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The Dative Case in Pennsylvania German: Diverging Norms in Language Maintenance and Loss

The Pennsylvania German population consists of many subgroups, each participating to varying degrees in the dominant society. Many of the subgroups continue to spcak Pennsylvania German, and the variety of Pennsylvania German spoken fulfills communicative and symbolic functions which also differ from group to group. The linguistic features which characterize the Pennsylvania German of each group vary, and one feature which clearly reflects differences between Pennsylvania German subgroups is the use of the dative case.[1]

The occurrence of the dative case in Pennsylvania German varies among communities. The maintenance of the dative in some groups and its disuse in others raise questions as to whether the loss of the dative case presages language loss and whether it reflects convergence to English. The purpose of this study is to document the distribution of the dative case and view that distribution in terms of the communicative functions served by Pennsylvania German in the communities investigated. This study demonstrates that the dative case continues to exist in the Pennsylvania German spoken in communities of nonsectarians where Pennsylvania German itself is dying but that the dative case has ceased to exist in the Pennsylvania German spoken in communities of sectarians where Pennsylvania German is being maintained. An analysis of this distribution suggests its relationship to the societal norms for Pennsylvania German usage and for appropriate switching behavior.

The case system in Pennsylvania German differs from that in some other varieties of American and European German. Pennsylvania German has a common case which fulfills nominative and accusative functions, a feature which Pennsylvania German shares with southeastern Rhine-Palatinate dialects.[2] The nominative/accusative distinction still exists for personal pronouns. Reports regarding the viability of the Pennsylvania German dative case vary considerably. Anderson and Martin report for the Pennsylvania German spoken among the Old Order Mennonites in Pennsylvania and Ontario a lack of dative forms

after certain prepositions and verbal expressions "which govern the dative in Standard German" (78). They find that older informants and some preschool-age children use more datives than do other members of the community. For the Pennsylvania German spoken by the Old Order Amish in Delaware, Werner Enninger (1980) reports "a trend towards the neutralization of dative and accusative cases" (14). John Costello finds accusative as well as dative forms used as the object of prepositions which express the agent of passive verbs, and he speculates that this represents an incipient case merger. All published teaching grammars of Pennsylvania German, even those most recently (re)published (Frey, Haag), carefully distinguish dative and accusative forms and functions. Neither the Buffington and Barba standardized grammar of Pennsylvania German nor Reed's descriptive study based on field work in Berks and Lehigh counties indicate variability in dative case usage.

Procedures

The following observations are based on interviews with 52 Pennsylvania Germans who live in central Pennsylvania: 33 nonsectarians and 19 sectarians. The nonsectarians live in the farm valleys of southern Northumberland, northern Dauphin, and western Schuylkill counties where they were also born and raised. They are classified into three groups:

Group N: Native speakers of Pennsylvania German. The native speakers of Pennsylvania German range in age from 35 to 75 years; all but four are 60 years old or older. All but the two youngest (35 and 47 years old) continue to speak Pennsylvania German with their spouses and peers, but all speak English to their children.

Group 1: First in the family native English speakers. Speakers in Group 1 are the first in their respective families to speak English natively. They range in age from 32 to 54 years. They speak Pennsylvania German to certain (elderly) members of the family and community but English to their spouses and children.

Group 2: Second or later in the family native English speakers. These native speakers of English range in age from 22 to 65 years. They understand Pennsylvania German, some with difficulty, but they seldom speak it.

The Pennsylvania German sectarian sample consists of 10 Mennonites and 9 Amish, who range from 24 to 65 years of age. They were born and raised in Lancaster County but currently reside in Union County, Pennsylvania. All the sectarians speak Pennsylvania German natively and use it for daily discourse within the family and community.

Group M: The Mennonites. The Mennonite group consists of members of an Old Order Mennonite community, also called "Team Mennonites" because of their use of horse and buggy transportation. The group is also characterized by distinctive dress and limited education to the eighth grade.

Group A: The Amish. The Amish group consists of 8 members of a conservative wing of the New Order Amish and one member of an Old

Order Amish community. Old Order and New Order Amish differ in their interpretation of being "separate from the world." As do the Old Order Mennonites, members of the New Order Amish group have electricity in their homes, and the group is also characterized by horse and buggy transportation, distinctive dress, and limited education to the eighth grade. The Old Order Amish informant has no electricity in his home.

