

**FROM DIALECT TO STANDARD LANGUAGE (AND BACK?):
THE STORY OF GERMAN***

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“A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.”
Max Weinreich

No unified German language existed at the start of the fifteenth century: it was dialects all the way down in the territories where a German nation would be born four centuries later. The Holy Roman Empire, ruled from Rome, claimed these territories, and governed them through its *Kanzleien* ‘chanceries’.

The people spoke their local dialect, each dialect shading off into another not quite identical, every few miles, until at some remove on this continuum people from one region could not understand those from another. In churches the congregation heard Latin, though only the clergy and some of the nobility could understand it. The farmers spoke dialect to their families, their neighbors, and the merchants to whom they sold their crops and animals; the merchants had learned to adjust their dialect to speak not only to their fellow townspeople and the local farmers, but also to their suppliers from the next town or a few towns farther away.

The princes and dukes, however, were as likely as not to speak French, to their families, to each other, to their personal servants (they probably never spoke at all to the scullery maids, the grooms, and so on), and to their kinsmen and women in the ruling houses of Europe near and far; for the military, political and economic dominance of *Frankenreich* ‘France’ made French the language of international institutions such as the European nobility.

This system seemed to serve well enough, until a constellation of events starting in 1440 began a storm that ended in Standard German. By the early decades of the sixteenth century the technology, politics, religion, demography, and commerce of the German territories came together amongst a thundering crash and a storm of creativity. After the storm cleared, a new German language was on the horizon.

Technology: Johannes Gutenberg’s invention in 1440 of European printing using movable type was the opening event in this chain. The increasingly mercantile economy in the German towns made literacy beneficial, even if only for recording debts, payments, and tax; and increasing prosperity resulted in increasing population, with need for more clergy, lawyers, and teachers. The fifteenth century saw the founding of fifteen new universities in the German territories, adding to the five already in existence. Soon there were print shops in fifty German-speaking cities, including Gutenberg’s and Johannes

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Mentelin's, both in Strassburg (then located in German-speaking territory; today in France). Meanwhile, the first paper mill north of the Alps had been built in Nuremberg in 1347, making books printed on paper far cheaper than the vellum that had been used for hand-copied books, affordable for the rising mercantile classes.

Printed books began to replace the hand-copied and hand-illustrated manuscripts of the previous age. Prominent among the books in the first wave of printing was the Bible: Gutenberg's edition of 1455/56, in Latin. Mentelin's 1466 edition of the Bible in German was a first; however, the Church still disapproved of Bible reading by the laity, and Mentelin's Bible accordingly was more of a reference aid for the clergy than a popular book. Actually, the Mentelin Bible could not be easily understood by those who knew only German, as it mirrored the Latin structure and vocabulary of the Vulgate Bible, ignoring German idioms and word order.

Politics: The German-speaking territories, made up of about 150 principalities, dukedoms and other 'estates', had little opportunity for self-rule, as the princes, dukes and petty nobility all owed allegiance to the Holy Roman Emperor and his laws, passed down to the territories by the Holy Roman chanceries. Those in the east-central-southern territories had by the fifteenth century cobbled together a legal scribal language that combined features of the local German dialects, so that scribes of chanceries hundreds of miles distant from each other could exchange memos, and not just in Latin. This chancery German was however primarily a written, not a spoken, language, a language of convenience for the bureaucratic business of the chanceries.

Meanwhile, the chanceries' clients, both the nobility who saw their own powers of rule as diminished by control from Rome and the increasingly restive burghers of the German towns, yearned for a way to throw off the yoke of Rome and express in concrete terms a German nationalism that had no German nation. Yet rebellion against the Holy Roman Empire was not only difficult, it also represented rebellion against the Church, which no one in the German territories was equipped or, perhaps, even willing to undertake.

Religion: Into this cauldron of boiling wishes and possibilities stepped Martin Luther, an enormously popular Roman Catholic monk whose writings in Latin were already causing a cultural stir. In 1517 Luther made public his protest against the very idea of 'indulgences', certificates sold by priests to ordinary people who hoped by buying them to ransom deceased loved ones from the torment of Purgatory. After a series of unsuccessful efforts to silence Luther, Pope Leo excommunicated him in 1521. Shortly thereafter the secular court of the Holy Roman Empire tried Luther in Worms, a town on the Rhine, for heresy. Agents of the German Elector Friedrich clandestinely rescued Luther from an almost certain death penalty and took him by night to a remote castle in Wartburg. Luther's rebellion and his sympathy for German nationalism had caught the attention, and the support, of the German princes who wanted to get out from under Roman authority.

During his ten-month internal exile at Wartburg Castle, Luther spent his time in crafting a new translation of the New Testament, going back to the oldest available documents in Greek and Latin, consciously attempting to create a New Testament that all German speakers could understand, for he believed that every Christian should read the Bible, rather than relying on the interpretations of the priests. Translation of the Old Testament would not come until 1534; for this Luther would need the help of Hebrew scholars.

