Change in Life and Language: Mennonite Communities in Southwestern Kansas

Nora Vosburg

Waut jleewst du, woo wudd dien Läwen en Meksiko vondoag sennen?
   - Ekj jleew daut wudd vál aundasch sennen.
Ekj jleew, daut wia dolla soo aus de Dietsch sennen.
Hia es daut dolla soo aus de enjlische Menschen sennen.¹
[24 years, came to the US at age 6]

1. Introduction

For centuries, Old Colony Mennonites have (although not uniformly) been associated with a triglossic separation of language use into the realms of Sunday, daily, and community-external life. The languages involved in this situation varied depending on the location of settlement. A new development is underway in a Mennonite community of bilingual Plautdietsch-English speakers in southwestern Kansas, in which triglossia can no longer be maintained. This situation is the result of changes in the social dynamics of the region. What factors contribute to language shift and how do members of the community reflect on these changes? This paper explores the phenomena of shift in lifestyle and language in this community. All speakers were born in Mexico and moved to the US at different points in their lives. They have undergone dramatic changes in their lifestyles within a relatively short period of time. Based on oral history interviews, I present a community-internal perspective on change with two goals: First, I address the specific developments of social changes in the community dynamics, of shift in spiritual orientation, and in language use and attitude towards the speakers’ languages. Second, I embed these overall findings within specific principles of Fishman’s (2006) sociology of religion and language, and show that language shift from Plautdietsch to English is a direct consequence of certain verticalization processes (Salmons 2005). I argue that both aforementioned frameworks as well as different circumstances of migration to the US can explain the drastic changes that part of this community has already undergone.


The analysis of change in life and language among the Kansas Mennonites is embedded in two frameworks: Fishman (2006) provides the theoretical baseline for an analysis of language and religion and how these are intimately connected, and Salmons (2005) presents a holistic approach to the outcome of language shift.

¹ What do you think your life would be like in Mexico today? – I think it would be very different. I think it would be more like the Dietsch [Germans]. Here it is more like the English people are. [Translation NV]

2.1. Sociology of religion and language

Fishman (2006) presents an overview of studies that researched the relationship of language and religion within society, and provides a discussion base for further efforts to “find a theoretical parental home” (p. 13) for any research on the sociology of religion and language, rather than seeing them as separate entities. He compiled ten theoretical principles that underlie certain developments in such communities. Three of these principles serve as a theoretical frame for developments that are either completed or ongoing in Kansas:

Principle 5: “The rise and spread of newly sanctified and co-sanctified varieties (or also of less sanctified ones) within the sociolinguistic repertoire of a speech community renders that repertoire more complex and more functionally differentiated than heretofore.” (p. 17)

Principle 6: “All sources of sociocultural change are also sources of change in the sociolinguistic repertoire vis-à-vis religion, including religious change per se.” (p. 18)

Principle 7: “There are several reasons why multiple religious varieties may co-exist within the same religious community.” (p. 20)

2.2. Verticalization

Salmons (2005) utilizes a new approach to language shift that is linked to changes in the regional structures. He builds on Warren’s (1978) notion of the Great Change that involved a shift from local (horizontal) patterns in US communities to regional or national (vertical) ones. Salmons applies this regionalism model to linguistics and shows that historically, the abandonment of local structures occurred parallel to shift from German to English in Wisconsin heritage communities, thus arguing that they are directly connected. For the present paper, this approach provides an applicable baseline to explain the rapid shift to English in Kansas, while coming from a triglossic situation in Mexico.

3. Background on Mennonite community

The Mennonites who came from Mexico to Kansas are descendants of Russian Mennonites. Their history dates back to the 16th century when they left the Netherlands, Friesland, and Flanders due to persecution and settled in Poland (Epp 1993). When religious freedom of their community was endangered, they moved first to the Ukraine (at that time Russia), later to Canada, and then to Mexico after World War I (Brandt 1992; Moelleken 1986; 1987). More recently, many members of the community settled in southwestern Kansas (Figure 1).
Figure 1. Migration history of Kansas Mennonites.
Traditionally, Russian Mennonites showed a triglossic pattern of language usage with a high variety (H-variety) used in realms of church and education, and served as a written medium, a low variety (L-variety) used outside of these realms and as a spoken-only medium, and an external variety (E-variety) used with members outside of the Mennonite community. While for most Mennonite communities Dutch served as the H-variety in Poland, German became the H-variety in the Ukraine and is used as such until today. Plautdietsch formed as a Mennonite in-group language during times of persecution and isolation and is still today the oral medium. The E-variety shifted naturally to the surrounding environment that the Mennonites moved to (Cox 2015; Moelleken 1986). In the US, we see a breakdown of the triglossic pattern, i.e. English and Plautdietsch now overlap in their domains of language use (Table 1).

