**Lexical Borrowing in Pennsylvania German: How much and Why?**

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**Background**

When I first turned my attention to the broad study of language variation as a focus for this particular research project, I was alarmed by the vastness of the subject. Where to begin, I wondered. Fortunately for me, I had a rich field of study close at hand. So close, in fact, that I did not take note of it at first. When one is brought up speaking a dialect, in my case, Pennsylvania German (PG), it is sometimes difficult to mentally stop and take note of that dialect, paying attention to what is being said and how; in short, taking the role of an “outsider.” I realized that my own family provided a perfect opportunity for my study in language variation, since most linguists would probably find them to be at least partly bilingual, English being their primary functional language and the PG dialect their secondary, ethnic language. Almost immediately after making this discovery I also realized that this was going to be both an extremely interesting and monumental undertaking on my part – making a conscious effort to pay attention to something I take for granted and picking it apart as a scientist does a frog. My first task (after this conscious awakening) was then to define and narrow the focus of my study beyond that of merely looking at how our dialect has been affected by the English language and the dominant culture around us. First of all, I decided that I specifically wanted to look at lexical borrowing in PG and do so by attempting to figure out how much borrowing goes on in a normal conversation among members of my family. Secondly, I decided to group these borrowed words into lexical categories (nouns, verbs and so forth) in order to find a pattern of which words are borrowed most frequently. Third, in an attempt to get to the root of why we borrow the words we do, I decided to explore and differentiate “need” and “non-need” borrowing. Finally, I wished to explore any correlations between age and frequency of lexical borrowing. All of these questions, in the context of studying my family, were part of my attempt to answer an otherwise too broad question of how well Pennsylvania German is or is not being maintained and some of the why and hows behind this.

Because PG is a dialect that is closely related to religious as well as ethnic functions in Mennonite communities, it would seem almost impossible to begin an exploration of lexical borrowing in PG without first looking briefly at some of the sociolinguistic factors that surround it. Marion Lois Huffines does an exceptional job of pointing out some of the reasons why PG is a very complicated dialect to study:

> The Pennsylvania Germans (also commonly know as Pennsylvania Dutch) provide an interesting paradigm of the nature of language contact because within the total Pennsylvania German community is enmeshed a variety of subgroups, each having a different relation to the dominant culture. The Pennsylvania German community is not one community, culturally or linguistically, and this diversity is reflected in the nature and extent of the languages used by the various communities which comprise the whole Pennsylvania German group. (352)

It is important to understand that Mennonites (including my family) do not all fit into some predictably neat category, even though we share much of the same religious history and ethnic affiliations. There is an endless continuum of Mennonite “flavors,” ranging from ultra-conservative sectarians who choose very secluded lifestyles, to those Mennonites who are relatively indistinguishable from those around them and have for the most part merged with the dominant culture in language and lifestyle. It seems necessary to look at these extremes when studying PG because it directly affects how and why the dialect is maintained by some Mennonites and is being lost by others. “Less conservative […] Mennonites tend to use more English in their daily lives and religious services than do Old Orders, and this parallels their greater accommodation of the dominant culture in terms of life style. The use of Pennsylvania German among non-plain Pennsylvania Germans is diminishing rapidly […]. The complete shift to English among the younger Pennsylvania Germans is accompanied by an ever-diminishing sense of Pennsylvania German ethnicity and the perception of Pennsylvania German as a dying, useless language” (Huffines 352). To
place all of this into context, it is only logical to point out that the vulnerability of the dialect and the question of lexical borrowing is directly related to the intensity (or lack of contact) between PG and English. Further, the dialect’s perceived function in a Mennonite home or community is also an extremely important component that cannot be ignored.

