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German Language Shift in the Nebraska District of the Missouri Synod from 1918 to 1950

The issue of whether to maintain German or to shift to English is hardly a point of debate today within the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod generally or in the Nebraska District specifically. The outcome of the language question is no longer in doubt and has not been for nearly forty years. English has replaced German as the language of the parish schools, Sunday schools, and worship services except for those attempts to have a German worship service on special occasions such as Christmas or Easter.

There was a time, however, when the language issue caused a great deal of concern for congregational as well as district and synod leaders of the Lutheran Church. One could cite the problems of language transition in the Pennsylvania Ministerium in the eighteenth century and among Lutherans in Ohio from 1836-1858 as the earliest instances of language shift in the Lutheran Church in the United States (Weis 5). In the latter case, an English synod had organized as early as 1836 and was tied to the Joint Synod of Ohio until 1855, when it withdrew from the Joint Synod after a disagreement about membership in the Masonic Order. The Joint Synod itself seemed willing to function bilingually with both German and English except for a brief period in 1844-1845 (Weis 15).

The Missouri Synod, unlike the Joint Synod of Ohio, had closer ties to its German heritage and was, for that reason, known as the "German Lutheran" Church. Its roots go back to the more than six hundred Saxons who immigrated as a colony from Germany to Missouri in 1839. Having suffered religious persecution because of their refusal to be merged with Reformed congregations in the state church of Saxony, they created a new Lutheran synod known as the German Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States, in Chicago in 1847 (Luebke 21-22).

One of the new synod's goals was to preserve doctrinal purity in the new environment and avoid the contamination of faith, which they had

seen happen in other synods. One means of preventing Americanization of its members was to maintain the German language (Luebke 22-23). It is interesting to note that the continued use of German was not viewed by the Missouri Synod as a link with the country of origin, but rather as an insulator against the American way of life and the rationalism and materialism that it represented (Dietz 97). English made few inroads in the Missouri Synod until the beginning of the twentieth century, although there is evidence that some English was already being encouraged by that time. At the constituting convention in Nebraska in 1882, for example, a resolution was adopted which urged German Lutherans to subscribe to the newly established English publication, *Lutheran Witness*. It was advertised as a soundly Lutheran voice which could also be heard by those Lutherans who spoke no German (Janzow 48). Approximately twenty years later, the minutes of the 1903 convention indicate that regular services in English had already been held in several communities in Nebraska by that time, e.g., Imperial, North Omaha, and Scottsbluff (Janzow 49). In other congregations English and German had reportedly begun to alternate with more congregations adding English services every year.

In 1905 the *Lutheran*, the official organ of an eastern synod, criticized the Missouri Synod as a whole for not doing more to solve the language question. Franz Pieper, the then president of the Missouri Synod, took exception to the criticism and pointed out that nearly all of the younger generation had already become bilingual and that the Missouri Synod was fully prepared for a transition to English whenever necessary. He added, however, that he did not wish to force the issue of transition from German to English since he saw advantages for children, teachers, and pastors who were bilingual (qtd. in Stellhorn 311). This attitude seems to have been a prevailing one within the synod toward the language issue. One finds little evidence of the synod prescribing a course of action regarding the language question. On May 15, 1911, the English Synod was taken as a body into the membership of the Missouri Synod as a district, which is further indication that the synod was receptive to English as one of the languages of the synod. Some districts apparently attempted to have English made the official language of the synod as early as 1923, but the synod refused saying that both languages were to be used (Dietz 103-04).

