

The influence of literary practice on language maintenance: Evidence from the *Ostfriesen Zeitung* and a reader's diary

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The study of written code-switching in ego-documents (e.g. private letters or diaries) has seen increased interest in recent years (e.g. Knüsli 2019, Schiegg 2016), but so far the importance of literary practices (Sebba 2012: 113) as a factor in language maintenance represents a largely unexplored domain of study. To address this gap, I will compare the discourse-pragmatic usage of code-switches, defined as the alternation between two languages in a single sentence or discourse (Poplack 1980: 583), in a corpus of letters published in the *Ostfriesen Zeitung* ('East Frisian newspaper', OZ) and a personal diary written by a reader of the newspaper in order to investigate the influence of communal and private literary practices on language maintenance in diglossic communities (Ferguson 1959, Fishman 1967). It seems that the expansion of the L-variety to the written domain indicates its pragmatic purpose as the language of closeness, which is maintained even though the H-variety may undergo linguistic shift.

The OZ was published in Breda, Iowa, from 1882-1971 for the East Frisian-American community, creating a sense of identity and belonging by including High German (HG), Low German (LG), and code-switching texts (that is, texts which make use of both HG and LG to different extents). In particular, some letters to the editor written by correspondents from settlements across the USA have been shown to expand the use of LG to the written domain for a variety of discourse-pragmatic reasons (e.g. reported speech, humoristic anecdotes, references to cultural concepts) (Rocker, forthcoming). Interestingly, a subscriber of the OZ, who received the bi-weekly paper for at least twenty-six years (1946-1971), has also been shown to use code-switching between HG and LG. Born in 1901, the speaker moved to the US in 1924, became part of the Iowan East Frisian community, and began writing his autobiography/diary in 1974. The text is 160 pages long, spans nine years, and includes code-switching between HG and LG, especially for reported speech and nostalgic topics such as childhood memories (Rocker, forthcoming). As the writer refers to the newspaper in his diary and contributed at least one letter to the editor in April 1953, we can assume that he read the newspaper regularly. A comparison of code-switching in the newspaper letters and the diary shows similar discourse-pragmatic usages, such as reported speech (see examples 1 and 2 below), lexical insertions for cultural concepts or food items (e.g. *pankoken* 'pancakes'), humoristic anecdotes, and references to the homeland and childhood memories. Additionally, the diary writer may have taken some inspiration from short stories and poems published in the newspaper, as some of the entries include his own LG poems which resemble those published in the newspaper in form and content.

Both the letters to the editor in the OZ and the diary maintain important pragmatic differences between the languages, with HG being used for formal content, while LG can be characterized as the language of familiarity and closeness (Pavlenko 2002). In a sense, LG is the language of emotion in the face of communal language shift from HG to English as the H-variety, in order to increase a feeling of identity, community and belonging. Although there may not be a strictly causal relationship between reading the newspaper and implementing code-switches, we can assume that the multilingual texts published in the OZ promoted literary practices (i.e. written code-switching behavior) which reflect the language preferences and capabilities of their authors and readers (Sebba 2012: 113). The fact that LG use was expanded to the written domain as a language of closeness underlines its importance to the group, which is still evident in its maintenance in the spoken domain today, while HG has been completely replaced by English. Overall, the combination of both data sets may grant valuable insights into the sociolinguistic circumstances of the speech community and shine a light on the impact of communal and private literary practices on language maintenance in diglossic communities.

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(1) Ostfriesen Zeitung; December 1st 1968; Memories from a visit in East Frisia

Früher ging man ja in jedes Haus ohne weiteres hinein, aber nun meinte ich doch, anklopfen zu müssen. Ein Mann kam an die Tür: „*Well is dar?*“ Ich sagte: “*Ick wull blot fragen, of ick hier woll övernacht blieben kunn, ick hebb all so wiet schluurt mit mien Kuffer un kann nich wieder.*“

Back in the day, you simply walked into every house but now I had the feeling I should knock. A man came to the door: “*Who is it?*“ I said: “*I just wanted to ask if I could stay here overnight, I already dragged my suitcase so far and I can’t go any further.*”

(Low German parts in italics, orthography as in the original; my translation)

(2) Diary Part 1, Page10 (1974)

Ein im mitel Jährige stehendes Ehe-Paar, ershien in die oben genante Halle. Fragen wurden an mich gestellt, im ost-friesishen Platt. *Wat is di,n Naum, wor kumst du här, wor geihst du hen, un hest ok Hunger!* Die letzte Frage musste ich vermeinen, denn in Pitsburg würden die Lokomotiven gewechselt.

A middle-aged couple showed up in the afore-mentioned hall. Questions were directed at me in East Frisian Low German. *What’s your name, where are you from, where are you going and are you hungry as well!* I had to negate the last question, for trains were changed in Pittsburgh.

(Low German parts in italics, orthography as in the original; my translation)