

Switzerland and Midwest Connections: Shwitzer The Swiss German of the Midwest

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Welcome to the History Blog featuring the connections between Switzerland and the Midwest. I am Joerg Oberschmied, Deputy Consul General in Chicago. My interest in history started at an early age and continues to this day. The views expressed are solely mine and I hope you enjoy these journeys through time.

It may come to many Swiss today as a surprise that Swiss German continues to be spoken in rural areas of the Midwest. Following the split among the Swiss Anabaptists into Mennonite and Amish branches in 1693, the first Amish settled in Pennsylvania in the mid-1700s. They became part of the Pennsylvania Dutch speaking community. This language is derived from Pfälzisch, i.e. German dialects spoken in the Southwest of Germany. Later, in the late 1830s, a number of Swiss immigrants of various faiths began settling in what is now Adams County in Indiana. In 1852, a group of Mennonite families settled in the area and founded the town Berne, IN. These Mennonites had their roots in the Swiss Canton of Berne, but due to the harsh persecution of Anabaptist groups by Bernese authorities they had settled in the Jura Mountains. In Indiana they were followed by Amish, also of Bernese descent, who used to live in Eastern France (in Franche-Comté and Alsace) before migrating to Indiana. When the Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad planned to build a railroad through Adams County, two farmers donated land to the railroad in exchange for a railroad depot in the small community. The railroad company agreed, and on Christmas Day 1871, the first train arrived. Today, Indiana has the largest concentration of Swiss German speaking Amish. *Guido Seiler*, Professor for Germanic Linguistics at the University of Zurich und *Mark Loudon*, Professor of Germanic Linguistics at the University of Wisconsin take us into the fascinating world of the unique Swiss German spoken in the Midwest today.



Professor Guido Seiler, University of Zurich



Professor Mark Loudon, University of Wisconsin

Joerg Oberschmied: Do Amish and Mennonites today both still practice Swiss German?

Guido Seiler & Mark Loudon: The original language of both groups in Adams County, IN, was Bernese Swiss German. It is very likely that Bernese Swiss German continued to be the dominant language for informal conversation within and between those groups throughout the 19th century. The picture dramatically changed during the 20th century, but interestingly in clearly different directions: Whereas the Adams County Mennonites almost completely shifted to monolingual American English, the Adams County Amish continue to speak their own dialect which, however, developed in quite distinct ways as compared to the Bernese dialect spoken in Switzerland. There are only a few elderly Mennonites left who can still speak the dialect, although they usually do not do so on a daily basis. And the less often a language is used, the more difficult it is for its speakers to keep it alive. Some Mennonites report that in childhood they were still able to speak the language but in later years there was so little opportunity to talk in Swiss that the memory of the language vanished. Changes in lifestyle (e.g. greater physical and social mobility, more contact with English-speaking neighbors, etc.) play an important part in language shift, but the bottom line is that the language has not been passed on to the next generations.

Among the Adams County Amish, who are usually called the “Swiss Amish” (in contrast to other, Pennsylvania Dutch speaking Amish), the dialect is still the dominant spoken language within the community and at home, such that children acquire it as their first language. The community is quite endogamous, that is, Swiss Amish typically marry partners from within their own community. Consequently, the language continues to be used within and between Swiss Amish families. Another important factor for language maintenance is its role in identity: The immigration history of the Adams County Swiss Amish is different from that of other Amish settlements. They arrived in America about a century later, and they maintain cultural practices which set them apart from other Amish — and having their own language is an important part of maintaining a separate identity as an inner-Amish minority.

JO: How do these dialects compare with the Swiss German spoken in Switzerland today?

GS & ML: There are remarkable differences between the dialects spoken by Mennonites and Amish in Adams County. The Mennonite dialect is surprisingly similar to the Bernese Swiss German as we know it from the Swiss Canton of Berne. It is very easy to understand for a person with a Swiss German background. It contains expressions that sound archaic, e.g. *brichtein* the sense of ‘to talk’, but we must keep in mind that this dialect was brought to America in the 19th century. On the other hand, there is some influence from English, but this influence is relatively modest, as can be demonstrated by the word for ‘to call (by phone)’, which is *aalüüte* in Mennonite Swiss German — the same word as in today’s Swiss dialects. This is remarkable insofar as it demonstrates that there has probably always been some connection with the homeland, and possibly also some influx of speakers arriving from Europe after the first Swiss Mennonites migrated to the US Midwest.

In contrast, the Amish variety of Swiss German is more difficult to understand for a speaker of (European) Swiss German. This fact alone demonstrates already that the Amish dialect further developed in ways that are new from the perspective of the Bernese Swiss German (from which the Amish variety stems, too). Speakers themselves call the language “Swiss” or “*Shwitzer*”, and they are aware of its Swiss roots. However, Swiss Amish did not maintain ties to Switzerland nor did later Swiss migrants merge with them after their arrival in Indiana. *Shwitzer* contains much vocabulary that reflects the (Shwitzer-English) bilingual situation of its speakers. Some English vocabulary is borrowed directly, such as school subjects like history, geography etc., but more often English influence is more subtle since it affects the meaning of words that continue nonetheless to be pronounced in a Swiss German way: *es luegt guet* ‘it looks good’ (Swiss German *luege* is otherwise used only in the sense of ‘looking at

something'), or *es schaffet guet* 'it works well' (Swiss German *schaffe* means only 'to do work' but not 'to be functioning'). However, clearly more important than English is the influence of another Amish language, namely Pennsylvania Dutch. Amish Shwitzer contains so many commonalities with Pennsylvania Dutch (all unknown in Bernese Swiss German) that we might even say it is a mixed dialect with Bernese and Pennsylvania Dutch as its parental languages.

