

Professional Register and Regional Dialect:

A sociolinguistic survey on the use of Low German at the workplace

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Introduction.

Low German (*Plattdeutsch* or just *Platt*), a West-Germanic language spoken in northern Germany and parts of the Netherlands, was once the dominant language in northern Germany. During the Middle Ages, Low German was spoken as a lingua franca in northern Europe, particularly during the prime of the Hanseatic League (Stellmacher 1990). However, since the middle of the 20th century, Low German has been experiencing erosion on such a vast scale that in 1998 the European Union added it to its list of Endangered Languages in Europe. Experts (Möller 2008) estimate that the current number of active Low German speakers in northern Germany is approximately at 1.1 – 1.2 million. This number, although it might sound impressive, will barely guarantee a viable future for the language. Indeed, most Low German linguists describe the status of Low German in the 21st century as moribund to a high degree (e.g. Wirrer 1998). It is commonly assumed that Low German nowadays fulfills the functions of a typical L-variety in the Fergusonian sense, i.e. it is used among family and friends and for informal occasions. This paper discusses the results of a socio-linguistic field study that I conducted in 2012 in northwestern Germany to determine if and to what degree Low German is used as a professional register by local businesses and administrations. My results show that Low German, despite its image as being backwards and a “peasant language”, is frequently used by a wide range of businesses and administrations in the target area.

Methodology.

My two target areas were the counties of *Grafschaft Bentheim* and *Emsland* in the far northwestern corner of the federal state of *Niedersachsen*. Both counties border on the Netherlands and are predominantly rural with a population of 134,329 and 315,757 respectively.

In order to investigate whether Low German is used as a professional register, I designed a questionnaire, and sent out 435 copies to businesses and administration offices in the target areas (335 to the Grafschaft Bentheim and 100 to the Emsland). The questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, and participants could mark their answers with a cross. The last page of the questionnaire was a blank page for comments of which many participants made use. Participants were asked to mail their filled-out questionnaires to a local contact in Uelsen (Grafschaft Bentheim), who collected the answers and sent them back to my address in North Carolina. Altogether, I received 176 filled-out questionnaires, which amounts to a return rate of 40.5%. 137 questionnaires (40.3%) were sent from the Grafschaft, and 39 (39%) came from the Emsland. All questionnaires except one from the Grafschaft were utilizable for evaluation. This paper discusses three major findings of my survey, namely Low German as an Internal Professional Register, Low German as an External Professional Register, and the use of Low German with apprentices.

Before I present my results, however, it needs to be pointed out that “register” has been and continues to be a much-discussed and at times contentious issue in linguistics with a large body of research literature (Halliday 1978; Biber & Finegan 1994; Biber 1995; Biber and Conrad 2009). It would go beyond the scope of this paper to address questions such as how many registers exist, whether it is restricted to spoken language only or should include written language, and what its relation to dialect studies and diglossia studies is.¹ Despite different definitions of the term register and what it entails, most scholars (Biber & Finegan 1994) agree that a key characteristic is its use and affiliation with a specific situation or specific context:

Broadly conceived, a register is a language variety viewed with respect to its context of use. (Biber & Finegan 1994: 4)

Notwithstanding this common denominator, several scholars (Hervey 1992; Biber 1994) have pointed out that the term itself is still lacking a precise definition of framework. Hervey, for example, wrote: “*Register' is a much used, but poorly defined term*” (Hervey 1992: 189). This paper makes no claim to resolve these issues but rather focuses on the (more or less) established

¹ For more information on the relationship dialect and register studies, see Hervey (1992); Biber (1994), Hudson (1994), and Wiggers (2015).

definition that a professional register falls under the type of *consultative register* or *formal register*, i.e. a more polished, refined register that avoids slang and strong dialect features and is often used at the workplace. If professional register is used in a diglossic speech community it is usually identical to the H-variety. Unlike register variation studies on social dialect (for example Labov’s “Department Store Study” in New York [1966] to investigate the pronunciation of postvocalic /r/), this study does not focus on one particular phonological or morphological aspect and its relation to socioeconomic status or social stratification but rather how register is used as a whole in a distinct social situation/specific discourse domain.

