Language Shift and Group Identity: Mennonite Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Germany[1]

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Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,
my daily labour to pursue,
thee, only thee, resolved to know
in all I think or speak or do

Give me to bear thine easy yoke,
and every moment watch and pray,
and still to things eternal look,
and hasten to thy glorious day;

(Charles Wesley: Angels' Song, 1707 - 88)

1. Introduction

The above text from a protestant hymn book[2] perfectly reflects the work ethic that is an important characteristic of the ethnic group under investigation in the present paper: the Mennonites. This Protestant group of German and Dutch descent settled in Russia about 200 years ago. With the decline of Soviet power about 200.000 Mennonites decided to head for their original (now foreign) homeland and have settled in Germany over the past few decades. These Mennonites have managed to preserve their linguistic, religious and social identity in Russia and the former Soviet Union and now face the task of integrating themselves into modern German society.

The German settlement in Russia has a long tradition, and the word for German "nemec" was for a long time a synonym for all foreigners from the West (Kopelew 1988: 26). In 1763 The Russian Empress Katharina II "The Great" (who was of German descent herself) invited foreigners to settle in Russia. Many Germans used this opportunity, among them many Mennonites, a protestant group tracing their history back to Menno Simons (1496 - 1561), a protestant reformer from Witmarsum/ Friesland. These Mennonites settled in Russia in their own villages and were economically very successful as farmers. It is reported that the Russian government revisor Loškarev thought he was in another country or in the next century when he inspected the Mennonite villages in Moločna in 1844 (Brandes 1993: 105). The Mennonites in Russia had their own schools and preserved their ethnic identity including their own language "Plautdiitsch" a low-German variety (see Nieuweboer 1998) for a long time. The 20th century, especially the time during and after World War II was a troublesome period for most ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union, including the Mennonites. They were regarded as

[2] United Reformed Church (1991): Rejoice and Sing, hymn 521. Oxford University Press. Although Charles Wesley was not a Mennonite, these verses perfectly reflect the protestant work ethos that is typical of the Mennonite and other smaller protestant groups.

alien foreigners and were persecuted under Stalin's regime (see P. & E. Dyck 1991, Driediger 1997). This experience led many to emigrate and head for their now foreign homeland, Germany. Since the end of the war, there has been a constant immigration to Germany by ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union, despite the fact that emigration from the Soviet Union was not easy in many cases. This immigration reached its peak after the elimination of the "iron curtain". Between 1989 and 1998 2.3 million ethnic Germans left the former Soviet Union and emigrated to Germany (Bade and Oltmer, 1999: 9). According to German law (lex sanguinis) they had never lost their nationality even after 200 years of settlement in Russia. In contrast with other immigrants in Germany they receive a German passport immediately (other immigrants can only apply for naturalisation after 8 years of permanent residence in Germany). However, new legislation was introduced in 2000. The number of immigrants from the Soviet Union is now limited to 100.000 per year. Furthermore, a language test was introduced to prevent immigrants with an unclear ethnic background from coming to Germany.

The ethnic German immigrants from the former Soviet Union are called "Aussiedler", a term created to distinguish them from other immigrants in Germany. Roughly 200,000 of these "Aussiedler" have a Mennonite background (personal communication with Herr von Niessen)[3]. The Mennonite immigrants deliberately decided to settle mainly in certain areas in Germany. As early as 1952 Mennonite groups organised the settlement in Espelkamp near Bielefeld (see Oberpenning 1999: 303 ff.). Since then this area has become one of the two centres of Mennonite settlement in Germany (the other centre is in and around the town Neuwied). A special office, the "Übersiedlerbetreuungsdienst" set up by the group themselves has been responsible for organising the settlement. The aim is to keep the group together to make it possible to preserve their own identity. The recent German government policy is to distribute "Aussiedler" evenly among German cities. However, this affects the Mennonites only marginally because only a few group members are still in the former Soviet Union. According to the Head of the Mennonite immigration office (Übersiedlungs-beauftragter), Herr Heidebrecht, the immigration of Mennonites is now almost completed. Nearly all Mennonites have left the former Soviet Union. Not all of them went to Germany. South and North America are areas of Mennonite immigration as well.