Table 1. Changes in Mennonite language patterns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>H-variety</th>
<th>L-variety</th>
<th>E-variety</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>Dutch</td>
<td>Plautdietsch</td>
<td>German, Polish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UA</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Plautdietsch</td>
<td>Ukrainian, Russian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Plautdietsch</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MX</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Plautdietsch</td>
<td>Spanish, (English)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>English,</td>
<td>Plautdietsch,</td>
<td>(German, Spanish)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another important change between previous migrations and the migration to the US lies in the nature of movement. Throughout the centuries, Mennonites moved in large groups when they were religiously persecuted, threatened by the introduction of the E-variety into their schooling system, or forced into military service, a threat against their basic principle not to raise arms against others. Additionally, land became scarce or too expensive (Hedges 1996; Moelleken 1986; Sawatzky 1971). In contrast, single families migrated to Kansas because of the economic hardship that many faced in Mexico. Consequences of the open trade market policies between the US and Mexico led to poverty among many farmers. At the same time, US companies hired cheap labor in the meat and farming industries which many Mennonites saw as a good opportunity to provide a better life for their families. I argue that it might be exactly these differences in mass vs. single migration that contributed to different adaptation processes to the majority culture in Mexico and Kansas.

4. Methodology

For this paper, I analyzed oral history interviews, conducted in 2016 and 2017 with 25 Mennonites (21 women) who range between the ages of 24-68 (AVG 42, SD 9.7). These interviews are part of a larger research project in the community. The sample is random, with the exception that all participants were born in Mexico. They immigrated to the US between the ages of 0.2-48 (AVG 20, SD 11.7). Their L1 is Plautdietsch. While they are all bilingual, English may be their L2/L3/L4, depending on their background in L2 German and L3 Spanish. Their schooling background ranges from 5-12 years (AVG 8, SD 2.3), depending on where they grew up (fewer years of schooling in Mexico than the US).

The interviews were conducted in English and Plautdietsch. Questions included topics such as language background, church affiliation, and living situation in Kansas and Mexico. All interviews were audio-recorded (6.8 hours) and later on transcribed verbatim in ELAN (https://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/citing_elan/).

5. Comparison of Mexican and Kansas Mennonite settlements

In this section, I provide a detailed comparison between living and language situations in Mexico and Kansas that is based on speakers’ comments in their interviews, and embed the findings into Fishman’s (2006) principles of the sociology of religion and language as well as Salmons’ (2005) model of verticalization. Table 2 shows an outline of the major differences and similarities that will be subsequently discussed in greater detail in each subsection of this chapter.
Table 2. Differences and similarities between Mennonite settlements in Mexico and Kansas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mexico</th>
<th>Kansas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Living</td>
<td>Colony organization with closed community, “campos”</td>
<td>Interspersed with non-Mennonite US-Americans, spread apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Mennonite schools</td>
<td>Public schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Farming, small businesses</td>
<td>Farming, meat industry, small businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>Russian and Canadian Mennonite churches</td>
<td>Russian and Canadian Mennonite churches (minority), Mennonite Central Conference churches (majority)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Triglossia</td>
<td>Loss of compartmentalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1. Living

The social changes addressed in the following subsections of living (§5.1), education (§5.2), and work (§5.3) culminate in the switch between churches (§5.4), reflected in Fishman’s (2006) Principle 6 that sociocultural change interrelates with religious change.

In Mexico, most Mennonites live in closed communities that are organized quite similarly to their former settlements in Canada and Russia. This organization is often referred to as a colony, and has the characteristic name campo (“field”). Hedges (1996) describes a typical campo as a village with one main street from which each family owns or rents a strip of land that is attached to their house and small garden. Each campo has a one-room school, a church building, and is designed in a symmetrical order. In contrast, Mennonites in Kansas live indistinguishably from non-Mennonites. They typically work on farms away from their home, and are interspersed with other non-Mennonites.

5.2. Education

As previously stated, the schooling background differs by each speaker, but correlates with the speakers’ age of arrival (AoA) in the US. If speakers were educated in Mexico, length of education ranges from 5-9 years (n=20, AVG 7, SD 1.2), while those with (partial) education in the US went to school for 9-12 years (n=6, AVG 11, SD 1.7). Another important difference concerns the language of education. In Mexico, Mennonite schools teach in German. Some speakers also reported instruction in Spanish (n=4). Plautdietsch was either formally prohibited or only used during recreation. However, many speakers admitted to have used Plautdietsch instead of German, e.g. reflected in the word choice fail that indicates the disobedience to the rule (1):

(1) “We were supposed to speak in High German but we, we failed often.” [P02, 45 years, AoA 22]

