

## **What is Deitsch? What is German?**

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[English translation of “Was is deitsch? Was ist deutsch?”, an address delivered on the occasion of the presentation of the 2016 Jacob and Wilhelm Prize from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Bayreuth, Germany, September 27, 2016]

Honored ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

I would like to express my deep thanks to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), especially Professor Mukherjee, Professor Lauer and all members of the German Studies Committee, including Professor Huber, for presenting me with the 2016 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm Prize. I feel very happy and honored. Peter [Auer], thank you very much for the kind words. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the DAAD for its support of my guest professorships over the past several years at the Philipp University in Marburg and the Albert Ludwig University in Freiburg. I value the connections I have made with students and colleagues during these visits, connections that substantially enrich my work as a Germanist in the United States. Thank you very much.

My passion, both professionally and personally, is the Pennsylvania Dutch language, *Deitsch*. More than thirty years ago, when I was in the second semester of my graduate program at Cornell University, I attended an Amish church service for the first time. What drew me there initially had nothing to do with my studies. I had planned on returning at some point to Munich, where I had spent one year as a undergraduate, in order to conduct research on Bavarian. It was, in fact, my interest in the way they lived out their faith that drew me to the Amish, and then, a short time later, to the Old Order Mennonites. I was deeply impressed that these believers do not just talk about love for one’s neighbor, forgiveness, or nonresistance on Sundays; rather, every day, every minute they aim to put these values into practice. Some years later I was baptized in a Mennonite congregation and am today very happy as a confessing Mennonite.

Already at that first service on a cold Sunday morning in February 1985 the brothers and sisters in the congregation spoke only Deitsch with – more accurately, to – me. But I was able to understand quite a bit right away, and within a relatively short time, after regular visits with Amish people, I had no difficulties communicating in Deitsch. Today I am just as at home in Deitsch as in my first language, English.

As a Germanist, I, of course, enjoy speaking German and feel very comfortable in German-speaking Europe. Although I know German well, no German speaker would mistake me for a German. I am an American who speaks German. The situation is quite different among my Amish and Old Order Mennonite friends, who consider me to be Deitsch. A good friend of mine once explained to another Amish person, “Mark is just as Deitsch as you and me; he’s a fallen away English person” (*Der Mark is yuscht so deitsch as ich un du; er is en abfallener Englischer*). The fact that I am not of Deitsch background, or even have any German or Swiss ancestors at all, is completely irrelevant. The ability to speak fluent Deitsch and a close proximity to and respect for the Old Order way of living out one’s faith are what make a person Deitsch.

Thus being Deutsch means something different from being German. So what does Deutsch mean? The related question, "What is German?," has been posed for generations by both Germans and non-Germans. The goal of my talk this evening is to compare the concepts Deutsch and German so that, I hope, I might be able to clarify both, at least to some degree.

Before we continue, we should familiarize ourselves with a few basic facts about Deutsch. Pennsylvania Dutch is a North American language with roots in the Palatinate region of German-speaking Europe. It developed in the second half of the eighteenth century in rural southeastern Pennsylvania through the emigration of approximately 81,000 German speakers from modern southwestern Germany, Alsace, and Switzerland, of whom a critical mass came from the southeastern Palatinate. The great majority of these settlers, around 95%, were members of Lutheran or German Reformed churches, the so-called "church people" (*Kirchenleute*). The remaining 5% were Anabaptist and Pietist sectarians ("sect or Plain people"; *Sektenleute*), among whom were Mennonites and Amish.

With the American Revolution, contacts between the Pennsylvania Dutch and Europe were severed. Some two generations later, and about a century after the arrival of the ancestors of the Pennsylvania Dutch, during the 1830s and 1840s, Germans began emigrating to America again. Yet the profoundly Americanized *Deutsche* and the newly arrived *Deutschlerner* had little in common with one another. The former were the descendants of farmers and craftspeople who came to America before the momentous social and intellectual upheavals of the European Enlightenment. The *Deutschlerner*, for their part, were generally urban dwellers who identified with a rising ideology of *Deutschtum*. They read the poems of Schiller and enjoyed listening to the symphonies of Beethoven, works that to this day are essentially unknown among the Pennsylvania Dutch. To be sure, the deeply pious *Deutsche* could read and understand High German, more precisely, Pennsylvania High German (*Hochdeutsch*). That was and remains their sole liturgical language. Yet aside from the Bible, hymnals, and prayer books, most Pennsylvania Dutch bookshelves contained just the German farmer's almanac, and most of what they sang in Pennsylvania High German were religious songs. It should be noted, though, that Pennsylvania Dutch people have always been bilingual, even if they have never used English as much as their *Mudderschprooch* (mother tongue).