2. The data collection

The data collection took place participant observations and interviews. The settlement in Neuwied was visited by the author in 2001, the settlement around Bielefeld in 2002. In total 12 interviews were tape-recorded. Many more were carried out in an informal way. Some people were visited several times so that the total length of some of the interviews is more than two hours. Furthermore, a questionnaire was administered to both groups (n = 92). As mentioned above the Mennonites have a specific work ethos that distinguishes them from the mainstream environment. Therefore some of the questions in the questionnaire focus on the importance of fundamental values in business. These data were compared with data from a control group where a similar questionnaire was distributed. This control group consists of 72 first year business students from a College in Germany (the average age is 23). It is obvious that the two groups are different but the aim of the study is to show exactly what this difference is. The data from the control group were compared with the data from the Mennonite group as a whole and with the data from the younger group members.

As described above, the design of the study combines quantitative ways of data collection (questionnaires) with various ways of qualitative approaches (formal and informal interviews). This combination of methods, sometimes called "triangulation" (see also Hussey and Hussey 1997: 74 ff.) seems to be the most appropriate approach in a complex immigration setting.

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[3] Herr von Niessen is the former head of the Mennonite immigration office.

3. Results

3.1 Interviews

One question in almost all interviews was the history of the group in the former Soviet Union. Surprisingly, there were also some positive comments about the past:

> "In a certain sense Stalin was a blessing in disguise. Many found their (religious) identity under the enormous pressure from outside." (Herr Janssen, 88 years old)[4]

It is this group identity that is now under threat in the new environment. The Mennonites have always regarded themselves as German, and as stated earlier, they had some troublesome experiences in the Soviet Union. However, in the new environment this ethnic identity is not undisputed. A comment made several times was:

> "In Russia we were fascists, we were Germans … generally, we were accused to be Germans, and then we came to Germany, and we were accused to be Russians." (Herr Dijk, 26, immigration to Germany 13 years ago)

This comment reflects the fact that not everybody in mainstream society accepts them as "homecoming" Germans. There is a potential conflict with other second and third generation immigrants, especially from Turkish descent, who were born in Germany but did not have the nationality until the recent change in the immigration law which now accepts double nationality for children of immigrants at least for a transitional period.

Economically, the immigration to Germany is a success story for the Mennonites. The group in Neuwied consists of several thousand members. It was pointed out by Mennonites in this group that there is only one unemployed person in the group, despite the fact that the unemployment rate in Germany has reached a record level of more than 10% in recent years. It was also pointed out that this person is only unemployed for health reasons and is willing to work. This is a reflection of the specific work ethos of the group. Work is an end in itself and is a (religious) duty. A further example of this work ethos is the fact that all Mennonite churches I visited were built by the group themselves. Many group members work as craftsmen and manual labourers, some of them in the construction industry. After office hours a lot of time is invested in building their own churches and congregation centres. Almost all of the rather big family homes were also built by the families themselves with the help of other group members. Of course this is an area for potential envy from non-Mennonite neighbours.

