

Marion Lois Huffines

### **Pennsylvania German Stereotype: Particles, Prepositions, and Adverbs**

Mention of the Pennsylvania Germans brings to mind large farmhouses amid verdant fields, ruddy-faced farm families, and the Amish with their horse-drawn buggies. The image is one of a culture which is as rural and staid as it is culturally conservative. The tourist industry of southeastern Pennsylvania emphasizes the extreme and the exotic: the life style of the separatist sects, local foods (ponhaas, pig's maw, head cheese), and the variety of English spoken by the Pennsylvania Germans. As with all stereotypes, exaggeration mixes with truth, but the whole mixture influences how one perceives the ethnic group.

Of the thousands of Germans who immigrated to the United States in the last three centuries, the Pennsylvania Germans have been among the last to assimilate linguistically. Pennsylvania German is still spoken natively by the Old Order Amish and a majority of the Old Order Mennonites. As a people set apart from mainstream American society, they have been able to protect the communicative functions fulfilled by Pennsylvania German and use English to accommodate the dominant culture in transactional contexts. While the Old Orders are the most visible Pennsylvania Germans, they form only a very small percentage of the total number of Pennsylvania Germans in the United States. Among non-sectarian Pennsylvania Germans, the use of Pennsylvania German is receding rapidly, and because spoken Pennsylvania German has diminished as a marker of ethnic identity, the variety of English spoken by the Pennsylvania Germans now serves that purpose. Studies of subjective reactions to language varieties have shown that listeners respond to such ethnically accented English as they would to the spoken ethnic language itself.<sup>1</sup> Pennsylvania German-accented English is as much a part of the stereotype as are Amish buggies.

Historically, the term *Dutchman* and the image it denoted were derogatory.<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of their Anglo counterparts, the seventeenth-century German immigrants were ignorant, stubborn, and suspect in their political loyalties. Language played a dominant role in the dispar-

agement: Pennsylvania Germans were stubborn and suspect because they refused to learn English and ignorant because they did not learn English. Timothy Dwight, President of Yale, observed in 1800, "The settlers themselves were extremely ignorant. Their children became, if possible, more and more ignorant, for they were destitute for a long time even of the means of a parochial education. Their own language they spoke with increasing imperfection, and the English they scarcely spoke at all."<sup>3</sup> These connotations survive today in the epithet "dumb Dutchman," a term still associated with rural backwardness and linguistic awkwardness.

The English of the Pennsylvania Germans exhibits varying amounts of influence from Pennsylvania German. Tourists to central and southeastern Pennsylvania are treated to ludicrous depictions of so-called Pennsylvania German English on souvenir trivets and wall decorations as well as on placemats in local restaurants and diners. Among the language features often cited as characteristic of Pennsylvania German English is the unusual (and unacceptable) word order involving "prepositions" and adverbs. The following study investigates this linguistic behavior and its relationship to the "dumb Dutch" stereotype.

### **Background**

Although the popular media ridicule the Pennsylvania Germans for their peculiar use of prepositions and adverbs, linguists have not analyzed that language behavior. Frey mentions that "[t]he use of superfluous prepositions and adverbs in the Vernacular is influenced by the dialect, where these are good usage."<sup>4</sup> Mencken observes, "The early German settlers, when they began to acquire English, translated their native idioms, and in many cases those translations survive, and have been picked up by non-German natives, though not infrequently they do violence to accepted English usages, especially in the matter of prepositions."<sup>5</sup> Struble, Kreider, and Buffington list sentences without analysis to illustrate the syntax found in this variety of English and define adverbial forms by citing their German or Pennsylvania German counterparts.<sup>6</sup> Other investigations of the English of the Pennsylvania Germans generally concentrate on phonology and vocabulary. A more recent sociolinguistic study, however, indicates that the longest lasting contribution of the Pennsylvania Germans to the continuing development of English will be in the areas of intonation and syntax.<sup>7</sup>

### **Procedures**

The following observations on the English of the Pennsylvania Germans are based on tape-recorded interviews of spontaneous conversations carried out in English with 208 Pennsylvania Germans in a seven county area in southeastern and central Pennsylvania: the counties of Lancaster, Lebanon, Berks, Lehigh, Schuylkill, Northumberland, and Dauphin. The interviews were conducted in the informants' homes, and conversations covered such topics as farm chores, butchering, recipes, home remedies, and one-room schoolhouses. All English examples cited



below are derived from these tape-recorded conversations. Because the Pennsylvania German settlement area is located in the Midland dialect area, standard English will refer to general northern Midland usage.