Over the course of the last two and a half centuries, most descendants of the Pennsylvania Dutch founder population, especially the church people, but also the majority of so-called modern Mennonites, have given up their heritage language in favor of English exclusively. Only the most conservative sectarians, the Amish and Old Order Mennonites, continue to maintain Pennsylvania Dutch and Pennsylvania High German, alongside fluent English. Their sociolinguistic situation is nearly unique. Worldwide, more than one-half of the roughly 7,000 languages spoken today are severely endangered, meaning that by the turn of the next century it is estimated that they will have lost their native speakers. Most of these endangered languages, like Pennsylvania Dutch, are spoken by small minority communities. Yet the central place of Deutsch and Pennsylvania High German in the special socio-religious identity of Amish and Old Order Mennonites has enabled these groups to resist the pressure to shift to English monolingualism and

preserve their *Mudderschprooch*. And Pennsylvania Dutch is not just surviving, it is thriving: the population of the Amish and related groups is doubling every twenty years. No other group in the world is growing as rapidly as the Amish, right in the heart of the United States.

Now we are able to turn to the questions, "What is Deitsch?" and "What is German?" My remarks here will be limited to the Amish, the largest and most familiar group of Pennsylvania Dutch speakers.

When outsiders ask questions like "What is X?," that often means, "What is typically X?" or "What is stereotypically X?," questions that often bring concrete, tangible images to mind. If a tourist, for example, hears the phrase "Pennsylvania Dutch," he or she might think of bearded Amish men, quilts, and horse-drawn buggies, which differ from stereotypically German objects such as garden gnomes, featherbeds, and fast cars.

If one were to pose the question "What is German?" to Germans, they would be less likely to think of Mercedes or garden gnomes than this – the German language, according to a study conducted two years ago by the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research at the Humboldt University.<sup>1</sup> The researchers found to their surprise that knowledge of German was deemed more important for national identity than ethnicity. That parallels the sociolinguistic situation of Pennsylvania Dutch: being Deitsch depends mainly on the ability to speak the Deitsch language rather than one's ancestry. Yet it must be admitted that Germans' equation of national identity with the command of the German language has its limits: the expression "with a migration background" (*mit Migrationshintergrund*) points up the distinction that at least some Germans "without a migration background" make between Germans such as the national soccer stars Jérôme Boateng, on the one hand, and Bastian Schweinsteiger, on the other.

So just what is this Deitsch language, and how different is it from German? Consider the example below, from a contemporary collection of children's Bible stories, *Vella Laysa, Bivvel Shtoahris Fa Kinnah* (Let's read, Bible stories for children). This is the beginning of the creation story retold in Pennsylvania Dutch.

#### Da Shteht Funn Di Eaht

Vay lang zrikk hott's kenn eaht katt, kenn leit, kenn helling. Es voah alles yusht dunkel gvest.

Fa shteahra mitt hott Gott da himmel un di eaht gmacht.

No hott Eah ksawt, "Loss es licht sei." Yusht vi sell voah's licht gvest. Gott hott's licht dawk kaysa, un's dunkel nacht. Dess voah no da eahsht dawk es selayva voah.

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<sup>1</sup> „Umfrage zu Einwanderung: Deutsch ist, wer deutsch spricht.“ *Spiegel Online*, November 30, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/wann-sind-einwanderer-deutsche-laut-umfrage-soll-sprache-entscheiden-a-1005767.html>.

Da neksht dawk hott eah di volka gmacht. Eah hott aw di luft gmacht so es ma shnaufa kann.

Uf da dritt dawk hott eah's vassah un's land fadayld. Eah hott da say un di hivvla gmacht sellah dawk.

Eah hott no ksawt, "Loss di baym un's graws shteahra vaxa." Un si henn no kshteht vaxa.