A further area of potential conflict are the schools. In recent years some Mennonite parents in the Bielefeld area have not allowed their children to go on school trips because of perceived negative influences. Therefore one school expelled a number of Mennonite children. This is possible under German law because the school was an independent mainstream, protestant (!) school. There was much discussion in the local press, and finally the ministry for education had to mediate. It is beyond the focus of this article to analyse this conflict in detail. Nevertheless, this is a potential area of conflict. One Mennonite parent even told me that the problem is bigger now in Germany than it was in Russia. In Russia perceived negative influence by the school could be explained by the fact that the teachers were not Christians. In Germany it might be the case that a teacher from another Christian congregation has an influence on the child that is not accepted by the parents, and yet the teacher is a Christian. The argument used in Russia is now no longer possible. There is a tendency for Mennonite parents to send their children to evangelical independent schools. However, even there, other Christian groups are represented and these may have some unwanted influence on the children as well. This perceived constant "threat" from other Christian groups is the reason why the Mennonites from the former Soviet Union tend to minimise contacts with other groups, even with "old" Mennonite groups that have been in Germany and nearby Holland for centuries and, never emigrated to Russia. As one group member states: "we are polite to our (non-Mennonite) neighbours but would like to stay alone". Obviously this self-chosen isolation is a strategy to preserve the group identity in the new environment. Nevertheless,

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[4] All names have been changed by the author.

there is an ongoing discussion in the group concerning the extent to which parents should allow their children to adapt to the new (school) environment, for example in the choice of clothing.

For the Mennonites Plautdiitsch was the language of identity in the Soviet Union. Contacts with the outside world there would naturally have been made in Russian. Within the group, however, Plautdiitsch was spoken. Standard German was only used as a foreign language in school and as the language of the Bible. All Bibles used by the group were written in Standard German so that a high receptive knowledge of this language can be assumed. Younger group members report that Christian Sunday schools took place in Russian because this was the language the children understood best. These Sunday schools were sometimes illegal, sometimes tolerated by the authorities. Since the immigration to Germany a complete language shift towards Standard German has taken place. The older generation still uses Plautdiitsch, and many younger members have at least a passive knowledge. There are still some younger families who use it at home but these are exceptions. It is very doubtful whether Plautdiitsch will survive in the new environment. It certainly does not have the function of supporting the group identity. All public group activities including church services are carried out in Standard German. There are indications that Plautdiitsch had already lost ground in the Soviet Union as the following example of the language situation before immigration illustrates:

" … the parents could speak Plautdiitsch very well with the Granny … Interviewer: Did you speak German with your sisters? Answer: no Russian" (Herr Dijk, 26, immigration to Germany 13 years ago)

The following table illustrates the language shift that took place within three generations of Mennonite immigrants.

Table 1
Language shift over three generations (interview data)
1 = Main language, 2 = Second language, 3 = Language used occasionally 4 = Passive knowledge

Generation	In the Soviet Union	In Germany
Grandparents	**1 Plautdiitsch** 2 Russian	**1German** 2/3 Plautdiitsch
Parents	**1 Russian** 2 Plautdiitsch	**1 German** 3 Plautdiitsch
Children	**1 Russian** 4 Plautdiitsch	**1 German** **(2 Russian)** 4 Plautdiitsch

Some members of the third generation can still speak Russian but the preferred language in most cases is German. Plautdiitsch is under threat as it has no specific function, it is no longer the language of identity nor is it the language for a specific domain of communication. Bilingualism at group level is hard to sustain without diglossia. Diglossia is the fact that the languages involved have their specific area or domain. One reason for the decline of Plautdiitsch is certainly the fact that the Mennonites see themselves not as a linguistic but religious group. It is therefore logical to adopt the language of the host country as for example many Mennonites in Canada have done. Only in isolated settlements, such as those in Russia, could the group language survive. In any case, the group had been unable to continue living in isolation from the outside world ever since the deportations by Stalin, long before the immigration to Germany.

3.2. Results: language choice

In addition to the qualitative data obtained by participant observation and interviews a questionnaire survey was carried out.[5] The questionnaire was filled in by 92 people of three different age groups.

Table 2
Age groups in the questionnaire

Age group	Number of informants
15 - 24	45
25 - 44	31
45 +	16

Older group members who willingly took part in the interviews were a bit more reluctant than younger informants when it came to the questionnaires. This illustrates the importance of using both methods of data collection in combination.
The informants had quite a heterogeneous migration history, which reflects the migration process for the group as a whole as shown in the following table.

