Carroll E. Reed

Pennsylvania German: A Test of Semantic Survival*

Pennsylvania German is a fairly homogeneous dialect spoken in southeastern Pennsylvania and in small enclaves elsewhere, e.g., Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, and Ontario. It originated in southwestern Germany during the eighteenth century when many people there, particularly in the Rhenish Palatinate, left their homes to settle in America. Most of the emigrants were farmers, largely illiterate or unsophisticated in the use of cultivated German, contact with which was often limited to the Lutheran Bible and the words of its religious proponents.

After their settlement in America there seems to have been considerable levelling in whatever divergences their dialects represented, although patterns of variation and adjustment are still clearly evident in the distribution of certain regional differences in grammar and vocabulary. Relations with the mother country were never very strong, and the influence of standard German remained minimal. Cultural innovations manifested themselves in the dialect, as time went on, in the form of borrowings, translations, or calques, based upon local forms of American English. Briefly then, it can be said that this dialect represents a linguistic island perpetuating speech forms that were locally current in southwestern Germany during the latter part of the seventeenth century or the early part of the eighteenth century.

In various studies during the last fifty years[1] it has been determined that Pennsylvania German most closely resembles the dialects of the southeastern Palatinate. Criteria for comparison are based on data from the *Deutscher Sprachatlas,* a dialect archive established in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many small monographs and dissertations of somewhat uneven quality and completeness, personal contacts in the Palatinate, peripheral dialect dictionaries, and the archives of the *Pfälzische Wörterbuchkanzlei* in Kaiserslautern. Systematic field work in Pennsylvania has supplied the ultimate dimension.

In the last thirty years, three other research sources have become available: (1) twenty-two volumes of the *Deutscher Wortatlas* (edited by

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W. Mitzka and L. E. Schmitt), a work devoted to the geographical illustration of dialect vocabulary variants, (2) *Phonai* (originated by E. Zwirner), a collection of tape-recordings and monographs, and (3) since 1977, two volumes of J. Eichhoff's *Wortatlas der deutschen Umgangssprachen*, an atlas of variable colloquial vocabulary usage in present-day Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. A similar survey of regional usage was first published in 1917 by Paul Kretschmer *(Wortgeographie der hochdeutschen Umgangssprache)*, who indicated in 1938 that a new survey was then needed because of changes in population distribution since the time of his original research. Kretschmer's book was a simple lexical compilation, without maps, that covered the German-speaking areas sparsely and unevenly. The concern with *Umgangssprachen*, rather than being confined to dialect, focuses chiefly on the language of urban dwellers in their local rendition of educated speech.

These relatively recent records, made several centuries after the principal Palatine migrations to America, offer an enlightening picture of semantic and structural survival when compared with the long-isolated speech of the Pennsylvania Germans. Three levels of vocabulary are then posited for the Rhenish Palatinate: dialect, colloquial standard, and educated standard. Various mixtures of these levels are used by different speakers, as the situation demands, although some speakers lack familiarity with one or another level.[2] Since gaps between such levels are relatively slight in this area, compared, for example, with those of Low German or Swiss speakers, it often appears that features of the colloquial standard agree with those of the dialects as tokens of the same term. Semantic structures tend to maintain themselves, for the most part, constrained by social mores, particularly when the linguistic types themselves can become critically ambiguous or confusing.

The following sets of examples will serve to illustrate the significance and depth of structured semantic survival through examination and comparison of data available from the more recent vocabulary studies mentioned above, as they apply to southwestern Germany, especially the Palatinate, with the corresponding forms of Pennsylvania German, a fossil dialect so to speak, dislodged from its roots more than two hundred and fifty years ago.[3]

A. Terms common to Middle and Upper German. Except for the last three examples, these correspond in type to the literary standard.

