Plautdietsch: Russian German Mennonites Around the World Join Efforts in the Web to Save their Mother Tongue

by Peter Wiens

What is Plautdietsch?

„Plautdietsch" belongs to the group of Low Saxon languages and is often also called „Mennonite Low German". In the northern parts of Germany and in the eastern parts of the Netherlands Low Saxon is used as a minority language. Until the end of World War II its area extended into Eastern Pomerania and Eastern Prussia, areas that are now administered by Poland and Russia. So what then has Low Saxon or Low German to do with the Mennonites?

The Mennonites were part of the Anabaptist movement belonging to the left wing of reformation. Many of them fled the Netherlands in the 1500's to settle in the Vistula River delta were Prussian Low German was spoken. Reuben Epp[2], one of Canada's leading Plautdietsch experts, explains the historical background of Plautdietsch as follows:

„The earliest settlements of Mennonites in Poland/West Prussia were in the delta of the Vistula and Nogat rivers, between the cities of Danzig (Gdansk), Marienburg (Malbork) and Elbing (Elblag). When they settled into the delta they found themselves surrounded by neighbouring German and Low German peoples who had been its inhabitants since the thirteenth century military conquest of Prussia by the Teutonic Order of Knights. The Knightly Order at that time had brought in these German and Low German settlers to consolidate their military gains in former Slavic territories.

Mennonites fleeing the Netherlands were mostly farming people who spoke dialects of Lower Saxon and Lower Franconian Low German, along with Frisian and German from their native homes in East Friesland, Groningen, Flanders, West Friesland, southern Germany and Switzerland. What little writing they did in form of personal letters or record keeping was done in Dutch. Dutch was also the language they used in their worship services. Among themselves they conversed in their native dialects, predominantly Nether Saxon Low German. The Flemish faction among them initially spoke a closely-related Lower Franconian dialect.

The Mennonites settled in the delta of the Vistula river among a resident population that spoke a West Prussian dialect of Nether Saxon Low German which they could easily understand. They very soon adopted this dialect. Therefore, resettlement from the Netherlands to Poland did not necessitate a change of language but merely a change over to the West Prussian manner of speaking Low German. This West Prussian tongue came to be known as Plautdietsch."

After more than two centuries in Prussia, in 1789, Catherine II invited many Germans and also the netherlandic Mennonites from West Prussia to settle in South Russia near the Dnepr River. During the following 200 years these Plautdietsch Mennonites founded new colonies in many different parts of Russia and the former Soviet Union. Mostly for religious reasons, but also for economic ones, many of them later migrated from Russia to Canada, the USA, and from there to South America. From the 1970's on many families with German origins left the (former) Soviet Union. The so called „Russian German" Mennonites also migrated „back" to Germany along with them. This migration process is still going on.

During the last decade about two million immigrants from the former Soviet Union settled in Germany. Among them there must be well over 100,000 Russian German Mennonites. There exists no exact number, since the term „Mennonite" is mostly regarded as religious and is usually not used to describe the ethnic origins. In order to find out how many Russian German Mennonites or Plautdietsch speakers there are in Germany one has to take a look at the „Aussiedlergemeinden", the Russian German Mennonite or Baptist churches or congregations where usually more than 70% are Plautdietsch-speakers.

Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. in Germany

Even though there are 100,000 or more Plautdietsch-speakers in Germany, this dialect will not be spoken anymore by the next generations. The situation is the same in Canada or in the USA. For this reason last year the „Plautdietsch-Freunde", a few Russian German Mennonites, founded an organisation in order to document, promote and cultivate their mother tongue Plautdietsch, this endangered Mennonite Low German or Low Saxon. The letters e.V. mean „eingetragener Verein", which is a registered non-profit organisation, association or society. The main purpose of the „Plautdietsch friends" is to put all kinds of Plautdietsch material into the archives, written or recorded, and present the information of its existence and availability on their internet web site <www.plautdietsch-freunde.de>. This web site also offers information on the organization's projects, on upcoming events dealing with Plautdietsch, or on any other subject in some way related to Plautdietsch.

The visitor of the Plautdietsch-Freunde web site has the chance to order Plautdietsch material like books, CDs or videos in the online shop, check the online dictionary, read and take part in a Plautdietsch discussion group or even join a Plautdietsch chat room. Whoever visits the homepage of the Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. should be able to intuitively find what he or she is looking for.

