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When is a Dissertation not a Dissertation?: On Eikel 1954¹

Fred Eikel, Jr. (1909–67)² was the first scholar to investigate Texas German extensively. He focused on New Braunfels German (still the best-studied variety of Texas German), which is spoken in New Braunfels, Texas (approximately 30 miles northeast of San Antonio). New Braunfels German was in fact Eikel’s native language (Eikel 1954: iv). Eikel’s most important contribution in this regard is his 1954 study, “The New Braunfels German Dialect,” which documents New Braunfels German as it was spoken in the early 1950s. Eikel (1954) was never published in its entirety, although a number of its findings eventually appeared in a series of shorter articles, e.g. Eikel (1966a, 1966b, 1967). It remains a foundational work on Texas German, as it is the first of three large-scale studies of Texas German—the other two being Gilbert (1972) and the Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP; www.tgdp.org), founded in 2001 by Hans C. Boas. Both Gilbert (1972) and the TGDP use Eikel’s data as a diachronic base for their own investigations (as do numerous other studies). Despite its importance in the field, the circumstances surrounding Eikel (1954) remain murky: it was intended to be Eikel’s dissertation at Johns Hopkins University (hereafter JHU), but was never accepted as a dissertation. The following note therefore sketches the circumstances surrounding Eikel (1954), in an attempt both to clarify the situation and to bring it to the attention of scholars interested in Texas German, German-American studies, and the history of linguistics. It is based largely on an examination of Eikel’s student file from JHU. (Eikel’s student file unfortunately does not contain all the information that we would like to have about his situation, but it suffices for this note.) It should also be pointed out at the outset that this note does not offer a complete assessment of Eikel’s work on Texas German and its place in the history of linguistics and of German Stud-

ies. Such a study remains a desideratum; this note is preliminary to that larger project. We first sketch the background to the topic before offering our own appraisal of the situation.

Eikel (1954) is cited widely in the relevant literature, e.g., in Gilbert (1964), Van Ness (1990), Salmons & Lucht (2006), and Boas (2009). However, the citations vary: Gilbert (1964: 149 fn 1) cites it as “(multilithed)”; Van Ness (1990: 152) as “Diss., Johns Hopkins U.”; Salmons & Lucht (2006: 186) as “Multilith.”; and Boas (2009: 318) as “Thesis, Johns Hopkins Univ.” The title page of Eikel (1954) identifies it as “A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Philosophy of the Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.” To complicate the issue further, Eikel never cites the earlier work in any of the studies extracted from Eikel (1954), stating only that the later papers are “Copyright 1954 by Fred Eikel, Jr.” (Eikel 1966a: 5 fn *; Eikel 1966b: 254 fn *; Eikel 1967: 83 fn *). To continue with the complications, searches of Worldcat (www.worldcat.org), conducted by James Stimpert, Senior Reference Archivist at JHU in August 2017 and by Marc Pierce on October 16, 2017, revealed that eight university libraries, including the University of Texas at Austin, Emory University, and the Philipps-Universität Marburg in Germany, as well as the Library of Congress, have copies, but JHU does not. Finally, several searches failed to turn up any record of anyone named Fred Eikel receiving a Ph.D. from JHU.

In an attempt to clarify the situation, Hans C. Boas contacted the JHU library in August 2017. His inquiry was referred to James Stimpert, who responded (e-mail of August 28, 2017), that he “did not find this dissertation—or the author—in our online catalog and [Eikel] does not appear in our Commencement programs for the span 1941–1960.” In light of the WorldCat record on Eikel (1954), Stimpert further commented (e-mail of August 28, 2017) that

Ordinarily, I would say that this means our library copy must have been lost at some point and the record subsequently purged from our catalog. But that would not remove the entry from the Commencement program. To make things even more interesting, we do apparently have a student record for Eikel in the Records of the Department of English.

A further e-mail from Stimpert (also sent on August 28, 2017) indicated that “I can tell you that, to the best of my knowledge and based on information contained in his student file, Fred Eikel does not hold a PhD from the Johns Hopkins University,” and briefly sketched his account of this development.

