THE LANGUAGE OF THE WEST SIBERIAN MENNONITES

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ABSTRACT

Plautdiitsch, the language used by Mennonites in many parts of the world, is a descendant of West Prussian Low German dialects. Many of its peculiarities can be explained by the two centuries of isolation from other German dialects and by contacts with other languages. Until recently, the dialect in West Siberia could be studied by Soviet scholars only, but in the last few years it has become possible also for others to do ethno-linguistic field work in this area. The Universities of Groningen, Oldenburg and Novosibirsk study this particular variety of the Plautdiitsch language in a joint research project [1].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the beginning of the 16th century, growing discontent with the catholic church led to the foundation of a number of new religious movements. In the Netherlands the former catholic priest Menno Simons (from a small village in Friesland) gathered a number of people around him who came from various parts of the Netherlands, but also from Germany and Switzerland. They moved from the Low Countries to the Weichsel delta area near Danzig (Gdańsk in present-day Poland).

The settlers were not a homogeneous group, they spoke different languages and dialects: Frisian, Low Franconian and Low Saxonian dialects. In their new country, they lived among people who spoke various Low German dialects, which must have sounded rather familiar to them. Dutch was to be preserved as the language used in church for over two centuries, and religious literature for the Mennonites was printed in the Netherlands, but for everyday communication the dialects of the area were soon adapted [2].

The Polish state did not interfere much with the lives of the emigrants, and until the first Polish Partition (1772) the Mennonites were allowed to live according to their principles. When, as a result of this Partition, the area around Danzig became a part of the state of Prussia, the situation deteriorated significantly. In 1789, a first group of settlers set off for Southern Russia, to areas later to become part of the Ukraine. In 1803/4 a second group of Mennonites left the Weichsel area for Southern Russia. These two groups of settlers came from different parts of the Weichsel delta area and different social backgrounds and they spoke somewhat different dialects. The two dialects evolving in the new environment in the two colonies, Chortitsa and Molochna, both being mixtures of Western Prussian speech varieties, reflected the differences in geographical, social and historical background of these two groups [3].

A major setback for the Mennonites was the abolition of their privileges in Russia in the 1870's, which resulted in a large emigration to Northern America (Canada and the United States) [4]. The founding of new colonies continued, however, and after 1910, a group of settlers left for Siberia and founded colonies in the Orenburg region and the Kulunda Steppe near the border with Kazakhstan.

After the October Revolution, the situation for the Russian Mennonites became very difficult. In the 30's, the first mass deportation took place, and when World War II started, all ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union faced labour camps and, again, deportation. The situation improved somewhat after 1953, but it lasted many years before emigration again became a possible alternative. The colonies in the Ukraine had disappeared, and most Mennonites now lived in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Only in a few areas in South Western Siberia Mennonites still lived in ethnically homogenous villages, in most other parts of the country they were scattered amongst many other nationalities. In the villages in the Altai Region we visited, only a few years ago almost 100% of the population were Mennonites, but now in some villages they are a minority. During our stay in the Altai region, we studied the complicated language situation, in particular its phonetic/phonological aspects. We collected many data on language use by the local inhabitants and found interesting cases of code switching and interference.

THE PLAUTDIITSCH LANGUAGE

The Plautdiitsch language as it is used today in Mennonite communities all over the world is the descendant of West Prussian varieties of Low German. The two century isolation in a non-German speaking environment has resulted not only in a considerable amount of loanwords from the surrounding languages, but also in a somewhat different and partly accelerated development of a few elements already present in the Weichsel delta dialects. The resemblances between Plautdiitsch and Dutch, or rather the Low Saxonian dialects of the Dutch language, were sometimes used to indicate the non-German character of Plautdiitsch and thus to 'proof' the Dutch origin of its speakers [2].

In most Mennonite communities two different varieties of the language are used, based on the Old Colony or Chortitsa dialect, and the New Colony or Molochna dialect respectively. The variety spoken in the Altai Region is an example of a mixture of these two dialects. The following list shows some of the most typical differences between the dialects of Chortitsa and Molochna, and the forms used in the Altai Region, which we investigated during our field work in 1992 and 1993 [5, 6].

Khortitsa	Molochna	Altai	
[kˈɪkˈən]	[tˈɪtˈə]	[tˈɪtˈə]	to look
[lɪgˈən]	[lɪdˈə]	[lɪdˈə]	to lie
[hy:s]	[hu:s]	[hy:s]	house
[by:ən]	[bu:ə]	[by:ə]	to build
[ku:lən]	[ko:lə]	[ko:lə, ku:lə]	coal
[møɔkən]	[mɔɐkə]	[mɔɐkə]	make, do
[zeɪt]	[zeɪt, zəɪt]	[zəɪt, zɔɪt]	sweet
[plaut]	[plɔ:t]	[plɔ:t]	flat
[ji:]	[zeɪ, zəɪ]	[zəɪ, zɔɪ, ji:]	you (polite form)

The consonant systems seem to be practically identical, with the exception of the development of the palatalized phonemes originating from /k, g/ before or after front vowels: the Chortitsa dialect has [k', g'], the Molochna dialect has [t', d']. The main differences are found in the vowel systems: most long vowels and diphtongs have separate realizations in the two varieties. Within the Altai dialect, great variation in the vowel system is possible, so that the actual pronunciation of a word may differ from speaker to speaker and from occasion to occasion.

