

# Language Shift in Slow Motion: Evidence from German-Canadian Family Papers

Doris Stolberg

## 1. Introduction

It is a frequent observation that migration is accompanied by language shift on the side of the migrating speakers. What has been reported recurringly is a language shift within three generations, from a monolingual command of the language of origin via bilingualism to monolingualism in the new majority language (Fishman 1964). The adequacy of this three generation pattern has been discussed controversially and differing patterns of language shift are reported for different speech communities; the shift itself, though, seems to be a solid reality.<sup>1</sup> It becomes more obvious with detailed research, however, that the process and the timeline of language shift seem to depend on a range of different factors among which individual preferences play an equally important role as infrastructural and societal conditions.

The current paper takes a closer look at individual language preferences in a historical immigration setting. The focus is on the shift from German to English as reflected in language choice in private written data. The data are derived from archival material from a family who migrated from Germany to North America in the 1840s and settled in southern Ontario in the 1860s. Investigating the data from the perspective of language preference, heritage language maintenance and language shift can help better understand how members of migrant communities make use of their language resources.

In this paper I present preliminary findings from a larger project that will include linguistic and sociolinguistic analyses of private documents from four generations of this immigrant family. Of central interest to the investigation are the diaries from several family members. Diary entries will be compared in two sets: (a) entries written by different persons during the same year, investigating possible effects of the community's language practices on individual language use; and (b) entries written by different persons when they were at the same age (during adolescence), focussing on heritage language acquisition patterns with respect to written language. Especially in the latter respect, the data are unique since heritage language studies usually investigate either spoken data (that can be compared across speakers) or historical written data from individuals (usually adults) where no direct comparison is possible, in particular not for the acquisition process.

Complementary to the diaries, private letters from the same family members are investigated in order to achieve insight into individual and general patterns of language choice (English or German) and the factors influencing it.

The objective of this approach is to gain insight into long-term processes of minority language maintenance, heritage language acquisition and the slow process of language shift in a setting where local bilingualism was an everyday practice for over 100 years, in contrast to settings of faster, three-generational shift scenarios.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example Ortman & Stevens (2008) and Villa & Rivera-Mills (2009) for a discussion of language shift scenarios that do not follow this model smoothly, and for pointing out the complex processes underlying changes in language behavior after immigration that this model may not be able to capture.

The research questions addressed in the current paper are geared towards getting a better understanding of the material: What language preferences can be identified for different family members? What factors play a role in determining these preferences? How is the acquisition process of a written heritage standard reflected in the data? These questions are embedded in a larger research context that addresses the matter of long-term language maintenance in a migration setting, the different ways in which the heritage language is transmitted, and the process of acquiring a written standard of the heritage language in a minority setting.<sup>2</sup>

Among the findings from the material is the fact that within few years after immigration, the first business-related entries (for example, drafts of business letters) in English show up in a first-generation immigrant's notebook while German notes (business and private) continue. Such findings imply that the shift to bilingualism set in just after immigration. Nevertheless, German was continued to be used over the following three generations (if to diminishing degrees) even though English was available from early on.

The current paper centers on one member of the family in particular, Louis Jacob Breithaupt (1855–1939), who belongs to the third generation after immigration. He kept a diary for most of his life, partly in German, partly in English. His business correspondence seems to be in English throughout, while some of his private letters are in German, some are in English, and a number of them contain both languages. In order to gain insight into the process of shift from German to English, this study investigates L. J. Breithaupt's language choices in his diaries and his private correspondence.

## 2. Historical background

The town of Berlin, later Kitchener, in southern Ontario has its origins in settlements by (Pennsylvania) German-speaking Mennonite farmers who migrated to Ontario from Pennsylvania starting in the late 18th century (Bloomfield, Foster & Forgay 1993; Hayes 1999). The town of Berlin was officially founded in 1833. Immigration from German-speaking parts of Europe added to the population, and around 1870, more than 50% of the residents were of ethnic German origin (Bloomfield, Foster & Forgay 1993). Due to anti-German sentiments around WW I, Berlin was renamed Kitchener in 1916. Nevertheless, German language and ethnic origin are a salient part of Kitchener up until today, with a continuing (if low-level) immigration of German speakers from Europe. In 2001, 25% of the population of the c. 200,000 residents of Kitchener still claimed an ethnic German origin (StatCan 2001; cf. also StatCan 2006).