Upon the request of Marc Pierce, Stimpert provided us with a copy of Eikel's JHU student file. (Because Eikel died in 1967, any statute limiting access to his student file would have expired.)

Eikel's JHU student file sheds further light on the issue. Eikel's connection with JHU began on August 29, 1949, when he applied for admission to "the School of Higher Studies" there (letter from Eikel to Stella S. Ivey, Secretary of the "Executive Committee of the School of Higher Studies" at JHU). According to his application, Eikel held a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin (awarded in 1933 and 1936, respectively), and had also studied at Columbia, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Florida, and at the 1941 Linguistics Society of America Summer Linguistic Institute at the University of North Carolina. His grades were not stellar—in his first year as an undergraduate at the University of Texas he flunked botany, trigonometry, and a course in English literature. More surprisingly, during a later period of study at Texas (1940–42, when he was apparently not a degree candidate), Eikel flunked "Outline History of the English Language" and received a C in "Elements of Germanic Philology." His grades in his other academic programs are similar. Even for an era without grade inflation, these grades are surprisingly low for someone in Eikel's situation (i.e., someone who intended to pursue graduate studies).

Eikel's application contained letters of recommendation from Thomas Pyles (then at the University of Florida; but previously at the University of Oklahoma, where he had known Eikel), Lee Hollander and R. H. Griffith (both at the University of Texas at Austin). Hollander's handwritten letter consists of only two sentences, one saying that he "highly recommend[ed]" Eikel for admission to JHU, and the other describing Eikel as "a person of maturity and fully capable of deriving advantage of the opportunities offered" (letter from Hollander to Stella S. Ivey at JHU, September 6, 1949). Griffith's letter, also handwritten, is equally brief and somewhat equivocal, stating that "My recommendation is that you admit him" (letter from Griffith to Ivey, September 25, 1949). Pyles's letter is both typed and more positive, but not glowing. He writes that Eikel had done "good, if not distinguished work" for him at Oklahoma. He also noted that Eikel "has some difficulty in the oral presentation of research material," which Pyles blamed on Eikel's bilingualism. Pyles concluded that "I know of absolutely nothing that would explain the vicissitudes that he has apparently suffered, and see no reason why he should not do distinguished work in an atmosphere like that of the Hopkins" (letter from Pyles to the Executive Committee of the School of Higher Studies at JHU, August 29, 1949). We do not know what the "vicissitudes" referred to by Pyles actually were, which is unfortunate, as it would have helped clarify the situation further.

At that point, Eikel had published about half a dozen short pieces on linguistics (e.g., Eikel 1946, 1949) and had extensive teaching experience. He had taught English and German at various levels at various institutions, ranging from an unnamed junior high school in New Braunfels, Texas (1931-35) to the University of Oklahoma (1947-49) and the University of Florida (1949-50). His previous academic appointments had been at the rank of Instructor, except for a year (1946-47) as Associate Professor of English at North Texas Agricultural College in Arlington Texas (now the University of Texas at Arlington), and it seems clear that Eikel saw the PhD as his ticket to a more permanent position. Presumably Eikel's other achievements outweighed his mediocre grades and letters of recommendation and led to his acceptance at JHU.³

Eikel's application to JHU was accepted on September 9, 1949, but for reasons that are not entirely clear (most likely financial), he did not begin his studies there until 1950. Eikel progressed relatively smoothly through the program—his JHU transcripts show that his performance in his courses was mixed, but he completed the various requirements steadily. On January 14, 1953, Eikel submitted the necessary form to “present [himself] for the Ph.D. in June 1953,” i.e., to defend his dissertation. “June 1953” is crossed out on the form and has been replaced by “Oct. 1953,” indicating that there were some problems with the dissertation. This notwithstanding, Arno Schirokauer, by then chair of both the department and of Eikel's dissertation committee, signed the form on April 9, 1953; and Eikel's application to defend his dissertation was approved by the administration on May 19, 1953. The next relevant document in the file is a short letter, dated May 20, 1953, sent to Eikel at the German Department at JHU by Elizabeth Paynter, then “Executive Secretary” of the “Group Council” at JHU, notifying him that his application to defend his dissertation in October 1953 had been approved. At this point, then, it seems that everything was in order and that Eikel was on track to defend his dissertation.

