2009), and Indiana East Franconian (Nützel 2009) have mainly investigated sociolinguistic variation, attrition, and change. Understandably, the data presented focuses on demonstrating structural aspects rather than on metalinguistic data that often reveals speaker attitudes. Other sociolinguistic studies on U.S. German immigrant communities focus on language shift and death by identifying and describing contributing factors, e.g., Webber (1993) on Iowa *Kolonie-Deutsch*, Seeger (2007) on Kansas Low German, and Lucht (2007) on Wisconsin Low German. Recent studies by Boas (2009) and Roesch (2012) on two Texas varieties evaluate data for linguistic, sociolinguistic, and metalinguistic information, e.g., language loss, apparent time language shift, and attitudes (see Section 6).

Authors Davies and Langer (2006) of *The Making of Bad Language* investigate what Germans think about their own language and what constitutes “good” or “bad” language. They mandate that “linguistic systems and knowledge about language have to be examined within a sociohistorical context”

(2006: 13). Accordingly, they reconstruct the history of several morphosyntactic structures from 1600 to 2005 by tracking references in a corpus of 250 metalinguistic publications. As this inquiry parallels Davies' and Langer's (2006) investigation (albeit on a smaller scale), I first describe the sociohistorical setting of language and culture characteristic of 19th-century German-speaking immigrants in the U.S., and later return to Davies' and Langer's (2006) findings for comparison.

The following sociohistorical description is necessarily simplified in scope and does not adequately represent the diversity of these immigrants, but attempts to provide a general overview of conditions in the homeland and those in their adopted one.

3. 19th-century German immigration to the U.S.

In contrast to religious intolerance and persecution that initiated a wave of emigration to the U.S. in the 18th century (e.g., ancestors of today's Pennsylvania "Dutch"), social and political environments were mainly responsible for 19th-century emigration from Europe, which hit its first peak in the early 1800s. Economically, as in other parts of Europe, German-speaking areas were suffering from poor harvests, famines, overpopulation and the effects of industrialization, which caused untenable conditions of widespread hunger, unemployment and poverty. In addition, failed political protests against strict economic policies of the German authoritarian monarchies in the mid-1800s added to the steady flow of emigrants departing for U.S. ports.

These German-speaking immigrants in the 19th century were a culturally and linguistically diverse group who spoke local varieties of regional languages that were often not mutually intelligible. The first waves initially settled in both urban and rural areas along the East Coast, the Midwest, as well as in independent territories such as the Republic of Texas. The immigrants who chose to settle in more remote areas where land was abundant and affordable were mainly comprised of farmers, craftsmen, and small merchants, but were often led or accompanied by an "educated" element of religious clergy and entrepreneurs. Many of these rural communities were fairly self-sufficient and remained isolated into the early 20th century due to a combination of geographical and sociohistorical factors.⁷ Ferdinand in southern Indiana or Fredericksburg in the Texas Western Settlements (Biesele 1987) are examples of such linguistic and cultural enclaves or *speech islands*.

The immigrants' language, social and religious practices and institutions established in their new home were an integral part of their individual and community identity. Their local varieties, or *Mundarten*, were mainly spoken varieties with no written form. Many of today's speakers, however, also relate

stories of learning to read and write “book German” (*Schriftdeutsch* or *Hochdeutsch*) in school or for their catechism lessons. Educated clergy and educators who taught *Schriftdeutsch* in outlying German-speaking communities often unintentionally promoted this written standard as the “correct” variety over the spoken ancestral varieties. Many communities also published or had access to newspapers in German (usually in Standard German) into the early 1900s, which English-only legislation during WWI all but eliminated.

Today’s heritage speakers of moribund German immigrant varieties are “unequal bilinguals,” that is, they have full fluency in English, but are only semi-fluent in their heritage variety, with the only surviving register being an informal one. Some have had German instruction in Standard German in high school or college and have discovered that the German taught there is very different from the German their parents or grandparents spoke.

4. U.S. German immigrant varieties vs. varieties in the Federal Republic of Germany

This history of isolation, self-sufficiency, and preservation of 19th-century German language and culture into the 4th–6th generation places German immigrant varieties in a different context from the evaluation and perception of non-standard varieties in present-day Germany. Three main differences are: 1) the dominant language is not German, but English; 2) the influence of Standard German does not play a significant role in the perception of their variety for most German heritage speakers today; and 3) there are no current prescriptive institutions which promote a “correct” German over the American heritage variety.