Historically, several German-origin families played an important role in the economic and political life of Waterloo County and, in particular, in the town of Berlin/Kitchener. Archival materials show that German was preserved over several generations by these former immigrants.<sup>3</sup> German was not only a family and church language but also important in business and in schools where it was, in several cases, the language of instruction (Lorenzowski 2008). In this community, the language shift to English occurred in the early 20th century when it was sped up, although not triggered, by the political climate around WW I.

## 3. The data resource

The Dana Porter library of the University of Waterloo (Waterloo, ON) hosts a large amount of private as well as official documents from some of the most prominent families of the region. Among these

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<sup>2</sup> Equally interesting questions are how this standard was derived, or developed, what its measure was, and why it was important to educate children in acquiring and using this standard. It is expected that further analyses of the material will also shed light on these questions.

<sup>3</sup> In the community, oral language use seems to have differed from the written standard of German as reflected in official papers. This oral variant is sometimes referred to as Pennsylvania German (henceforth PG; Gubitz 1995; cf. Loudon 2016 on the origins and development of PG). While it is possible that PG came to be the preferred oral variety in the community – due to a large population of PG speakers in the area –, it seems more likely that it was a blend of PG and European German dialects that were used in daily interaction. There is some evidence that 'PG', as a term, in this setting is applied in a non-linguistic sense, meaning 'a/any non-standard oral variety of German'. In addition, a more standard-like variety seems to have been in use, too.

families is the Breithaupt family who arrived in North America from Hesse, Germany, in 1843 and started business dealings in Berlin/Kitchener, Ontario, in the 1850s. The family moved to Berlin in 1861; from then on, they were an influential player in the business and political matters of the town. The Breithaupt family papers are preserved in the Breithaupt Hewetson Clark collection of the Dana Porter Library. They constitute a considerable historical and linguistic resource, covering a period of more than 100 years, with the earliest documents dating from the year of immigration (1843). The collection contains family correspondence, business documents, ledgers, diaries from several family members and a photograph collection. Some research has been carried out based on this resource, mainly with a focus on historical, economic and sociohistorical topics.<sup>4</sup> The only detailed linguistic investigation so far is that by Gubitz (1995), analyzing the 1888 diary of one family member, Catherine Hailer Breithaupt.

In the following sections, the sociolinguistic footing of the data from this collection is explored, and some qualitative aspects of intra- and intergenerational language shift (cf. Ortman & Stevens 2008) in 19th and 20th century Canada are investigated.

#### 4. Louis Jacob Breithaupt: Data analysis

Louis Jacob Breithaupt (henceforth LJB) produced a major part of the materials preserved in the collection. He kept a diary from the age of twelve up into his late seventies, with only few years of interruption (cf. Lorenzkowski 2008: esp. 10–13). The collection also hosts business and private letters written by him. Considering that the – by then – third generation heritage language was more likely to be used as the language of immediacy, private materials can be assumed to be more informative than official ones of LJB's use of German.<sup>5</sup> This hypothesis was supported by the finding that all business letters were written in English. Being interested in LJB's use of German, I therefore concentrated on his private papers.

##### 4.1. Diaries

LJB's diaries cover the years from 1867 to 1933. They are kept in German and English variably, with German being written in German cursive script throughout, while Latin script is used for English. In the beginning, the use of German prevails, but there are switches to English even in the early diaries. For example, the entries up to and including January 31, 1870, are in German while the entry of February 1, 1870, as well as the following ones, are in English. The entries offer no hint as to the motivation for this switch.