For the Missouri Synod the entire language question was brought to a head with the American involvement in World War I in 1917. Having been known as the German Lutheran Church since its creation, it now faced much anti-German sentiment since it was believed that there was a natural affiliation between the Missouri Synod and the Kaiser in Germany (Nohl 60). Ironically, as Theodore Graebner mentioned in a pamphlet explaining the synod's attitude toward the war, the founders of the Missouri Synod had themselves fled from persecution in Germany to America in 1838 (qtd. in Manley 6). In addition, the Missouri Synod had been established in the United States for nearly a century, and there was no longer a close association between the synod and the Lutheran Church in Germany. All these arguments meant little to those

superpatriots who insisted that the use of German was an indication of loyalty and support for the Kaiser. State councils of defense were established with the expressed purpose of discouraging the teaching of German in parochial schools. Once they were successful there, they then directed their attention toward the religious services in churches. Although the actual enforcement of the ban on German varied greatly at the local levels, the councils were generally successful in suppressing the use of German, except where the older members of the congregation had an insufficient knowledge to be able to participate in regular worship services. In those cases, an extra service was permitted in German as long as there was no advertising of it in advance.

The situation in the Nebraska District changed rapidly in 1918 as the Nebraska legislature, at the behest of Governor Keith Neville, repealed the Mockett Law, which had made the teaching of a modern foreign language in any school mandatory as long as the parents of fifty children attending the school asked for it (Johnston 119). In addition, on April 9, 1919, the Nebraska legislature passed the Siman Act which prohibited the use of any foreign language in all public and private schools up to and through eighth grade. It did permit the teaching of a foreign language outside of regular school hours and also permitted church services in a language other than English as long as those services were not regular services. Perceiving the Siman Act as a threat to the Fourteenth Amendment rights of due process, the Nebraska District challenged it in court and lost the appeal in the Nebraska Supreme Court (Johnston 120). On May 25, 1920, Robert T. Meyer, a teacher in rural Hamilton County, taught a Bible lesson in German during an extended lunch hour to a boy who had not yet passed the eighth grade. This became the well-known legal battle and test case between Meyer, supported by the synod, and the state of Nebraska, which finally ended in June 1923, when the United States Supreme Court ruled the Siman Act and two others like it unconstitutional. In the meantime, the Nebraska legislature passed an even tougher piece of legislation, the Reed-Norval Act of April 1921, which required that all subjects in elementary school be taught in English and that all teachers must have a Nebraska certificate in order to be able to teach in any Nebraska school (Suelflow 117). Shortly after the repeal of the Siman Act, the Nebraska Supreme Court deemed that the Reed-Norval Act was also unconstitutional.

With the above information serving as a general introduction and frame of reference, this article will examine the process of language shift from German to English in the Nebraska District between the years 1918 and 1950. Using data provided by the *Statistical Yearbook*, this study will attempt to determine when and under what conditions the greatest amount of language shift occurred. In addition, a comparison of data between the Nebraska District and the synod will be undertaken in an attempt to determine whether Nebraska, with such famous anti-German legislation as the Siman and the Reed-Norval Acts, experienced a more rapid shift from German to English than the rest of the synod.

The dates 1918 to 1950 were selected for several reasons: First, the *Statistical Yearbook* provides fairly detailed reports of the language condition for those years. Second, it is commonly agreed that the shift from German to English occurred in most congregations between those two dates. Language shift will be understood to mean the "replacement of one language (L 1) by another (L 2) in all domains of usage, resulting in the loss of function of L 1" (Kipp 52). Domains will be understood as those classes of situations which may require one or more varieties of language (Fishman 6). It will be assumed that the situation in the Nebraska District was already bilingual or nearly so by 1918 and that the shift was from the bilingual situation to English monolingualism. Third, the years following World War I provide the best evidence for the effect of the anti-German sentiment and legislation on language shift. The Nebraska District was also divided into the Northern and Southern Districts from 1922 to 1970 and thus allows for further breakdown into smaller geographical units. Fourth, the synod asked the language question in various formats from 1918 until 1969, but the final nineteen years account for only a small percentage of the shift and for that reason, were omitted from consideration here. Finally, there are few statistical data available for the period prior to 1918. It is known from the 1910 census of Nebraska that almost 17% of all Nebraskans were of German descent and still using the language actively. 12,000 children were attending parish schools where German was taught as a subject or used in teaching (Suelflow 117). Although the amount of German taught varied, it nevertheless was considered an important part of the curriculum of the parish schools and a necessary preparation for participation in the worship services of the congregation. There is some indication of the effect of World War I if one compares the number of services offered in 1910 with that of 1919. In 1910, for example, it is known that 471 stations (congregations) were using English in religious worship. By 1919 that number had increased to 2,492 stations for an increase of 429% (Dietz 102).