In contrast, local and regional varieties in Germany co-exist with an overarching German Standard. A system of norm makers (e.g., grammarians), norm setters (e.g., education ministers), norm transmitters (e.g., teachers, journalists), and norm gatekeepers (e.g., teachers, editors, etc.) also exists (cf. Polenz 1999: 230-1), which maintains a hegemonic ideology of a “correct” German (the Standard) and “less correct” non-standard varieties. The ideology of the superiority of an “educated” German language versus local varieties, as well as the prestige of certain German varieties over others, is not a new development. These ideologies were widespread in German-speaking areas by the 19th century and still exist in Germany today.⁸ A current example of this ideology is the general lay opinion on a developing Berlin variety among immigrant youth called *Kiezdeutsch* as “bad language:”

Wer Kiezdeutsch spricht, spricht kein „richtiges“ Deutsch . . . (Wiese 2012:207)

‘whoever speaks Kiez-German doesn’t speak “correct” German . . .’

However, Wiese’s (2012) research shows this to be a legitimate variety with its own grammatical logic. Despite efforts to legitimize this “new variety,” *Kiezdeutsch* is generally not accepted by the German public as “correct” German.

5. Which characteristics do German-American heritage speakers identify as “bad”?

To identify which characteristics of their language German-American heritage speakers consider “bad” or stigmatized, I return to Davies and Langer’s (2006) study and their findings. Davies and Langer (2006: 263) find six major recurring motives in metalinguistic publications for labelling a grammatical construction as stigmatized:

1. Archaic or no longer in use
2. Regionally restricted
3. Socially marked as a lower-class language feature
4. Imported under foreign influence
5. Superfluous, too long
6. Breaks the rules of German grammar

The constructions Davies and Langer (2006) find referenced most often are the auxiliary *tun* ‘to do’, the periphrastic possessive, *wegen* ‘because’ + dative, and the temporal *wo* ‘who, what (colloquial), which are generally features associated with regional or lower-class use. Interestingly, they also suggest that their findings indicate that the making of “bad language” mainly took place during the 19th century based upon a lack of references to their selected features in the previous two centuries (2006: 262).

The six data samples taken from German heritage speakers in Section 1 reveal interesting similarities to three of Davies and Langer’s (2006) motives:

1. *Archaic or no longer in use:*
Respondents in Examples (1) – (3) comment on archaic vocabulary, using descriptors “old,” “behind,” “bad,” and “embarrassing;”
2. *Regionally restricted:*
Speakers in Examples (3) – (6) mention a regional or local variety and imply a degree of “inadequacy;” in fact, in Example (4) the speaker expresses her embarrassment upon recognition

that what she had learned from her father was not correct, and the speaker in Example (6) characterizes *Hochdeutsch* as “better” than her Amana variety, *Kolonie-Deutsch*.

3. *Imported under foreign influence*: (borrowed words)
Participants in Examples (1) – (4) also refer to the number of English words frequently used in their heritage variety.

In addition, the respondent in Example (4) accommodates German nationals by trying to speak “more *Hochdeutsch*.” This suggests an additional factor impacting the perception of heritage varieties—contact with the homeland—and will be addressed in the next section.

The term *Hochdeutsch* ‘High German’ is inherently problematic for the non-linguist. Linguistically, “High German” refers to the language varieties spoken in the southern highlands and Alps (southern Germany, Switzerland, Austria), while “Low German” or *Niederdeutsch* refers to the language varieties spoken in the lowlands along the coast of northern Germany. *Hochdeutsch* also refers to Standard German, which is the codified form used in formal contexts for speaking and writing (*Schriftdeutsch*) and also carries associations of “educated” or “cultured.” The tendency for a non-linguist to perceive *hoch* ‘high’ (as in *Hochdeutsch*) as “correct” and *nieder* ‘low’ (as in *Niederdeutsch*) as “not as correct” is understandable.⁹

6. Self-stigmatization and reversal in a Texas Alsatian community

The external stigmatization of German heritage languages after two world wars with Germany, together with a shift to English already in progress since the end of the 19th century, left its mark on German-American citizens and communities and cannot be completely ignored in this discussion, although its scope and causes are too vast to adequately address here.¹⁰ This public stigmatization which contributed to the self-stigmatization of German heritage varieties is evident in this fluent Alsatian speaker’s explanation in Example (7) of why his brothers do not speak Alsatian.