PaG   *bu:*   'boy/Bube'   WDU 1, DWA 4, PfWb
       paifə   'whistle/pfeifen'   WDU 9, DWA 19, PfWb
       kæ:re   'sweep/kehren'   WDU 16, DWA 3, PfWb
       búdsfrɔ: 'cleaning woman/Putzfrau'   WDU 18
       ʃrainər   'carpenter/Schreiner'   WDU 20, DWA 9, PfWb
       búdslùmbə   'mop/Putzlumpen'   WDU 80
       ʃú:bèndəl   'shoestring/Schuhbändel'   WDU 87, DWA 18
       gé:lrì:b   'carrot/gelbe Rübe'   WDU 89, DWA 11
       (wais)graud   'cabbage/Weißkraut'   WDU 92
       ge:s   'goat/Geiß'   WDU 100, DWA 5, PfWb

míddɔ:gèsə 'midday meal/Mittagessen' WDUu

ʃafə 'work/schaffen' WDUu

siç dumələ 'hurry/sich tummeln' WDUu, DWA 2

parə 'pastor/Pfarrer' WDUu

he:m '(go)home/heim' WDU 28

bágədsɔ̀: 'molar/Backenzahn' WDUu

ro:m 'cream/Rahm' WDUu, DWA 5

wádɔ̀:g, wárigdɔ̀:g 'weekday/Werktag' WDUu, DWA 16

óidòdər 'egg yolk/Eidotter' WDUu, DWA 19

nimi[4] 'never/nimmer' WDU 105

ned[4] 'not/nicht' WDU 116

gel[4] 'isn't it true/nicht wahr?' WDU 104

B. Terms more restricted in western and Upper German. Most of these are considered strictly dialectal.

PaG   *siç fərkéldə* 'catch cold/sich erkälten' WDU 6, DWA 20, PfWb

ʃlegə 'lick/lecken' WDUu

míliçhàfə 'milk jug/Milchtopf' WDUu

nóxdèsə 'evening meal/Abendessen' WDUu

es hod 'there is, are/es gibt' WDU 106

als, as[5] 'always/immer' WDUu

fərdsé:lə 'narrate/erzählen' WDUu

es ʃeld 'the bell is ringing/es klingelt' WDU 27

grúmbì:r 'potato/Kartoffel' WDUu, DWA 1

pedsə 'pinch/kneifen' WDU 10, DWA 19, PfWb

budsə 'core/Butzen' WDU 97

   (*grudsə* 'cob/Krotze')[6]

ʃligsər 'hiccup/Schluckauf' WDU 5

C. Grammatical or phonetic features of vocabulary common to Middle and Upper German. Most of these are considered dialectal.

PaG 1. apocope of final *-e* of standard German:
   laid 'people/Leute' WDU 118

2. syncope of *-e-* in standard German *ge-* prefix before fricatives:
   gfalə 'fallen/gefallen' WDUu[7]

3. lack of umlaut in 2./3. pers. indic. of strong verbs:
   ʃlofd 'sleeps/schläft' WDU 123

4. ʃ for standard German [s] after *r*: *erʃd* 'first/erst' WDU 113; *anərʃ* 'otherwise/anders' WDUu

5. ʃ for standard German [s] before consonants:[8]
   ledʃdə 'last/letzte' WDU 114; also in *samʃdɔ:g* 'Saturday/Samstag' WDU 41, DWA 5

6. umlaut in the plural of certain strong nouns:
   we:jə 'wagons/Wagen' WDU 119

7. *mir* 'we/wir' WDU 120

8. auxiliary verb *sai* with *sidsə*   'to sit/sitzen':[9]
  iç bin gsodsə   'I have sat/ich habe gesessen'   WDU 125
  Common throughout southern Germany: *ich bin gesessen*.
9. replacement of the genitive case by the possessive dative:
  sel is der ru:d i:r gle:d   'that is Ruth's dress/das ist Ruths
  Kleid'   WDUu
10. diminutives in *-əl, -li*, or *-əlçə*:[10]   e.g., *haisəl, haisli,
  haisəlçə*   'litte house/Häuschen'   WDU 121