*The Beginning of the Earth*

*Way long ago there was no Earth, no people, no light. Everything was just dark.*

*To begin with, God created Heaven and Earth.*

*Then He said, "Let there be light." Just like that, there was light. God called the light day and the dark night. That was the first day that ever was.*

*The next day He made the clouds. He made the air, too, so one can breathe.*

*On the third day He separated the water from the land. He made the ocean and the mountains that day.*

*Then he said, "Let the trees and grass start growing." And they started growing.*

One has to conclude, quite objectively, that this is not German; at the very least, it is as distant from German as Dutch, Luxembourgish, Swiss German, or Yiddish. It is Deitsch. But Pennsylvania Dutch is only the one side of the *Mudderschprooch* coin; on the reverse is Pennsylvania High German. How German is that?

Let us consider the book *Von dem Christlichen Glauben und Leiden Jesu Christi* (On the Christian faith and passion of Jesus Christ), a reference manual for Amish ministers. The title is completely normal German. Now let's have a look at the beginning of the book's *Forrede* (preface):

Die Forrede

Liebe Leser! Nach-dem das fiele Bischöfe und Prediger, so-wohl wie auch Brüder, ein herzlicher zu-spruch gegeben haben für dies Buch in der druck bringen, haben wir es mit fleiß untersucht und es gefunden unter die alte-Bischöfe angesehen (notwendig) und kann nach eine große hilfe sein für die deutsche sprache Gemeinden mit helfen. Da das diese sprache eine der schönsten, wortreichsten und vollkommensten, unter allen sprachen ist und nach am meisten die Muttersprache, da wollen wir, Amishe Leute, mehr fleiß a-wenden sie aufhalten.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, Emanuel D. and Ben J. Raber (eds.). 1986. *Von dem Christlichen Glauben und Leiden Jesu Christi*, 1986. Baltic, OH: Raber's Book Store.

Preface

*Dear readers! After many bishops and ministers, as well as brethren, gave hearty encouragement to bring this book into print, we diligently looked into this and found that it is considered necessary by the senior bishops and could be a great help to churches using the German language. Since this language is one of the most beautiful, most rich in vocabulary, and most advanced of all languages, and above all our mother tongue, let us Amish people apply more diligence and keep it up.*

If a German teacher were to get a hold of this, the red ink would flow copiously. But what we just read is not High German, rather Pennsylvania High German. Pennsylvania High German, like its European cousin, is a form of written German, but unlike High German it is not subject to firm rules of grammar and usage. To our modern sensibilities, a standard language without fixed norms is an oxymoron. Yet we have to remember that the earliest ancestors of the Pennsylvania Dutch came in the middle of the eighteenth century, at a time before written German was standardized. High German and Pennsylvania High German are simply not the same thing.

So how is the Pennsylvania Dutch *Mudderschprooch* – Deutsch and Pennsylvania High German together – valued? The poem below, which was written by an anonymous Amish person, gives us some insight into this question.

Die Muttersprache

Wir lieben doch die Muttersprache  
Die wir lernten auf ihren Schoß  
So tut doch eure Eltern ehren  
Mit der Sprache wie sie es begehren.

Wo kommt das her daß unsere Knaben  
Ein andere Sprach im Gebrauch haben  
Wenn sie also zusammen kommen,  
Haben wir dies schon wahr genommen?

Was möchte dann der Treiber sein  
Andre Sprach zu gebrauchen in der Gemein?  
Welcher Geist tut zu diesem führen,  
Daß die Muttersprach sie tun verlieren?

Wenn an der Gemein man das muß hören,  
Wünsch ich wir würden alle wehren.  
Daß nicht eine Sprach kommt herein  
Daß uns nicht ziemt in der Gemein.

Wir wollen das recht betrachten,  
Und das doch nicht so gar leicht achten,  
Daß wir das nur walten lassen,  
Das Rechte dann zu viel vergessen.

Der Hochmuts-Geist, der liebt das sehr,  
Wer Demut liebt, dem fällt es schwer,  
Und nimmt doch solches tief zu Herzen,  
Wie das in Zeit uns macht zu stürzen.

Ich will uns alle hier noch recht warnen  
Daß wir die Kinder recht Deutsch lernen  
Daß sie recht können lesen und singen,  
Für den Herrn ein Dankopfer bringen.

Wo möchte das uns dann hinführen?  
Wenn wir unsere Sprach verlieren,  
O warnet sie doch recht in Zeit  
Und nehmt es wahr, ihr liebe Leut'.

Wer mit der Muttersprache nicht zufrieden ist  
Heißt er noch wirklich dann ein „Christ“?

