The sociolinguistic situation of two language islands in Ohio and Argentina

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Abstract Argentina and Ohio are homes of two distinct language islands (‘Sprachinseln’). This paper provides a basic overview of the history of these two heritage grammars, and comment on the current state of the speech communities. Analyses suggest that Swiss German is now moribund (i.e. the community consists of the final generation of fluent speakers, as it was not passed on to the next generation). Similarly, numbers of fluent MSG speakers are decreasing. Yet, the degree of decay is different to that from Kidron, as there is a general cultural awareness within the speaker group to maintain parts of the language.

1 Introduction

The following paper focuses on two language islands (i.e. Sprachinseln) located in North and South America, respectively. More specifically, the sociolinguistic situation will be introduced to trace down the nature of the language shift in the respective communities. Research on either community has been scarce, mainly focusing on syntactic and phonological phenomena of these Sprachinseln (Hoffman & Klosinski 2018 for Kidron Swiss German; Putnam & Lipski 2016; Putnam & Schwarz 2014 for Misionero German). Both communities are far removed from the home country and thus their base dialect. Nevertheless, they speak distinct varieties of German. The language island in Ohio is Swiss German, and in Argentina it is a German variety, mainly from the Hunsrück area of Germany. Crucially, the sociolinguistics background has been neglected to date. However, before the two communities of this paper are introduced, it is important to discuss the term Sprachinsel (‘speech island’) as it is seen in the literature.

A Sprachinsel is a term that can be taken quite literally as a linguistic island. More specifically, the term is commonly used to describe small speech communities surrounded by a larger language community. They are formed through linguistic and cultural assimilation of the minority with the surrounding larger majority. (Mattheier, 1994 in Riehl 2013, p. 67) There are often synonymous with
minority languages (Louden 2006: 140). Importantly, these language islands can support the study of heritage grammars in general, as each contact variety constitutes a unique contact phenomenon with reduced input conditions. Hopp & Putnam (2015: 210) argue that these communities can provide evidence of the linguistic complexity of last-generation heritage speakers, while the individual is going through several stages of language loss. However, it also sheds light on the individual stages of language shift within the community.

The paper is structured as follows: The first part of the paper is concerned with the Swiss German community along with its history and the Swiss language situation. Following this, the German language island in the province of Misiones in Argentina is introduced to similarly look at the immigration history, and current language situations. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief comparison of the two language islands as well as provides an outlook for future studies.

2 The Swiss Germans of Kidron, Ohio

Kidron, located in Wayne County, OH, is home to a moribund Swiss German variety spoken by about 40 remaining speakers. All of them have been living in Kidron and surrounding areas for the entirety of their lives (i.e. they were also born in this area). In this area, English is not the only majority language surrounding Kidron, as Pennsylvania Dutch communities are present in the counties neighboring as well as within Wayne County. Besides being located in the county neighboring the largest Amish settlement in the nation (i.e. Holmes County) (Louden 2016: 70), the town of Kidron also hosts a weekly auction, during which animals are traded between the Amish and the English (Hurst & McConnell 2010: 189), which indicates further conversations with the outside members of the community.

2.1 Initial Settlement of Kidron

Looking at the history of the Swiss community in Kidron, we see that the first settlers arrived in 1819 – ten years after the first Amish to the area (Louden 2016: 70; Umble 1955: 280). During that time, Switzerland experienced poor economy and the Mennonites were religiously persecuted in Europe (Lehman 1962). Consequently, Ulrich Lehman as well as the families of Peter Lehman, Isaac Sommer and David Kirchhofer left their homes in the Bernese Jura for the US in pursuit of a better life with religious freedom. Once they arrived in Wayne County, they in-
vestigated and purchased land to establish a church, which they named after their home mountain in Switzerland, Sonnenberg. Following positive letters from these pioneers, more families started the journey from Switzerland to Ohio, including a bishop named Hans Lehman in 1821. Generally, bishops and the church were and are to date an integral part to the Swiss language community in Kidron. In subsequent years, an estimated number of 1200 Swiss Mennonites immigrated to the US. Most of the Swiss immigrants to the Kidron came from the canton of Bern, and thus their base dialect would have been the Bernese Swiss German.

2.2 Swiss German Spoken in Kidron Today

As mentioned above, the church was one of the integral pieces to how Kidron was shaped. Crucially, this is not only restricted to the town itself, but also spreads to the language use within the community. While previous research on language death (e.g. Dorian 1981) identified the church as one of the domains that facilitates language maintenance, it is quite different for Kidron Sonnenberg church.