D. Terms indicating a special semantic structure (''field'') or a change of
such in Pennsylvania German.

PaG 1. *der erʃd ʃdog*   'the first story/Erdgeschoß'   WDUu in the
  southeastern Palatinate, southern Baden, and parts of Switzer-
  land. (Possible English influence also.)
  der dswed ʃdog   'the second story/erster Stock'   WDUu
2. *ʃwedsə*   'talk/sprechen'
  redə   'speak/reden'   WDUu, DSA 55, in the Mosel Valley, the
  Palatinate, and Swabian areas.
3. *der belsnigəl*   'Santa Claus/Christkind/Weihnachtsmann'
  WDU 46   According to the PfWb, the term *Pelznickel* is now no
  longer used, whereas formerly this applied to the person who
  accompanied the ''Christchild'' and distributed the presents
  according to merit. The *Atlas der deutschen Volkskunde* (37) found
  Pelznickel limited to occasional use in the Palatinate, Baden, and
  part of Hesse-Darmstadt.
4. *di ʃib*   '(blade) shovel/Schüppe'   WDU 14,15 (*Schaufel/ Schnee-
  schaufel*)   DWA 18.   PaG *ʃib* varies with *ʃaufəl*, which is more
  often a fork. The Palatinate has *Schipp/Schneeschippen*.
5. *gaundʃ*   'swing/Schaukel'   WDUu. PaG   has   the   type
  Schaukel only in *ʃogəlʃdu:l* 'rocking chair' and occasionally *ʃogəl*
  as 'cradle/Wiege.' Terms like *gaundʃ* are evidently archaic in
  northern Baden and in Württemberg (Kretschmer).
6. *gaul*   'horse/Pferd'   WDU 99, DSA 8. Usage in (West Middle)
  German is definitely rural and dialectal, since *Gaul* 'nag' is
  opposed to *Pferd* in standard German. The PaG children's
  rhyme ''*raidə, raidə, gaili*'' is no longer current in the Palatinate,
  but has been replaced there with the Alemannic type *reite, reite
  Rößli* 'ride-a-ride a horsey/hopp, hopp, galopp.' (Corr. E.
  Christmann.)
7. *baidʃ*   'riding whip/Peitsche'
  ge:ʃəl   'lash/Fuhrgeißel'   WDUu. DWA 12 indicates *Beitsch*
  in the eastern and southern Palatinate, and *Gäschel* in the
  western Palatinate—both for *Peitsche*.
8. *mug, mig*   'fly/Fliege'
  ʃno:g   'gnat, mosquito/Mücke, Schnake'   WDU 101
  ʃɔ:b   'moth/Motte'   WDUu, DWA 1.
  The mutual relation of these terms agrees generally with that of
  the Palatinate and is reflected in slightly different sets of terms in

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neighboring areas of Upper and Middle German. (Cf. Theo Schumacher, *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung*, 23, 1 [1955], 59-64.)

9. *ʃnubdu:x, sagdu:x* 'handkerchief/Taschentuch' WDU 77
The item itself is of modern origin, *Schnupftuch* ca. sixteenth century, *Taschentuch* not until the eighteenth century, perhaps too late for PaG, which does not use the term *Tasche* for pocket anyway, but *Sack* (see below under taboo items).