There seems to be some disagreement among scholars of PG about how much lexical borrowing actually occurs, not to mention that the data currently available is not as up-to-date as it should be. It is impossible for scholars to make irresponsible generalizations, because, as alluded to in part, “the percentage of borrowing in [PG]” depends on sociolinguistic factors: the speaker, the context of the conversation and what is being discussed (Clausing 13). There is also the significant problem of regionality because, though we may all call our dialect “Pennsylvania German,” there are many of us who do not live in Pennsylvania! Because of these factors, Dr. Hartman-Keiser notes that “the actual number of English lexical borrowing in PG has not been firmly established, and the fluid nature of an intense contact situation makes only rough estimates possible” (3). He goes on to say that “the percentage of PG lexicon that is borrowed from English (excluding cognates)” is estimated by scholars Anderson and Martin (1976) to be “only slightly higher than Buffington’s (1965) figure of between 2% and 8% […]” (Anderson and Martin qtd. Hartman-Keiser 3) and that “Enninger and Raith (1988) put the number at 14%” (qtd. Hartman-Keiser 3). Various scholars also note the danger of exaggerating the percentages of borrowing, for example, because “the presence of certain striking, very common words [can give] an erroneous impression of a high percentage of borrowing” (Clausing 14). Despite these rather dated figures and the fact that they do change somewhat from region to region, there is agreement that the lexicon is the most vulnerable part of a language and thus is most affected in intense language contact situations.

Though there is disagreement about the overall percentage of lexical borrowing, scholars of PG do agree that “in terms of which lexical categories are most susceptible to borrowing, there appear to be no exceptions to the rule that nouns are the most frequently borrowed and function words the least” (Hartman-Keiser). Clausing summarizes the results of five other scholars in his book to show that there is a definite pattern and therefore reason for logical dependability. Five of these scholars list nouns as being the most frequently borrowed, followed by verbs and four out of five list adjectives and adverbs in the next category of frequency, with one of the five listing an ambiguous “other” in this category (Clausing 15). Mathematically speaking, Hartman-Keiser, who draws on the research of another scholar, breaks down these categories as follows: “[of] 738 non-phrasal borrowings […] 68% are nouns, 22% are verbs, 10% are adjectives and adverbs, and [there are] no function words [accounted for]” (3). Following these quoted figures of another’s research, he adds that in his own personal studies (in Wisconsin) these mathematical categorizations have proven to be correct and fairly predictable (Hartman-Keiser 3). This may seem an insignificant fact to add, but I do so in order to point out that of all my research, the data on what is borrowed most frequently is the most consistent, regardless of region.

Motivations for lexical borrowing are in some ways fairly predictable and straightforward as well, though no less interesting to study, especially in a theory-into-practice project like my own. The most obvious type of borrowing is “cultural borrowing” and is comprised of words “which are borrowed to denote new items or concepts introduced into a society, or found in a new environment” (Fuller 35). It makes sense that when two languages and cultures are thrown together, a large amount of “necessary” lexical borrowing will occur because of the practicality on the part of the minority language to graft words into its lexicon that describe things unique to the dominant culture it finds itself in (Clausing 140). A second type of borrowing is known as “core borrowing,” and refers to the integration of “basic vocabulary [and] occurs when languages are in intense contact” (Fuller 35). With this second type of borrowing it is fair to acknowledge that there might not be a clear “motivation” for speakers of a secondary language to incorporate such “basic vocabulary” into their dialect. As a speaker of a dialect, I can say from experience that this is something that just “happens,” and the best reason at hand is the one just given – that it is a direct result of two languages coinciding with one another. However, there is a third type of borrowing that could be considered a more conscious type of borrowing with a clearer motivation, and this falls under the title of “unnecessary borrowing.” For example, if a PG speaker would choose to say “pick [flowers]” and “but” instead of using perfectly good and commonly known PG vocabulary such as “robbie” (to pick) and “awwer” (but, however) (Hartman-Keiser 3), this type of borrowing could be interpreted as “borrowings motivated by the prestige of the matrix language” (Hartman-Keiser 3). The last of these “motivations” is the most troublesome and one that will reappear when I begin to discuss the results of studying my family’s speech patterns.
Research and Methods

The methodology I chose in studying my family and making sense of all this research was meant to be fairly simple and uncomplicated. Alas, I found that there were many pitfalls of convolution along the way, partly due to the fact that my family is “impossible” (tongue in cheek) and partly because my own curiosity alarmingly overshadowed the size of this research project! Using a digital recording device, I recorded my parents and the two oldest of my three older siblings on a Sunday afternoon when everyone was relaxed and just “hanging out” together. Initially the recording process was a bit awkward, since they were overly aware of the tiny three-inch device sitting in the middle of the living room. My goal was to help them forget that it was there. I attempted to do this by asking them goofy questions and getting them to talk about sentimental things such as memories of childhood and significantly hilarious family moments. From this recording I then painstakingly transcribed every single borrowed English word, being careful to weed out any cognates along the way and listing only “true” loanwords. The next step was categorizing the transcriptions of this conversation into lexical categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs so that I could determine what categories were borrowed most. I also explored “need” and “non-need borrowing” by taking commonly borrowed words from our conversation and comparing them with PG words in Beam’s Pennsylvania German Dictionary. Along with the transcriptions and lexical categorization, I also marked who said what, so that I could make connections between age and frequency of borrowing.