### **The Phrasal Verb, Prepositions, and Adverbs in English**

In American English the phrasal verb or verb-particle construction forms a special class which is set off from other verb constructions by certain syntactic features. The particle, which frequently has the form of a preposition, has different syntactic properties from a preposition. The particle can occur finally and precede or follow object nouns without taking those nouns as its objects; for example:

It's supposed to draw the earache out.  
This would draw out the pain.

Particles always follow pronouns:

Grind it up.  
I never put them in.

In addition, the particle can be stressed while prepositions usually receive stress only when used contrastively:

Then I take my piece *out*. (particle stressed)  
I put it in the *oven*. (preposition normally unstressed)

While there are constructions in which it is almost impossible to distinguish adverbial and prepositional usages from that of the phrasal verb particle, of interest in this study is the position of the particle. Other defining properties of the phrasal verb are suggested by Bolinger and Fraser.<sup>8</sup>

The productive use of the verb-particle construction is considered one of the major features of American English which distinguishes it from British English.<sup>9</sup> While the verb-particle construction did occur in Old English, it was rare and only in Modern English showed a rapid development, especially in America. Both Kennedy and Baugh suggest that its evolution in English would have been more rapid if it had not been weakened by an influx of new verb forms from French during the Middle English period.<sup>10</sup> Kennedy describes the verb-particle combination as essentially Teutonic, and Baugh finds a comparison with the separable prefixes in German inescapable. One may speculate whether Pennsylvania German influence may have accelerated the development of the phrasal verb in American English.

Prepositions, which may have the same form as some particles, also occur after verbs. Prepositions precede and take their objects:

You'd put it in the bucket.  
There was a crank on the side.  
Some put spareribs in it.

The overlap in form of particles and prepositions, even though they perform different grammatical functions, is a source of confusion among

English speakers. Particles are popularly called prepositions although they do not take objects.

In standard varieties of English, the temporal adverbs *once*, *still*, *yet*, and *already* occur before the main verb of the sentence, often before an auxiliary but most frequently after an auxiliary and before the main verb;<sup>11</sup> for example:

I still do it.

He's already seen the movie.

Standard speakers normally preserve the preverbal position of these adverbs.

### The Separable Prefix Verb, Prepositions, and Adverbs in Pennsylvania German

Pennsylvania German has verbs with separable prefixes. In independent clauses with present tense or imperative verb forms, the prefix separates from the verb and occurs at the end of the clause. The prefix remains bound to the verb in its participial or infinitive form and also in dependent clauses where the finite verb must also occur finally. Examples of the separated prefix from the Buffington and Barba grammar illustrate:<sup>12</sup>

Ich schteh alle Marriye frieh uff.

'I get up early every morning.'

Mach die Dier zu.

'Close the door.'

Gnibb doch dei Rock uff.

'Unbutton your coat.'

Adverbs and prepositions as well as words in other grammatical categories may serve as prefixes.

Also as in standard German, three classes of prepositions exist in Pennsylvania German: those that regularly take the accusative case, those that regularly take the dative case, and those that may take either:

Er hot nix ghatt fer ihn. (ihn = acc.)

'He had nothing for him.'

Nooch em Esse hen mer widder gschpielt. (em Esse = dat.)

'After the meal we played again.'

Mer henke die Ladann owwich die Dier.

'We hang the lantern over the door.'

(die Dier = acc., verb shows motion to a place)

Es hot immer owwich der Dier ghunke.

'It always hung over the door.'

(der Dier = dat., verb shows no motion to a place)

If the object of the preposition is a personal pronoun which refers to an inanimate object, however, the proclitic particle *de-* or *dr-* attaches itself to the preposition and replaces the pronoun regardless of case:

Duh Kohle uffs Feier. Es sin schunn Kohle druff.