Results.

Question one of the questionnaire asked which language is mostly used at the participants’ workplace. Most participants in the two target areas stated that they predominately use High German, which was, however, closely followed by a combination of both High and Low German. The results are shown in table one²:

Table 1. Language Use at the Workplace in the Grafschaft Bentheim and Emsland/ Low German as Internal Professional Register (2012).

<u>Professional Register</u>	<u>Grafschaft Bentheim and Emsland</u>
Only High German	46.9%
Predominant Low German	7.4%
Combination of Low German and High German	45.7%

Although the number of participants who speak predominantly Low German is relatively small (13 participants altogether), table one demonstrates that many businesses and public offices use a

² The categories in the tables include "predominant Low German", "Only High German", or a combination of both. There was not a single business or office that reported to use only Low German at work, hence the designation "predominant Low German." There were, however, quite a number of participants who reported to speak High German only at work.

combination of Low and High German at work. In general, it could be observed that there exists a correlation between the frequency of Low German on the job and population figures, i.e. the smaller a place is the more Low German is used at work:

Table 2. Low German as Internal Professional Register in the Grafschaft Bentheim and the Emsland by Population Figures (2012).

<u>Professional Register</u>	<u>≤ 10,000</u>	<u>10,000 – 15,000</u>	<u>≥ 15,000</u>
Only High German	24%	60%	75%
Predominant Low German	11%	3.33%	3.5%
Combination of Low German and High German	65%	36.66%	21.5%

The numbers in table two indicate that the smaller and more rural a place in the Grafschaft Bentheim is, the more does the regional dialect/L-variety serve, at least partly, as a professional register. Furthermore, the results in the two tables contradict the assumption that a regional dialect variation is unsuitable to serve as a professional register. In fact, the combined number of participants who use mostly Low German or a combination of Low German and High German at work was higher than those who speak High German only (53.1% vs. 46.9%). Several comments by participants, particularly from smaller family businesses, indicate that the use of Low German as an internal professional register is rather due to tradition than conscious or unconscious acts of convergence, i.e. a conscious accommodative process or modification of one's own speech toward the interlocutor:

Bei uns in der Firma wurde schon immer Platt gesprochen.

"We have always talked Platt in our company."

(Florist in Hoogstede, Grafschaft Bentheim, 6 employees, 2012)

Convergence, however, did play an important role in register choices with customers. Table three shows the results for Low German as an External Professional Register:

Table 3: Register Choice with Customers/

Low German as External Professional Register in the Grafschaft Bentheim and Emsland (2012).

<u>Professional Register</u>	<u>Total</u> (Grafschaft Bentheim and Emsland)	<u>Grafschaft Bentheim</u>	<u>Emsland</u>
Only High German	44.5%	42%	54%
Predominant Low German	11%	12.5%	5%
Combination of Low German and High German	44.5%	45.5%	41%

These results show that Plattdeutsch also plays a significant role in conversations with customers. As was the case for question one, the use of Low German as an external professional register revealed noticeable differences in terms of location and number of inhabitants. The smaller a community is the more Low German is used as an external professional register. Why do businesses and public offices choose a Low German register with their customers or clients? Several of the participants' comments may offer some valuable clues. The owner of a barber shop in the Grafschaft Bentheim (seven employees) confirmed the accommodative nature of switching registers: "*Wenn Kunden Plattdeutsch sprechen, sprechen wir es auch.*" ("If customers speak Low German, than we speak it, too."). Likewise, a car dealership in the same county added: "*Wenn der Kunde Platt spricht, machen wir alles auf Platt.*" ("If the customer speaks Platt, then we do everything in Platt."). These comments seem to indicate that the seller (or *Beamte* if in a government or municipal office) calibrates his/her linguistic knowledge to

accommodate the buyer/interlocutor³. Some participants regarded the switch to Low German as more than just accommodating customers. A construction company in the Grafschaft Bentheim (eight employees, two apprentices) noted that a change in tenor, i.e. to Low German, seems to affect the field of discourse as a whole in a positive way:

