

Migration, Conservatism, and Identity among North American Mennonites

This paper compares two linguistic systems in a geographically-discontinuous speech community in order to understand how migration and identity interact in the development of linguistic variation. Based on the results of two hierarchical clustering analyses, I propose that different linguistic systems can develop to signal different, and sometimes conflicting, aspects of community identity. Plautdietsch is the heritage language of the ethno-religious group known as Netherlandic Mennonites. This group is dispersed over four continents, but psychologically, speakers view themselves as an extended and related community (Cañas-Bottos 2008). The speech community often rejects outside cultural influences, and is known to take extreme measures to socially distance members who are more open by either shunning them or migrating away from them. Speech serves as one of the ways that Mennonites mark their openness to others. Different “traditional dialect” features are associated with different denominations (Tolksdorf 1985, Rempel 1995, Epp 1993, Quiring 1928). Some features are associated with traditionally reclusive and conservative communities, while other features are associated with traditionally open and progressive communities. Recent investigations into Plautdietsch indicate that a vowel shift is taking place in the language and this variation may serve a different purpose than the traditional dialect variation (Nieuweboer 1998, Burns 2015).

In this study, I compare the hierarchical clustering results of the traditional dialect systems and vowel system in order to assess whether they have the same distribution throughout the community in North America. Fifty native Plautdietsch-speakers residing in North America were asked to provide translations for a list of words containing both traditional dialect markers and vowel classes identified in Burns 2015. Words were recorded on a Zoom digital recorder at a sample rate of 44.1 khz/s. Vowel formants were extracted using an automated extractor and were cross-checked by hand. Use of traditional dialect markers were tallied by hand. Resulting values for each linguistic system were analyzed statistically with a complete agglomerative clustering method. Clusters were validated with bootstrapping.

Results of the two clustering analyses indicate that within North America, the two different linguistic systems correlate with different aspects of Mennonite identity. On the one hand, the traditional dialect system maintains a two-way “conservative” vs “non-conservative” distinction. The usage of these features varies by region and some speakers are even aware of switching the traditional dialect features that they use when they switch from one church to another. The vowel variation, on the other hand, is mostly defined in terms of region and when the region was settled. Regions of North America settled in the 1870s share similar vowel inventories. Latin American daughter communities, which developed in the 1920s due to a church schism, have a different vowel inventory than their Canadian parent communities. The most conservative Mennonites in Latin America in this survey, who view themselves as keepers of the language and culture, use traditional dialect features consistent with conservative churches, but have the most innovative vowel system which marks them as distinct from their progressive Canadian parent communities.

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