External circumstances seem to have influenced LJB's language choice to some extent: He used English during the time when he attended college in Toronto (starting in 1872) whereas he used German when writing about the private and emotional topic of his father's passing (in 1880), as also Lorenzkowski (2008: 11) notes. It is, however, by no means always transparent why he chooses one language over the other. Thus, the diaries do not reflect either a complementary (diglossic) use or a unidirectional shift from German to English but a flexible use of both languages for several decades. As late as during the 1920s, LJB's diary entries contain some notes or single words in German although the overall tendency is towards an increasing preference for English. In addition, there is a noticeable shift from writing in German towards writing about using German. For example, while earlier diary entries are written in German, later diaries contain notes in English on letters that LJB had written to Germany (in German) or on his attending a church service that had been held in German.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information on the collection, cf. <https://uwaterloo.ca/library/special-collections-archives/collections/breithaupt-hewetson-clark-collection>. A full list of publications using material from the Breithaupt Hewetson Clark collection is provided at <https://uwaterloo.ca/library/special-collections-archives/collections/breithaupt-hewetson-clark-collection/breithaupt-hewetson-clark-publications>. A great thank you goes to the staff of the Special Collections & Archives at the Dana Porter Library who readily and cheerfully guided me through the materials and made available the documents I was interested in.

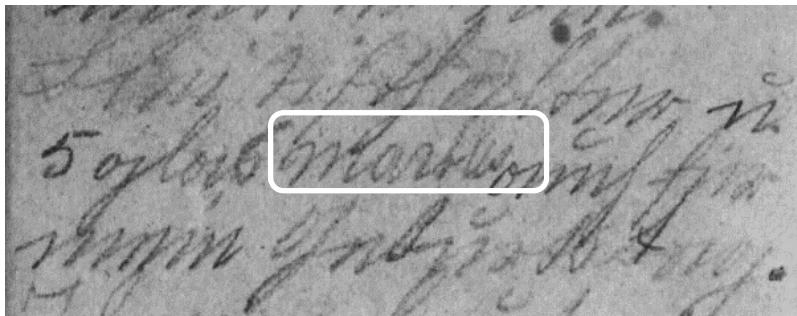
<sup>5</sup> Language of immediacy refers to a mode of communication where speakers share an informal relationship. It is linked to conceptual orality and often characterized by using informal registers (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 2012).

#### 4.1.1. Diaries: Results and interpretation

LJB's German exhibits a number of lexical and structural features that seem to be attributable to different sources. English-derived loanwords and a tendency to extrapose light adverbs, such as *heute* 'today',<sup>6</sup> are likely to be due to contact with English, either of his own variety or – as possibly established features in the local variant of German – of the Berlin/Kitchener-German speech community. The use of a periphrastic possessive construction (as in *der Großmutter ihr Zimmer* 'grandmother's room', lit. 'of/to the grandmother her room') is clearly unrelated to contact with English; rather, it reflects a spoken register of German that must have been part of the German spoken in Berlin/Kitchener or in the Breithaupt family (or both) but that was not very likely to be found in print or similarly normative/written forms of German. Occasionally, nominative case is used with accusative objects, a feature quite common in spoken (colloquial) German. This could be due to an as yet incomplete acquisition of standard written forms since this feature does not appear any more in the later diaries and letters. Some misspellings occur, part of which are attributable to the fact that the German cursive script had not been mastered fully.

In the German parts of the early diaries, in particular, LJB uses some borrowings from English, such as *marbles* in one of the very first entries when he lists his birthday presents. The way the word is written suggests that he may have been looking for an alternative but finally settled with the English word, squeezing it into the space he had left beforehand.

Figure 1: "Marbles".



Transcription: Bleistifthalter u. / 5 glas marbles auch für / mein Geburtstag.<sup>7</sup>  
 [Translation: 'pencil holder and / 5 glass marbles too for / my birthday']  
 (Source: Dana Porter Library/University of Waterloo; Record No. 36271, Control No. 2.5.3-2; Diary of Louis Jacob Breithaupt, entry of March 4, 1867)

Other English words and hybrid compounds are linguistically well integrated and may have been established borrowings in the German of the speech community LJB grew up in. Examples of such items are [*d*]er *Grammarschul Inspektor* ('the grammar school inspector', Gm. 'der Oberschulinspektor'; entry of December 15, 1869) and *zu dem Lederstohr* ('to the leather store', Gm. 'zu dem Ledergeschäft'; entry of January 10, 1870<sup>8</sup>). A more detailed investigation of lexical borrowing in the diaries is likely to reveal which of these items are ad-hoc borrowings or established borrowings.

Finally, the (early) diaries reflect a blend of different registers, juxtaposing informal items and structures with highly formal (including Biblical and archaic) ones at times (for example, *ich ließ mein*

<sup>6</sup> The positioning of light adverbs can diverge between English and German, due to differences in the underlying sentence structure. For German, extraposition refers to a placement beyond the verbal complex (or the right verbal bracket), a position that results in a surface alignment with the English clause-final positioning of light adverbs.