The interview consisted of three parts: free conversation, translation of English sentences into Pennsylvania German, and description of pictures. The topics of conversation centered on activities which commonly take place on the farm and at school: daily chores, butchering, weather events, home remedies. The sentences used in the translation task and the selection of pictures used to elicit comparable descriptions without overt reference to English likewise reflect the activities and vocabulary items closely associated with rural family life.

Results

The results below report dative case usage for each of the five groups of informants. Attention is given to three areas of dative function: 1. the use and distribution of dative personal pronouns, for example, *ich hab ihne geschder gholfe* 'I helped them yesterday' and *sie hen ihm en Present bringe welle* 'they wanted to bring him a gift'; 2. the use of the dative to express possession, as in *meim Graenpaep seini schmackt es bescht vun all* 'my grandfather's (wurst) tastes best of all' and *mir waare in meinre Aent ihrem Haus* 'we were in my aunt's house'; 3. the use of the dative to express the object of prepositions, for example, *fer was schwetscht er net zu ihre* 'why doesn't he talk to her?' and *ich waar nach em Schtor gange* 'I had gone to the store.' Results based on the translation task are reported separately from those of the picture descriptions and free conversation.

I. Dative Personal Pronouns

In the translation task 15 sentences are designed to elicit personal pronouns in dative functions. The nonsectarian native speakers (Group N) respond with the most dative pronouns, a total of 83; of the 22 elicited accusative forms, 18 are given by the two youngest speakers in Group N. These two informants frequently diverge linguistically from the older native speakers as will be noted below. First native English speakers (Group 1) respond with the second largest number of dative pronoun forms. Second native English speakers (Group 2) have still fewer dative forms and more accusative forms; this group differs from Group 1 in the number of faulty forms offered which are neither dative nor accusative. Of the sectarians only the oldest Mennonite informant and the one Old Order Amish informant offer dative forms (see Table 1).

The free conversation and picture descriptions yield dative pronoun forms from Groups N and 1. Only 5 dative forms occur in the speech of members in the other groups (see Table 2).

Table 1
Case of Personal Pronouns in Dative Functions
(Translation Task)

Group	dat	acc	other
N	83	22	0
1	50	43	1
2	30	39	8
M	1	86	0
A	2	90	0

Table 2
Dative Personal Pronouns
(Free Conversation and Picture Descriptions)

Group	1 sg	2 sg	3m sg	3f sg	3 pl	Total
N	14	5	9	8	3	39
1	3	2	2	5	0	12
2	1	1	2*	0	0	4
M	0	1	0	0	0	1
A	0	0	0	0	0	0

*other faulty forms given

II. Possession

In Pennsylvania German the dative is used in conjunction with the possessive adjective to express possession. The possessor is expressed by the dative; the possessive adjective follows and agrees with the possessed, the noun it modifies; for example *wu is em Daadi sei Buch* 'where is daddy's book', *was dudscht du mit sellem Mann seim Hut* 'what are you doing with that man's hat'.

In the translation task, 6 sentences are designed to elicit expressions of possession. Nonsectarian native speakers respond most frequently with dative forms to express the possessor. The sectarians with few exceptions use the common case. Nonsectarian native English speakers show considerable variation. The second native English speakers resort most frequently to the English genitive -s and also produce faulty constructions lacking gender, number, and case agreement (see Table 3).

Informants use few possessive constructions during free conversation and picture descriptions, but the results parallel those obtained in the translation task. Among nonsectarian native speakers, only the two youngest speakers use the common case. For Group 1 dative usage recedes while common case usage increases. Group 2 demonstrates no mastery of the possessive construction, and one speaker resorts twice to the English construction. The sectarians consistently use the common case to express possession (see Table 4).

Table 3
Case of the Possessor
(Translation Task)

Group	dat	common	-s	other
N	25	21	2	3
1	19	17	6	2
2	9	10	18	12
M	3	31	5	3
A	1	34	4	6

Table 4
Case of the Possessor
(Free Conversation and Picture Descriptions)

Group	dat	common	-s	other
N	4	3	0	0
1	3	4	0	0
2	0	0	2	4
M	0	11	0	0
A	0	14	0	1

III. Prepositions

As in Standard German, the Pennsylvania German dative is used to express the object of two sets of prepositions. One set of prepositions always governs the dative; a second set governs the dative when the activity of the verb takes place within the spatial or temporal limits expressed by the prepositions. The spoken Pennsylvania German of this sample presents a more complex picture than the above prescriptive rules suggest.