Table 3
Migration history of the Mennonite group (n = 92)

	Mean	Std.Dev.
Age at immigration to Germany (in years)	15.17	14.27
Length of residence in Germany (in years)	15.76	5.67

As shown in paragraph 3.1. there is a decline in the use of Plautdiitsch over the generations. Two questions were asked about the use of this variety. The results are given in table 4 and 5.

Table 4
Answers to the question: Do you speak Plautdiitsch today?

Age group	Yes	No
< 25 (n = 45)	19	26
≥ 25 (n = 42)[6]	36	6

The differences between the age groups are statistically significant (Mann-Whitney U test, $p < .001$, two-tailed). A further question was "how often do you speak Plautdiitsch today?" The informants were asked to give their answer on a five-point-scale.

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[5] I would like to thank Herr von Niessen (Neuwied) and Herr Heidebrecht (Bielefeld) for the distribution of this questionnaire.
[6] Not all participants filled in the answer to this question. Therefore "n" is lower than 92.

Table 5
How often do you speak Plautdiitsch?
(1 = often, 5 = never).

Age group	Mean	Std. Dev.[7]
< 25 (n = 44)	4.09	1.27
≥ 25 (n = 42)	2.88	1.27

Again these differences are statistically significant (t-Test, $p < .001$, two-tailed). As a whole the younger group speaks Plautdiitsch significantly less often than the older group which is in line with the expectations and the interview data. The mean value for the younger group in table 5 indicates that this group speaks Plautdiitsch only on rare occasions. A further indication that Plautdiitsch had already lost ground in the Soviet Union are the answers to the level of proficiency in the three languages at the time of immigration to Germany as reported in table 6.

Table 6
Reported proficiency at the time of immigration
(five-point scale, 1 (very good) to 5 (not at all)

Language	Mean	St. Dev.
Russian	2.54 (n = 85)	1.49
Plautdiitsch	3.21 (n = 81)	1.51
Standard German	3.40 (n = 84)	1.15

Russian was the best known language at the time of immigration. Interestingly there is no difference between the age groups at this point. For all age groups Russian was the strongest language. There is only a difference in the second and third language between the age groups. For the older group the second language was Plautdiitsch and the third Standard German. The younger group reports that Standard German was the second and Plautdiitsch the third. This is a further indication that the language shift from Plautdiitsch towards the other language had already taken place in the Soviet Union. Overall, one can conclude that Plautdiitsch has lost its function as the language of group identity. It will most probably disappear in the next generation.

3.3. Results: cultural values

A major aim of the present study is to investigate whether the language shift described in the previous chapter is accompanied by a shift in group values. The part of the questionnaire that deals with cultural values is mainly based on Hofstede's framework (Hofstede 1980, 1991). I will therefore describe this framework briefly in this section. Hofstede developed a system of five dimensions for the description of differences in economic values between countries. His framework is based on extensive quantitative research (more than 100.000 questionnaires). Hofstede eventually develops the following five dimensions:

- low versus high power distance
- low versus high uncertainty avoidance
- individualism vs. collectivism
- femininity vs. masculinity
- long-term vs. short-term orientation

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[7] Coincidentally the two standard deviations are the same.

The questionnaire that was administered in the present study focuses on the first three dimensions. Russia (the USSR) and Germany score as follows on these dimensions:

Table 7
Cultural Values
(see Hofstede 1991, Daller 2002)

	Uncertainty avoidance	Power distance	Individualism
Russia	high	high	low
Germany	(relatively) low	low	(relatively) high

The question is whether the Mennonite group shows values that are different from German mainstream society. In order to have a point of reference, the same questionnaire on cultural values was administered to a group of young German business students (mean age = 23). The differences between the older and younger Mennonite informants will be discussed in the following sections. One additional question is of interest in the present context. It is the question whether ethical values are and should be important in business. The comparison between the answers of the Mennonites and the business students (from now on: the control group) are shown in Table 8.