'Put coals on the fire. There are already coals on it.'



Die Katz bringt ihr Ketzeln in die Kich. Hoscht ebbes degege?

'The cat is bringing her kitten into the kitchen. Do you have anything against it?'

Bekimmer dich nix drum.

'Don't worry about it.'

Adverbial usage in Pennsylvania German is affected by the rules for word order and for the tense system. The Pennsylvania German finite verb occurs in second position in independent clauses and in first position in questions and commands. Other parts of the predicate, including temporal adverbs, are placed later in the sentence. Except for the verb *sei*, Pennsylvania German has only one past tense which corresponds formally to the English perfect and semantically to both the English preterite and present perfect. This is a linguistic feature which Pennsylvania German shares with other Middle and South German dialects.<sup>13</sup> Adverbs supplement the tense system by providing aspectual information. The adverb *mol/moll* has a specialized usage in addition to its temporal meaning. It frequently occurs with the imperative and seems to express an immediacy of interest on the part of the speaker; for example:

Geh heem un schlof moll wennich!

'Go home and sleep a little!'

### Accommodation of Syntactic Structures in Pennsylvania-German English

Bilingual speakers of Pennsylvania German and English often accommodate Pennsylvania German usage in their English as follows:

1. The syntax of the Pennsylvania German separable prefix verb parallels that of the English verb-particle construction and expresses itself in an overwhelming preference among Pennsylvania Germans for a word order which places the English particle after verbal objects, usually in final position. This word order predominates over the verb-particle-object word order 78% to 22%. The length and syntactic complexity of the object noun phrase does not seem to influence the particle position:

You put, is it, four or five cups of vinegar in?

Mabel just puts potatoes and smoked sausage, parsley and regular sausage in.

Well, I had put a small amount of sugar or honey in already.

One example occurs of the particle appearing in both positions:

I've written letters that I've put in a Dutch phrase in already.

2. The syntax of prepositional phrases in Pennsylvania German normally parallels that in English. However, the Pennsylvania German proclitic (*de-*, *dr-*) has no counterpart in English, and prepositions occur without expressed objects:

I didn't know you had anything in.

It might have had mold on.

A fasnacht is just a square bun without a hole in.  
They got them with orange juice in.

3. Speakers of Pennsylvania German English place the adverbs *once*, *still*, *yet*, and *already* after the main verb and usually in sentence-final position, the placement one would expect in Pennsylvania German; for example:

I stopped once and turned around and they weren't after me and I stood  
there a while once and they didn't come.  
I didn't have to do that too much still. My dad did still, but I never did.  
Most of our children went to the little schoolhouse yet.  
I heard different remedies already.

4. The choice of tense also affects the position of the adverbs in the above examples. Pennsylvania German has one past tense, the present perfect, which assumes the functions of both the preterite and the present perfect tenses found in standard German. In Pennsylvania German English these functions are fulfilled by the preterite. The English of the Pennsylvania Germans exhibits, therefore, a heavy reliance on preterite forms where other varieties of English use the present perfect. This is especially noticeable with the adverb *already*; for example:

I did dry string beans already.  
I remember she did do that though already.  
I helped butcher already.

In standard English, the present perfect refers to an action which is complete at the moment of speaking but does not specify the definite time when the action occurred. In addition, the present perfect must have what Traugott calls "present relevance": the subject of the verb must be alive or still exist, and the action must have been discussed before.<sup>14</sup> The preterite, on the other hand, generally refers to an action which occurred in a past period of time definitely separated from the present moment, a notion which the meaning of *already* disallows. In the examples above, *already* indicates the completion and present relevance of the action, a way of viewing the action which the preterite form does not express. The use of *already* in such cases is not redundant, as suggested in earlier studies, but a necessary aspectual adjustment to the time framework expressed by the tense.

5. The Pennsylvania German specialized usage of *mol* with the imperative expresses itself in a similar use of *once* in English; for example:

Explain it to her once.  
Let's see once.  
Now wait once.  
You listen once and see.