In contrast, public education in Kansas was exclusively in English, thus German played virtually no role for those participants, and Plautdietsch was removed from this realm. For the Mexican Mennonites’ children, i.e. the second generation of immigrants, all education is public and in English (although Mennonite schools with education in German exist in the area. e.g. the Reinlander School in Sublette), and some even proceed with a college education. The educational system (2) and its quality (3) were an important motivation for some speakers to make the conscious decision to move to Kansas:

(2) “Yes, my parents became the US citizen here and so that’s why we decided to come here too, since we made very little money and we only had private schools there and it was- we could not afford paying for the school after our son start school and so that’s why we decide to move here.” [P09, 48 years, AoA 20]
(3) “We wanted our kids to have a better education and also because of jobs.” [P14, 50 years, AoA 25]

Salmons (2005) addresses the effect on language shift when educational structures shift from local to national. Once these horizontal ties are weakened, language shift becomes likely. In the case of the Mennonites, the language of education changed, thus weakening the position of both German and Plautdietsch, and resolving one realm that was part of the triglossic separation in Mexico (see §5.5).

5.3. Work

The outlook of improving the standard of living was a strong motivation to move to Kansas (4). If we compare the working environments between their former Mexican and present Kansas life, we see a shift from family farming to hired farming work and some even moved up to self-employment (5). Women often focus solely on raising children and maintaining the household. Some, however, have part-time jobs to contribute to the family income (6). Historically, this process of verticalization, i.e. going from small to big farming in other heritage communities contributed to change in the social structure (Frey 2013).

(4) “We didn’t have very good to live in Mexico and we decided to move here.” [P06, 50 years, AoA 28]

(5) In Mexico: “We [she and siblings] would just help our parents on the farm with animals, fields, we had to stock grain in the fields and so.”
In Kansas: “He [husband] worked for Enns Harvesting and then after that, he got his own business, his own truck.” [P02, 45 years, AoA 22]

(6) “I’m a stay at home mom. I do clean a dairy office once every two weeks and my husband’s former boss, I clean her [boss’ wife] house about every other week too. So that’s about it.” [P09, 48 years, AoA 20]

Many women reflect positively on the changes in work life (7). While their husbands are usually gone during the day, they now have time to come together and participate more, for example, in church activities. In contrast, life in Mexico was defined by work of both husband and wife (and children) in order to earn a living.

(7) Interviewer: “Es daut Läwen bäta hia?” [Is life here better?]
“Väl bäta, leichta.” [Much better, easier.] [P17, 43 years, AoA 23]

5.4. Church and faith

While being a member of the same congregation within one family was important in Mexico, in Kansas there is a lot of interaction between congregations, and belonging to different churches does not seem to pose any inner-family conflict. There are many different Mennonite churches in the area that can be categorized on a spectrum from more to less conservative. Most speakers for the present paper went to different churches in Mexico than now in Kansas, with a clear trend towards less conservative ones (Table 3).
Table 3. Changes in church affiliation in Mexico and Kansas (n=23)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church affiliation in Mexico</th>
<th>More conservative</th>
<th>Less conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Colony</td>
<td>Reinlander</td>
<td>Kleine Gemeinde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conferenza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gottes Gemeinde</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total #</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinlander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleine Gemeinde</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference (GMC, MEC, New Beginning)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total #</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Old Colony and Kleine Gemeinde (‘Little Church’) were founded during the Mennonites’ stay in Russia, and the conservative Reinlander church originated in Canada. The Conferenza is the Mexican equivalent to Conference churches in the US, and the Gottes Gemeinde (‘Church of God’) is not affiliated with the Mennonite Church.

From the interviews, speakers reflect on three main differences that influenced their decision to change church affiliation (Table 4).

Table 4. Main differences between more and less conservative churches both in Mexico and Kansas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>More conservative</th>
<th>Less conservative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>head covering, dresses, black in church</td>
<td>indistinguishable from non-Mennonite church communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scripture</td>
<td>sermon/reading/knowing by heart</td>
<td>sermon/reading/discussion in Bible studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>German/Plautdietsch</td>
<td>(mainly) English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(8) Clothing:
“One was like the head covering. The other church had a head covering. I didn’t want it- use that anymore so we just felt like we could feel more comfortable here.” [P17, 43 years, AoA 23]

(9) Scripture:
“It was the beliefs, kind of. They were pretty strict over there with their laws, or like their self-made laws and stuff. And ever since we found the truth in the Bible or whatever, we decided to go somewhere where we could agree with what they were teaching, so.” - Interviewer: “Was it a transition for you to go from German service to English service?” - “It wasn’t a big transition. We totally accept the English, ‘cause my girls can understand the English better than the whole High German. ‘Cause they do not speak the High German language (laughs).” [P19, 33 years, AoA 2]
“And I remember I couldn’t even understand the High German until I was ten years old. Yeah, it was totally a different language. I couldn’t even understand it and I had gone to school since I was six, and then until ten. It was just- I didn’t know that what we’re reading [the Bible] actually were stories and that it actually meant something.” [P03, 42 years, AoA 19]

5.5. Language

Fishman’s (2006) Principle 5 addresses the effects of newly sanctified varieties that result in a more complex sociolinguistic repertoire. In Kansas, shift from German/Plautdietsch to English entered the Sunday realm. Many speakers are aware of a generational difference and reflect positively upon the use of English instead of German.

