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Swiss German in Wisconsin:
The Assessment of Changes in Case Marking

The village of New Glarus, which is named for one of the smallest cantons in Switzerland, is located southwest of Madison in Green County, Wisconsin.[1] As Eichhoff (1971, 57) has pointed out, there is no single linguistic entity that might be called Wisconsin German. Swiss German is one of the many individual German dialects ranging from Low German to High Alemannic that have been spoken in the state. Relatively few of these dialects have been the subject of a detailed linguistic study. The present article will give a brief history of settlement and language use in New Glarus, review accounts of changes in case marking in other American German dialects and assess the changes of this type that have occurred in a dialect of Swiss German spoken in New Glarus.

The history of New Glarus and the surrounding area is typical of that of rural nineteenth-century German communities in the Midwest.[2] The village was founded in 1845 by immigrants from Canton Glarus who had left the canton for economic reasons. Immigration reached a peak in 1860 when 446 newcomers arrived to increase the population of New Glarus to 960. In the first twenty years of the settlement the majority of the Swiss settlers came from Glarus, but after this there was little immigration from this source, except again in the 1880s, when Glarus experienced further economic problems. Smaller numbers of immigrants arrived from other Swiss cantons, especially Canton Bern. Swiss settlement eventually spread over most parts of Green County and into neighboring counties. Today, this is a region of dairy farming, in the development of which the Swiss played a major role. Dairy farming was introduced by immigrants from Bern and only taken up by the settlers from Glarus in Wisconsin.

Language use in New Glarus was stable in the nineteenth century. At the turn of the century, English was the language for both everyday and official contacts with non-Swiss and was one of the languages of the

1

school. At that time Standard German was used in the church, the newspaper and the school. Swiss German was still the means of communication of the Swiss among themselves. Standard German was completely replaced by English in the school in 1914, in the newspaper in 1921, and in the church in 1950. At the time of the author's recordings in New Glarus between 1966 and 1972, the ability to speak Standard German or even to read or understand it was rare. The use of Swiss German had declined, too. In the families that came to Wisconsin in the nineteenth century, only the middle and older generations still spoke Swiss German, and, when they did so, they spoke only with family and close friends.

Because of the diversity of Swiss German dialects, the exact origins of the Swiss settlers in New Glarus are important for linguistic studies. The majority of the immigrants came from the villages of the Grosstal and the Kleintal, two valleys in the southern part of the canton. A smaller number, speaking a somewhat different dialect, emigrated from the Mittelland of the canton. Emigrants from other cantons, particularly Canton Bern, can be said to make up a third group. A dialect based on the speech of the Grosstal and Kleintal, the home of the largest group, became the dominant Swiss German dialect in the area. It is the dialect described in this article.

Methods

This study is based on fieldwork carried out by the author in New Glarus in 1966, 1967 and 1972. It thus describes the dialect spoken in the area more than twenty years ago. Already at that time it proved very difficult to find younger speakers of the dialect. Today few speakers of this Glarus dialect remain. In 1966 and 1967, eleven informants completed a slightly revised version of Lester Seifert's Wisconsin German Questionnaire (1946), a collection of more than 700 English sentences grouped according to topic and intended for translation. A shorter questionnaire of the same type was used in 1972 with twelve informants and supplemented by spontaneous spoken material from these twelve speakers and from others. The total number of informants was twenty-eight.

Earlier Studies of Case Marking in American German

It is not surprising that descriptions of American German have dealt particularly with the lexicon, since that is the aspect of language which is most susceptible to change in *Sprachinseln* and other language contact situations. In the area of morphosyntax the marking of cases is a topic that has received some attention. The changes that have occurred in the case systems of different varieties of American German provide an

2

opportunity to examine the role played by English influence, continuing internal developments and other factors in grammatical change.