A series of letters exchanged by Paynter and Eikel over the next year, though, reveal that there were some major problems. A letter from Paynter to Eikel, dated September 22, 1953, and sent to Eikel's New Braunfels address, suggests that Schirokauer had lost some faith in Eikel's dissertation, as in it Paynter asks Eikel for “an idea when [he] expect[s] to take [his] final orals in connection with [his] PhD” (letter from Paynter to Eikel, 9/22/53). At this point, Paynter had already gotten in touch with Schirokauer, who “suggests that February [1954] might be the more appropriate date than October [1953],” but Paynter wanted “a definite opinion” from Eikel on the matter (letter from Paynter to Eikel, 9/22/53).

Eikel's response, dated October 19, 1953, and sent from Atlanta,⁴ equivocates. Eikel writes that when he received Paynter's letter, he "still did not know if [he] had an acceptable dissertation" (letter from Eikel to Paynter, 10/19/53)—which suggests that he had since then been in communication with Schirokauer—and that given the delays involved in having the dissertation typed and sent out on time, he would not be able to defend in October 1953. Eikel then raises some further issues (e.g., the difficulty of obtaining a typewriter with keys for various letters of the IPA), and never actually proposes a defense date, suggesting that he had lost some confidence in his work. Paynter's response to Eikel, dated 11 November 1953, resolved these concerns (e.g., by telling Eikel that he could insert any diacritics he needed to by hand in ink), and reminded him of various administrative matters (e.g., the deadline for filing his dissertation [January 9, 1954], etc.). The next items in the file are letters between the two of them to schedule his defense for May 1954 (letter from Eikel to Paynter, April 3, 1954; letter from Paynter to Eikel, April 6, 1954; and letter from Eikel to Paynter, April 18, 1954). The bottom line at this point was that Eikel's defense was scheduled for May 27, 1954, despite what seems to be growing frustration on everyone's part.

Two additional documents, both dated April 26, 1954, confirm this view. One is a form signed by Arno Schirokauer, certifying that Eikel had completed the German Department's requirements for the Ph.D. degree and that the department recommended that it be awarded to him. The other is a letter to the Group Council, presumably written by Schirokauer, and signed by Schirokauer and Kemp Malone (another linguist at JHU and then a member of Eikel's dissertation committee). This letter recommends the acceptance of Eikel's dissertation, describing it as a "competent and sufficiently detailed description of Texas German as spoken in the community of New Braunfels." The letter sums up their evaluation of Eikel's dissertation as follows: "Mr. Eikel develops a sound method in the presentation of the properties of his chosen dialect, and gives a satisfactory description of a language exposed to coalescence with the culturally superior idiom of English." We return to the impact of this letter below.

Eikel's defense duly took place on May 27, 1954, and he failed, by a vote of six to two. (The handwriting on the form is difficult to read, but that is our best assessment of the voting.) The circumstances are puzzling and macabre: Schirokauer, who to all indications was the chair of Eikel's committee, had died unexpectedly on May 24, 1954 (Stammler 1956: 1), but Eikel's defense still took place, only three days later, with Kemp Malone as the chair. We return to this issue below as well.

Eikel reacted with understandable petulance. In a letter to Paynter, dated September 27, 1954, and sent from New Braunfels, Eikel complained that he

had written to someone unspecified at JHU several months ago,⁵ “asking to be informed as soon as a successor to Dr. Schirokauer has been named,” but without “hear[ing] a word.” He concluded by asking “what sort of a recourse the Group Council is going to extend to me in regard to my final examination” (letter from Eikel to Paynter, 27 September 1954).