Group N produces dative forms most frequently followed by Group 1. Group 2 has a high percentage of faulty forms. With few exceptions, sectarians produce forms in the common case (see Tables 5 and 6).

The nonsectarian groups diverge linguistically from each other more than the figures in Tables 5 and 6 suggest. For Group N, certain phrases

Table 5
Case Usage with All Dative Prepositions
(Translation Task)

Group	dat	common	other
N	127	99	5
1	71	74	24
2	27	81	41
M	3	175	8
A	2	172	4

Table 6
Case Usage with All Dative Prepositions
(Free Conversation and Picture Descriptions)

Group	dat	common	other
N	331	132	6
1	142	126	35
2	95	123	24
M	40	346	0
A	14	303	3

appear to be formulaic and are invariant. Two such phrases, *in die Schul* 'in school' and *in die Mitt* 'in the middle', are particularly frequent. One statement occurring during free conversation suggests the formulaic nature of the feminine definite article *di* (the common case form) with the noun *Schul: well die acht Graedes waare in die eem Schulhaus* 'Well, the eight grades were in the one schoolhouse'. The form *eem*, here a numeral used as an adjective, is marked for the dative case. Common case forms with dative prepositions not accounted for by their use in formulaic expressions occur only in the speech of the two youngest speakers in Group N.

The first native English speakers use common case forms more frequently with prepositions governing the dative than does Group N, but Group 1 differs from the latter in other ways. The aberrant form *ene* as in *mit ene Pulli druff* 'with a pulley on it' or *sie hocke uff ene Baam* 'they're sitting on a tree' appears to function as the dative indefinite article for three members of this group and for one in particular. The form *ene* occurs with nouns of all genders, and accounts for over half of the total in the "other" category for Group 1 in Tables 5 and 6.

The Pennsylvania German of the second native English speakers (Group 2) differs from the previous group (Group 1) in that it contains a larger number of grammatically and semantically aberrant forms. Other linguistic strategies employed by Group 2 are not reflected in the tables. Definite and indefinite articles, which normally carry case markings, are frequently omitted and the nouns occur in telegraphic-style strings, such as *ich geh zu Scheier* 'I go to barn'. Prepositions with contracted forms of the dative definite article *(zum, im)* occur as the prepositional form itself: *im die Schul* for 'in school', *zum die ganz Familye* 'to the whole family'. When compared to all other groups, Group 2 shows the least agreement on usage. Each individual's formation of sentences in the translation task differs from all the others in the group on some dimension.

In contrast to Groups 1 and 2, the sectarians show a substantial amount of agreement in usage. Their use of the common case for dative functions with prepositions far exceeds such usage among the nonsectarians. The dative forms that occur among the Mennonites are generally found in the speech of the oldest members of that group. Some dative expressions seem to be fossilized; one informant uses *nach em*

Riessess 'after (the) recess' three times but has only one other occurrence of the dative definite article *em*. Aberrant forms such as those found in Group 2 do not occur in the speech of the sectarians.

Discussion

The nonsectarian native speakers (Group N) with few exceptions use dative forms to express dative functions. Except for the two youngest speakers, almost all use of nondative forms for dative functions occurs in formulaic phrases. The speech of the nonsectarian native speakers reflects a firmly established norm for Pennsylvania German dative usage. The two youngest nonsectarian native speakers diverge from that norm in ways which parallel the linguistic performance of the first native English speakers. Their usage of Pennsylvania German in terms of communicative function and frequency also corresponds to that of Group 1.

The first in the family native English speakers (Group 1) use fewer datives and more accusative and common case forms to express dative functions than does Group N. The second in the family native English speakers (Group 2) use still fewer datives and contrast with all other groups by the large number of errors in agreement and of aberrant forms which are neither dative nor a correct formation of accusative or common case forms. In addition, these speakers resort to other strategies in their effort to produce Pennsylvania German. They delete articles and possessive adjectives which would normally mark grammatical agreement. They reformulate intended sentences in a seemingly extreme effort to maintain discourse in Pennsylvania German by using familiar constructions in sentences which *almost* say what they intend to say. For Group 2, dative forms are simply not available. Common case forms appear by default but so do others representing misfired attempts to produce Pennsylvania German. Particularly apparent in this group is the lack of unified usage or norm. Individuals often produce unique forms culled from their personal language acquisition history. Fossilized expressions come to function as forms, and memorized remnants serve as structural components. The norm for dative case usage established by Group N and aspired to by Group 1 has not been acquired by Group 2.