Taking a closer look at the written Plautdietsch on these pages will soon reveal the fact that anybody seems to write according to his own orthographic system, because there is no official one. Reinhard „Ron" F. Hahn of the University of Seattle wrote in one of his mailings to the mailing list Plautdietsch-L[3] the following statement regarding the great spelling differences between the Netherland, North German and Mennonite way of spelling Low Saxon:

„In short, ‚exposure' is the keyword here. Plautdietsch speakers also tend to know ‚High' German and English, Spanish and/or Russian as well. What they are probably used to doing is exercising mental conversion between Plautdietsch and German. Most of them have been exposed to other dialects of their native language *very rarely*, the majority of them probably never, and most North Germans do not even know about the existence of Plautdietsch, leave alone the finer points. This is part and parcel of the fragmentation I keep going on about.

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[3] see PLAUTDIETSCH-L@LISTSERV.LINGUISTLIST.ORG, Nov. 2nd 2000

Thus, what I believe we need as a first, important step toward unification (> strength > protection > advancement), a type of unification that respects and celebrates differences, is exposure to each other's dialects. This would not only increase mutual comprehension but would also create or enhance a general sense of belonging to a larger whole. Given open minds and an appropriate mindset (foremost willingness), discussions about orthography and similar matters would then follow on the basis of deeper understanding of the issues and choices. Electronic communication, including forums like Plautdietsch-L, Lowlands-L and a fast increasing number of relevant and useful websites (such as Herman Rempel's dictionary site), offers us opportunities to accomplish this with considerable ease and speed."

Projects

There is a long list of planned and started projects that can be browsed through on the Plautdietsch-Freunde web pages. Most of them use the means of multimedia or the internet, some of them are based on the technology of the world wide web.

Video projects

One of the main Plautdietsch projects is producing public video material which will be available online and also have an easy to use downloaded site. In one of the video projects people with an interesting migration background talk about important episodes of their lives in their mother tongue Plautdietsch while being recorded with a video camera. The first recordings have just begun in October, so it will take a while until it finally will be put into the internet.

Other video recordings will show interesting events like concerts or literature readings. Here is an example: Reuben Epp who is the author of several Plautdietsch books and lives in British Columbia, Canada, visited Germany last month. The Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. organised an evening with him and some parts of this „Plautdietsch-Lesung" can already be „clicked on" in the world wide web.

Language learning

The Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. also offer the chance to reacquire, learn or improve basic language skills. For the first time in Germany or even Europe it's possible to take part in reading and writing courses for Plautdietsch. Together with the German *Volkshochschule* the Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. offer lessons for Plautdietsch speakers once a week during the semester of the *Volkshochschule*. After the course the participants should be able to read and write in their mother tongue and should also be familiar with today's Plautdietsch writers and literature.

Hot Potatoes[4]

Anyone interested in practicing and improving his or her Plautdietsch can do so via the internet, too. A free software called „hot potatoes" makes it possible:

"Hot Potatoes" is a program developed and released by "Half-baked Software", a group from the University of Victoria in Canada. Within the "Hot Potatoes" suite of software are six separate programs with a largely shared interface for producing a range of different exercises in a web-page format. Unlike some CALL software, Arneil and Holmes's program grew out

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[4] see http://web.uvic.ca/hrd/hotpot/

of their needs to produce web pages for graduate language learning. They found that the most practical solution, was to produce pages using java-script.

Arneil and Holmes quickly found that producing pages by creating java-script was a laborious process, and for the average classroom teacher the idea of learning to write in java-script seems an entirely unnecessary chore. Even through the use of a WYSIWYG ("What you see is what you get") web page designer, such as Frontpage or Dreamweaver, the time it would take to create a page for learners to use would be be exponential to the time it would take learners to complete the exercises. So, the solution that Arneil and Holmes came up with was to create a suite of programs that automatically transformed teachers' words into an interactive web page.

A major strength of "Hot Potatoes" is its price – nothing! Licenses are required for commercial use and users are required to register the product in order to release all applications, otherwise only three questions can be created for each exercise. It can be downloaded in around 10 minutes, depending on the connection, from the Half-baked software website. There are both PC and Mac versions (apparently slightly different) and the pages require a java-enabled browser such as Netscape's Navigator 3 or Microsoft's Internet Explorer 3 or above. These browsers should have no problems with "Hot Potatoes" frames-based format. Clearly users have to consider the software available on the systems they are using, but since both Microsoft and Netscape's products are regularly installed on new systems it is a problem that should be avoidable.