- (7) #202 (Roesch 2012:15)

Ja, àwr sie reda kà Elsàssisch. I hàn zwi Brüedr un a Schwester jiengr às ich und às isch wàga em zweiten Walkrieg, . . . will wemmir uewer in San Antonio gànga sin, sin mir nitt serviert worda, . . . will dia wàs gschàfft kàà hàn—die Amerikàn—die hàn g’meint, die reda Dietsch; g’meint, das sin Schwo:va, mit debna sie nitt serviera. Drnou sin sie wiedr heimkumma, dia wàs gànga sin fer iekäufa und hàn g’sait zuanàndr, mir reda nimmr Elsess mit d’ Kindr, das profitiert sie

nitt. Es wart bessr wemma nur Ànglisch reda mit inna, . . . ich bin siebeunsàchzig und die jiengera—ach ich sàg zweiunsàchzig—sie reda kei elsàssisch mehr. Sie verstàhn's, àwr sie reda es nitt.

‘Yes, but they don’t speak Alsatian. I have two brothers and a sister younger than me . . . and it’s because of the Second World War. . . because when we went over to San Antonio, we weren’t waited on. . . because those who worked—the Americans—they thought we were speaking German, thought we were Swabians [Germans], who they didn’t wait on. After that they came home, those that had gone shopping, and said to each other, we’re not going to speak Alsatian with the children anymore, it’s of no value to them. It would be better if we only spoke English with them. I’m sixty-seven and the younger ones—oh, I’ll say sixty-two—they don’t speak Alsatian anymore. They understand it, but they don’t speak it.’

In a study conducted between 2007 and 2012, I interviewed 36 speakers of Upper Alsatian varieties in Medina County, Texas. Questionnaire data collected from 35 respondents (three born 1911-1920; eleven born 1921-1930, eighteen born 1931-1940, and three born 1941-1959) show this same decrease in the use of Alsatian and a shift to English well in progress, with a sharp decline after 1940.

Table 1: Use of Alsatian as a child

Birth year	1911-1920	1921-1930	1931-1940	1941-1959
always	1	1	2	
often		5	7	
sometimes	1	4	1	
seldom	1	1	2	2
never			6	1

Table 2: Use of Alsatian as a young adult¹¹

Birth year	1911-1920	1921-1930	1931-1940	1941-1959
always	1			
often		2	3	
sometimes	1	2	3	
seldom	1	2	8	2
never		2	3	1

With whom do these heritage speakers use their ancestral language today? Table 3 shows that predominant use of Alsatian today has moved out of the home and family domain and into the domain of friends and colleagues.

Table 3: Use of Alsatian today

	always	often	sometimes	seldom	never
grandparents* ¹²			1	1	3
parents*		2	1	2	3
siblings		2	2	6	14
spouse	1		6	8	11
children			4	2	25
grandchildren				2	26
friends	1		15	12	3
colleagues			6	7	14
Alsatian visitors	9	6	9	2	5
others		2	1	2	5

Alsatian is rarely spoken with the younger generation, i.e., children and grandchildren, which confirms a completion of the break in transmission and language shift to English in the younger generation. The most frequent conversation partners are friends and Alsatian visitors by a significant margin. Responses to the question investigating its current practical value shown in Figure 1 provide additional insight into speaker perceptions of the heritage variety (more than one answer per respondent was permissible).

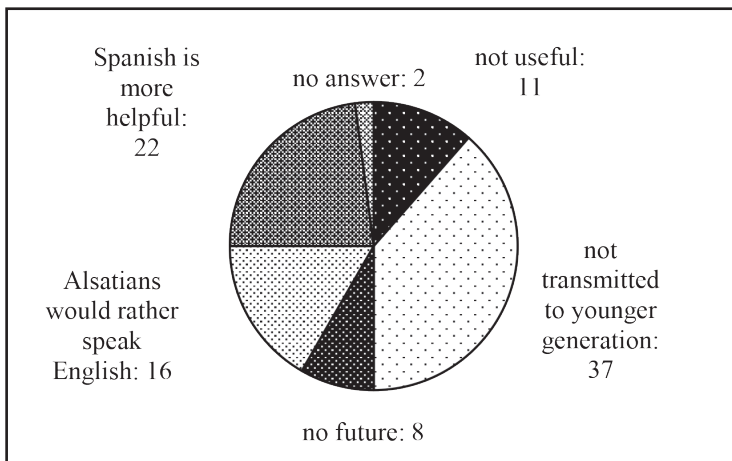


Figure 1: “Why do you think Alsatian is spoken less these days? (Roesch 2012: 183)

Their answers point to an inadequacy and outdatedness of Texas Alsatian as “not useful” and having “no future.”