Table 1 presents an overview of the use of German and English in the Nebraska District and the Missouri Synod for the years 1920 to 1940. Language use is broken down into five categories ranging from "All German" to "All English." The data are classified according to two criteria: 1. membership—the percentage of the membership attending church services where German and English were used; 2. stations—the percentage of stations or congregations offering services in each language.

On the basis of the data reported in Table 1, the following observations can be made concerning language use in the Nebraska District and the synod from 1920 to 1940:

1. The "All German" and "More German than English" categories decreased steadily between 1920 and 1940 in the district and the synod while the "All English" and "More English than German" categories increased in percentage. Basically, this is a statistical confirmation of a shift from German to English which is known to have occurred between 1920 and 1940.

Table 1

Language Used in Service According to Membership and Stations in the Nebraska District and Total Synod

Amount of German Used		Nebraska District						Total Synod					
		Year 1920 %	Year 1930 %	Year 1940 %	Diff. 1920-30	Diff. 1930-40	Diff. 1920-40	Year 1920 %	Year 1930 %	Year 1940 %	Diff. 1920-30	Diff. 1930-40	Diff. 1920-40
All German	Membership	15	3	0	(−12)	(− 3)	(−15)	14	4	1	(−10)	(− 3)	(−13)
	Station	17	2	0	(−15)	(− 2)	(−17)	21	7	2	(−14)	(− 5)	(−19)
More German than English	Membership	49	12	1	(−37)	(−11)	(−48)	38	14	3	(−24)	(−11)	(−35)
	Station	37	12	1	(−25)	(−11)	(−36)	28	11	3	(−17)	(− 8)	(−25)
Half and Half	Membership	27	51	38	(+24)	(−13)	(+11)	30	45	42	(+15)	(− 3)	(+12)
	Station	30	41	24	(+11)	(−17)	(− 6)	27	32	24	(+ 5)	(− 8)	(− 3)
More English than German	Membership	6	24	33	(+18)	(+ 9)	(+27)	9	20	20	(+11)	(0)	(+11)
	Station	6	24	29	(+18)	(+ 5)	(+23)	8	18	18	(+10)	(0)	(+10)
All English	Membership	3	10	28	(+ 7)	(+18)	(+25)	9	17	34	(+ 8)	(+17)	(+25)
	Station	10	21	46	(+11)	(+25)	(+36)	16	32	53	(+16)	(+21)	(+37)

Sources: *Statistical Yearbook* (1920): 121; (1930): 152; (1940): 183.

In order to find the percentage of German for a particular year, e.g., membership 1920, find the appropriate percentage of German in each column and add the figures (*Statistical Yearbook* [1920]: 122).

All German	15%
More German than English	36.75% (¾ of 49)
Half and Half	13.5% (½ of 27)
More English than German	1.5% (¼ of 6)
	66.75 = 67% German

2. The "Half and Half" category increased from 1920 to 1930, but then decreased from 1930 to 1940. This category shows clearly the tendency toward bilingualism and the subsequent turn to English monolingualism.

3. Except for the membership criterion in 1920, the Nebraska District showed less use of "All German" and "All English" than the synod during the years 1920 to 1940. This means that the Nebraska District, compared to the total synod, showed less of the two extremes and was more likely to be represented in the three middle categories.

4. In both the membership and station criteria, the greatest decreases tended to occur in the "More German than English" category. The greatest amount of increase between 1920 and 1940 was, on the other hand, in the "All English" category for both the district and the synod.

Table 2

Composite of Language Use in Services 1920-40 with Respect to Membership and Stations in the Nebraska District and Total Synod

		Nebraska		Total Synod	
		German%	English%	German%	English%
1920	Membership	67	33	60	40
	Stations	61	39	58	42
1930	Membership	44	56	42	58
	Stations	38	62	36	64
1940	Membership	28	72	29	71
	Stations	20	80	21	79

Source: *Statistical Yearbook* (1920): 75-80; (1930): 101-03, 126-30; (1940): 119-22, 149-52, 183.