The investigation of spoken American German almost always involves German dialects rather than the standard language. The study of the changes in case marking requires therefore careful consideration of the different case systems of the original German dialects and of the continuing development of these dialects in Europe. The reduced case systems of German dialects contrast with the more conservative four-case system of modern Standard German. The loss of genitive forms, except for traces, is general in German dialects. Two other major differences from the standard language involve the merger of the masculine nominative and accusative in some parts of speech in the west and southwest of the German-speaking area and the use of accusative or nominative/accusative forms to express former dative functions, especially in the north.[3] All the major types of German case marking systems are represented in North America. Reports of changes in case marking have involved those varieties in which there was a separate dative case form at the time of immigration. The characteristic feature of these developments has been the loss in some way of the dative forms.

The first report of the loss of dative forms in American German was made by Eikel (1949), who found extensive use of accusative forms for datives in the speech of New Braunfels, Texas. Because older speakers had retained the dative to a greater extent than younger ones, he suggested that English interference was the main reason for the changes. Gilbert (1965b, 109), who recorded the same phenomenon and the same difference between generations in the Texas German koiné that arose in Kendall and Gillespie counties, regarded the development as having its origin in the dialects brought there by the immigrants, supported by the structure of English. He later (1980, 237) also attributed decreasing use of the dative in the formal oral style to decreasing literacy in Standard German, which began after the First World War, when formal instruction in German was banned. Dialect contact was suggested by Pulte (1970) as a cause of the loss of the dative in German dialects in North Texas and Oklahoma. Salmons, whose findings in Gillespie County, Texas, were similar to those of Eikel and Gilbert, sees in these changes a typical kind of language change, but also the possible "beginning of some breakdown of the language system " (1983, 194).

After making a survey of German dialects in Wisconsin, Eichhoff (1971, 52) stated that they preserved the forms of the homeland dialects, but he made no specific reference to case systems. Many of the dialects Eichhoff found in the state are dialects of Low German which have no separate dative form. McGraw, who reported the loss of the dative in the Kölsch of Dane County, Wisconsin, noted "a strong tendency to confuse the dative and accusative of all personal pronouns which have separate

3

forms for the two cases" (1973, 189) and attributed it to the influence of English. In the Swiss German of New Glarus, Wisconsin, the author reported the preservation of dative forms except in the plural endings of nouns (Lewis 1973, 222).

In Pennsylvania German, Anderson and Martin (1976) made an early report of the loss of the dative case in the speech of Old Order Mennonites. The most detailed study of changes in case marking in Pennsylvania German has been carried out by Huffines, who attributes the almost exclusive use of accusative and common case forms for the dative in sectarian Pennsylvania German speech to convergence with English (1989, 223). Similarly, Louden (1988, 147) considers case merger in plain Pennsylvania German to be the result of syntactic convergence with English in a stable bilingual community. In non-sectarian Pennsylvania German, the retention of the dative by native speakers and its disappearance among non-native speakers are seen by Huffines (1989, 223) as the result of a gradual loss of contact with the Pennsylvania German norm in a community where the dominant language has become English.

Most recently, changes in case marking have been reported in Indiana. Freeouf is not specific in his explanation of case marking changes in the Jasper-Ferdinand area of Dubois County, attributing them to a combination of factors that include "the relationship between the written language (SG) and base dialects, interference and convergence, language shift and language death, and internal structural tendencies" (1989, 184).

These various accounts of the nature and causes of changes in the marking of cases in American German have been published in the last forty years or more. There is no comprehensive treatment of this topic, although Clausing discusses the literature up to the mid 1980s with a focus on the role of English influence and comes to the conclusion that "case coalescence in Texas German and elsewhere may be only marginally connected to English influence" (1986, 65).

The Original Case System in New Glarus

Determining the origins of the immigrants in New Glarus and their original case system is a relatively straightforward matter, especially when compared with the same task in settlements like the Volga German communities in Kansas with their complex history (Keel 1982). In New Glarus it is clear that the great majority of immigrants came from Canton Glarus, Switzerland, with the addition of a small number from Canton Bern and other Swiss cantons. There were no other German-speaking groups in the area besides the Swiss.