The adverb *once* seems to lose much of its temporal meaning and expresses the immediacy of the speaker's interest as *mol* does in Pennsylvania German.



The use of most of these compromise constructions is characteristic of the English of the whole Pennsylvania German community. Native speakers of Pennsylvania German tend to use prepositions without expressed objects more frequently than non-native speakers; however, monolingual English speakers and those who have only minimal ability in Pennsylvania German also exhibit the preference for sentence-final verb-particles, the use of preverbal adverbs postverbally with the preterite where other varieties of English use the perfect, and the use of *once* with the imperative in their speech. If the counterpart standard English constructions occur, they are found in the speech of younger and more educated Pennsylvania Germans.

### Discussion

The "peculiar use of prepositions" and the "superfluous use of adverbs" are frequently depicted in popular literature and informal discussions about the Pennsylvania German speech. They are in the layman's stereotype of Pennsylvania German English. Stereotypic examples are readily found in tourist materials. Gift shops sell, for instance, a twenty-four page booklet *Ferhoodled English*, a collection of "quaintly amusing expressions heard among the Pennsylvania Dutch Folks," which cites sentences showing the occurrence of prepositions after their objects:<sup>15</sup>

We go the bridge over.

Go look the window out and see who's coming the yard in.

Climb the ladder down.

Although it may be possible to envision such formulations as direct translations of separable prefix verbs, such examples, in fact, simply do not occur. None exist in the present corpus of data, and only one occurs in scholarly studies on the English of the Pennsylvania Germans: Struble's first syntactic example, which he supplies from memory, "He climbed the fence over."<sup>16</sup> The stereotype appears to be based on unanalyzed popular perceptions of grammar features, not on fact. As is the case with stereotypes, even a single occurrence of such expressions may appear to be frequent because of a strong listener reaction, and the stereotype lives although facts to support it do not exist.

Most nonstandard varieties of English are stigmatized. For some language varieties, the stigma reflects implicit national biases, such as those which exist against varieties of Black English, Spanish-American English, or the language spoken by members of lower socio-economic classes. However, for the Pennsylvania Germans, the stigma seems to arise from pressures solely within the area of cultural contact. A look at one specific farm community and its interaction with the surrounding non-Pennsylvania German area clarifies the issues involved. The community which serves as the example is located in the Mahantango Valley of southern Northumberland County, a rural area which is geographically isolated by surrounding mountain ridges and in which the family farm tradition still maintains itself today. The valley residents are non-



sectarian Pennsylvania Germans who because of their occupation and education must increasingly interact with non-Pennsylvania Germans.

Within the Pennsylvania German community itself, Pennsylvania German and Pennsylvania German English denote in-group solidarity. Outsiders are viewed with suspicion, especially those from cities and out of state. Business transactions carried out in Pennsylvania German are perceived to take place in an atmosphere of trust, even if the individuals do not know each other. By comparison, Pennsylvania Germans who are known to have speaking ability in Pennsylvania German and refuse to speak it or who make obvious efforts to eradicate Pennsylvania German features from their English are considered arrogant and snobbish. The in-group use of Pennsylvania German and Pennsylvania German English is evaluated positively.

Valley residents who leave the immediate area for educational or occupational purposes or for military service meet people who are unfamiliar with Pennsylvania German English and who have little knowledge of Pennsylvania German culture. The reaction of these people to this variety of English is also not negative. They are, however, curious, and they ask the speakers such questions as, "Are you from the South?" "What country are you from?" "You have an accent. What is it?" Such responses are natural and for the most part judgmentally neutral. Nationally, Pennsylvania Germans maintain a low profile in the mass media and are not associated with crime or disasters. An American cultural bias against Pennsylvania Germans does not exist. Most Americans associate the term Pennsylvania German with the Amish and Mennonites, and even these groups are perceived as curiosities, whose members are neither economically nor socially threatening.

The negative social evaluation of Pennsylvania German and Pennsylvania German English does occur in areas immediately adjacent to the Mahantango Valley. The ethnic composition of these areas is varied and includes descendants of the Scotch-Irish colonial population and of the eastern and southern European immigrants who came much later to work in the coal industry. Valley residents perceive these people to be very different from themselves.