Initially, preacher Jacob Moser was the driving force in the maintenance of the Swiss language within the church and thus the community in the early 20th century. The language of the service of the Sonnenberg church was solely German till the 1920s. This also meant that whenever religious, cultural, and congregational issues arose, the Sonnenberg church had to deal with them sans collaboration with other surrounding churches. This was regarded as a problem by many members of the church and thus, it was proposed to introduce English. However, preacher Moser did not speak English, and thus offered his resignation in May 1921. Crucially, the Sonnenberg church community relied on the only preacher and his services, which meant that Moser essentially blocked the shift to English services, as he would only preach if the language remained German. In other words, he was the gatekeeper of the church, providing protection against the influence of the English language within the church (e.g. Frey & Salmons 2012: 9). Nevertheless, in 1924, one monthly English sermon was introduced, but the preacher insisted on being excused from those. There is unfortunately no clear evidence when the church switched to English services, like the ones held nowadays (Umble 1955: 292).

Importantly, the church was not the only domain in which the shift to English occurred. As noted by Hoffman & Klosinski (2018: 38) all Swiss speakers of Kidron are now English-dominant. Thus, a closer look at the Kidron-specific
structures is warranted. Another important factor is the technological progress, which led to an increase in mobility at the turn of the century. In 1884, the local cheese factory of Kidron was established. Few years later, in 1900, the construction of railroads in Kidron began, which then lead to the first train going through Kidron to West Lebanon in 1901. This train was called “Cheese Run”, hinting at the cheese transportation from the cheese factory away from Kidron. This innovative means of transportation was not only relevant to the cheese factory and other factories in town. Additionally, it had direct impact on the people of Kidron, as some of them moved away and sought external opportunities. Furthermore, others got the opportunity to meet outside members of the community and thus potentially get married to external members of the community (i.e. to non-Swiss German speakers). Some started jobs outside of Kidron that required the use of English. However, not only did Swiss speakers leave Kidron, but non-Swiss companies also made their way into Kidron (e.g. “The Kidron Weekly News and Shoppers”), which was the first local newspaper of Kidron, established by Harvey Gardner, an outside member of the community (Geiser 1994: 56).

During fieldwork interviews in the summer of 2017 and 2018, those verticalized structures and contact to outside members of the community were confirmed by our participants (N=29; year of birth: \( \approx 1938, \) SD=10.33). Furthermore, the interviewees, who grew up in the 1930s and 40s, did not encounter any English till they entered formal education (i.e. public school) and thus acquired Swiss German as their L1. Additionally, none of the L1 Swiss speakers passed the language on to their children. Some of our participants mentioned that their main reasoning behind this decision was grounded in their own experience in school. Having to learn English within a few years in school was a tremendous challenge that they did not want their own children to go through. Interestingly, Wenger (1969) notes that some Swiss children were more literate in Swiss than in English, even as late as the late 1960s. However, those were from the more conservative and religious families (Wenger 1969: 14). Thus, it seems likely that none of our interviewees was interviewed by Wenger in the 60s, as we would have received overlapping reports on the language to the children.

In conclusion, it is clear that the linguistic situation has changed severely from the 30s and 40s but also the late 60s, as it caused a once monolingual community to become fully bilingual, yet English-dominant. The language shift in Kidron was triggered through numerous internal and external factors, like the church,
but also an increase in mobility and the process of verticalization in general (e.g. Bousquetté & Ehresmann 2010; Salmons 2005; Warren 1978).

3 The Misionero German of Misiones, Argentina

Misiones is a unique area of Argentina. Located in the north-eastern corner of Argentina, this province not only borders Brazil and Uruguay, but also Paraguay. The area, which looks like a peninsula, yet is surrounded by land, is not the only fact that makes Misiones special, as the speakers also contribute to this uniqueness. The geographical location of the province and a border that merely exists on paper contributed to the influx of immigrants to this area and do to date. Much of the border to Brazil is marked by the river Río Uruguay, while the western border to Paraguay is divided through the river Río Paraná. Consequently, it seems intuitive that immigrants that were keen on moving to a new place in hope of a better life did not have to cope with bureaucratic hurdles, but rather merely crossed the river to Argentina.