However, a small, but significant reversal of this self-stigmatization of their language began in the 1970s with the initiation of a Sister-City exchange between Castroville in Medina County, Texas, and the Upper Rhine Alsatian town of Eguisheim, France. In 1975, a church leader and a Texas Alsatian ex-mayor of Castroville initiated a trip to the “Old Country” in the spirit of visiting the villages of their ancestors. The group of twenty-five travelers was welcomed with such interest and enthusiasm that they extended an invitation to the French Alsatians to visit Castroville. Only months later, a group of over three hundred French Alsatians arrived in Castroville, which set a chain of events into motion that still defines the Castroville community and deeply influenced the perception of their language as a viable, living language rather than “old,” “not useful,” with “no future.”

The frequent mutual visits between Castroville and the Alsace, however, revealed certain inadequacies in their Texas Alsatian—mainly vocabulary—but also rekindled a determination to modernize their language (see Examples 8, 9, 10). In Example (8), a Castroville speaker points out differences between the two dialects after hosting European Alsatians, together with the discovery of the Alsatian word *Wàga* for “car.”

- (8) #240 (Roesch interview, 02/2008)

Dàlla Werdr sin ànderscht, will da Werder sin nitt g'sei, wu d'Lit dorüwer kumma sin, nitt g'sei, will mir heisse a cara a cara, un dett heissa sie a Wàga, YOU KNOW? Un Luffschiff. . . un, ja, alle so Dinges, WHAT sie sin nitt g'sei. In àchtzehvierunvierzik sin kà Luffschiff g'sei, kà Autos un so ebbis . . .

‘Their [European Alsatians] words are different, because those words didn’t exist when the people [ancestors] came over, didn’t exist, because we call a car a *cara* and there they call it a *Wàga*, you know? And *Luffschiff*³ . . . yes, and all those things that didn’t exist. In 1844, there weren’t any airplanes, no cars and things like that.’

- (9) #249b (Roesch interview, 08/2007)

But the *Alsess* (Alsatian) that we spoke is still the original, the old—they say it’s real old . . . what was that professor’s name? . . . over there it gets mixed in with the new words like we get new words in English, well they do that, too, over there . . . because they had some words we couldn’t understand . . . the only new words we added were the ones we mixed with English, like “the

fence” . . . So anyway, I learned that the *Kaller* was the cellar . . .
(10) #251 (Roesch 2012: 82)

“There’s some words that I never heard of before, like this first Alsatian we kept . . . we went to church Sunday morning and he wanted to drive my car. And he said, *Das isch a grossi Blachboxa* (‘that is a big tin box’). He called it a big tin box, you know. Anyway, he drove it and we got to the corner and he said, *Wu isch d’Bramsa* (‘where is the brake’)? Well, he was talking about the *brake*. I’d never heard that word before.”

A concluding questionnaire item illustrates that Texas Alsatian speakers not only acquired current Alsatian words for many of their English substitutions, but also a renewed respect for their language. They discovered that Alsatian was historically one of the oldest languages in Germany and that it was a living and viable language in the French Alsace. Respondents were asked to choose from three answers to complete the statement, “Alsatian is. . . . Choices shown in Figure 2 were: (a) a French dialect; (b) a German dialect; or (c) its own language.