Lastly, after having compared borrowed words to their PG counterparts, I chose a certain number of these words and comprised two lexical tests. The first test (see Appendix A) gave two to four PG equivalents of an English word, requiring my testees to mark the boxes next to the PG word most familiar to them. After doing this, they were to explain why it was or was not a familiar word. The second test (see Appendix B) was a “matching” test, where the testees were to match the letters of PG words with their English counterparts. These tests were applied to my family (all five members) plus my grandfather, aunt, and an older couple from my church. The purpose of this, besides exploring the factor of age and frequency of borrowing, was to determine how many borrowed words were “need words” (with no PG alternatives) and how many were “non-need” words (with well-known PG alternatives). I was also curious to see if there were any borrowed words with PG alternatives that the older test takers would recognize more readily than the younger test takers.

Findings

The data derived from the proceedings above are as follows: from the 36-minute conversation among my family (including myself), I counted 187 borrowed words. (I was not able to count the total amount of words spoken; this task would have been nigh impossible, since my family tends to talk quickly and all at once!) The borrowed words fell into the following categories: of these 187 words, eighty-seven were nouns (46.5%), twenty-five were verbs (13.3%), nineteen were adjectives (10%), twelve were adverbs (6.4%), and three were prepositions (1.6%). It is important to note, however, that not all of these 187 “borrowed” words fell into neat and manageable categories. First of all, eleven of them clearly fell into a “loanblend” category. These included words such as “ge(wrapped),” which means “to wrap” and seems to be an example of a derivative loanblend. These types of loanblends are those that “merely involv[e] the addition of a native morpheme to a loanword (Clausing 137), in this case, the marking of the past participle. There were also words such as “green(e),” which are difficult to analyze because it is unclear to scholars whether these are “stem loanblends,” or loan words that simply mark the noun according to its gender (Clausing 137). Among the 187 borrowed words, I also counted forty-five that either had no PG equivalent when I looked them up in Beam’s dictionary, or the definition given was not at all familiar to our particular region.

The data results from the two lexical tests were both extremely intriguing and somewhat frustrating to catalogue because the more I examined them, the more I realized that I had opened up a large, new can of worms – which begs for another -- more lengthy “fishing trip” as it were. The first test, which required those taking the test to mark only those PG equivalents that were most familiar to them and then asked them to explain the why or why not, was pretty much all over the map in terms of finding a predictable pattern. The most consistent pattern I found was among my dad, grandpa, and aunt, who marked between 2-4 of the same words as being very familiar/quite familiar. The other pattern was the stumbling of two of my testees over the definitions found in Beam’s dictionary of “es Gedunner, es Geraebbel, and der Larm(e)” (racket) and “es Bild, es Vergliechnis and es Gleichnes” (pictures) (see
Appendix A). My mother marked these as being totally unfamiliar to her and my grandpa indicated that these two words, at least in our area, have different definitions, namely "yaucht" (for racket) and "pic-tas" (for pictures) (Gingerich). Also, in this first lexical test there appeared to be no significant correlation between age and recognition of certain PG words. For both old(er) and young(er) alike, some words were only familiar through the recollection of hearing an older relative use them. By far the majority of the testees found at least one PG definition per category that they marked as being used “frequently” or “sometimes.”