Again, at first glance Pennsylvania Dutch influence is most obvious in vocabulary, e.g. *goul* ('horse', from Pennsylvania Dutch *gaul* or *gaal*; but in Bernese *ross*), but even more striking is the convergence of Amish Shwitzer with Pennsylvania Dutch when it comes to grammatical structure, i.e. rules of word or sentence formation. For example, 'he helps' is expressed as *er h lft* but not as *er hilft* as in Swiss German. Amish Shwitzer uses — again in accordance with Pennsylvania Dutch — a past tense form of 'to be': *si ware jung* 'they were young'. Interestingly, this form is not used in the dialect spoken by the Mennonites (where an analytical form is used, *si si jung tsi* lit. 'they are young been', the same basic pattern as in Bernese Swiss German).

Another example has to do with expressions of future time. Originally and till today, Bernese Swiss German has no distinct future tense form, such that the simple present tense is used for future events, too, e.g. *i s gs niemerem* lit. 'I tell-it nobody'. Amish Shwitzer, like Pennsylvania Dutch, has a form derived from the verb meaning 'to count', which became specialized for this function, e.g. *i tsel nieme das s ge* lit. 'I count nobody that tell', i.e. 'I will tell nobody'.

There are many more examples of the strong Pennsylvania Dutch influence in all parts of the Amish Shwitzer language, yet other features still reflect its Swiss German roots. Swiss Amish use words like *geng* ('always') that are familiar from Bernese Swiss German but unknown in Pennsylvania Dutch. They pronounce the initial *ch* sound as in *chind* 'child' or *chraft* 'strength, force' exactly like in Bernese Swiss German (whereas Pennsylvania Dutch would use a *k* pronunciation in these words). Overall, Bernese linguistic features in the Adams County Amish dialect are mostly concentrated in vocabulary and pronunciation, but there are also a few grammatical constructions that Amish Shwitzer inherited from Bernese Swiss German, e.g. *er geit gi schaffe* lit. 'he goes go work' and are unknown in Pennsylvania Dutch. Finally, Amish Shwitzer developed novel expressions that are neither Bernese nor Pennsylvania Dutch, such as the word *schaff-fahri* 'driver who brings Amish to their workplaces', or the form *er choat* 'he can, he is able', with an *oa* pronunciation and an ending *-t* absent in Pennsylvania Dutch or Bernese (where this form would be *er cha*).

In sum, the dialect spoken by the Adams County Mennonites is largely Bernese Swiss German. One might say that this dialect maintained many features of its ancestral language until its disappearance, a moment that has not yet come, but unfortunately speakers are becoming fewer and fewer. In contrast, Amish Shwitzer continues to develop in dynamic ways, making it increasingly difficult for a Swiss person to understand. This development is the natural consequence of the fact that Amish Shwitzer is a vibrant, actively spoken language.

JO: How many people in America today still speak the Amish Swiss German?

GS & ML: In 2017, the estimated population of the Adams County, IN, Old Order Amish settlement was 8,595 (1). We must bear in mind that there are numerous daughter settlements of Swiss Amish in Missouri, Kentucky, Illinois, and other US states, too. Thus *Kraybill, Nolt & Burdge* estimate the number of Amish Shwitzer speakers at 21,195 (2).

JO: Is the language growing or is it dying out as is the case with many other languages?

GS & ML: Kraybill, Nolt & Burdge estimate that the Amish Shwitzer speaking population has grown from 1900 speakers in 1960 to 21,195 in 2017. This means that the speaker population has more than doubled every twenty years, and at present there is no reason to assume that this growth will stop in the foreseeable future. Growth is very unusual for minority languages, yet we must bear in mind that among all Old Order Amish exceptionally large average family sizes (on average 6–7 children) and retention rates around 90% are the norm. The robust demographic health of the Amish points toward a bright future for their languages, Amish Shwitzer and Pennsylvania Dutch.

Many thanks to Professor Seiler and Professor Loudon for this interesting conversation.



Credit: Image courtesy of <https://bernein.com/our-community/#>

For additional information please see the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies (Elizabethtown College) <https://groups.ets.edu/amishstudies/>. On Mennonite communities in Switzerland see <https://www.menno.ch/de/>.

For the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia online www.gameo.org. For an interview with Professors Loudon and Seiler see https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/society/german-dialects-in-the-us_-i-recognise-every-word-but-i-have-no-idea-what-you-re-saying/43491608. On Pennsylvania Dutch: <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/pennsylvania-dutch-fastest-growing-minority-language>.

For the Blog “Anabaptist Historians see”: <https://anabaptisthistorians.org/tag/pennsylvania-dutch/>. Notes:

(1) “Twelve Largest Amish Settlements, 2017.” Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, Elizabethtown College. <http://groups.ets.edu/amishstudies/statistics/twelve-largest-settlements-2017/>).

(2) Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, and Edsel Burdge Jr. 2017. “Language Use among Anabaptist Groups”, pp. 108–130 in: Simon J. Bronner and Joshua R. Brown, eds., *Pennsylvania Germans: An Interpretive Encyclopedia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.

SHWITZER Project Website: <https://www.ds.uzh.ch/de/projekte/shwitzer.html>