Table 8
Ethical values in business
M = Mennonite group, C = control group
(5 = totally agree, 1 = totally disagree)

All differences are statistically significant (t-test, 1. question p = .000, 2. Question p = .002). The young business students think that ethical values <u>should be</u> less important whereas the Mennonite group thinks they should be more important. Both groups think that ethical values <u>are not</u> important in business. The lower score for the Mennonites to question 2 indicates that they are especially "disappointed" with the real role of these values in business.

There were several questions on the dimension individualism versus collectivism. These questions were:
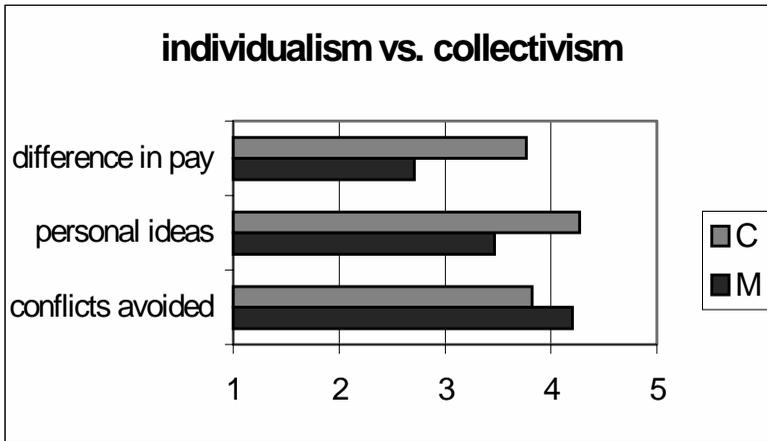
- Most organisations would function more effectively if conflicts could be avoided
- It is important to realise personal ideas on the workplace

- Difference in salary between a specialist (e.g. computer specialist) and an unskilled worker should be high

Table 9
Individualism versus collectivism
(5 = totally agree, 1 = totally dissagree,)

Again the differences between the groups are statistically significant (three t-tests, two-tailed, for question 1 p = .019, for question 2 p = .000, for question 3 p = .000). The Mennonite group has a clear preference for collectivist values whereas the control group prefers individualistic values. A similar question, which is also related to uncertainty avoidance, is the question of whether an employee should stay with the same company during his/her working life. Both groups tend to think they should not but the Mennonites to a lesser extent. Again the differences in the answers to this question are statistically different (t-test, two-tailed, p < .001).

A further cultural dimension in Hofstede's framework is "power distance". There were five questions in the questionnaire on this dimension. Both groups were asked whether they would agree/ disagree with the following statements (five-point-scale):

- A manager should be informed about every detail
- A manager should have precise answers
- Employees should not break basic company rules[8]
- Employees need clear instructions
- A manager has to take all decisions on his/her own

The Mennonite group clearly prefers a manager with high personal power. In Hofstede's description this type of managers is referred to as benevolent patriarchs or (traditional) father figures. All differences are statistically significant (t-tests, two tailed, for all questions p < .001).

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[8] This questions is also an indicator for uncertainty avoidance.