Table 2 is a composite of the five subcategories of Table 1 for the years 1920, 1930, and 1940. It shows clearly in terms of percentage the shift from German to English in the Nebraska District as well as the synod for those years. By comparison, the Nebraska District shows greater use of German than the synod for the first two decades, but by 1940 the synod has a one point advantage for both membership and stations. If the amount of decrease is considered, however, then the Nebraska District gives evidence of greater decline than the synod, especially during the decade 1920-30. It can also be noted that the membership criterion consistently shows greater strength in German than do the stations. In 1940, for example, there is a difference of eight percentage points between the stations and the membership for both the Nebraska District and the total synod. This suggests that the impression of the strength of German could depend on the criterion chosen as an indicator of language maintenance or shift.

Table 3

Summary of Language Use in Services 1920-30 with Respect to Membership in the Nebraska District and Total Synod

	Nebraska		Total Synod	
	German%	English%	German%	English%
1920	67	33	60	40
1922	62	38	56	44
1924	57	43	51	49
1926	50	50	46	54
1928	46	54	44	56
1930	44	56	42	58

Source: *Statistical Yearbook* (1930): 152.

Table 3 is a summary of language use in the Nebraska District and the synod for two-year intervals between 1920 and 1930, the decade of greatest decline for German in the Nebraska District and the synod. From the data given, it can be noted that the Nebraska District was consistently more retentive in German than the total synod, although by 1930 the difference between them had decreased to a margin of two percentage points. The period of greatest decline for the Nebraska District was between 1920 and 1928 (−21 points), while the synod declined a total of sixteen percentage points for the same period. The greatest decline for any two-year period was seven percentage points in Nebraska between the years 1924 and 1926. The synod experienced a five percentage point decline during the periods 1922-24 and 1924-26.

Several explanations can be offered for the faster pace of language shift during the 1920s: First, the effect of the anti-German sentiment and legislation during and after World War I is evident. The fact that the Siman and Reed-Norval Acts were not repealed until June 1923 meant that German could not be reintroduced into the schools and services until that time. Second, it is clear from various sources within the synod, that the membership desired bilingual meetings and publications already during the 1920s. In the Northern Nebraska District, for example, the *Business Report* was published in German and English in 1924. In the same year, the Southern Nebraska District decided to publish an English summary of the German essay and in the following year the entire *Proceedings* were to be printed in English. Third, comments such as those given by Theodore Graebner that a change of language expands immeasurably the missionary opportunity of the church suggest that some synod leaders were already receptive to the idea of language shift as early as 1921 (qtd. in Dietz 119).

Table 4 is a summary of language use within the two Nebraska districts between 1922 and 1940. From 1922 to 1970 the Nebraska District was divided into the Northern and Southern Districts. The Northern

Table 4

Summary of Language Use in Services According to Membership in the Northern and Southern Nebraska Districts

	Northern District		Southern District	
	German%	English%	German%	English%
1920	67	33	—	—
1922	62	38	63	37
1924	58	42	56	44
1926	51	49	50	50
1928	49	51	44	56
1929	46	54	45	55
1930	45	55	43	57
1932	42	58	41	59
1934	36	64	36	64
1936	34	66	34	66
1939	30	70	30	70
1940	28	72	28	72

Source: *Statistical Yearbook* (1940): 183.

District was made up of congregations in the Omaha area as well as those north of a line from Omaha to Columbus to Wyoming. The Southern District was composed of those congregations south of this line and included parts of southern Wyoming as well. The figures in Table 4 indicate only a small amount of variance in terms of language use and retention between the two districts. The Northern District shows a slightly better maintenance of German between the years 1924 and 1932, but then has an identical record with the Southern District between 1934 and 1940.