*The Mother Tongue*

*How we love our mother tongue  
That we learned on her lap;  
So honor your parents  
With the language, as they would want you to.*

*Why is it that our young people  
Use a different language  
When they get together;  
Haven't we seen that before?*

*What could be the reason  
For using a different language in church?  
What kind of spirit leads to this,  
That they lose their mother tongue?*

*When we have to hear this in church,  
I wish we would all prevent  
A language from coming in  
That is not appropriate there.*

*Let us look at this clearly  
And not take it lightly,  
And let things slide  
And forget that which is right.*

*The spirit of pride likes that sort of thing,  
While whoever loves humility is troubled by it*

*And takes to heart  
How it might make us falter.*

*I want to warn us all  
That we teach our children proper German  
So that they may be able to read and sing properly  
And give thanks to the Lord.*

*Where will this lead us  
If we lose our language?  
Oh, warn them before it's too late  
And take this seriously, dear people.*

*Can someone not satisfied with our mother tongue  
Still be called a "Christian"?*

The "different language" (*and[e]re Sprach*) mentioned here is English. As mentioned earlier, all Amish speak fluent English, yet speaking this language is not appropriate in certain circumstances, as, for example, "when our young people come together" (*wenn die Knaben zusammen kommen*) or "in church" (*in der Gemein*). When among just themselves, Amish should use only Deutsch or Pennsylvania High German. And where might the loss of their mother tongue lead the Amish, according to the poet? Whoever prefers English is led by the "spirit of pride" (*der Hochmuts-Geist*); the maintenance of the mother tongue, in contrast, is a sign of humility (*Demut*).

Humility. If one were to ask an Amish person what guides his or her life in a single word, he or she would probably reply with *Demut*. In the words of one of the most popular Amish songs, humility is "the most beautiful virtue."

*Demut ist die schönste Tugend,  
Aller Christen Ruhm und Ehr',  
Denn sie zieret unsere Jugend  
Und das Alter noch viel mehr.*

*Humility is the most beautiful virtue,  
The glory and honor of all Christians,  
For it adorns our youth  
And old age even more so.*

Humility is at the center of being Deutsch. Is that also true of Germanness? After a Google search, I found an advertisement on amazon.de for a mousepad with the proverb "Humility, this beautiful virtue, honors old and young" (*Demut, diese schöne Tugend, ehrt das Alter und die Jugend*).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amazon.de/Mauspad-sch%C3%B6ne-Tugend-Jugend-Dekoration/dp/B001D3E752>

Rather tellingly, this item is "not available at this time"; "if and when [it] will be stocked again is not known" (*derzeit nicht verfügbar; ob und wann [er] wieder vorrätig wird, ist unbekannt*). That may have to do with the fact that humility has been stricken from the canon of German virtues, replaced by values like honesty, duty, cleanliness, and order, among others. Yet as reported in a 2012 article in *Spiegel Online*,<sup>4</sup> it could be that humility is back. Very interesting are the readers' reactions to this article. A paragon example of humility cited there is Willy Brandt's famous genuflection in December 1970 at the monument to the memory of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Even if humility were to become fashionable again, it is very unlikely that Germans would associate it with the use of their mother tongue, as Amish people do.

Let us recall briefly the parallels between Pennsylvania Dutch and Germans with respect to the autonomy of language and ethnicity. While it may be that contemporary Germans no longer link their mother tongue to "blood" (*Blut*) they have more difficulty separating it from "soil" (*Boden*). Illuminating in this context is a quote from Friedrich Kluge, one of the most famous German linguists at the turn of the twentieth century and coincidentally a predecessor of Prof. Auer at the University of Freiburg. Writing in 1918, Kluge asserted: "The mother tongue is the emblem of the fatherland. The unity of language is the unity of the homeland. ... Cultivation of the mother tongue is the cultivation of Germanness" (*Die Muttersprache ist das Wahrzeichen des Vaterlands. Die Einheit der Sprache ist die Einheit der Heimat. ... Pflege der Muttersprache ist Pflege des Deutschtums*).<sup>5</sup>

The word *Vaterland* has in the meantime become problematic, *Deutschtum* even more so, yet *Heimat* not at all. This latter word occupies fourth place in a top ten list of entries submitted by Germans to "The Most Beautiful German Word" competition sponsored by the German Language Council (Deutscher Sprachrat) in 2004.<sup>6</sup>