The sectarians use accusative and common case forms to express dative functions almost exclusively. The Mennonites produce some dative forms, most of which are fossilized remnants. Other dative forms are given by the oldest members of the Mennonite group. The Amish group uses even fewer dative forms than the Mennonites. It is clear from their uniform linguistic behavior that the sectarians have a firmly established norm. Their norm has adopted a one-case (common case) system for nouns and a two-case (nominative and accusative) system for personal pronouns. Their nominal system as a whole reflects an English model.

Case merger may, indeed, characterize terminal stages of receding languages, but the disuse of the dative among nonsectarian nonfluent Pennsylvania German speakers (especially Group 2) does not reflect

case merger or the superimposition of English rules. It reflects norm loss, a loss resulting from inadequate access to native speaker norms. Among sectarian Pennsylvania German speakers (Groups M and A), the merger of the dative and the common cases is complete. For Pennsylvania German, case merger occurs not in language death, but in continued language usage, where merged forms have become the norm and are transmitted to the next generation.

Each of the five groups has a different commitment to Pennsylvania German, a commitment which is tied to the communicative and symbolic uses of Pennsylvania German. For the nonsectarians, native speakers (Group N) use Pennsylvania German among themselves and with their linguistic peers, and they switch languages as is socially appropriate. The first native English speakers (Group 1) are part of the Pennsylvania German speaking community. Pennsylvania German fulfills for them limited communicative functions. They also switch to English when appropriate. For the second in the family native English speakers (Group 2), Pennsylvania German generally serves no communicative function. They participate in Pennsylvania German conversations by using their passive skills and by speaking English. Their faulty use of Pennsylvania German, though simplified to the point of telegraphic speech, serves them well in establishing their identity and group membership.

Within the sectarian communities of Groups M and A, where it is inappropriate to switch to English, Pennsylvania German continues a forced existence where sociolinguistic norms prescribe its usage but not its form. The lack of switching behavior exposes their Pennsylvania German to the influence of its English environment. As Pennsylvania German continues to fulfill communicative functions in the sectarian speech community, it must meet the needs of today, and while change in sectarian communities is not readily apparent to outsiders, these communities must nevertheless cope with changing environments, both within and without. Sectarian proficiency in an archaic variety of Standard German is passive at best and restricted to liturgical contexts. English serves as the readily available resource of linguistic items and structures for Pennsylvania German elaboration and development. For the sectarians, linguistic convergence toward an English model is becoming increasingly apparent. As seen in this case, the loss of the dative results in a Pennsylvania German noun system which corresponds more closely to that of English. Structural convergence in the verb aspectual system has been noted elsewhere (Huffines), and lexical borrowing from English in the Pennsylvania German written by sectarians has been found to be greater than that in the Pennsylvania German written by nonsectarians (Enninger, 1979).

The societal norms which specify the inappropriateness of language switching within the sectarian community succeed in maintaining the use of Pennsylvania German for daily discourse, but these norms also effect a more intimate contact between Pennsylvania German and English than would otherwise obtain. English linguistic structures exert a more sustained influence on Pennsylvania German precisely because

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English structures cannot express themselves in English. As a consequence, linguistic changes often associated with language loss, such as the reduction of morphological complexity, appear in the maintenance of Pennsylvania German among the sectarians. In contrast to the sectarian unified norm, the variation and nonfluencies exhibited by nonsectarian speakers demonstrate the loss of a norm, a loss which does not result in convergence to English but in a desperate search for the morphological complexity no longer modeled in the community.

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Notes

[1] This is a revised and much condensed version of "Case Usage among the Pennsylvania German Sectarians and Nonsectarians" to appear in *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*. Ed. Nancy C. Dorian. Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

[2] While many northern German dialects do not distinguish dative and accusative forms, the Rhine-Palatinate dialects, the German dialects to which Pennsylvania German is most closely related, maintain a vigorous dative case. Rhine-Palatinate dialects have, therefore, a two-case noun system: the common case and the dative case. The genitive case does not occur in either American or European German dialects although maintained in Standard German.

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