E. Terms for which PaG either preserves certain archaisms or has developed innovations.

PaG 1. *márijèsə* 'breakfast/Frühstück' WDUu. Evidently modeled after *mídɔ:gèsə* 'midday meal/Mittagessen' and *nóxdèsə* 'evening meal/Abendessen.'
2. *nainú:rʃdìg* 'second breakfast/zweites Frühstück' WDU 35.
The term is rare in the Palatinate, which has *zweites Frühstück, Brotzeit,* and (rarely) *Vesper*. The PaG term reflects the common Swiss dialect form *Z'nüni*.
3. *fi:rú:rʃdìg* 'four o'clock lunch/vier Uhr Stück'. WDU 36.
The term has been replaced by *Vesper(brot)* in the Palatinate and is reflected by the Swiss dialect form *Z'vieri*.
4. *ʃmí:rkè:s* 'cottage cheese/Quark'. WDUu shows *weißer Käse* in the Palatinate. PfWb indicates occasional use of *Schmierkäse* there, evidently archaic.
5. *dés jo:r* 'this year/dies(es) Jahr'. WDU 42 notes this form in southwestern Germany with the common form *dies Jahr*. DWA 16 gives *des Jahr* for the dialects (also *Dt. Spracharchiv* tape 1602 et al.).
6. *də márijə* 'this morning/heute morgen'. WDU 34 indicates this term for Switzerland, not for the Palatinate, which has *heut morgen*.
7. *adjé* 'goodbye/Servus, Tschüs'. This term is nearly extinct in PaG. WDU 48 shows rare traces of it along the west German border. PfWb lists some occurrences of *adjé* and the earlier form *adé*, both from French. *Adjé* and *adjéle* attested for Württemberg. WDU gives both *Servus* and *Tschüs* for the Palatinate; these are unknown in PaG.
8. *wádshàus* 'tavern/Kneipe'. WDU 32 has *Kneipe* for the Palatinate, less commonly *Beiz(e)*, while *Wirtshaus* is rare. PaG *gnaib* is attested (Lambert), but apparently no longer used.
9. *ʃlídəbɔ:* 'sliding strip/Rutschbahn'. WDU53: very rare in the Palatinate, which has *Glenner* and, also rarely, *Schleife* or *Schleimer*.
10. *moʃdərd* 'mustard/Senf'. WDU 71 gives *Senf* for the Palatinate, with *Mostert* along the west German border.
11. *dígimìliç, dígmìliç* 'sour milk/Sauermilch'. WDU 72 shows *Dickmilch* only in the western and northern Palatinate, otherwise the term *Sauermilch* prevails.

12. *juʃd*   'just/eben, halt'.   WDU 103 shows *halt* in the Palatinate.
13. *ʃbeŋlər, bleçʃmid*   'tinsmith, blacksmith/Spengler'.   WDU 21 notes *Spengler* or *Klempner* for the southeastern Palatinate, *Spengler* in Württemberg, occasionally *Blechner* in Baden. Scattered instances of *Blechschmied* in Baden and Alsace were noted by Kretschmer.
14. *dradʃə/redʃə*   'gossip, chat/tratschen, schwätzen'. WDUu has *schwätzen* for the eastern Palatinate, rarely *tratschen*, and *ratschen* in the western Palatinate. PaG *ʃwedsə* means simply 'to talk', which is the case for *schwätzen* throughout southwestern Germany (DSA 55).
15. *faʃdə*   'heel/Ferse', with epenthetic *d/t*, is indicated in WDU 3 only for the western Palatinate.
16. *dú:wàg*   'tobacco/Tabak', with accent on the initial syllable (WDU 109 *Tábak* in the Palatinate) and the normal raising of an earlier [o:] to [u:] before the labial (*o* from a Spanish/Carib loan).

F. Terms subject to taboos affecting usage and survival. These chiefly involve metaphorical references to the genitals. All have analogs in German as well as in vulgar English.

Pag 1. *deʃ*   'vulva/Tasche' shows the earlier palatal umlaut for *Tasche*. The PaG word for 'pocket' is *sag*, which occurs widely in southern Germany, but which is also a metaphor for 'scrotum.' *Tasche* (WDUu) is used for 'pocket' in the Palatinate; it does not occur as such in PaG.
   2. *dsod*   'fem. pudendum/Zotte'.   WDU 76 has *Schnaube* (occas. *Schnauz(e)*, *Zutt(e)* or *Zott(e)* in the Palatinate for the 'spout' on the coffeepot.
   3. *gligər*   'marble(s)/Murmel(n)', also meaning 'testicles', likewise in the Palatinate.   WDU 50 gives *Klicker* for the Palatinate.
   4. *baidəl*   'scrotum/Beutel'   (seldom   'purse').   WDUu   has *Geldbeutel* 'purse' for the Palatinate.