Paynter’s response was swift and terse. In a letter dated September 30, 1954, she informed Eikel that Schirokauer’s successor had not been named, and then quoted the appropriate Group Council regulation to him. According to the rules, candidates who failed their final oral exams for the doctorate could retake them once, if their department or committee recommended that, and that the retake had to be completed within five years of the first exam. This indicated that Eikel could retake his PhD oral exam no later than May 27, 1959.

The next batch of relevant material in Eikel’s file is from the fall of 1957 and is concerned with Eikel’s application for a job at State Teachers College in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania (now East Stroudsburg University). Of relevance here is a letter from Francis B. McGarry, then Dean of Instruction at State Teachers College, to Irene M. Davis in the Registrar’s Office at JHU. In this letter, McGarry wrote that Eikel “informs us that he has passed all requirements for the doctorate but that the chairman of his committee has died and he is experiencing much difficulty in finding a new chairman” (letter from McGarry to Davis, November 8, 1957). McGarry continued:

I am wondering whether you could confirm this explanation of his status as a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins. We are trying to utilize his services but we are finding it difficult to establish his academic rank. It would help if you could tell me whether he is still a candidate for the doctorate at Johns Hopkins and whether it is likely he will be able to complete his work within the next year.

A final memorandum from the Registrar’s Office at JHU on this topic, dated November 13, 1957, reads: “Miss Davis telephoned Dean McGarry of State Teachers College at Stroudsburg, in answer to his letter of November 8, 1957. She told him during the conversation that Fred Eikel, Jr. had taken and failed his oral examination.” No further documentation is available on the topic.

The final relevant documents in Eikel’s file address his request to postpone his retake of his oral examination. His deadline, according to JHU’s regulations, was May 27, 1959. The first relevant document in his file addressing this issue is a letter from Benjamin A. Ring, “Executive Secretary” of the “Group Council” of the “Faculty of Philosophy,” dated December 1, 1959, and informing Eikel that his “request for postponement of [his] fi-

nal oral examination until the mid-year examination period” had been approved (letter from Ring to Eikel, December 1, 1959). This was presumably on medical grounds, as Ring wished Eikel “a rapid recovery,” but this cannot be confirmed, as Eikel’s letter on the topic is not in the file.

However, Eikel was not able to defend his dissertation at the “mid-year examination period” either. The next document in the file is a letter from H. Bentley Class, Chair of the Group Council of the Faculty of Philosophy, to Harold S. Jantz, then chair of the German Department, dated March 8, 1960. This letter notes that Eikel had requested another postponement of his defense and that the Group Council had already given Eikel two such postponements. The letter passed the buck to the German Department; Jantz was told that the Council had decided to “request a formal recommendation from your department on the matter” (letter from Class to Jantz, March 8, 1960). Moreover, if the German Department approved Eikel’s request for a postponement, it would be “a final postponement” (letter from Class to Jantz, March 8, 1960; underlining in original). If the German Department did not approve Eikel’s request, then his candidacy would be terminated. Finally, Class said that “I have been asked to make it clear to you that the Council will be favorably disposed toward a recommendation for a final postponement” (letter from Class to Jantz, March 8, 1960). This suggests to us that the university hoped that Eikel would be able to defend his dissertation successfully, which would solve everyone’s problems: Eikel would have his doctorate and would hopefully be able to find a better job, and the university would not have to devote any further time or resources to him.

The German Department did indeed approve a final extension for Eikel, as stated in a letter from Ring to Eikel, dated April 4, 1960. The tone of the letter is frustrated; Ring remarks that the Group Council had “devoted considerable time to a discussion of your letter . . . indicating that you would like a further postponement of your Ph.D. orals” (letter from Ring to Eikel, April 4, 1960). The letter informs Eikel of the conditions for this postponement (Eikel had to submit a formal written request to the Group Council and take his exam between May 23 and May 27 of that year), and then states flatly that

Since you have already been granted several postponements, it is necessary to make it quite explicit that if such an extension is requested and granted, it will be the final extension. The Council recognizes the difficulties you have faced, but at the same time it feels that it cannot permit a candidacy to be extended indefinitely. Unless it receives a request for postponement, therefore, it will regard your candidacy as automatically terminated, and in no case will it consider a postpone-

ment beyond the next examination period (letter from Ring to Eikel, April 4, 1960; underlining in original).