Wenn mit Kunden Platt gesprochen wird, bricht eine Barriere, man geht leichter aufeinander zu. Es ist einfach im Allgemeinen positiv für das Gespräch.

"When we speak Low German with customers then a barrier breaks and we tune into each other much easier. It is just in general positive for the conversation."

Indeed, several businesses reported that using a Low German register with customers is a necessity. A landscaping business commented: "*Es gibt Kunden, die wünschen das Gespräch auf Platt.*" ("There are customers, who wish to have conversations in Low German."). Other participants wrote that many older customers felt uncomfortable speaking High German only. In fact, some participants, among them two banks, deemed the use of Low German with their customers so important that they encouraged or even trained their employees to acquire a working knowledge of the language. These results seem encouraging as to the future of Plattdeutsch in the target areas. The results for language use with apprentices (i.e. young adults), however, were rather sobering:

Table 4. Register Choice with Apprentices (Grafschaft Bentheim & Emsland, 2012).

<u>Professional Register</u>	<u>Total</u> (Grafschaft Bentheim and Emsland)	<u>Grafschaft Bentheim</u>	<u>Emsland</u>
Only High German	89%	86%	100%

³ It is worthwhile to point out here that several offices in municipal buildings in the Grafschaft Bentheim had stickers on their doors that read "Wij proat ock Platt" (=We also speak Low German) to accommodate the citizens or perhaps to allay their fears that the *Beamte* would speak only High German with them.

Predominant Low German	0%	0%	0%
Combination of Low German and High German	11%	14%	0%

Table 4 shows that not one single business or office in both target areas used predominantly Low German with their apprentices. A comment by the *Jugendzentrum* in Nordhorn, the largest city in the Grafschaft Bentheim (ca. 53,000 inhabitants), was exemplary for the register choice among and with young adults in the target areas: “*Die Jugendlichen in der Stadt Nordhorn können kein Plattdeutsch sprechen* (“Young adults in the city of Nordhorn are unable to speak Low German.”). Even businesses where Low German was otherwise predominant routinely spoke High German with their apprentices. It is not quite clear what is prompting the register choice with apprentices. Possible reasons might be that participants did not wish to interfere with the High German structure of apprenticeships, or, as the comment by the *Jugendzentrum* seems to indicate, that the use and mastery of Plattdeutsch is very low among young adults.

Conclusion.

The results of my study demonstrate that *Grafschafter Platt* and *Emsländer Platt*, regional dialects and diglossic Low-varieties, are able to fulfill the intricate communicative purposes of a professional register. This paper argues that the principal reason(s) for the widespread use of Plattdeutsch as a professional register is to be found in the cultural and linguistic individuality of the target areas, or, in other words, in their unique sociogenesis and linguistic culture. (see also Coupland 2002; Schiffman 1996). To a certain degree, using Plattdeutsch in formal situations might also be seen as a “sign of solidarity” (Romaine 1994:79). However, it seems that local factors, that frequently predate modern research and are often found on the margins or even beyond the discipline of sociolinguistics, are key elements in understanding motivated register-shifting in my target areas. It is unclear, however, how much longer this will be the case given the results for register choice with and among young adults in

the target areas. Considering the rather precarious situation of Low German in general in the 21st century, it must be assumed that the use of Low German at the workplace in the target areas will be drastically reduced in the future. This is reinforced by the fact that 98% of all respondents believe that Low German will be used less, significantly less, or not at all anymore at their respective workplaces in ten to fifteen years.

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