4

Jost Winteler's classic monograph, *Die Kerenzer Mundart des Kantons Glarus in ihren Grundzügen dargestellt*, which appeared in 1876 and was one of the first detailed studies of a German dialect, provides a description of the dialect of Glarus in the latter half of the nineteenth century.[4] Information about the case system in Glarus in this century is provided by Streiff (1915) and by the maps of the third volume of the *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* (Hotzenköcherle 1975), for which data were collected in 1946 and 1947 in eleven localities in Canton Glarus, including five in the Grosstal and Kleintal. The author's own fieldwork in Canton Glarus, Switzerland, in 1968 and 1969 provides data for approximately the same period as the recordings in New Glarus.

The case system of the dialects brought to New Glarus was typical both of Swiss German dialects in general and of the dialects of southwestern Germany. In definite and indefinite articles, demonstratives, possessives and adjective endings, there was a two-way contrast both in the singular of all genders (including the masculine) and in the plural between the nominative/accusative form (i.e., a common case) on the one hand and the dative on the other. The nominative/accusative form in the masculine singular, which had already developed before the emigration to the United States, no doubt by analogy with the structure of the feminine, neuter and plural declensions, usually took the form of the nominative. In the personal pronouns, the same case contrasts existed as in Standard German, namely, a three-way contrast between nominative, accusative and dative in some forms, a two-way contrast in the others. The dative was also marked in the plural of some nouns. Plural forms that did not already end in *-ä* added *-ä* after consonants, e.g., *Chind* (nom. and acc. pl.) *Chindä* (dat. pl.) 'children', and *-nä* after vowels except *-i*, e.g., *Sùù* (nom. and acc. pl.) *Sùùna* (dat. pl.) 'sons'. Nouns ending in *-i* dropped the ending and added *-enä*, e.g., *Mäitli* (nom. and acc. pl.) *Mäitlenä* (dat. pl.) 'girls'.[5]

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the dative in this Swiss German dialect had a separate identity, and the dative forms marked the traditional dative functions. This is basically the same original case system as the one usually assumed for Pennsylvania German. The use of German for a considerably longer period in Pennsylvania has led to the choice of a different baseline for identifying the changes in this dialect. Huffines (1989, 216) takes as her starting point the forms used by the oldest non-sectarian speakers. Louden (1988, 135) uses a reconstructed linguistic ancestor of modern varieties of Pennsylvania German, which he calls Common Pennsylvania German.

5

The Case System in New Glarus in the Twentieth Century

An examination of the data from New Glarus indicates that the majority of informants used the dative case, with very few exceptions, wherever it was required, for all articles, other determiners, personal pronouns and adjective endings. (The dative plural endings of nouns and other minor changes will be discussed below.) Tables 1 and 2, which list the forms of the definite article and personal pronouns most frequently recorded, illustrate the case system of this group of speakers.

Table 1

Definite Article

	M	N	F	Pl
NA	dr	ds + noun	d + noun	d + noun
		des + adj.	di + adj.	di + adj.
D	em, mm	em, mm	dr, r	de

Table 2

Personal Pronouns

N	ich, i	du, de, t	èr, er	sii, si	ees, es, s
A	mich, mi	dich, di	ine, ne	sii, si	ines, s
D	mir, mer	dir, der	im, em	ire, ere	im, em

N	mir, mer	ir, er	sii, si
A	ûùs, ùs	üüx, ex	sii, si
D	ûùs, ùs	üüx, ex	ine, ne

The following sentences contain typical examples of their use of the dative.