Luther left the castle in February, 1522, and rejoined his old life in Wittenberg as a professor of Bible, and a few months later, in September 1522, the first edition of the New Testament was published and almost instantly sold out. But Luther never stopped revising. Trying to find a *German* lingua franca, he consulted obsessively with experts on language as well as with the local butchers and market women to express the Bible to speakers from North, Central and South. He re-purposed the chancery superdialect, together with Wittenberg's *Mitteloberdeutsch* 'middle upper German', to mirror in German the simple and direct style of St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible.

Demographics: By 1500 about 10 percent of the German population was able to read German, fueling a demand for books printed in Germany. And after 1522, what they wanted to read was evidently the Bible. Not only newly minted Protestants, but also Catholics read the Luther Bible, first only the New Testament, and then, when it became available in 1534 (with the aid of Luther's think tank of scholars, including two rabbis), the Old Testament too. All over middle and south Germany, the Luther translation sold and sold, becoming the biggest best-seller in the German territories. In Wittenberg, Luther's home town, more than 100,000 copies were sold in Luther's lifetime. Printers formulated house rules—how words would be spelled, what the grammar rules would be; and the rules of the big printing houses were adopted by the smaller printing houses—the beginning of a codified standard written language.

Commerce: In northern German-speaking territories, the Hanseatic League, medieval mercantile powerhouse, reached and passed the peak of its powers. Early modern nation-states in Europe presented competition that the Hansa was not prepared to meet. So, where in an earlier time the Hansa with its northern Low German lingua franca might have been expected eventually to dominate the southern German territories linguistically as well as commercially, the rising literacy, printing press, and secular-supported Reformation, topped off by a new Bible in High German, interrupted the flow of events. Thus occurred an unexpected linguistic triumph of the small-town and rural South over the urban North, and of the religious over the secular. The Low German lingua franca of the Baltic *Kontors* 'trading posts' from London to Novgorod gradually gave way to the German of the Luther Bible, and even in the northern urban areas of the German territories, this supplanted Low German as the written standard language.

The High Status of Bible German

Within fifty years of the first appearance of Luther's 1534 complete German Bible, then, its language became the common written standard of German. Further, Luther's choice of a direct, 'people's language' for the Bible lent prestige to this vernacular style, which began to compete with the ornate literary style, patterned after secular Latin writing, that had dominated in earlier centuries.

Within one hundred years, German was to replace Latin as the language of universities—spoken in lectures and among students and professors, written in scholarly books. By the sixteenth century, the German of the Bible was the academic language of the German-speaking territories; Latin supplied the technical vocabulary and the roots for creation of new words, but not the structure of the discourse.

The German Dialects Survive

Still, though, the German dialects both north and south retained their places of pride within the homes, in the marketplaces, and in the sermons of the Protestant churches. The growing influence of Luther's standard Bible German remained focused on the written language, not on the spoken language in either its homeland—central and south German territories—or north German territories. There the dialects of Upper, High (mountain territory), or Low German (*Plattdeutsch*) reigned supreme.

Throughout the grim time of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648), largely waged by all the great powers of Europe on the lands of German estates and the backs of German peasants, not much changed, linguistically speaking. When the smoke cleared, the German territories were still not a nation, but remained a collection of principalities in the Holy Roman Empire, without a capital city and without a dominant spoken language, dozens of dialects the mother tongues of German speakers. The countryside was devastated for decades, and the people demoralized. But as culture slowly recovered its voice, the German of the Luther Bible was still the commonest written language.

By the nineteenth century, however, the need for a spoken as well as a written standard was becoming clearer. The Second Industrial Revolution at mid-century saw German factories eclipsing England, the former industrial leader, in the all-important production of steel. German factories needed workers, and there was a massive move of the population from the countryside to the cities. The factories needed a lingua franca—the cacophony of a dozen dialects could not meet the needs of production. For, unlike in earlier times, when the nobility saw no need to communicate with the common people, industrial organization required middlemen—foremen—who would explain to the workers how to operate the machinery. And the teams of workers needed to talk to one another.

The Influence of Prussia

In Prussia, locus for much of the heavy-duty industrial development, the nineteenth century saw a change of thinking in which the state would be responsible for education. In a system designed by Prussian education minister Wilhelm von Humboldt, eight years of schooling became mandatory for every child. Though the schoolchildren spoke a dialect at home, standard German—by now called ‘High German’ to distinguish it from the Prussian Low German dialects—was the only language permitted in school—for writing or for speaking. American authorities such as reformer Horace Mann, who traveled to Prussia to see the schooling first hand, reacted so positively that in short order American states began to pattern their public schooling after the Prussian system.

In 1871, under Kaiser Wilhelm and Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, the German territories (except for Austria, Luxembourg, and Switzerland) united to form the Second German Reich. The first had been the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, though it was in actuality “neither holy, nor an empire, nor German,” as Voltaire remarked. Soon after, the new German Civil Service and military, like industry, required a common language. High German filled the bill, and was in short order purged of its French governmental and military vocabulary, which was replaced by German terms, underlining the new nation’s independence from France. “Centralized bureaucracies for post and telecommunications, railways, law, education, and administration all needed corresponding linguistic standards,” writes Wells (1987, 397). By 1878 Kaiser Wilhelm II had ordered Germanization of military terminology—for example the French *Detachements* became *Abteilungen*. At the post office, *Couvert* ‘envelope’ became *Briefumschlag*. In Austria and Switzerland, by contrast,—both already nations at the time of German unification—these and other French expressions were never replaced.