The second lexical test was easier to grade in terms of patterns. Everyone except my youngest brother did very well on this test, but the reason for this does not necessarily have to do with his not knowing the language well. I will discuss this further in the interpretation of data section of this paper. Three of the nine people who took this test matched all of the words correctly. The rest got between eight and ten out of twelve correct. Of the twelve words on which I chose to test my family, two were commonly switched around and gotten wrong. These words were “der Schtarich” (stork), and “es Waerkzeich” (tools), which seemed to indicate that these were the least familiar words of the twelve. Other words that seemed less familiar and gave some people difficulty were “Grach” (clap), “Fehlrefiz” (perfect) and “die Fedder” (pen). Again, however, the majority of the testees knew most of the words and matched them up correctly.

In terms of the recording session with my family, it is only fair to say that this “normal conversation” sample was flawed at best because of the fact that my family knew that they were expected to speak PG. That is, there was, at least at the beginning of the conversation, a concentrated effort to speak PG and not English. As the conversation progressed, however, I felt that the language flowed in a smoother, genuine manner, without my having to contrive or fabricate an ideal setting or topic. As is often heard of those who speak another language or have an accent, the language and accent tend to become more dominant or “thicker” in the presence of other speakers of this language, or others who share an accent. The same can be said of my family’s experience. The more we spoke and got involved in what we were saying, the more we forgot why we were doing it in the first place. It became more natural. When addressing the correlation between age and frequency of lexical borrowing, I can honestly say that I did not observe a significant gap among members of my family and their speech patterns. That is not to say that there is not a gap present (at least between my parents and siblings); this may simply indicate that I need to do more thorough research on this! For example, I am the youngest member of my family and have a very difficult time concentrating and holding a complete conversation in PG for any length of time for several reasons, not the least of which is that I have studied standard German. But this opens up a completely new topic that has no place here! Finally, in terms of the amount of lexical borrowing that went on, I think the element of interference spoken of earlier is important to mention because I believe that it affected the amount of borrowing that actually occurred throughout the conversation. With the conversation lasting thirty-six minutes, and with 187 of these words being borrowed words, this puts the percentage at about five borrowed words per minute. Though this may sound like a fairly high percentage, I do not think the percentage itself is so significant; instead, the real significance lies in what was borrowed and why. Indeed, I think that my family did quite well conversing in PG, considering that English is overwhelmingly our primary, functional language.

As might be expected, the categorizations and percentages of what was borrowed in our family conversation did not come as a huge surprise. My findings matched the pattern of others who have researched along these same lines. The most frequently borrowed words were indeed nouns, followed by verbs, adjectives and adverbs. For me, the data of amount of borrowing and categorization of borrowing are strongly connected to motivation. As noted earlier, because culture borrowing is the most common type, it would make sense that the majority of words borrowed -- namely nouns -- are words that, of necessity, have been incorporated into our PG dialect in order for it to continue functioning in its new and continually changing environment.

**Interpretation of Data**

Perhaps the most difficult and interesting components of the data I gathered dealt with the issue of need and non-need lexical borrowing. As my lexical tests revealed, most of the time there was a perfectly good PG alternative found for an English word that was borrowed. Of the 187 word borrowed during our recorded conversation, I listed 142 (75.9%) as having commonly known PG definitions, either from Beam’s dictionary or from our own regional dialectal vocabulary. This percentage clearly falls under the category of non-need borrowing. The question is, why? Unfortunately, I have no easy answers. The research I have done is literally in its infant stages. The best
answer I can come up with is that which conjecture has already provided. My family is of a fairly non-sectarian Mennonite variety. Our dialect is struggling to survive in an intense language contact situation. Factors such as a "lack of bilingual education and instruction in standard German, the absence of a unifying dialect, and a higher degree of social interaction with the surrounding English-speaking communities are reasons offered for the advancing Anglicization, even for sectarians" (Van Ness 403). This also holds true for my family. It cannot be ignored that English is our primary language and serves a larger function, though not necessarily a more important one, on an everyday basis. Perhaps a better way of looking at the issue of borrowing as a whole is to come at it from a different angle, that is, to look at how much of our PG vocabulary has actually survived these hundred-some years. It seems to me that the figures, both mathematically and demographically, would be staggeringly favorable for us non-Pennsylvania Germans! It is because of this that I choose to look at the brighter side of PG maintenance in my own family. I know for a fact that the dialect is still alive and well, and if all of my siblings choose to do so, they have the unique opportunity to pass it on to yet another generation.