> *Dr Ove isch i dr Chùchi*
> 'The stove is in the kitchen'

> *Gim mer es Glaas Wasser*
> 'Give me a glass of water'

> *D Chüe sind im Gadä*
> 'The cows are in the barn'

> *Es isch e Nachtüüiel i dèm Baum*
> 'There is an owl in that tree'

The majority who consistently used these dative forms were the oldest speakers, born between 1885 and 1920. Ten of the eleven informants who completed the Wisconsin German Questionnaire belonged to this group. They used four or fewer non-dative forms in the approximately 180 environments in which dative forms are historically required in the questionnaire. Non-dative forms tended to occur when the modified noun was unfamiliar or there was some other difficulty in the sentence. Essentially, these speakers showed no loss of the dative form to express dative functions.[6] The minority of informants who showed a pattern of more, sometimes much more, use of non-dative variants to express dative functions were younger, born in 1920 or later. The loss of the dative manifested itself in a number of different ways. The use of an accusative or a nominative/accusative case form for a dative, which has been reported in Texas German, Pennsylvania German and other dialects, was recorded in New Glarus too. (In the following examples the expected dative form is given in parentheses.)

> *Mir häid e Ränter ùff ùùseri Farem (ùùserer)*
> 'We have a renter on our farm'

> *Èr isch äine vù di èèrschte Manne gsii wo . . . (de)*
> 'He was one of the first men who . . .'

> *Däätisch du mich dry Daler etliä? (mir)*
> 'Would you lend me three dollars?'

But, significantly, the replacement of datives by accusative or nominative/accusative forms was not the only development. All of the informants in this group also used variants of other types. For example, new forms of the definite article were created.

> *Mir sitzed i dere Stùbä (dr)*

7

'We're sitting in the living room'

Mit em es Ross (eme)
'On a horse'

Sometimes the gender selection was inappropriate.

Dr Ove isch im Chùchi (i dr)
'The stove is in the kitchen'

In contrast to these findings for determiners, pronouns and adjectives, the loss of the dative plural ending in nouns occurred in different degrees in the speech of all informants, including the older majority who retained the dative case in other parts of speech. Patterns of use varied. Some speakers rarely used the ending, but others preserved it almost completely. Occasionally the ending was alternately used and omitted in repetitions of a single word by the same speaker. The following examples illustrate this failure to mark the dative plural of nouns. (Expected dative forms are given in parentheses.)

Mir gänd üüsere Hüender Chorä (Hüenderä)
'We give our chickens corn'

Bi de chlyne Lövi (Lövenä)
'With the little chicks'

The ending was also occasionally added to loan words. For example, several speakers used *vù myne Kändenä* 'of my candies', a form based on *Kändi* 'candy', no doubt by analogy with a word like *Mäitli* (nom. and acc. pl.) *Mäitlenä* (dat. pl.) 'girls'.

Explanation of the Case Forms Recorded in New Glarus

The preservation of the dative case by a majority of the New Glarus informants in determiners, pronouns and adjectives, contrasts with the reports of changes in case marking in many other varieties of American German.[7] In New Glarus, it seems probable that the continued, if eventually only occasional, use by the majority of informants of what was earlier in their lives an everyday means of communication was sufficient to preserve the basic form of the original case system, even if their speech shows evidence of decline in other areas, e.g., in the range of their vocabulary and their repertoire of stylistic options.

The explanation of the non-dative variants used by a minority of informants in these parts of speech requires consideration of the factors that

that cause changes in an immigrant dialect. The possible causes of change include the continuation of internal changes that were already in progress, external factors like the influence of English, Standard German and other dialects, and the decline of linguistic proficiency. New Glarus provides an opportunity to study the process of change in a relatively well-defined situation.

A number of these factors clearly played no role in the developments that took place in New Glarus. Continuing internal change within the dialect is not a likely cause of the loss of the dative in determiners, pronouns and adjectives, because in these parts of speech the dative was stable at the time of emigration from Switzerland, and it remains so today in Canton Glarus. An interaction between dialect and standard language is also not a plausible agent of change in New Glarus. Standard German played only a minor role in the community and was little known by the informants. If it had been influential, it would have in any case supported the preservation of dative forms. Leveling as a result of dialect contact can be discounted too, since there was in New Glarus no contact with a dialect with a different case system.[8]

The possible role of English interference needs more detailed examination. Haugen (1973, 536) pointed out the importance of a distinction, which he believed was sometimes neglected, between deviations from the norm caused by English interference and changes occurring as a result of a decline in an individual's linguistic skills. Clausing (1986, 60), in enlarging upon Haugen's statement, uses the term "morphological decay" for the latter type of change and suggests that it is found in forms that do not correspond to English structures. The fact that the minority of informants in New Glarus who did not always preserve the dative in determiners, pronouns and adjectives employ both accusatives and a variety of other non-dative forms to replace it suggests that English influence is not solely responsible for the changes, if it is at all, since these variants do not all reflect the structure of English.