<sup>7</sup> This short excerpt exhibits, in addition, nominative case in *mein Geburtstag* 'my birthday' where accusative case marking would be expected in written standard German (*meinen Geburtstag*).

<sup>8</sup> The same borrowing, in the spelling *Leder-store*, is also used by the local German newspaper, the Berliner Journal, e.g. in 1862 (Uttley 1975: 100). This fact indicates that the item must have been an established borrowing in the local variety of German.

*Bildniß*<sup>9</sup> *nehmen* ‘I had my picture taken’, Gm. ‘ich ließ ein Foto von mir machen’; March 3, 1869). A similar pattern was reported for Wisconsin German (Litty, Evans & Salmons 2015) and has been termed register compression. However, while in Wisconsin German the blending of diverging registers seems to indicate loss of competence in the sense that speakers do no longer distinguish between different registers or styles appropriate in distinct social contexts, in the case of LJB’s diary entries, this pattern seems to be due to his being in the process of acquiring the proper distinctions. It is the great advantage of this data set that it offers a long-term perspective on the speaker’s/writer’s language use, and it becomes clear in his later writings that he has different registers of German at his disposal, being able to write an appropriate letter to his wife as well as to a business partner in Germany. This ability, of course, cannot be taken as *prima facie* evidence for the general level of German competence in Berlin/Kitchener at that time. Apparently, LJB and his parents invested time and effort in his (and his siblings’) acquiring standard German<sup>10</sup>, a possibility probably not available to every member of the community.

#### 4.2. Private letters

The private letters by LJB were written between 1880 and 1933, and they were addressed to different recipients within his family. Table 1 shows their distribution across generations and according to relationship, with his wife and his brothers being third-generation immigrants (as LJB himself) and his children and son-in-law (who was apparently not German speaking) belonging to the fourth generation. For this preliminary investigation, one major interest was to determine the correlation between language choice and relationship to the addressee, in the sense of a social network analysis (cf. Fitzmaurice 2007).

Table 1: Private letters by Louis Jacob Breithaupt (1855–1939)

Recipient(s)	Biographical dates	Letter dates	No. of letters	Sum per group
Emma (wife)	1860–1925	1880–1916	18	Wife: 18 letters
Ezra Carl (brother)	1866–1897	1888–1891	9	Siblings: 11 letters
Albert Liborius (brother)	1870–1955	1888 & 1896	2	
Rosa (daughter)	1888–1981	1909–1933	26	Children: 28 letters
Rosa (daughter) & Russell (son-in-law)		1918	1	
Paul (son)	1903–1961	1922	1	
In sum		1880–1933	57	

##### 4.2.1. Letters: Results and interpretation

English is the language most frequently used in these private letters. Two interesting patterns emerge, however. The letters addressed to LJB’s brothers mainly (though not exclusively) deal with business matters, as he and his brothers were all involved in the family business. These letters are written in English throughout, so regarding their content as well as the language choice, they pattern with the business letters.

The majority of LJB’s letters to his wife are also written in English, except for two of them (in 1880 and 1904). The German letters are written in German cursive script, implying that his wife was able to both understand German and read the German script. The remaining letters, though written in English, repeatedly contain German openings (*Liebe Emma* ‘Dear Emma’) and closings (*Papa* ‘Dad’), thus pragmatic markers rather than content items.

<sup>9</sup> *Bildniß*/*Bildnis* ‘image’ is a Biblical and archaic term; *Photographie*, *Porträt*, or (possibly) *Lichtbild* would be common German equivalents of the time for the English term ‘photograph’.

<sup>10</sup> This is implied in several of his diary entries, especially from the 1860s.