“[If I talk to an older person, they usually don’t know English very well, so it’s always gonna be Plautdietsch. If I talk to a younger person it’s gonna be English.]” [P02, 45 years, AoA 22]

“[Well, if our kids are there, like young people, then I prefer English because then they don’t understand (laughs) so then I prefer English. But it doesn’t matter to me if it’s Low German or High German or English.]” [P09, 48 years, AoA 20]

“[Some, some not. That is very difficult. That’s different than we speak, so.]” [P06, 50 years, AoA 28]

“[Which is something that I just never understood. Why would you teach something that you don’t speak?]” [P07, 27 years, AoA 5]

This shift extends beyond church into the realm of family and home. When looking at the languages that the participants’ parents use with each other, those that the participants use with their parents, spouse, and children, and those that the children use with the participants, we see the classic three-generation model of language shift (Valdés 2000) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Language use of Plautdietsch (PD) and English (EN) in different generations.
With each generation, the use of Plautdietsch decreases while the use of English increases. Whereas the participants’ parent generation used only Plautdietsch with each other (despite the presence of Spanish as the E-variety), the picture becomes more differentiated with each generation.

6. Conclusion

Fishman’s (2006) Principle 7 concludes this brief overview: “There are several reasons why multiple religious varieties may co-exist within the same religious community” (p. 20). In this Kansas community, shift is underway. This shift affects not only the H-variety, but also the former L-variety. In Mexico, a stable triglossia persists, where German takes on the role of an identity marker, and Plautdietsch is more susceptible to influence from the E-variety without losing the status as the L-variety (Cox 2015). In Kansas, a change in identity defines a change in language and life: Being Mennonite is not primarily defined by the shared faith, culture and language, but by a newly defined faith (14). Another important aspect for the promotion of language shift is the loss of social compartmentalization (Fishman 1980) (15).

Interviewer: “Can you think of any situation in general where you would prefer one language over the other?”

(14) “I can’t say because like when I grew up church was High German, school was High German, home was Low German. And for me now that I grew closer to the Lord like after being married, it’s all English, and it’s like for me it’s way more meaningful in English, because that’s where I grew in. When I was reading that Low German and English together, like side by side, the same verses, it just didn’t have the same meaning. It didn’t touch my heart the way English did, so I was like ‘I’m sticking with the English’.” [P03, 43 years, AoA 19]

(15) “Yeah, pretty much everything I would prefer English. Yeah, it’s just easier for me and since I had public school and I didn’t have any that really counts I-guess, any schooling. In the Plautdietsch for sure I didn’t have any schooling, just a little bit High German, but, you know, if you don’t practice that, that’s all gone.” [P08, 39 years, AoA 3]

This paper, however, only represents a small part of the community in Kansas, and further research is needed to obtain a more complete picture of the situation. While shift is not completed in this community, we see many layers of shift developments. The conference congregations e.g. prioritize the effect of English for mission purposes, where English strengthens the vertical ties with society for outreach. This has also been shown for certain Amish in earlier decades (Brown forthcoming). More recent developments in Kansas and the US in general demonstrate the importance of this, as the “Evangelical Anabaptist” movement (EvAna) unites multiple conferences in the US without carrying the name “Mennonite” in their label. Similarly, the “Gospel Mennonite Church” in Sublette is now “The Living Gospel Church” and the “Kleine Gemeinde” is renamed as the “Evangelical Mennonite Conference,” losing its German name heritage. All these changes reflect Salmons’ (2005) approach to shift from horizontal, local patterns, to more vertical, regional or national ones. Importantly, we see this rapid change happening within one generation of speakers that has undergone an abrupt change between Mexico and Kansas in living, schooling, and church. This change occurred despite the fact that strong bonds are maintained with the Mennonite community in Mexico, as many family members are still living there. This, I argue, is a direct consequence of the migration of individual families that lead to the change away from more traditional patterns.

Finally, it is important to underscore that not everything has changed. All speakers define themselves strongly as Mennonites, they mainly persist in endogamic structures, but marry across church affiliations, and their gender roles remain clearly defined. In this short overview, I presented data from one part of the community, namely those that have mainly undergone shift. But, as Fishman says so well at the beginning of this conclusion, there are multiple religious varieties that co-exist within this same religious community.
References

Brown, Joshua (forthcoming). The changing sociolinguistic identities of the Beachy Amish-Mennonites. *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies*.


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