Another important issue that I would like to point out in conjunction with all of this is that I am keenly aware that my lexical tests provided somewhat flawed information. For example, the fact that my younger brother knew only two of the twelve words on the "matching" lexical test does not mean that he is rapidly losing the language. There is at least one simple explanation for why some words were unfamiliar or unknown to some of my testees, including my brother, and that is that PG is largely a spoken language and not a written one. The problem came down to knowing how to pronounce the words in question. This leads me to wonder what might have happened had I chosen to give an oral lexical examination instead of or along with a written one. Another factor that bears reference is the fact that the only PG dictionary at my disposal was one that did not represent a regional vocabulary. Therefore, just because some of my testees were not familiar with a word does not necessarily point to the fact that this word has been "lost," but instead, that a word more common to our region may be lost, or, more optimistically, forgotten from years of disuse.

The final question that needs to be addressed in order for this to come full circle deals directly with my family. Where do we fit on the endless continuum of Mennonite "flavors" (sectarians versus non-sectarians) and how has this affected our maintenance (or lack thereof) of the Pennsylvania German dialect? I have looked at all of the questions I set out to examine: lexical borrowing, most borrowed words, motivations for borrowing, need versus non-need borrowing, and age connected to frequency of borrowing in my family. All of these questions beg for more exploration and research, since I feel there are still a host of unanswered questions and topics that I merely skimmed over, especially differentiation of need versus non-need borrowing.

Conclusions

I suppose that I am expected to come up with some good answers, wrapped neatly and thus providing a comforting sense of closure for this entire research project. Unfortunately I cannot do this. I cringe at the thought of attempting to assign my family a spot on the Mennonite scale, ranging from "conservative" to "liberal," since these terms are so subjective in and of themselves. However, considering the fact that non-sectarians are losing the dialect much more quickly than sectarians are, I point out that my family must then appear somewhere in the "middle" of this shadowy scale. That is, despite the amount of lexical borrowing that goes on which appears to be an erosion of our dialect, my family has managed to maintain the dialect well enough to continue using it in our home and community. Moreover, as pointed out before, my siblings and I know it well enough to be able to pass it on to another generation, insuring that it will not die out anytime soon, at least amongst my family.

Appendix A

Lexical Test 1

Please follow directions: I will give you the English equivalent of the word in the left column, and on the right a series of choices from Pennsylvania German. Please mark the box next to the word that is MOST FAMILIAR to you. If you feel you need to mark more than one box, do so, and if possible, explain why you needed to do this. Also, if you feel the boxes are too restrictive for your explanation, feel free to add your own box/remarks.
1). “Some” (deel) ____ (ebbes) ____ (etlich) ____ (wennich) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

2). “Now” (alleweil) ____ (annweil) ____ (jetz) ____ (jetzt) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

3). “Wrapped” (or (to) wrap) (ei binne/eiebunne) ____ (eiwickel/eigwickelt) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

4). “Butcher” (der Butcher) ____ (der Schlachtmann) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

5). “Gosling” (en yungi Gans) ____ (es Gensli/Genslin) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

6). “Racket” (es Gedunner) ____ (es Geraebbel) ____ (der Lerm(e) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

7). “Pictures” (es Bild/Bilder) ____ (es Vergleichnis) ____ (es Gleichnes) ____
   If you marked one of the boxes, please answer the following question(s):
   This word is (very familiar: I use it frequently) ____ (familiar: I use it somtimes) ____ (somewhat familiar: I think I’ve heard it used by parents/grandparents/relatives before) ____ (unfamiliar: I don’t think I’ve ever used/heard it before) ____ Other explanation:

Appendix B

Lexical Test 2

Please follow these simple directions: match the LETTER of the Pennsylvania German word to what is in your understanding its best equivalent in English: If you don’t know, guess. It won’t hurt. (Smile.)

Turkeys ___
Christmas___
Clap ___

A). es Waerkzeich
B). die Bortsch
C). der Warm
Aunt(s)  D). der Schtarich
Perfect  E). Beeplin/Bieblì
Stork  F). die Fedder
Tools  G). der Welschhaahne
Pen  H). Schlim/Schlecht
Worm  I). der Grach
Porch  J). fehlerfrei
Bad  K). der Grischtdaag
Chicks  L). die Aendi

Works Cited

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