The letters to LJB's children cover private matters. While all of these letters are in English generally, some of those addressed to Rosa, LJB's daughter, include fixed phrases in German, such as greetings and good wishes. Examples are *Guten Morgen* 'good morning' (Oct. 15, 1928), *Gruß zuvor* 'greeting ahead' (May 21, 1929; March 24, 1930), or *Lebe wohl* 'farewell', lit. 'live well' (Feb. 20, 1925). One of the letters is signed *Vater* ('father'), as opposed to *Father* as in the other letters. Interestingly, the use of German items and expressions only surfaces in later letters, namely in 1919, 1925, and 1928–1930, at a time when clearly German is no longer the language LJB and his daughter use for regular (written) communication. In a letter of 1928, however, LJB mentions that Rosa used to write in German as a child, a possible indication of her being a heritage speaker (cf. Polinsky & Kagan 2007) of German who acquired the language as a child but shifted to English as the dominant language fairly early in life.

An interesting pattern that emerges in these private letters is a gender-related language use even though this conclusion can only be tentative due to the low numbers of letters to males. As it is, the letters to LJB's brothers and the letter to his son are all in English. German appears only in the letters to his wife and his daughter. Presumably, LJB's brothers knew German, too, since LJB reports in his diaries that he as well as his brothers went to German school, and the family spoke German at home. Whether his son knew enough German to communicate fluently is impossible to say. Being 15 years younger than his sister, he might well have had much less input in German than his sister had, assuming that this was the period when LJB himself and possibly also his immediate family shifted to English increasingly. It may thus be coincidence that language use here patterns with the gender of the addressee. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the data seem to imply that LJB's written use of German was restricted to female family members and to his diaries, maybe indicating a greater intimacy value of the heritage language.

## 5. Conclusions

The analysis of certain aspects of the data material from the Breithaupt Hewetsen Clark collection and, in particular, of the diaries and private letters written by Louis Jacob Breithaupt illuminates several characteristics of language use in Berlin/Kitchener during the late 19th and early 20th century. From the data, it becomes obvious that German was still well established in the communicative repertoire of the community at least up until the beginning of the 20th century. German school instruction as well as German church services were offered regularly and were easily available. A first investigation of the data shows that the informant's language choice oscillated between German and English over several decades, and both languages were used side by side. That is, the data exhibit no clear-cut or quick shift. During the third and the fourth generation, German seems to have been petering out rather than being discarded abruptly. As the community shifted to English, also for LJB (a third-generation heritage speaker) an intra-generational language shift is reflected in his language use. Over time, English becomes quantitatively dominant in his writings, although not at the cost of a complete abandonment of German, as evidence from his late diaries shows.

A somewhat complementary distribution of German and English between the private and the business domain is documented even for the first generation of immigrants. English was acquired quickly after immigration, that is, within the first few years, but it remained restricted to business matters. The pattern that is observable in LJB's language choices is that he uses English only for business matters while both languages are employed for family communication, with an increasing tendency towards English over his life time. The letters to his daughter show that a few fixed phrases with a pragmatic (rather than a semantic) content remain available for intergenerational communication in German. The diaries remain a refuge for using (some) German since here, LJB does not depend on the communicative abilities of other addressees. Still, even here the shift to English is more or less complete towards the end of his diaries.

The data show that German remained salient and available as a means of communication side by side with English for up to four generations after immigration to North America. This is somewhat unexpected as the functional distribution of these two languages shifted from an affiliation with different domains (German – private, English – business) to the overlapping use of both German and English in the private domain within two generations (if not earlier).

A network analysis of Louis Jacob Breithaupt's private correspondence offered insights into the stages of language shift in practice. The analysis of his language choice according to the addressees of his letters reveals that the shift was never fully complete but that his preferences clearly changed over time. Thus, English was the language of choice when writing to his brothers about business matters even though they were close family members. On the other hand, when addressing his daughter, the fourth generation after immigration, he included German words, phrases and sections even late in his life.

L.J. Breithaupt was an important representative of the German community of Berlin/Kitchener at the turn to the 20th century. He was a member of an influential family; therefore, his language choice can be assumed to not have gone unnoticed, and it may have influenced others. At the same time, it reflected a pattern of language use that was not exceptional, as can be gathered from historical reports. By the end of Breithaupt's life time, Kitchener was English speaking, at least in public. What this paper has focused on are the small – and not always straightforward or unidirectional – steps of individual choice that in sum contribute to language shift drawn out over more than a century.

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# Selected Proceedings of the 8th Workshop on Immigrant Languages in the Americas (WILA 8)

edited by Jan Heegård Petersen  
and Karoline Kühl

Cascadilla Proceedings Project    Somerville, MA    2018

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