The most likely explanation for the loss of dative forms in the younger group of speakers is the decline of their language skills. We can speculate that when these speakers were growing up, use of the dialect was already becoming less common, and that the dialect was in most cases not their first language. It may be that they achieved full competence in the dialect and then gradually lost it through disuse or that they did not ever completely learn the dialect that was a second language for them. They may have lost some of their less than complete proficiency through lack of use. English is a possible model for the use of accusative for dative, but it is difficult to be sure about the extent of its influence.

The non-dative forms recorded in New Glarus show a number of similarities to those reported by Huffines (1989) for non-sectarian speakers

9

of Pennsylvania German who were the first and second of their generation in their families to learn English as a first language. Huffines explains the variant forms as the result of a decline in the informant's linguistic skills or incomplete learning, attributing them to internal analogy in the speech of informants who have lost contact with the norm.

The sporadic lack of a dative plural ending on nouns was attributed by the author (Lewis 1973, 222) solely to English influence, but English influence almost certainly was no more than a possible contributing factor. The maps of the *Sprachatlas der deutschen Schweiz* (Hotzenköcherle 1975, 172, 181, 190) show instances of the loss of this ending in Glarus, especially in the plural of diminutives in -*li*. In New Glarus, nouns ending in -i are particularly liable to lose the ending. The same loss of the ending was also found by Weber (1964, 109) among younger speakers in the nearby Swiss canton of Zurich, where it was attributed to internal leveling and the influence of other dialects where this loss had already occurred. Seen from this point of view, the omission of this ending in New Glarus can be interpreted as part of the continuing process of the loss of case differentiation in nouns in Swiss German. The dative is leveled with the form of the nominative and accusative plural. Analogy with English noun plurals, which lack an equivalent ending, may have played a role in the change, perhaps accelerating the process.[9]

Other Changes

Several other minor variants for the dative that are to be found occasionally in the speech of almost all informants in New Glarus merit brief mention here. They do not involve significant changes in the dialect, but serve to illustrate the variety of forms that can occur. The dative of the first person singular personal pronoun, *mer*, is replaced by *mi*, which has the form of an unstressed accusative pronoun.

> *Bring mi das ander Glaas (mer)*
> 'Bring me that other glass'

This substitution is no doubt related to the translation process, since it occurs mainly in the translation of sentences beginning "Give me" or "Bring me." Other English pronouns also appear to be used from time to time for both dative and non-dative forms.

> *Die Bluuse passt er nùùd (ere)*
> 'That blouse doesn't fit her'

> *Wi häid zwii Bùllä (Mir)*
> 'We have two bulls'

Another occasional change is the replacement of the feminine dative singular of the definite article, *dr* by *de*.

> *Si häid i de Chilche Hoochset gchaa (dr)*
> 'They were married in the church'

This reduction of *dr* to *de* occurs also in the masculine nominative/accusative singular of the definite article.

> *Èr het de Gade uusegmischtet (dr)*
> 'He cleaned the stable'

While changes of this type have occurred in Switzerland in cantons close to Glarus (Hotzenköcherle 1975, 135; Meyer 1967, 47), it seems likely that the new forms in New Glarus are not related to them, but rather influenced by English "the."[10]

Conclusion

The majority of informants in New Glarus preserved the case endings of the original dialect in determiners, pronouns and adjective endings, while a minority, the youngest speakers, failed to mark the dative consistently in these parts of speech. The non-dative variants were interpreted as the consequence of a decline in the linguistic skills of the latter group or of their incomplete learning of the dialect. A tendency not to mark the dative plural of nouns was present in varying degrees in all speakers and regarded as a likely result of a continuing internal development in the dialect, possibly supported by the influence of English.