Eikel duly defended his dissertation for a second time, on May 26, 1960, with the same result: he failed his exam, this time by a vote of 7 to 2. His candidacy was terminated (although no formal notice of such appears in the file), and he never graduated from JHU (as Eikel himself admits in a 1965 letter also in his file).

Having summarized the events that led up to Eikel's unsuccessful defenses, we are now in a position to answer the question of how it should be cited. Since it was never accepted as a dissertation, it should not be cited as such. But the citation question is a minor one, compared to the bigger issue of how this happened. Although the following remarks must remain speculative, in light of the incomplete documentation of the situation available in Eikel's file, we attribute the entire fiasco to the following factors.

First, the death of Arno Schirokauer, then Eikel's dissertation adviser, obviously played a crucial role. The occasionally sparse documentation suggests that Schirokauer guided Eikel through his studies at JHU, and that Schirokauer's death robbed Eikel of his main supporter and advocate. In addition, we are stunned that a student was allowed to defend a dissertation three days after the adviser's death and strongly suspect that Eikel was in no state of mind to do so. Second, despite Schirokauer's support of Eikel, we believe that his letter of April 26, 1954, also played a crucial role. Recall that the letter described Eikel's dissertation as a "competent and sufficiently detailed description of Texas German as spoken in the community of New Braunfels." The letter further indicates that "[a]lthough Mr. Eikel's findings are less spectacular than those of scholars dealing with German dialects within Pennsylvania, this is not because of ineptitude on his part," but is instead due to the different times when speakers of Pennsylvania German and speakers of Texas German came to the New World. That is, Pennsylvania German speakers had settled in North America before German was fully standardized, but speakers of Texas German arrived in North America after German was fully standardized and when dialects were fading in Germany.⁶ The letter damns Eikel with faint praise: if there were any doubt about the quality of Eikel's dissertation, and if his two main advisers describe it as "competent" and "satisfactory," it is not surprising that other members of the committee would reject it as not being sufficiently polished or of sufficiently high quality. The work is also startlingly short, only 77 pages, which may have reinforced this impression.

This leads us to a different issue, namely the then-prevailing attitudes towards the study of American-German dialects. We suspect that New Braunfels German was simply viewed as not being worthy of a JHU dissertation by

some members of the committee—a belief reinforced by some experiences of Glenn Gilbert during his own graduate studies and early academic career. Lastly, we believe that some of this was due to Eikel's personality. His letters are sometimes prickly. While at least some of this must have been due to his increasing frustration with the situation and with his life in general, they also give the impression of a somewhat combative man who was very much set in his ways when he started graduate school (recall that he was 41 when he did so). This can be a poor formula for academic success.

Eikel's 1954 work may not have won him a doctorate from Johns Hopkins, but as noted above, it is a classic in the field. We anticipate that it will remain so.

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Notes

¹ We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of James Stimpert, Senior Reference Archivist at Johns Hopkins University, who corresponded with us on several occasions about the status of Eikel (1954) and ultimately provided us with a copy of Eikel's JHU student file. We thank also the anonymous referees for YGAS and Bill Keel for his assistance in his role as editor.

² "Frederick Adolph Eikel, Jr." according to his University of Texas transcripts, but in all other sources he is referred to as "Fred Eikel, Jr." and we therefore use that name here. Given the political climate in Texas for much of Eikel's lifetime, it is entirely unsurprising that he went by "Fred Eikel, Jr."

³ We suspect that it was Arno Schirokauer, later to become Eikel's dissertation adviser, who championed his application, although there is no conclusive evidence in favor of this idea.

⁴ Eikel had taken up a new position at Georgia Tech, which explains his somewhat delayed response.

⁵ There is no indication to whom Eikel had written. He does state explicitly that the letter had not been to Paynter, but does not say to whom it had been.

⁶ This is our reading of Schirokauer's comment. Schirokauer's reasoning here is unclear to us. It is also unclear to us what he means by "less spectacular."

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