

Codeswitching and language shift in the trilingual diary of an East Frisian immigrant in the US

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This presentation reports preliminary results of a longitudinal case study examining the written code-switching practices and language shift of a trilingual East Frisian immigrant (1901-1985) who first arrived in the USA in 1924. The corpus is composed of a 160-page diary written in High German (HG), Low German (LG), and English between 1974 and 1982. The diary includes a detailed account of the author's journey and settlement in the American Midwest and deals with a broad range of topics such as religion, politics, farming, childhood, and aging.

For the purposes of this exploration, a sample of 52 pages was examined. Specifically, six pages were randomly chosen for each of the years from 1974 to 1981, while the entirety of the material from 1982 was included, given that only four pages were written during this period. Concerning the analysis itself, the rate of use of each language was calculated for the corpus as a whole, for each year, and for a series of topic categories (aging, childhood, daily activities and work life, family, migration, politics and religion, weather, and miscellaneous). These categories were attained using a bottom-up approach, meaning that they were not established a priori but emerged from the materials under study.

We learn from the diary that the author spoke LG with his family, acquired HG in elementary school, and learned English only after migrating to the US. Although the author began to write the diary after fifty years in America, during which he presumably communicated mainly in English outside of his LG-speaking family circle, the preferred language in the corpus as a whole is HG. Then follows LG, which is unexpected considering that it was not taught in schools and its transmission in Northern Germany was mainly oral during the author's lifespan (see Reershemius 2004). Overall, English is the language with the least presence in the corpus.

From a diachronic perspective, the corpus shows a progressive language shift. Between 1974 and 1979, the corpus features mostly HG. During this period, LG and English are mainly found in isolated sentences and in quotes of previous discursive events (examples 1–2). In the pages written between 1980 and 1981, the presence of the three languages is relatively balanced, with full paragraphs written in LG and English, and frequent switches between the three languages (examples 3–4). Finally, three out of the four pages written in 1982 are entirely in English (example 5), while the last page contains a LG poem. Overall, while the rate of LG use seems to remain relatively constant throughout the diary, English starts to gain ground with the turn of the decade until it becomes the main language, at the expense of HG, whose rate of use drops steadily until finally the language stops being used altogether. Still, the shift documented in the corpus is a late one, since English only starts to become the main written language after more than five decades in the country. Thus, the diary seems to illustrate the fact that, when literacy has come prior to interaction with a foreign language, the previous language may resist displacement longer in writing than in speaking (see Fishman 1965), even if the language in question is not strictly speaking the mother tongue but a second language learned in a diglossic setting (as is the case here with HG).

Beyond the aforementioned language shift, the consideration of topic categories reveals that the choice between languages is not entirely arbitrary. In particular, it is interesting to note that LG, which is the one language whose rate of use did not experience a noticeable change with the passing of time, is especially preferred when the author writes about childhood and aging. This lends further support to the idea that multilingual speakers may be more likely to use their first language to express emotions, especially in the face of shifting language dominance (see Dewaele 2004, Pavlenko 2002).

The adoption of LG to a written domain, the pragmatic differentiation in language choice, and the shift in language-dominance provide new insights into multilingual code-switching practices, and may thereby address questions of language loss and maintenance in general. It seems that the diary mirrors the linguistic developments in this (formerly) trilingual community, which has already lost its HG and will likely see the loss of its remaining LG-speakers in the next two decades (see Mertens 1994).

Examples¹

- (1) [Ein im mittel Jährige–stehendes Ehe-Paar, ershien in die oben genante Halle. Fragen wurden an mich gestelt, im ost-friesishen Platt.]_{no} [Wat is di,n Naum, wor kumst du här, wor geihst du hen, un hest ok Hunger!]_{no} [Die letzte Frage muste ich vermeinen, denn ich Pitzburg würden die Lokomotiven gewechselt.]_{no}
Diary1_Page10_1974
'[A middle-ages couple showed up in the before-mentioned hall. Questions were directed at me in East Frisian Low German.]_{no} [What's your name, where are you from, where are you going and are you hungry as well!]_{no} [I had to negate the last question, because in Pittsburg trains were changed.]_{no}'
- (2) [Sie Hielten ihre Platt-Deutsche sprachen-Kunst auf,]_{no} ["So as sä lert harn,,]_{no} Diary1_Page55_1975
'[They kept up their Low German speaking skills]_{no} [just like they had learned it]_{no}'
- (3) [Der Regen fiel zur rechte zeit, obwohl, Shaden war angerichtet.]_{no} [Vor't Jauhr kring'n wie auber'n bitze minner]_{no} [Wir waren auch verwöhnt, durch den über-fluss, erzeugt durch die letzte Jahre hindurch]_{no} [Man daur wur ok woll segt, dat Bleitze kann sück drei'n un dat löpt ok ni'g altied mit]_{no} [Doch wir warten bis zum Abschluss der Ernte.]
Diary2_Page20_1980
'[Rain fell at the right time although damage was done.]_{no} [This year we will get a little less.]_{no} [We were spoiled by the abundance of the last years.]_{no} [But it was said that the tables may turn and that it wouldn't always go like that.]_{no} [But we will wait until harvest is done.]_{no}'
- (4) [A New to be Ruler, and man of wonders, had, or will be taken the Helm in Distress e–in the Land of the "Grande Natione,,]_{no} [un wat wul'ter ok noch seg'n, dat een ligt ja klaur up'd hand, dat't beter word över nacht, da laut noch man'n setze sitten.]_{no}
Diary2_Page23_1980
'[and what do you want to say, one thing is obvious, that it will be better overnight, let us sit a little longer]_{no}'
- (5) [‘No Relief from the forth winter storm, at 3p.m Saturday. Strong winds Prevaling, and blowing snow. Temperatur at a low of 10-12 Below. Storm starting Jesterday, at noon, and no Let up until this time 3.30pm. No Travel or gathering, advised. Snow-revowel, at a stand-still.]_{no}
Diary2_Page61_1984

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¹ Orthography, punctuation and crossed out words are represented as in the original diary. Squared brackets and language codes were added for better readability and clarity. All translations were made by the author of this abstract.