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Introduction

Varieties of German have been spoken by migrants from German-speaking Europe to North America and their descendants from the colonial era to the present. The scholarly literature produced on them is vast, extending back to the second half of the 19th century. Investigators have explored heritage German varieties in the United States and Canada from the perspective of multiple linguistic subfields, including but not limited to phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, socio(historical) linguistics, dialectology, and contact linguistics.

For most heritage languages in North America spoken by migrants and their descendants, including German, the shift from speaking a non-English language to speaking English only has typically occurred by the second generation after migration (Fishman 1966, Fishman and Hofman 1966). Some heritage varieties of German, however, have defied that trend. Maintenance beyond the third generation is due to particular external factors, including the geographic or social isolation of heritage language communities, or successive waves of migration from abroad to these communities. Even in ethnolinguistically relatively homogeneous communities, however, especially after the first (migrant) generation, bilingualism has been the norm. While the proficiency of individual bilinguals in a form of German and English has often been imbalanced, the external pressure to develop at least a basic working knowledge of English among North American-born speakers of German has been considerable. The linguistic effects of bilingualism are most clearly discerned in the presence of vocabulary borrowed from English into all documented heritage varieties of German.

The purpose of this volume is not to provide a comprehensive overview of “the German language in America,” but to offer just a small sample of

the diversity of heritage varieties of German in the U.S. and Canada, past and present. Of the eight varieties discussed, five have not been actively acquired by children for at least two or three generations and are thus severely endangered: Wisconsin Pomeranian Low German; Volga German in Ellis County, Kansas; Moundridge (Kansas) Schweitzer German; Texas Alsatian; and Texas German. The remaining three varieties, Plautdietsch (Mennonite Low German), Hutterite German, and Pennsylvania Dutch, which are all actively spoken by members of endogamous and highly traditional Anabaptist groups, are not only surviving, but thriving, due to exponential demographic growth. In fact, these three varieties, which today may be viewed as distinct Germanic languages in their own right, along with one other not treated in this volume, Amish Shwitzer (Amish Swiss German; Hasse and Seiler 2024), as well as Yiddish spoken by many Hasidic groups in North America and beyond (Bleaman 2018), are in fact the fastest growing languages, large or small, on the planet. In an era when most of the approximately 7,000 languages around the globe are spoken by small (and typically indigenous) minority populations and endangered, the success stories of the Germanic languages spoken by traditional Anabaptists and Jews are remarkable.

The eight German(ic) varieties discussed in this volume were selected for inclusion for their geographic and European dialectal diversity. Wisconsin Pomeranian and Plautdietsch are forms of Low German; Moundridge Schweitzer, Ellis County Volga German, and Pennsylvania Dutch are all descended from (West) Central German dialects; Texas Alsatian and Hutterite German are both related to Upper German varieties, Alemannic and Austro-Bavarian, respectively. Texas German most closely resembles Central German, however that could be due to the fact that it is descended from what is known in German as “*landschaftliches Hochdeutsch*” (regional High German; Ganswindt 2017), a general term that describes varieties of spoken standard German that emerged mainly in the 19th century and are direct antecedents of the regiolects spoken in Central Europe today. The unique status of Texas German versus the seven other varieties discussed in this volume is suggested by its remarkable degree of intelligibility for speakers of European standard German.

The eight varieties discussed here are spoken in diverse parts of North America. Four – Wisconsin Pomeranian, Ellis County Volga German, Texas Alsatian, and Texas German – are/were spoken in single states, namely Wisconsin, Texas, and Kansas. Moundridge Schweitzer was spoken in Kansas and also in South Dakota. Communities that use Hutterite German, Plautdietsch, and especially Pennsylvania Dutch, are dispersed across several U.S. states and Canadian provinces. Plautdietsch has the distinction of being

a truly global language, with communities spread across North, Central, and South America, as well as Germany and parts of the former Soviet Union.

In each of this volume's eight studies, the authors aimed to strike a balance between linguistic structural features and historical and sociolinguistic background information. All contributions discuss the place of English in the sociolinguistic ecology of the communities in which these varieties are/were spoken, as well the structural effects of contact. Ultimately, however, the eight chapters do not follow a uniform template, which allowed the authors to structure them as they saw fit.

References

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