The first place of confrontation between Pennsylvania Germans and local non-Pennsylvania Germans is in the school system. A consolidated school district serves the valley and nearby towns involved in the coal industry. Clear divisions emerge among the students, divisions which they express in terms of country vs. town, farmer vs. "coal cracker," "dumb Dutchman" vs. "grape stomper" or some other ethnic slur. These rivalries generally result in self-supporting peer groups between which there is little interaction. The emphasis on prescriptive English in the classroom also instills the perception in the minds of Pennsylvania Germans that their variety of English is inferior and that it is somehow due to their knowledge of or proximity to Pennsylvania German.

A second area of confrontation is administrative. Pennsylvania Germans come in contact with officials and service personnel of county, state, and federal offices or local financial, health, and legal institutions, and with business people of the outlying commercial centers. During



these transactions, remarks are passed on the Pennsylvania German accent which are good-natured and otherwise. The contacts are ones in which some speakers of Pennsylvania German English feel uncomfortable and disadvantaged. In this immediate contact area, a stigma is assigned to Pennsylvania German English by non-Pennsylvania Germans.

The compromise forms current in the English of today's Pennsylvania Germans have been adopted into the speech of monolingual English speakers and appear to survive independent of bilingualism. The preferential use of verb-object-particle word order, the occurrence of prepositions without expressed objects, the postverbal word order of *once, still, yet, and already*, their use with the English preterite, and the use of *once* with the imperative comprise the token factual supports for the "peculiar use of prepositions" and "superfluous adverbs" linguistic stereotype of the "dumb Dutchman." These structures seem to evoke a stereotype which does not conform to fact but poses as an object of ridicule for local non-Pennsylvania Germans.

Bucknell University  
Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Howard Giles and Peter F. Powesland, *Speech Style and Social Evaluation* (London: Academic Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> Don Yoder, "Palatine, Hessian, Dutchman: Three Images of the German in America," *Publications of the Pennsylvania German Society*, 14 (1980), 105-129.

<sup>3</sup> Yoder, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> J. William Frey, "Some Observations on Bilingualism in Eastern York County," 'S Pennsylvaniafnisch Deutsch Eck, *Morning Call* (Allentown, Pa., 15 Feb. 1941).

<sup>5</sup> H. L. Mencken, *The American Language*, Supplement II (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> George Struble, "The English of the Pennsylvania Germans," *American Speech*, 10 (1935), 163-172. Mary C. Kreider, "'Dutchified English'—Some Lebanon Valley Examples," *Pennsylvania Folklife*, 12 (1961), 40-43. Albert F. Buffington, "The Influence of the Pennsylvania German Dialect on the English Spoken in the Pennsylvania German Area," in *Helen Adolf Festschrift*, ed. Sheema Z. Buehne, James L. Hodes, and Lucille B. Pinto (New York: Ungar, 1968), pp. 30-41.

<sup>7</sup> Marion Lois Huffines, "The English of the Pennsylvania Germans: A Reflection of Ethnic Affiliation," *The German Quarterly*, 57 (1984), 173-182.

<sup>8</sup> Dwight Bolinger, *The Phrasal Verb in English* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971). Bruce Fraser, *The Verb-Particle Combination in English* (New York: Academic Press, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Closs Traugott, *A History of English Syntax* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), pp. 172-173.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur G. Kennedy, *The Modern English Verb-Adverb Combination*, Stanford University Publications in Language and Literature, Vol. 1 (Stanford: Stanford University, 1920). Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1957).

<sup>11</sup> Sven Jacobson, *Factors Influencing the Placement of English Adverbs in Relation to Auxiliaries* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Albert F. Buffington and Preston A. Barba, *A Pennsylvania German Grammar*, rev. ed. (Allentown, Pa.: Schlechter, 1965). Translations are the author's own.

<sup>13</sup> Buffington and Barba, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Traugott, pp. 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Gettysburg, Pa.: Conestoga Crafts, 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Struble, p. 167.