Along with the Germanizing of vocabulary came a Prussianizing of the spoken language. Where the central *Oberdeutsch* and the southern *Hochdeutsch* were more or less local versions of the now standard language, for Prussians High German was almost a foreign language—learned in school instead of on a mother’s knee. Consequently, Prussians produced a reading-influenced, carefully pronounced version of High German. Clyne (1995, 29) lists several specifically North German pronunciations that were standardized along with the grammar and spelling of High German: words ending in *-ig* were pronounced as an ich-laut (a kind of a whistling ‘h’), whereas in southern areas *-ig* is pronounced as ‘ick’; a pronounced *p* in the combination *pf*, where southern pronunciation omits the *p*, pronouncing, for

example *Pferd* ‘horse’ as *ferd*. These northernisms are today heard all over Germany, especially on television, radio and in films.

A New Role for the Dialects

The standardization of High German had certainly undermined the dialects as a tool for writing; in some areas, particularly in the north, dialects as a spoken medium were undermined as well, though it is uncertain whether this was a direct result of High German or whether the mobility of Germans in the industrial north might have been a stronger factor. But, north or south, dialects were to make a comeback in the late twentieth century, continuing into our own century—not, however, primarily as a means of communication, rather as a means of self-identification.

Rock groups in Germany are particularly likely to use dialect, or more accurately, phrases of dialect or dialect-tinged pronunciation of lyrics, as a way to mine positive energy from their audiences. Bavarian, Kölsch (from Cologne), and Berlin dialects provide particularly strong examples of the use of local language to foster a kind of identity strengthening. They serve as in-group identifiers, function as indicators of ‘down-home’ sincerity and old-fashioned values; signal comic intent; and with all that, are sometimes not really understood by the performers or their audiences except as well-worn phrases or pronunciations. A comparison may be drawn with American southern pronunciations as affected by country musicians in the United States, causing their audiences to sing along in a southern drawl even at concerts in New York or Minnesota.

Other National Standard German Languages

The picture is different in Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg. In each of these countries there is a Standard German which is not identical to what Clyne calls ‘German Standard German’ [GSG], but which is not a dialect because it is actually codified in national norms in national dictionaries or grammars of the language. These three national standards are both instantly identifiable by native speakers of the four major German-speaking nations, and are observed in schools, publications, and broadcasting. They are characterized not only by local pronunciations, but also by a certain amount of lexical difference, yet they are easily understood by speakers of GSG, and speakers of the other national standard Germans easily understand GSG.

Austrian Standard German calls *Obers* what GSG calls *Sahne* ‘cream’, and says *Greisler* for what GSG calls *Lebensmittelhändler* ‘grocer’, for example. Swiss Standard uses *Fürsprech* for the GSG *Anwalt* ‘attorney’, and *hausen* for GSG *sparen* ‘save’ (Stedje 2001, 187).

Further, Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg not only have their own national standard German, they also have local dialects—for example, the many dialects of *Swyzerdüütsch* (Swiss German), or *Lëtzebürgisch* (Luxemburgisch), which to a far greater extent than dialects in Germany, are actually the mother tongue of many native speakers in those lands. The national dialects are usually not understood by those who have not grown up with them, whether they are speakers of the same national standard or speakers of another national standard. Many, though not all, speakers of German Standard German are unable to differentiate in practice or even in principle a different national standard German from a dialect, and may believe that all speakers from, for example, Switzerland speak *Swyzerdüütsch* even when they are speaking Swiss Standard German.

What accounts for the flourishing of dialects in Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg as compared to the relative decline of dialects in Germany? We may have resort to both historical and

linguistic differences to explain this: Austria, Switzerland and Luxemburg were not part of the Prussian-led Unification in 1871, and being relatively slower to come to industrialization, perhaps did not feel a need to determine a national standard in both speaking and writing, or, when they did so, did not undergo an increase in mobility among the citizens, which tends to undermine the use of a home dialect as displaced families integrate into a new residence.

Further, additional national languages besides German complicate the question—for Switzerland French and Italian, for Luxemburg French. Here the dialect may serve as an ‘anchor’ in a multilingual nation. A final factor is one that figures into many social and cultural questions in post-World War II German-speaking nations: the deeds and ideology of the Nazis have provided a motivation for the Swiss and the Luxemburgers, who were not part of the German Nazi world, to emphasize that they are not Germans. Even the Austrians, who welcomed annexation to Nazi Germany, have many historical reasons for emphasizing their national identity as distinct from that of Germany.

To the question stated in the title of this address: are dialects of German dying out?—the answer must be *Jein* (*Ja und nein* ‘yes and no’). Clearly, even the limited use of dialects serves certain linguistic-pragmatic purposes; but modern needs for a national language, and now the forces of globalization that are fostering use of English as a lingua franca, are working against the retention of a fully functioning range of German dialects.

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