3.1 Settlement of Germans in Misiones

A look at the only available census data that reflects on the immigration to Misiones reveals that prior to 1991 most of the immigrants came from the neighboring countries Paraguay (26,799) and Brazil (13,000). However, while the majority of the immigrants came from these two countries, many other immigrants came from countries such as Germany, Spain, Italy, Ukraine and Poland, leading to an unparalleled linguistic diversity. Poenitz (2015) states that the first immigrants from Europe arrived in 1897, while the bulk of the immigrants moved between the two world wars. German immigrants usually settled in the north, while Scandinavians settled in the center and immigrants from Poland and Ukraine in the south.

German immigration to Misiones was characterized through two types of settlements: one official and one private. The local government of the province Misiones but also of Argentina encouraged the settlement to their area by not only offering each immigrant about 100 hectares of land but also technical support in form of farming tools. Furthermore, there was a privatization of land between 1919 and 1930. European companies located in the northern part of Misiones promoted the arrival of fellow countrymen (and women). One German entrepreneur,
who was influential for the colonialization of Misiones was Carlos Culmey. He founded the company “Colonizadora Alto Paraná”, which aimed to colonize the western part of Misiones (Gallero 2010: 80).

Partially due to Culmey’s efforts and his company, the German colonial towns of Puerto Rico and Monte Carlo were founded in 1919 and 1920, respectively. The third German town, Eldorado, in contrast, was founded by Adolfo Schwelm, one of Culmey’s partners (Gallero 2010: 82). Each of these towns lies near the Río Paraná in the northwest of Misiones. Crucially, this was not the only impact Culmey had on this area. In order to convince Germans to move to Misiones, he founded a German school in 1958, with the name Instituto Carlos Culmey. While most of the German immigration to Misiones had ceased at this point, the founding of a German school was still something the Germans of the area had been longing for. This was the starting point to provide German education from native German instructors in a formal setting.

Besides the direct immigration from Germany, there was also the immigration of Germans to Argentina via other countries, e.g. Brazil and Russia. At the beginning of the 19th century, many Germans moved to Brazil. On January 9, 1822, Dom Pedro, the Prince of Portugal, decided to stay in Brazil and declare independence from Portugal. This day was henceforth known as Dia de Fico (‘I shall stay day’) in Brazil (Kerr 2014). Furthermore, he confirmed the law his dad, Dom João VI of Portugal, implemented, which made it legal for non-Portuguese to own property in Brazil (Seyferth 1998: 131). At the beginning of the colonization, the Brazilian government wanted to recruit white farmers to Brazil, so that they could farm on uninhabited land (Seyferth 1998: 131). The ideal immigrant was considered to be white, obedient, and motivated to do agricultural work (Seyferth 1998: 133). This led to the founding of several German-Brazilian colonies in the south of Brazil, e.g. Rio Grande do Sul in 1824 and Santa Catarina in 1829. There, these immigrants were able to grow crops and farm cattle and other farm animals.

The largest group of German immigrants arriving in Rio Grande do Sul originated from the Hunsrück area of Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany (Gallero, María Cecilia 2005: 7), which also spread to the other German colonies of Brazil. Therefore, Gallero states that it is plausible that Hunsrückisch was the most-widespread German dialect in the (south) of Brazil (Gallero, María Cecilia 2005: 7). In fact, the Hunsrückdialekt is the German variety with the most native speakers in a single country worldwide, (3 million speakers in Brazil) (followed by Standard German 1.5 million speakers, also in Brazil) (Simons & Fennig 2018). However, The
Economist estimates that there about 1.2 million German speakers left today (Gialdo alert 2018: 44).

While the Hunsrück dialect was initially linguistically identical to the variety spoken in Germany, it has changed during the course of the time due to the influence of Portuguese as well as a leveling with other German varieties spoken in Southern Brazil (Maselko 2013: 44). Additionally, there is a degree of diglossia between the Riograndenser Hunsrück and Portuguese, which are not in competition but rather complementing each other. Different communicative situations will trigger a shift to either of the languages, e.g. to accommodate the interlocutor (Maselko 2013: 44). Even though the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1934-1945) changed the attitude towards the German population in Brazil and in essence banned the use of any foreign languages. This also meant that German speakers in Brazil were persecuted and many of them decided to flee to Argentina. However, many German varieties resisted the political pressure, and are therefore still spoken in Brazil today (Gialdo alert 2018: 43). However, in a recent article on the minority language situation in Brazil, it was noted that the speakers of Riograndenser Hunrückisch and East Pomeranian “fret that the advance of Portuguese will drive them to extinction” (Gialdo alert 2018: 43).