Hofman and Dietz report similar findings for the 1920s but differ concerning the retention record of 1940 and beyond. Hofman maintains that the Northern Nebraska District was among the "more retentive" districts of the Missouri Synod, while he classifies the Southern District as "less retentive" (144). The "more retentive" districts were, according to Hofman, about 5% to 10% less anglified in 1920 and 1940 than the "less retentive" districts, which is not supported by the data from the membership criterion in Table 4 (143). During the first year of reporting as separate districts, the Southern District actually indicated a one percentage point more retentiveness in German than did the Northern District.

Dietz, on the other hand, reports similar findings to those in Table 4 for 1930 but agrees more closely with Hofman with his results for 1946. He claims that the Northern District increased in the use of English from 54% in 1930 to 85% in 1946, while the Southern District increased from

57% English in 1930 to 89% in 1946 (Dietz 122-23). For the year 1930, Dietz agrees within one percentage point of the figures cited for the membership criterion in Table 4. In the case of 1946, there are unfortunately no comparable data available in the same format as in the previous years. The only data available for the years 1947 and 1950 come from using the criterion of language choice at church services. According to this criterion, the entire Nebraska District was using English in 79% of the cases in 1947 and 83% in 1950 (*Statistical Yearbook* 1950: 96-98; 131-34).

There are various explanations which can be suggested for the shift from German to English in the Nebraska District. World War I was one important agent of change. The data from the 1920s indicate, as is also popularly believed, that the anti-German sentiment did much to stifle the teaching of German in schools and the use of it for worship services. The interruption of German instruction from 1917 until 1923 made it very difficult to start up the programs again. Since German was used mainly in the public domains of schools and churches, it was a simple matter to enforce the ban on the language by intimidating the teachers and ministers.

A second factor related to the language shift in the Nebraska District was the change of generations. After the passing of the first generation, there was less need for German worship services, since the second and third generations were already bilingual. The latter also felt less compelled to speak out for the maintenance of German, especially after the experiences with the superpatriots of World War I. It was evident that the Missouri Synod, because of the identification as the Kaiser's religion, was subjected to close scrutiny in Nebraska.

A third factor favoring language shift is urbanization. It has been well documented by Fishman and others that rural dwellers are less likely to shift than urban dwellers (97). Cooper has also shown that urbanization is characteristic of the spread of a language such as Amharic in Ethiopia (465). Dietz also gives urbanization as one of the reasons for the change from German to English in the Missouri Synod, although he is not specific about the relationship of the two variables (101). In 1947 the *Statistical Yearbook* does mention that on the basis of location, 58% were rural and 43% were urban (111). According to the occupation of its members in the same year, however, the synod was 32% rural and 68% urban (111). This suggests that states like Nebraska, although predominantly rural and agricultural, experienced urbanization mainly as an occupational change of its residents, and this change apparently disrupted the traditional patterns of living and produced more contact with people outside of the immediate community who were not German speakers. As research has shown, language shift is very likely to occur under those circumstances.

Another factor to be considered is the pastor's knowledge of German. Although the Missouri Synod was known for its training in the German language in its colleges and seminaries, the pastors nevertheless had difficulty acquiring good language skills and maintaining those skills during the 1930s and 1940s. Hofman found in his study of

Minnesota congregations that twice as many pastors in retentive as in non-retentive parishes were reported to have a good knowledge of German (154). In an interview with a Lutheran pastor in a rural Nebraska parish in the early 1980s, the lack of adequate training and refresher courses was mentioned as a factor in his own eventual shift from German to English. By the 1940s the majority of the Lutheran pastors were learning German as a foreign language and their training and experience in the language simply did not permit them to preach about complex issues. It can be noted that the communion service, which is more ritualistic, was one of the last services to be held in German. The Mennonites of south-central Kansas also recognized this problem of inadequate training in German as a detriment for continued maintenance of German in worship services (*Mennonite Encyclopedia* 292). For that and other reasons, educated Mennonites urged their church leaders to shift from German to English.

