

German, Yiddish and Pa. Dutch

JACK BRUBAKER, The Scribbler (New Era)

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Dear Scribblersprecher:

I'm a Jewish man from New York City, and I grew up in a Yiddish speaking family. Yiddish, though written using the Hebrew alphabet, is largely derived from German.

In high school I studied German, sort of, as my language elective for three years. While not fluent in either language, I can read, comprehend and understand the spoken word to some degree.

Here's my dilemma: I can't make heads or tails of Pennsylvania Dutch. Having lived here for almost 20 years now, I've had a number of opportunities to hear it spoken, and I'm at a total loss.

Can you explain when and how this local dialect deviated from Hochdeutsch, the formal German I learned in high school? Is it spoken in the same way among all of Lancaster's Amish and Mennonite communities?

Danke, und sei gesund.

Howard Horn

Manheim Township

Dear Howard:

Ordinarily, the Scribbler consults a local authority to answer questions about Pennsylvania German, but this time he reached out for an expert farther afield.

Mark L. Loudon is an expert on German linguistics, with special emphasis on Pennsylvania Dutch and Yiddish. He teaches in the German Department at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

First, Loudon says, it is important to understand that the type of "High German" that you studied in high school, Howard, is not the historical source of related languages such as Yiddish and Pennsylvania Dutch.

High German is based mainly on the dialects of east-central Germany, especially Saxony and Thuringia. It developed in the 16th century.



And the "High" does not refer to status. High German is spoken in central and southern areas of Germany that are geographically "higher" than the Low German landscape in the north.

Yiddish, dating to the 10th century, is considerably older than High German. It developed in the Rhineland area. Jews brought it to Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages.

Pennsylvania Dutch also has its roots in the Rhineland, specifically the Palatinate region from which so many early Lancaster families came.

It developed from the High German dialects, but by the time it reached Pennsylvania, the two dialects differed.

"Yiddish, High German and Pennsylvania Dutch," Loudon sums up, "are all linguistic cousins, descendants of more ancient varieties of German spoken in Central Europe."

So what about the variations of Pennsylvania Dutch?

Dutch spoken in Lancaster differs slightly from Dutch spoken in Berks. Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites speak slightly different versions.

These versions use different individual words, Loudon emphasizes, but the grammar is the same.

"You can pretty quickly tell who comes from where in both English and Pennsylvania Dutch," he says, "and, in the case of Penn Dutch, whether you are Amish or Old Order Mennonite."

So, there you have it, Harold. If you want to make "heads or tails" of Pennsylvania Dutch, you need to take a course in a different dialect.