1. Liebe 'love'
2. Gemütlichkeit 'coziness, congeniality'
3. Sehnsucht 'desire, yearning, longing'
4. Heimat 'homeland, home'
5. Kindergarten 'pre-school'
6. Freiheit 'freedom'
7. gemütlich 'cozy'
8. Frieden 'peace'
9. Sonnenschein 'sunshine'
10. Schmetterling 'butterfly'

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<sup>4</sup> *Spiegel Online*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/demut-die-wiederkehr-der-werte-a-829604.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Kluge, Friedrich. 1918. "Vaterland und Muttersprache," *Wissenschaftliche Beihefte zur Zeitschrift des Allgemeinen Deutschen Sprachvereins*, 5. Reihe, Hefte 38/40, SS. 284, 285.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.deutscher-sprachrat.de/index.php?id=299>

And how Deitsch are these words? *Net arrich* (not very). Fully half – *Gemütlichkeit*, *Sehnsucht*, *Kindergarten*, *gemütlich* and *Schmetterling* – have no equivalents in Pennsylvania Dutch. *Liewi* (love) refers only to Christian love, or agape, and *Heemet* has the meaning of the English word *home*, the place where one resides. German *Heimat*, however, has a different status. There is even talk of a “yearning for *Heimat*” (*Sehnsucht nach Heimat*) in Germany today. An article from the *Westfälische Nachrichten* from December 2015 suggests that the “concept of *Heimat*” may even be “fashionable again” (*wieder in Mode*).<sup>7</sup> This insight fits nicely with the most recent research on spoken German. So-called regiolects, locally colored varieties situated between traditional dialects and the standard language, are playing an increasingly important role for contemporary Germans as expressions of their loyalty to a regional identity, a phenomenon that is often interpreted as a reaction to globalization. People from Baden-Württemberg, for example, have recently asserted their linguistic uniqueness within the Federal Republic through the motto “We can do everything. Except speak High German.” (*Wir können alles. Außer Hochdeutsch*). The Badenens among them, for their part, slice the regional linguistic pie into even smaller pieces and emphasize their linguistic distance from their Swabian (Württemberg) neighbors by asserting that they “can do everything. Except speak Swabian” (*Wir können alles. Außer Schwäbisch*). Even some contemporary residents of the city of Hanover, the mythic stronghold of spoken High German, are apparently mourning the loss of their Low German heritage.<sup>8</sup>

So what are Deitsch and German? At the center of both identities is a high valuation of a *Mudderschprooch/Muttersprache*. For Germans, their linguistic identity is a fundamentally worldly one, often linked to a region or homeland (*Heimat*). For the Amish, conversely, their deregionalized Deitsch/Pennsylvania High German is, on the one hand, an expression of Christian humility in a world profoundly affected by pride; on the other, it is a tangible connection, not with a mother- or fatherland, but with the spiritual heritage of their mothers and fathers.

I will close my remarks this evening with a few thoughts on the topic from an Amish man.

Knowing two languages is a privilege God has provided for us that we can put to good use. Although we have a knowledge of two languages, it would be wrong not to make an effort to express ourselves better in the English language. But it would be just as wrong to fail to keep and pass on the German to our children – that rich heritage our forefathers left for us. ...

So often when the mother tongue gets dropped, many other good things get dropped with it. It is not the German language in itself that will keep us from

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<sup>7</sup> “Vom Vaterland über die Muttersprache bis zur Heimatbewegung,” *Westfälische Nachrichten*, December 18, 2015, <http://www.wn.de/Muensterland/Heimat/2211311-Heimat-ein-Begriff-im-Wandel-Vom-Vaterland-ueber-die-Muttersprache-bis-zur-Heimatbewegung>.

<sup>8</sup> “Warum haben wir das verlernt?,” *Hannoversche Allgemeine*, December 23, 2010, <http://www.haz.de/Nachrichten/Kultur/Themen/Op-Platt/Warum-haben-wir-das-verlernt>.

drifting into the world. Yet it is a well-known fact that losing our mother tongue and drifting into the world usually go together. ...

Anybody who speaks English around home when just family members are around, or while working or visiting with others who know Pennsylvania Dutch is putting in a vote to drop a rich heritage that will never again be brought back if we lose it.

The value of that heritage is so great that we can't afford to lose it.<sup>9</sup>

Thank you.

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<sup>9</sup> Blank, Benueel S. 1986. "What Is in a Language?", *Family Life*, February 1986, p. 16.