The other half of the problem of proficiency lay with the membership. A major concern of Missouri Synod church leaders, as was the case also for the Mennonites in Kansas, was for the second and third generations. As the schools discontinued the teaching of German, the children and young adults became unable to understand and participate in the worship services held in German. This eventually led to what Hofman calls "an ideology of non-retention" among the Missouri Synod congregations (154). It became apparent that the retention of German would hinder the growth and expansion of the synod and also prevent it from being in the mainstream of American theology. Haugen observed a similar situation among Norwegian and Swedish Lutheran congregations as he said, "To stay alive and carry out its spiritual message, the church had to yield and become first bilingual, then increasingly English" (qtd. in Hofman 154).

Finally, a factor which has been deemed important in the maintenance of language is ethnic residential segregation (Lieberson; Li 117-18). Li found a high correlation between ethnic residential segregation and the ability to resist language shift among Chinese-Americans (117-18). A similar situation seems to exist with the Amish, the Hutterites, and to a certain extent, the Mennonites of south-central Kansas. Heinz Kloss uses the term "religio-societal insulation" to describe this phenomenon from yet another perspective and regards it as one of the most powerful factors for language maintenance (206). Within the Nebraska District there is little evidence to suggest such insulation or segregation. While some communities such as Seward, York, and Pierce may have been isolated from their neighboring communities, they certainly were not to the same extent as the Amish, Hutterites, and Chinese-Americans. The statistical data indicate that some congregations of the Nebraska District were as retentive or nearly so as the Mennonites in Kansas (Buchheit 119), but not so as an entire district.

From the data presented here, the following tentative conclusions can be drawn about language shift within the Nebraska District. First, it is evident from the data presented in the various tables that the greatest absolute shift occurred during the 1920s in the Nebraska District. The

peak period of shift was during the years 1924-26, just after the repeal of the Siman and Reed-Norval Acts. This differs slightly from Hofman's assessment that there was generally a steep decline of German during the 1930s, but he based his conclusion on the use of ethnic- and English-language publications and not on church services conducted in each language (140).

Second, the Nebraska District, in spite of the anti-German legislation and the active Council of Defense, appears to have had less shift from 1922 to 1934 than the total synod. Either the anti-German legislation did not have as much effect on language shift as is generally assumed, or there were other factors, e.g., the time of settlement or the number of first generation still living at the time, which were resisting language shift and which have not yet been identified.

Third, at least some of the evidence suggests that language spread was occurring as early as 1905 and 1910 in Nebraska. A number of congregations were already bilingual at that time, and others were introducing English into their services. With the ban of German instruction in the parochial schools during and immediately after World War I, language spread quickly became language shift during the 1920s and 1930s despite efforts to reintroduce German in the schools and worship services after the war. Once the domains for German were lost, it was very difficult to regain them, given the already bilingual situation and the absence of German instruction during the war.

Fourth, Hofman's claim that the Missouri Synod assumed an ideology of non-retention finds some support from the evidence gathered about the Nebraska District. The fact that quite a number of congregations in Nebraska were bilingual by 1905 and 1910 seems to indicate that some decisions concerning language choice had already been made prior to World War I. A second wave of English influence appears after World War I during the early 1920s when the Nebraska Districts officially shifted to English in their meetings and publications. From personal interviews with members of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod in Nebraska, it is evident that more German was used in the homes than in the churches during the final stages of the shift to English.

Finally, it appears that the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod responded to the language question in a very similar fashion as did other denominations which represented sizable ethnic groups. Once the majority of church leaders agreed that one could worship in English as well as German, it was simply a matter of waiting until the older folks and recent immigrants were in the minority. The argument that language saves faith gave way to the counter-argument that the synod needed to be concerned about the second- and third-generation Lutherans. This basic pattern was the same for other denominations and synods as well, e.g., the Norwegian Lutherans, the Swedish Lutherans, and the Mennonites on the Great Plains. They differ only in the pace with which they shifted to English. The Swedish and Norwegian Lutherans tended to shift earlier than the Missouri Synod, while the Mennonites appear to have shifted at about the same time or possibly a little later than the synod. It does appear, however, that the Nebraska

District does not deviate significantly from the three-generational pattern of language shift found among other ethnic and religious groups. By 1950 the majority of congregations were using English in all their services.

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