G. Terms with innovations from, or based on English.

PaG 1. *di nɔ:s blo:sə/budsə*   'blow the nose/die Nase putzen'.   WDU 7 indicates *putzen* for the Palatinate. PaG *blo:sə* translates 'blow'.
   2. *der mumbs*   'mumps/Ziegenpeter'.   WDUu shows *die Mumps* and *der Mumps* for the Palatinate. The term was borrowed from English in both areas during the nineteenth century.
   3. *mädʃ*   'match/Streichholz' originated in English also during the nineteenth century.   WDU 75 and DWA 3 both show *Streichholz* for the Palatinate.
   4. *kosən(d)*   'cousin/Vetter-Kusine'.   WDUu gives *Kusine* (female) for the Palatinate. The French loan *cousine/cousin* (seventeenth century) provided a single term for English, likewise for PaG, possibly through English.

5. *budʃər* 'butcher/Fleischer'. Both WDU 19 and DWA 9 give *Metzger* for the Palatinate, rarely *Metzler*. PaG has the verb *medslə* 'to butcher,' but no corresponding noun.
6. *garəd/ʃbaiçər* 'attic/Dachboden'. In PaG the two terms coexist. WDU 24 and PfWb both give *Speicher* for the Palatinate.
7. *gemäʃdə grumbi:rə* 'mashed potatoes/Kartoffelbrei'. The term is patterned after English. WDU 67 shows *Kartoffelbrei, Stampes,* or the more homey *Grumbierbrei* for the Palatinate.
8. *hógəlbì:r* 'huckleberry/Heidelbeere'. WDU 96 shows *Heidelbeere* for the Palatinate.
9. *pe:mənd/fú:swè:g* 'sidewalk/Bürgersteig' PaG *pe:mənd* is the Pennsylvania English dialect word for 'sidewalk' ('pavement'). WDU 30 shows *Trottoir* for the Palatinate, with *Fußweg* reported as rural (possibly with a semantic distinction).
10. *dí:rənàb* 'doorknob/Türklinke'. Here the cultural difference in door handles is reflected. WDUu has *Türklinke* for the Palatinate.

From the various categories of terms thus cited, it may be concluded that, for West Middle German at least, relationships between sign and meaning tend to be preserved as types based upon the most prominent dialect tokens. A fossil stage of regional usage, i.e., Pennsylvania German, preserved in isolated, but living speech forms, indicates attrition or accretion due to cultural innovation or bilingual association. It is especially remarkable, in this respect, that basic regional vocabulary persists with so little change over such long periods, regardless of whether the speech phylum is isolated at a given level or subject to the effects of education and urbanization. Dialect tokens are canonized as standard types in educated usage, both colloquial and literary. Kretschmer's concern with the obsolescence of his work over a scant twenty-five years is then vitiated by this evidence of semantic survival in regional usage over more than ten times that time span.

University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

Notes

* Due to his untimely death Professor Reed was unable to prepare a final copy.
[1] Buffington, A. F. and P. A. Barba. *A Pennsylvania German Grammar.* Allentown, Pa., 1965 (esp. pp. 137-45); Reed, C. E. *The Pennsylvania German Dialect Spoken in the Counties of Lehigh and Berks.* Seattle, 1949 (esp. pp. 42, 62).
[2] An older woman in the southeastern Palatinate commented on the difficulty she had trying to learn "Hochdeutsch" (Tape 1602, *Lautbibliothek der deutschen Mundarten*).
[3] Pennsylvania German terms are given in phonetic transcription; the principal accent, unless otherwise marked with an acute (´), is on the first syllable. Secondary accent, if relevant, is indicated by a grave (`). Note that *b, d, g* are voiceless lenes. See "Works Cited" for abbreviations.
[4] Strictly dialectal forms, though widely used.
[5] E.g., "Er redet *als* viel." ('he always talks a lot')
[6] PaG *ábəlbùdsə* 'apple core,' but *wélʃkansgrùdsə* 'corn cob.'
[7] WDU shows *ge-* in the eastern Palatinate and *g-* in the west; the dialects have *g-* throughout the Palatinate.

[8] Except where an underlying vowel has been deleted in the surface structure in modern German, e.g., PaG *losd* 'lets/läßt.'

[9] PaG more often uses *hogə*, rather than *sidsə*.

[10] PaG *me:dəl* 'girl/Mädchen' (WDU 2, DWA 4) has the plural *me:d*; this combination is largely restricted to the southeastern Palatinate.

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