

Pennsylvania Dutch in the 21st Century

Mark L. Louden

University of Wisconsin–Madison

Against the backdrop of the critical endangerment of languages across the globe that are spoken by small populations and do not enjoy official recognition, the sociolinguistic health of Pennsylvania Dutch, a North American language *mit pfälzischem Migrationshintergrund*, is a minor miracle. Not only has Pennsylvania Dutch survived for two and a half centuries in the US and Canada, it is thriving. Due to the exponential growth of the largest group of its speakers, the Amish, the Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking population is doubling approximately every twenty years. No other language on the planet, large or small, is growing faster.

In this presentation I will provide an overview of the current situation of Pennsylvania Dutch. I will begin with a sketch of the history of the language, indicating how it is related to European dialects of German. I will then introduce a salient sociolinguistic fact about the speakers of the language that has been relevant since its genesis, namely that Pennsylvania Dutch has been spoken by two major groups of people, the “church people” (*Kirchenleute*, nonsectarians), who were mainly of Lutheran and Reformed background, and the “sect people” (*Sektenleute*, sectarians), comprised largely of Mennonites and Amish. Into the 20th century, nonsectarians made up the majority of speakers, however that has changed dramatically as most have shifted to speaking English only. Among Amish and Old Order Mennonites, on the other hand, Pennsylvania Dutch continues to thrive. I will briefly analyze the reasons for the differential patterns of maintenance and shift across these two speech communities against the larger backdrop of minority language endangerment.

I will then turn my attention to the structural effects of bilingualism on contemporary Pennsylvania Dutch. Specifically, I will show how the substantial semantic influence of English on Pennsylvania Dutch, which is the result of the largely balanced bilingualism of sectarian speakers, has led to the limited syntactic convergence of the two languages. One clear example of the convergence of Pennsylvania Dutch in the direction of English has to do with infinitival complementation, specifically with the distribution of the prepositional complementizer *fēr* to introduce infinitives. The presentation will wrap up with information on how Pennsylvania Dutch has become increasingly used as a written medium, even though the literacy needs of modern Amish and Mennonites are met largely by English and an archaic form of standard German (*Hochdeutsch*).

Although the sociolinguistic situation of Pennsylvania Dutch is atypical relative to other small languages worldwide, including Germanic languages, its overall health is the direct consequence of its socio-religious status. In this regard, Pennsylvania Dutch is not unique, but a member of a small club of Germanic minority languages that includes Mennonite Low German (*Plautdietsch*), Hutterite German (*Hutterisch*), Amish Swiss German (*Shwitzer*), and Yiddish.