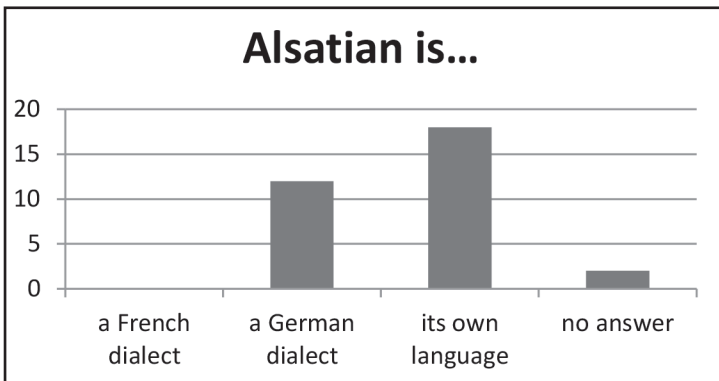


Figure 2: Alsatian is . . . (Roesch 2012: 173)

This heightened awareness of the status of their heritage variety as a language—not a dialect—is very different from comments prefacing this discussion.

This Sister-City relationship is not unique to Medina County, Texas. These partnerships exist in many states and have played an important role in the perception of heritage languages as still viable and useful. In Indiana, for example, small towns such as Jasper and Ferdinand have formed partnerships with their ancestral European villages where the same ancestral variety is still spoken. Interviews with speakers in these communities in 2015-16 confirm

that contact with this European “home,” i.e., Pfaffenweiler, Baden (Jasper), has been a positive and linguistically revitalizing experience. Indiana participants reported surprise when they discovered that their European partners spoke like they did, and viewed these visits as an opportunity to modernize their language.

7. Summary

Although the conditions in which these heritage varieties continue to exist is quite different for those still spoken in Germany, heritage speakers in the U.S. identify several of the same stigmatized elements for their variety as Davies and Langer (2006) found for European Germans. The three motives for stigmatization both groups shared were: (1) archaic, (2) regionally (or locally) restricted, and (3) imported from foreign influence (in this case, words borrowed from English). For German-American heritage speakers, these stigmatized elements were mostly related to vocabulary rather than certain structures.¹⁴ Recent visits to and from Germany also revealed inadequacies in the heritage variety and reinforced perception of the heritage variety as “old” and “incorrect.” This self-stigmatization appears to be common to many German heritage varieties throughout the U.S. However, encounters with native German speakers in Europe have also provided heritage speakers with a new and positive perception of their variety that has provided them with new language partners and motivated them to modernize their vocabulary.

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Notes

¹ ‘We don’t speak correct German.’ During the translation item portion, participants often ask *Isch das richtig?* ‘is that right?’ and think that the vocabulary they use is not necessarily correct.

² Pennsylvania German is a present-day exception to this, as it is experiencing a population growth and, due to the size and diversity of its speakers, is not specifically addressed here. See Loudon (2016) for a comprehensive sociolinguistic description of the development and growth of this 17th century immigrant variety.

³ Johannessen & Laake (2015) examine the heritage language American Norwegian in relation to remarks that it is old to find out which aspects of the language may be considered archaic. They compare it with European Norwegian and conclude that “American Norwegian is archaic . . . when it comes to vocabulary. The grammar is more or less the same (2015: 312).”

⁴ German immigrant varieties were brought from many areas outside of present-day Germany, especially from Eastern Europe.

⁵ The participant explained later that Grandfather F. was from Hamburg.

⁶ This only partially represents a large body of (socio-) linguistic studies on German immigrant dialects conducted in the 20th century. Examples of earlier studies include Louden's (e.g., 1993) publications on Pennsylvania German, Born (1994) on Michigan East Franconian, and Mertens (1994) on Iowa Low German.

⁷ For example, some communities in Texas remained non-English monolingual into the early 20th century (Heinen 1982).

⁸ For an informed historical perspective on German dialectology and language diversity, cf. Langer & Davies (2005), Niebaum & Macha (2014), Pavlenko (2014), etc.

⁹ To confuse the matter more, “high” and “low” is also used in diglossia, a type of bilingualism in two unrelated languages where “high” denotes a highly codified or high-prestige variety versus a second “low” variety or dialect (Fishman 1967). An example of this would be standard French (H) and the Germanic Alsatian dialect (L) in France.

¹⁰ cf. Boas (2009) on stigmatization in some Texas varieties.

¹¹ Only 31 responded to the question shown in Table 2.

¹² Most speakers' parents and grandparents are no longer living.

¹³ An archaic term designating a dirigible, which is used in Texas Alsatian for an airplane

¹⁴ As mentioned in Section 1, German-American heritage speakers do not know their language grammatically and thus cannot identify specific grammatical structures, such as the periphrastic genitive.

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