Table 10
Power distance: results
(5 = totally agree, 1 = totally disagree)
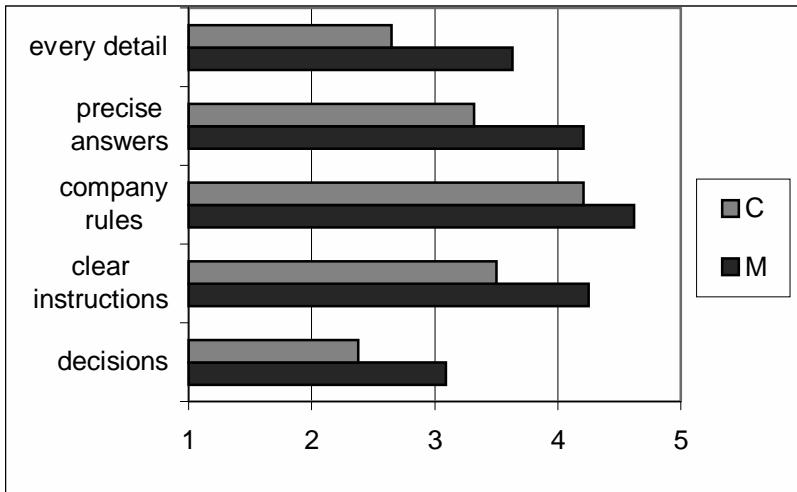
Overall the Mennonite group has cultural/ethical values that are clearly distinct from the control group. The question is whether this holds for both Mennonite age groups. Therefore the answers of these groups were compared. Both groups show the same values when it comes to the importance of ethical values in business. Both groups show a similar picture for the preference of collectivist values. There is, however, a statistically significant difference between the age groups with regard to power distance. Three statements are more acceptable to the older group than to the younger group. The difference between the age groups is shown in table 11.

Table 11
Power Distance
Difference between younger and older Mennonite group
(for all questions: 5 = totally agree, 1 = totally disagree)

	younger		older		Sign.*
	n = 50, except for question 1 where n = 49		n = 41		
Statement	mean	St.Dev	mean	St.Dev	
A manager has to make all decisions on his/her own	1.84	.96	2.39	1.05	.011
Employees need clear instructions	3.04	.92	3.51	.68	.009
Employees should not break basic company rules	3.48	.65	3.78	.42	.008

* p-value, t-test, two-tailed

The younger group's score on the power distance variables are lower than those of the older group. This can be seen as a partial adaptation of the younger group towards mainstream society. The school certainly plays an important role in this adaptation. An important question is whether the younger Mennonites (age < 25) and the control group (mean age 23) show significant difference in their

preferred cultural values. There are still significant differences between these two groups for all dimensions under investigation. The young Mennonites prefer a higher power distance, a higher grade of collectivism and a higher grade of uncertainty avoidance when compared with the control group. Although the younger group adapted partially towards mainstream society, there are still (statistically) significant differences between them and a comparable age group from mainstream society.

4. Summary and outlook

The Mennonites in the present study managed to preserve their group and linguistic identity in the former Soviet Union for almost two centuries. After immigration to Germany and to some extent even before that point in time, a language shift had taken place. The specific language of the group, Plautdiitsch, is under threat and will most probably die out. This language shift, however, is not paralleled by a shift in cultural values. The Mennonite group were able to preserve their specific identity after immigration through a policy of settling in specific areas together with other Mennonites. This made it possible to create viable congregations that could function relatively independently from mainstream society. Frictions are, however, not always avoidable, especially with regard to the mainstream schools.

The present study shows that Hofstede's framework, which was developed in a business context, can be adopted to describe the specific cultural values of the group and the differences from the values of mainstream society. The group as a whole shows a preference for a higher power distance, a higher grade of collectivism and a higher tendency to uncertainty avoidance when compared with the control group. Especially with regard to the dimensions "collectivism" and "uncertainty avoidance" older and younger group members show similar preferences. The only area where the age groups show significant differences is "power distance". For the younger group an adaptation towards mainstream society, with its lower power distance has taken place. This may be due to the fact that the younger group members went through the German school system at least partially. However, the fact that the younger group members agree with the whole group in the essential group values such as "collectivism" and "uncertainty avoidance" is a clear indication that the group as a whole can preserve their identity in the future, albeit not as a linguistic group. Some adaptation towards mainstream society can be expected the future. However, the overall conclusion is that cultural values that are different from mainstream society can persist over a very long period of time.

The present article also shows that a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection is the most appropriate approach in a complex immigration setting where some group members respond willingly to questionnaires while others prefer formal or informal interviews. From a methodological viewpoint a combination of different ways of collecting data, a "triangulation", is the most appropriate approach.

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