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Pennsylvania German in Lyndon, Kansas: Variation, Change, and Decline

Community Background

In 2001, ten families from an Amish-Mennonite—or “Beachy Amish”—community in Kentucky moved to Lyndon, Kansas, and established a new community, which also created a new Pennsylvania German (hereafter: PG) speech island in Kansas. During the few years since it was founded, the community has continued to grow steadily, drawing in families from other parts of the country. This mixture of people from different areas has created an environment where variants of PG are brought in close contact with one another, but also brings in members who do not speak PG. This has led to a shift in how some members speak PG, with several informants reporting changes in word choice since joining the community. Along with clear signs of change, and despite the community’s growth and an influx of new PG speakers, there are signs of decline in the language. Although both internal and external factors are at work, internal influences appear to have the greatest impact on this decline. Many informants spoke of increasingly less usage with each successive generation and also reported increasingly fewer opportunities to use the language in the community.

Methodology

Informants

In the summer of 2007, dialect interviews were conducted in Lyndon to collect and analyze samples of spoken PG. By the time the interviews were taken, the community had grown to twenty-five families. Only about half of the members spoke PG and their degree of ability varied widely. Most members were raised in Amish-Mennonite communities, but several were originally from Old Order Amish communities. A total of five interviews—two group interviews and three individual interviews—were conducted involving

seventeen informants. Of these, eight were over the age of eighteen and the remaining nine were eighteen and under. The youngest informant was seven years old while the oldest interviewed was fifty-nine. Though seventeen may seem a small number—about fifteen percent of the total population—since only about half the community speaks PG, these seventeen informants represent approximately twenty-five percent of the total speaking population.

Tools used

Interviews were conducted using a variety of tools to elicit a wide range of spoken responses from the informants. The first tool used was a dialect questionnaire that was developed by researchers at the University of Kansas. The questionnaire consists of twenty-six items, each being a single word; a set of related words, such as the numbers from one to ten or the days of the week; or simple sentences. The second tool used was an English translation of the Wenker sentences that had been translated by researchers at the University of Kansas. Other tools used were a set of pictures taken from a picture dictionary showing people engaged in various activities and a set of pictures taken from several coloring books made by a conservative Mennonite community in Mexico, which show farm scenes and pictures of everyday life in such a community. Use of these pictures allowed for unscripted language used within a specific context that could be compared to the responses of other informants. Finally, several informants volunteered samples of free speech, including humorous anecdotes, descriptions of events in the informant's life, comparison of life in Kansas to life in another state, songs, rhymes, and tongue twisters. This allowed for the greatest amount of freedom in language use, as the context was not constrained. The lack of a specific context made translation and comparison difficult, but these samples provided many useful and interesting examples of language use.

Conducting the interviews

Although the questionnaires were intended for individual interviews, I found they worked well for group interviews as well. During the group interviews, all informants took turns responding to successive items on the questionnaires. If the other informants agreed on the response, the group continued to the next item. If another informant had an alternative response, however, that response was recorded as well and all variations were annotated in the transcripts. I felt group interviews were significant as they provided an opportunity for spontaneous interaction between informants. Often, information was brought out that would not normally be provided through the questionnaires during an individual interview, such as regional variations

used by members of the same family or language changes that have occurred since the family moved to Lyndon.

During all interviews, informants were given a copy of each questionnaire, I would read each item to them in English, the informants provided an oral translation or approximation of the item in PG, and their responses were recorded on digital tape for later analysis. Informants were first asked to give responses from the dialect questionnaire and then from the Wenker sentences. After the informants completed both questionnaires, they were given the sets of pictures and asked to describe what they saw and were encouraged to give their own thoughts about the pictures. The coloring book pictures were especially useful for eliciting responses from the younger informants, though the adults provided many interesting observations as well.