Two of the differences bear resemblance to those found in Dutch dialects: standard [œy] as in *huis* (*house*) corresponds to [u] (the older form) in some varieties of Low Saxonian, and [y] (a later development) in others; the infinitive endings [(ə)n] and [ə] are found in the Low Saxonian and the Low Franconian dialects respectively.

As we have seen in the above, Plautdiitsch has a striking peculiarity: a number of palatalized consonant phonemes. In a few dialects in or near the Weichsel delta area, /k/ in front of or following a palatal vowel was realized as [k'], [t'] or [tʃ], and in Plautdiitsch this development later continued, resulting in the three new phonemes /k'/ or /t'/, /g'/ or /d'/, and /n'/. In West Siberian Plautdiitsch, original /k/ has become /t'/ in the following positions:

1. in front of palatal vowels:
[t'oɐʃ] High German *Kirsche*;
[t'a:rps] *Kürbis*
2. in front of palatal vowels, before [l,n,r,v]:
[t'laɪdʌ] *Kleider*; [t'li:n] *klein*;
[t'nepəl] *Knüppel*; [t'na:ls] *Cornelius*;
[t'rɪç] *Krieg*; [t'rɪpst] *kriechst* (from the infinitive [kry:pə] *kriechen*);

3. after palatal vowels:
[t'eʌt'] *Küche*; [et'] *ich*
4. after palatal vowels + /l,n,r/:
[ma:lt'] *Milch*; [drɪn't'] *trink*;
[boʌt'] *Birke*

It is believed that the palatalization may be related to the influence from Frisian. In this language, however, palatalization has a much more limited range and is restricted to old /k/ in front of palatal vowels where it has changed to [tʃ] (written as <tsj>), or, more seldom, [ts]: *tsjerke*, High German *Kirche*; *tsjettel* - *Kessel*; *tsiis* - *Käse*.

Most probably, the palatalization in Plautdiitsch has not arisen as a direct result of influence from Frisian. It is likely that some of the Low German dialects from which Plautdiitsch evolved, owed their palatalization to Frisian settlers (who moved from Eastern Friesland to the Danzig region in the Middle Ages), and that in Plautdiitsch this process developed further.

In general, Plautdiitsch shares many of the elements that distinguish the Low German dialects from High German. The sound changes [p] > [pf], [t] > [ts] that characterize the Southern German dialects have not occurred in the North, e.g.: High German (HD) *Apfel*, Dutch (D) *appel*, Plautdiitsch (PD) [a:pəl]; HD *Zeit*, D *tijd*, PD [ti:t]. Low German also has a great number of words that are unknown in High German, but not in Dutch. The Plautdiitsch word [fəndoɐɣ] (other Low German dialects have similar forms) *today*, is *vandaag* in Dutch, but *heute* in High German. These two elements give Plautdiitsch a very familiar ring to the Dutch ear. At the lexical level, the language of the Siberian Mennonites mirrors the history of these people. Most words are known from various Low German dialects: [hy:s]

house, [drɔk] *busy*, [maŋk] *between*.

Most of the hundred or so loanwords from Dutch (Tolksdorf 1990) found in dialects spoken in the Weichsel delta area have disappeared from Siberian Plautdiitsch. A few survivors are [o:lba:səm] from Dutch *aalbes* 'black currant', [mɔ:] or [me:v] from D *mouw* 'sleeve', [ta:xəntɪç] with initial [t] as in D *tachtig* 'eighty'. The word [pi:nɪç] is the descendant of *pijnlijk* (obsolete in this meaning) 'diligent' - in Plautdiitsch is has come to mean 'quick'.

Frisian seems not to have left many traces in the Plautdiitsch lexicon, but with certainty of Frisian origin is [t'a:st] 'wedding', from Frisian *kest* 'choice'. [ʃvi:nt'ət'a:st] 'the slaughtering of a pig' must originally have meant 'the choosing of a pig to be slaughtered'.

More dominating in the lexicon are the many loanwords of Slavonic (Polish, Ukrainian, Russian) origin. In particular, the influence of Russian on all levels has become very strong, as our field work recordings show.

CONCLUSION

In the Germanic language family, Plautdiitsch claims a special place. Its long isolation from other German dialects and its close contacts with other languages have given it a specific character, which to some extent can be compared to that of Yiddish. The Plautdiitsch language, the sole descendant from the many West Prussian Low German dialects once used in the Weichsel delta area, is now spoken by Mennonites in many countries and has partly taken over the religious factor as the main identity marker for this ethnic groupe. It is a pity that a language, that managed to survive centuries of isolation and many years of prohibition,

should now disappear where it has long had its most speakers − in Siberia. The increasing emigration to Germany has left many Mennonite villages russified more than decades of Soviet russification policy could accomplish. The Plautdiitsch speakers who choose to stay find it more and more difficult to provide their children with a Plautdiitsch speaking environment, and in the long run it must be feared that the language will lose much ground to Russian. In Germany, the children of Russian Mennonite immigrants will almost certainly only have passive knowledge of Plautdiitsch.

One can only hope that the language will survive in North America and the isolated colonies in South America's, where a revival can be observed.

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