BIDIALECTALISM

An Unexpected Development
in the Obsolescence
of Pennsylvania Dutchified English
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When I was a child growing up in south central Pennsylvania as a speaker of Pennsylvania Dutchified English, I could never have imagined that I would one day have an opportunity to write a monograph on the dialect. In fact, I’m not sure that anyone I knew at that time actually considered the way we spoke a dialect. To most of us, being “Dutchified” meant talking something like the old people talked; to our teachers, our way of speaking was just bad English; to tourists who came to see the Amish, the way we spoke was quaint and laughable. It would not be until I took a graduate Introduction to Linguistics course as a 23-year-old adult that it finally occurred to me that Pennsylvania Dutchified English was a genuine dialect of American English and that as such it was worthy of description and study.

I also could not have realized as I was growing up that I and my age-mates (those born in the 1960s and 1970s) would be the last generation of speakers for Pennsylvania Dutchified English. After all, the old people and our parents were all “Dutchified,” and so were a good many of our own age group; it never occurred to us that one day we would have children who would not speak the same way we did and that, due to the lack of intergenerational transmission, the way we spoke would someday cease to exist. No, we who were worried about language preservation were more concerned about the demise of Pennsylvania Dutch—I never heard it called “Pennsylvania German” until I entered graduate school—and many of us wished that we could speak that language, like our grandparents did. Pennsylvania Dutchified English just did not seem to be of much value. This is still the situation in Pennsylvania today: those interested in how language fits with the Pennsylvania Dutch ethnic identity attend events where Pennsylvania German is spoken—festivals, special church services, storytelling galas, and the like—but no one bothers about Pennsylvania Dutchified English. Its decline proceeds unnoticed, and its death—when the last Pennsylvania Dutchified English speakers of my generation pass away—will likely go unheralded by the general public even in Pennsylvania itself.

However, thanks to the support and opportunities I have been given to write about this little-known dialect, it is possible that the death of Pennsylvania Dutchified English will not go unremarked by the academic linguistic community. For that I am immensely grateful. There is no way to save Pennsylvania Dutchified English, but I hope that this little bit I have
to offer about my native dialect will make some contribution to the field of linguistics as a whole.

I would not have had even this to offer if it had not been for the support and encouragement of many people, whom I wish to acknowledge here, not just on behalf of myself, but also on behalf of all those who speak Pennsylvania Dutchified English:

To my parents, for encouraging my interest in Pennsylvania Dutch, and for buying me Gates’s humorous dictionary *How to Speak Dutchified English* as a Christmas present in 1987. Little could they or I have realized that the end result of having that book would be a manuscript on Pennsylvania Dutchified English.

To my husband, Jon, for patiently acting as my sounding board and for believing that Pennsylvania Dutchified English is an intriguing dialect, even if as a speaker of a more standard American English dialect he has had more than his share of humorous “misunderstandings” when interacting with my family and friends in Pennsylvania.

To Elizabeth Riddle, for patiently showing me during my master’s degree work at Ball State University that yes, Pennsylvania Dutchified English is a real dialect worthy of study.

To Stuart Davis, for his encouragement, guidance, and help in understanding how special Pennsylvania Dutchified English is, for his aid in uncovering some of its complexities, and for his patient advice. His insight and breadth of linguistic knowledge has elevated my work on Pennsylvania Dutchified English far above what it could have been if I had been on my own.

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