Phonology

Phonological features of PG in this community tended to agree with those features noted in other studies. For example, Mark Loudon and Robert Page, in discussing the phonology of a present-day Old Order Amish community in Lancaster County, observe: “/r/ and /l/ have the same phonetic realizations as in American English” (p. 1389). As examples, they provide the PG / AE pairs *recht* [ɹɛçt] / *wrecked* [ɹɛkt] and *Heisli* [haisli] / *nicely* [naisli] (p. 1389). These realizations were observed among all informants in Lyndon as well with no notable exceptions. Loudon and Page also report that final devoicing is preserved in this same Lancaster community, for example: *Bilder* [bildɐ] and *Bild* [bilt] (p. 1389). This same phenomenon also occurs consistently among the Lyndon informants.

An interesting phenomenon noted in Lyndon was variation between /w/ and /v/ in the realization of certain words. For example, some informants realized the PG word for “water” as [wasɐ], whereas other informants realized this same word as [vasɐ]. Similar variation was noted in the PG for “when/if” with most informants preferring [wɛn] while some realized it as [vɛn]. This phenomenon was not limited to words with these phonemes in initial position. The PG word for “sister” was realized either as [ʃwɛstɐ] or [ʃvɛstɐ]. Most informants realized the simple past of “to be” as [waɪ], with one informant switching between [waɪ] and [vaɪ]. Although each informant showed preference for one or the other realization in each of these examples, none were consistent in using only one of the two.

Another interesting phenomenon observed in this community was apocope in the first person singular pronoun in certain linguistic environments. All informants but one realized this pronoun as [ɪç], with the one exception consistently realizing it as [ɪk]. Whenever this pronoun appeared before /h/,

however, it was consistently realized as [ɪ]. For example, in responding to the last phrase of Wenker sentence eight (I believe I have walked them off), five of five informants responded with [ɪç glap ɪ hap sɪ apglɔfə]. Informants were also consistent in realizing the pronoun in this manner in the phrase “I have a headache” (item six on the dialect questionnaire): [ɪ hap kəp veɪ]. Informants were less consistent when the pronoun appeared prior to /s/. In the first part of Wenker sentence eleven, for example, only three of five informants realized “I am going to hit you” as: [ɪ sel di ʃla]. Two informants realized “If I just” as [wɛn ɪ juʃ], showing the same phenomenon before /j/. Only one of the two was consistent in doing this, however. More data and investigation are needed to better understand this phenomenon, but it is clear from the present data that it occurs consistently prior to /h/, possibly because of the similarities in articulation between it and /ç/.

Grammar

Verbs and Tenses

Table 1 shows the present tense conjugation observed for the verbs “to be” and “to have.” Often, the final [-t] of the second person, both singular and plural, was dropped, resulting in [bɪʃ], [sɪn], [hɑʃ], and [hɛn], but this was not consistent among informants. Though these two verbs are the only ones for which I have complete conjugations, the conjugation for regular verbs can be approximated from forms present in my corpus and is given in Table 2. For the past tense, the only preterit observed was for the verb [saɪ] “to be”: [wɑɪ] (sing.) and [wɑɪə] (plural). All other uses of the past tense were formed in the perfect using [saɪ] and [habə] as auxiliaries.

Though the present tense was used frequently, a progressive construction was used far more often to indicate current action. This phenomenon is consistent with usage observed by Janet Fuller, who reports use of a dative preposition “am” plus infinitive. This construction differs from the American English progressive (“to be” plus a participle), which, according to Fuller, shows the German character of the PG progressive (Fuller 1996, 503). In Lyndon, the preposition used was either [an(ə)] or simply—and most often—[n]:

	“to be” [saɪ]		“to have” [habə]	
	singular	plural	singular	plural
1st Person	[bɪn]	[sɪn]	[hap]	[hɛn]
2nd Person	[bɪʃt]	[sɪnt]	[hɑʃt]	[hɛnt]
3rd Person	[ɪs]	[sɪn]	[hat]	[hɛn]

Table 1: present tense conjugation of “to be” and “to have.”

	singular	plural
1st Person	-	[-ə]
2nd Person	[-ft]	[-ət]
3rd Person	[-t]	[-ə]

Table 2: Regular verb conjugation.

