THE LANGUAGE OF THE WEST SIBERIAN MENNONITES

T. de Graaf and R. Nieuweboer
Department of Linguistics,
Groningen University

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 and different social backgrounds and they spoke somewhat different dialects. The two dialects evolving in the new environment have 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 PLAUTDIITSCH LANGUAGE

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 similarities 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. In 1803/4 a second group of Mennonites lived 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 deportations took place, and when World War II started, all ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union faced labor 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 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 PLAUTDIITSCH LANGUAGE

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 PLAUTDIITSCH LANGUAGE

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

**Phonological Aspects**

**Khortitsa** | **Molochna** | **Altai**
---|---|---
[k'ik' an] | [t'it' a] | [t'it' a] | to look
[lug' an] | [hü' a] | [hü' a] | to lie
[hy' a] | [hu' a] | [hu' a] | house
[by' an] | [bu' a] | [by' a] | to build
[ku' l' a] | [ko' l' a] | [ko' l' a] | coal
[mÖ' s' k' an] | [mÖ' ka] | [mÖ' ka] | to make, do
[zent] | [zent, zat] | [zat, zot] | sweet
[plaut] | [pl' at] | [pl' at] | flat
[ji'] | [zei, zai] | [zei, zai] | 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
diphthongs have separate realiza-
tions 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 [ey] as in huis
(house) corresponds to [u] (the older
form) in some varieties of Low Saxo-
nian, and [y] (a later development) in
others; the definitive endings [e]m] and [a] are found in the Low Saxo-
nian 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 [t], and in
Plautdiitsch this development later
continued, resulting in the three new
phonemes /k'/ or /t'/, /g'/ or /d'/, and
/a'/ in West Siberian Plaut-
artiis, original /k/ has become /t/' in the
following positions:

1. in front of palatal vowels:
   [t'oe] High German Kirsche;
   [ta:p's] Kirbis
2. in front of palatal vowels, before
   [n,r]:
   [t'la:ds] Kleider; [t'li:n] klein;
   [t'na:is] Knüppel; [t'na:is] Cornelius;
   [tr'k] Krieg; [trp'st] kriechst (from the
   infinitive [kry:pa] kriechen);
3. after palatal vowels:
   [t'ea't'] Küche; [et'] ich
4. after palatal vowels + /l,n,r/:
   [malt'] Milch; [dram't'] trink;
   [boat'] Birke

It is believed that the palatali-
zation may be related to the influ-
ence 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 [t] (written
as <ts>), or, more seldom, [ts]:
tsjerke, High German Kirche; tsjettel
Kessel; tsiis - Kais.

Most probably, the palataliza-
tion 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 pa-
latalization 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) [ap:pol]; HD
Zeit, D tijd, PD [tit]. Low German
also has a great number of words that
are unknown in High German, but
not in Dutch. The Plautdiitsch word
[fandor] (other Low German dia-
lects have similar forms) today, is
vandaag in Dutch, but heute in High
German. These two elements give
Plautdiitsch a very familiar ring to
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 Russian 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
group. 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 Sibe-
ria. 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 chil-
dren 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 Ameri-
can and the isolated colonies in South
America's, where a revival can be
observed.

REFERENCES
(1994), The Language of the West
Siberian Mennonites,
Internationaltidsskrift for sprog og
[2] Unruh, B.H. (1955), Die niederlän-
disch-niederdeutschen Hintergründe
der mennonitischen Ostwanderungen.
Im Selbstverlag.
von Chortitza in Sibirien.
München.
Wortschatz der kanadischen Menno-
niten, Marburg: N.G. Elwert Verlag.
und Formbestand der niederdeutschen
Mundart des Altai-Gebietes.
Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
Das Plautdiitsch in Westsibirien.
Groningen: Lingua Mennonitica.