When these *teuto-brasileños*, as they were called in Brazil (‘German-brazilians’), moved to Argentina, they did so for other reasons as well. Gallero (2010) states that even for these speakers, the entrepreneur Carlos Culmey most important factor. The official government incentives did not contribute as much to the German immigration to the Misiones province, as did the private sector.

The third wave of German-speaking immigrants came directly from the region along the Volga river in Russia to Misiones. Importantly, the immigration of these speakers had its biggest wave at the end of the 19th century when Tsar Alexander II. revoked numerous rights and privileges implemented by Catherine the Great. The Germans, like Jews, Poles and Ukrainians had to escape from Russia and most of them settled in the Americas - Protestants in Canada and the US, while most Catholics went to South America. Again, the reason to go to South America was mainly driven by religious freedom and agricultural freedom (Švepeš 2014: 198).

There were an estimated 45,000 Volga Germans by 1910 (Lewczuk 2016: 227), 130,000 by the 1940s and about 300,000 today. Of those Volga Germans, it is estimated that approximately 40% still speak German, while there around 250,000 German speakers left regardless of origin (Meding 2005).
3.2 German Spoken in Misiones Today

Taking the sociolinguistics into account, it is clear that not one common dialect is found in Misiones. German speakers immigrated to Misiones from Germany, Brazil, and also Russia and each of these origins spoke distinct varieties of German. For example, Putnam & Lipski (2016) note that the German speakers from Germany mainly spoke a dialect that is closely related to the dialects found in the area of Western-Palatinate in Germany. Additionally, features from other Middle and Low German dialects are present (Putnam & Lipski 2016: 89). The German speakers in Brazil (who then immigrated to Argentina) most closely resembled the Hunsrück dialect, while it was also influenced by other German varieties, as mentioned above (Maselko 2013: 44). Finally, there is the German spoken by the immigrants from the Volga area of Russia. As noted by Rosenberg (2005), the German spoken in Russia was subject to convergence for more than a hundred years, so that numerous German dialects leveled, yet did not result in one uniform Volga German (Rosenberg 2005: 224).

In sum, Misiones encountered three waves of German-speaking immigration. Two of these (Hunsrück of Brazil & Volga German) were subject to leveling before they even reached Argentina. As such, it comes as little surprise that koineization of those German dialects also occurred in Misiones, as noted by Putnam & Lipski (2016: 89). Nowadays, German in Misiones is widely considered to be moribund. In theory, this means that there are only a limited number of speakers left and that these have not passed on this heritage language (i.e. a first language (L1) acquired at home, where Portuguese/Spanish is the majority language of the surrounding society) (Putnam & Lipski 2016: 86). However, at least one interviewee indicated that even his grandchildren acquired German as their first language, which would constitute some evidence that there are, indeed, speakers, who passed the German language on to their descendants. Furthermore, there seems to be a general awareness of cultural heritage among the Germans in Misiones. For example, numerous festivals are held annually (e.g. Vogelfest (‘birds festival’) & celebrations for the German national day). Thus, the maintenance of the German language as well as festivities, among others aid the preservation of the cultural heritage of the ancestors of today’s Misionero Germans.
4 Conclusion

The sociolinguistics of the German varieties spoken in Kidron and Misiones have previously not been discussed in the literature. This current paper serves as a brief overview of this missing piece. The two language islands were created differently and had a different path throughout the years. On the one hand, Swiss German spoken in Kidron was in mostly contact with English and partially with Pennsylvania Dutch. On the other hand, German as spoken in Misiones was subject to contact with Spanish and Portuguese, but also several Slavic languages and the different German dialects themselves that has led to some koineization. Furthermore, it seems as if the language shift to the majority language is not as extensive in Misiones as it is in Kidron, as there are speakers, who report teaching their children and grandchildren German as an L1. In contrast, all speakers interviewed in Kidron reported that they refrained from teaching their children Swiss German. Future studies should consider the younger generations of Misionero Germans but also try to identify younger speakers in Kidron (i.e. the children that grew up speaking Swiss only in the 60s).

Acknowledgements Thanks are due to the dozens of Swiss German Mennonites of Kidron, OH, who have graciously welcomed us to their church and shared their experiences and language with us. Thanks are also due to John Lipski (The Pennsylvania State University) & Michael T. Putnam (The Pennsylvania State University) for sharing their experiences from field work conducted in Misiones, Argentina.

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