- (1) [ɛʌ ɪs sei hɛnt n vɛʃə] "He is washing his hands."
 [vo bɪʃ du n geɪə] "Where are you going?"
 [də hunt ɪs də mæn anə watʃə] "The dog is watching the man."

Cases

As may be expected, there was no evidence for a genitive case in Lyndon. Phrases designed to elicit genitive responses were realized using a particular construct that follows the pattern *owner + possessive pronoun + item possessed*. The following examples illustrate this construct:

- (2) [sɛl wɑɪ maɪ nɔkba sei ʃaɪə] "That was my neighbor's barn."
 [dɪ saɪ ɪə ʃwanz] "the pigs' tails"
 [dɪ fɪa ɪ blats] "the woman's place"

This differs slightly from the typical construct that is occurring with increasing frequency in spoken Standard German in that it shows no dative case markings prior to the noun indicating the owner.

In all, in fact, of the corpus, no dative case markings were observed whatsoever. Silke Van Ness reports that PG speakers in Pennsylvania have lost dative case markings, while older speakers in Ohio, at the time of her study, still marked for the dative (Van Ness 1996, 12). Fuller, in one of her earlier studies, reports a trend toward convergence of the dative and accusative cases (Fuller 1996, 503), and in a later study published in 1999 observes: "Plain [PG] . . . has undergone the loss of dative case markings in all contexts" (Fuller 1999, 41). The data from Lyndon would seem to agree with this last observation. This is most clearly seen in the lack of differentiation in pronouns in different cases:

- (3) [fɪ mɪç] "for me"
 [gɛt mɪç də bux] "get me the book"
 [sək daɪ ʃwɛʃtə] "tell your sister"
 [fɪ daɪ mæm] "for your mother"

This shows there was no distinction made between pronouns as direct or indirect objects or as objects of prepositions.

The same phenomenon is seen in articles, as shown in the following examples:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| (4) [ɛv ɪz nai ɪn dɪ ʃtat n geɪə] | “he is going into town |
| [ɛv vont ɪn dɪ ʃtat] | “he lives in town” |
| [ɛv ɪz nai ɪnz kalt vasə gəfalə] | “he fell in(to) the cold water” |
| [də an.ɪ waɪə ʃʊn ɪnz bɛt] | “the others were already in bed” |

The evidence seems to point, then, to a convergence of the accusative and dative cases into a single objective case.

Lexicon

A total of 646 PG words were collected from the interviews. Some interesting lexical examples are given here:

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|---------------|------------------|
| (5) [bɪzkats] | skunk |
| [frija] | spring (season) |
| [ʃputja] | autumn |
| [hʌmli] | calf |
| [piplɪn] | chicks |
| [hɪŋglhas] | henhouse |
| [sʌdə/sadə] | somewhat, rather |

Twenty four of the PG words collected were variations of the same word, where different informants gave different PG words for the same meaning. Some of these variations are shown here:

- | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|----------------|
| (6) <u>PG 1</u> | <u>PG 2</u> | <u>English</u> |
| [lavə] | [bletə] | leaves |
| [anəʃtas] | [ʃʊŋʃ] | otherwise |
| [aləma] | [ɪmʌ] | always |
| [oni] | [mɪtaʊs] | without |

Also collected were 152 English words, fifty-eight for which at least one other informant gave a PG equivalent, showing the coexistence of loan words and native words for the same meaning within the same speech island. All informants interspersed their PG with English, with the younger speakers doing so more often than the older speakers.

Discussion

Variations in word choices and in pronunciation of the same words seem to indicate the coexistence of different variants of PG within the same speech island. Given the relatively recent founding of the community and the fact

that it has seen a steady influx of PG speakers from different regions, it is possible that no specific variant has yet become dominant within the community. If this is the case, then there is likely little or no pressure for PG speakers to adapt their speech when they come into the community.