This study of Swiss German in Wisconsin suggests a number of points pertinent to the investigation of the case systems of the dialects spoken in German-American communities established in the nineteenth century. At the time when these dialects were brought to North America, there were significant differences between their case systems. Since emigration, changes have continued to take place in the dialects spoken in Europe. To identify and explain the changes that have occurred in an American German dialect, it is essential to make a careful comparison with both the original European dialect or dialects and their modern counterparts. Forms that appear at first sight to be exclusively North American may turn out to be original features of a dialect brought to North America or to have a parallel in the modern dialects in Europe. In communities where there was more than one original dialect, leveling as the result of contact between dialects with different case systems needs to be given serious consideration.

The dissimilar development in New Glarus of the datives in determiners, personal pronouns and adjectives on the one hand and in the plural of nouns on the other has shown that changes in case marking within a single dialect are not necessarily all of the same type and may not all have the same cause or causes.

Inter-speaker variation that results from the decline of the linguistic skills of some speakers makes it necessary to examine the speech of individuals separately and not treat the speakers of a dialect as a single group. The changes that are characteristic of a receding language in an unstable bilingual situation need to be distinguished from the regular linguistic change that takes place in a stable bilingual setting where there continues to be transmission of the language to younger speakers as a first language, as, for example, among sectarian speakers of Pennsylvania German. Huffines (1988, 392) has pointed out that native speakers of American German are now only to be found in separatist, religious groups, such as the Old Order Amish, the Old Order Mennonites and the Hutterites. In all other German-American communities, German is in decline and the changes that result from the incomplete learning of a language or the erosion of language skills need to be taken into account. It is in this area particularly now that the German still spoken in communities founded in the nineteenth century can provide data for linguistic study and insights into language change.

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Notes

[1] This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the Sixteenth Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies in Lawrence, Kansas, May 1992. The author is grateful to Lois Huffines and William Keel for helpful comments on the original paper.

[2] More detailed accounts of the settlement of New Glarus and language use in the community are to be found in Brunnschweiler (1954) and Lewis (1973).

[3] The geographical distribution of case systems in German dialects is described in Schirmunski (1962) and Shrier (1965).

[4] Kerenzen is a village in the northern part of Canton Glarus, at the opposite end of the canton from the Grosstal and Kleintal where most of the settlers in New Glarus originated, but the dialects of the two areas are very similar and more like each other than they are to the intervening dialects of the Glarner Mittelland and Unterland. On the history of the settlement of the canton, see Trüb (1951, 254).

[5] The spellings follow, with a few exceptions, the principles of Eugen Dieth's (1938) manual for the spelling of Swiss German. Words are spelled as they are spoken without regard for the usual Standard German spelling. In this article, the letter *e* represents schwa in articles and personal pronouns, as well as in unstressed syllables in other words. Vowels with a grave accent are open vowels.

[6] Huffines (1991, 190) has shown that in Pennsylvania German more conservative forms are found in translation than in free conversation.

[7] In a study of another immigrant Swiss German dialect, a Canton Bern dialect spoken in Ohio and Indiana, Wenger (1969) makes no mention of the loss of case distinctions, except in the dative plural of nouns.

[8] On the other hand, the phonology and the verb forms of this dialect in New Glarus both provide the opportunity for the study of dialect contact.

[9] Wenger (1969) mentions the loss of the dative ending in the plural of nouns in the Canton Bern dialect spoken in Ohio and Indiana, but does not offer an explanation for these forms.

[10] In any event, this change does not involve a replacement of the dative by the accusative since the nominative/accusative form of the feminine singular definite article before nouns is not *de*, but usually a single consonant *d*, which is assimilated to the first consonant or vowel of the following noun. Before adjectives, the nominative/accusative form of this article is *di*.

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