There is, however, direct evidence of change due to internal influences that may indicate a shift toward one variant, or the creation of a unique one. One family that was interviewed had moved to Lyndon from Tennessee within the previous year. The family reported that, before they moved, all member of the family said [onɪ] for "without," and this was the word used in their previous community. Shortly after moving to Lyndon, the children began to use the word [mɪtaus] instead, while the parents continue to use the word [onɪ]. According to the children of this family, they learned it from other PG speaking children in the school, and [mɪtaus] does appear to be the dominant word in the community.

The clear English influence in the word [mɪtaus] is indicative of another trend within this community: the increasing use of English words or English-influenced words. This may show a slow process of convergence with or a shift toward English. As mentioned earlier, all informants interspersed their PG with English loan words. Most of these words are short conjunctions or particles and the informants would use them regularly even though in many cases the speakers knew—and sometimes would also use, even in the same discourse—the PG equivalents of these words. The most commonly used English words were "about," "really/real," "but" and "anyhow." An interesting combination of English and PG that was observed is in certain set phrases. These expressions are typically two words, with one being an English word and the other a PG word to form the whole phrase. Examples include: "instead fon" (instead of), "any epas" (any one), and "sure genug" (sure enough).

In general, the younger generation tends to use more English than their parents and most adults admitted to knowing less PG than their parents. An example that occurred in one family was how different family members translated the word "sleet." The parents both used the PG word [kɪslɪ] whereas all of their children simply used "sleet."

The main motivations for this increasing shift to English seem to be a lack of opportunity to use PG within the community, and attitudes about the language as it relates to their identity. As mentioned earlier, only about half the community speaks PG, and it has seen an increase in the number of members who do not speak PG. This community is also fairly isolated from other PG speaking communities, the nearest being about a two hour drive away. Because of the low percentage of speakers and the community's relative isolation, the same family from Tennessee mentioned before also reports

difficulty in maintaining their knowledge of PG due to fewer opportunities to use it in Lyndon, compared to their previous community.

The general attitude of the community toward PG seems to be consistent with the attitudes noted by Fuller in other Amish-Mennonite communities. In one study, she mentions the social setting of the language as a factor in Matrix Language turnover. She mentions that, for sectarian speakers, as long as a strong identification of PG with their way of life remains, there will not be a complete shift toward English (Fuller 1996, 511). In another study, where she studies this identification in more detail within a Beachy Mennonite community, she notes that the close identification of PG with plainness has been lost and further says, "These speakers acknowledge that it is possible to be Plain and not speak Dutch" (Fuller 2005, 805). My observations of the Lyndon community concur with hers. Unlike the Old Order Amish, the Lyndon Amish-Mennonite community does not try to isolate itself from the larger society, but seeks to interact with it and sees itself as an outreach to the surrounding community. This attitude was made obvious when, after being asked why they moved to Kansas, one of the ministers responded, "To spread the light of the Gospel." Given this view of their community, the use of PG can actually be seen as a barrier to their goals. Community members are in fact careful not to use PG in the presence of people they know do not speak it. That the ability to speak PG is no longer a necessary part of their identity is clear from several factors: church services and official activities are conducted exclusively in English, instruction in the community's private school is conducted solely in English, and those members who do not speak PG feel no compulsion to learn it. An extension of this attitude can be seen in the fact that, in families where only one parent speaks PG, the children do not learn it.

Conclusion

The Lyndon Amish-Mennonite community presents an interesting linguistic situation, where the interaction of PG variants in close contact with each other, changes due to this contact, and overall decline of PG can be seen in one place. Despite several influences that are helping maintain PG usage in the community, such as an occasional influx of PG speakers from other areas, including some who recently came from Old Order communities, and the fact that even young couples are using PG in their homes, the dominant trend is toward decline, especially since PG is no longer seen as a necessary part of their socio-religious identity. How long it will take for PG to completely disappear from this community is uncertain. The youngest informant was seven years old and spoke PG quite well for her age. In families where both parents

speak PG, this is not the exception, but the rule. As long as the community and the Amish-Mennonite way of life remains intact, this fact alone should guarantee that PG will continue to survive for at least a couple more generations and perhaps longer.

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