The Hot Potatoes Suite

JBC

This program creates multiple choice answer quizzes of the sort that will be immediately recognisable to students. The teacher can include a written text, with a reading time limit, and questions can have up to four answers. Feedback leading the student towards the correct answer can be included, although if none is entered, the default message "try again" is received.

JQuiz

This program creates short answer quizzes. The learner types the answer in the text-field and receives feedback from the computer. Up to four possible correct answers are available, assuming the teacher has included them. Holmes and Arneil were keen to avoid a simple "one click right/wrong"[5] interface, so instead they allow for more useful feedback.

"The java-script parses the guess and the nearest answer, and tells the student how much of the guess is correct and where the first error is."

This allows the student to work towards a correct answer thus enabling greater cognitive involvement. Students whose spelling is errant are able to see how much of the answer is correct, and therefore deduce the correct spelling. Other programs have been criticised for their one click right/wrong feedback system, and this was an error that the "Hot Potatoes" programmers were keen to avoid.

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[5] Holmes and Arneil 1999:p.13

JMix

This program creates jumbled sentence exercises that are very similar to ones that can be created with paper and scissors. The teacher needs to make sure that all possible combinations are included in the list of answer choices, so the learner isn't faced with correct suggestions being rejected by the computer. Again, careful programming is the key.

JCross

This program creates crossword puzzles 20x20 letters in size. Clues can be either in word-form or as pictures, although this involves a greater amount of technical know-how on the part of the instructor, in that they have to be able to import files, and remember to save them in the same folder. Some experience of Web authoring is a definite advantage. Similarly to configure the images size and page position, knowledge of HTML would be a distinct advantage. Still, it is possible to create exercises without such expertise, so both experienced and amateur computer users are catered for.

JMatch

This program can produce either listing exercises, for example placing frequency adverbs in order, or matching exercises, such as linking countries and nationalities. As with JCross, pictures can be used in place of words, with the same potential problems as with JCross.

JCloze

This program creates gap-filling exercises, another familiar EFL exercise, and one that has been used in other CALL applications such as WinWida. As with JQuiz, the java-script looks for parts of right answers, but only one answer for each gap is accepted and feedback is limited.

The tutorial included with the software cleverly uses the 6 programs of the suite to show how to use the program, and challenges the new user to put together a simple Web page in two minutes, which shows the speed and practicality of the software. All of the programs are clearly computer versions of traditional EFL exercises. It seems that the computer is faster than the pen in producing such materials.

Telos Language Partner[6]

Telos Language Partner (TLP Pro) is a multimedia software that supports relevant language learning scenarios. Intuitive editing functions facilitate the production and customisation of multimedia language learning contents. The heart of the software is its set of multimedia templates adapted to prototypical learning activities from communicative practice (involving texts, dialogues and video clips) to grammar and vocabulary learning. As these templates can be used in a learning as well as in an editing mode, they operate as a multimedia interface between complementary tutor and learner activities. Development and evaluation of TLP Pro has been supported by the European projects "Eloquent" (Lingua) and "Telos" (Telematics Applications Programme). TLP Pro enables tutors to create customised learning packages for any language using the Roman alphabet. It can also be used for "multimedia re-versioning" of existing learning materials available as books, audio cassettes, or videos.

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[6] see http://www.linguashop.de

TLP Pro has two modes of operation, a Learning Mode and an Editing Mode.

Learning Mode

The Learning Mode is used for self-study learning, which is preferably combined with direct classroom and/or tele-tutoring. Learners can practise with a variety of video-, dialogue- and text-based comprehension and production tasks involving a flexible combination of listening, speaking/recording, reading and writing.

Exercise in the Learning Mode

Hyperlinks enable learners to move swiftly from video transcripts, texts and dialogues to lexical, grammatical and cultural explanations and corresponding exercises including question answering, gap-fill, and drag&drop. Comprehension is supported by internal dictionaries and translations.

Editing Mode

The Editing Mode is used to customise existing multimedia learning materials by changing or adding the text, sound, picture and video content as required. It is also possible to activate empty learning templates and to enter new text, sound, picture and video content in a time/cost-effective way.

Currently, the following templates are available in TLP Pro:

- a video template for playing video clips, which may be supported by transcripts, translations and lexical look-up
- dialogue templates (either with head pictures or with a situation picture and balloons) for a flexible combination of listening, speaking, reading and writing exercises with or without dialogue text or translation;

Dialogue Exercise in the Editing Mode

- text templates (with or without support of an image) for listening and reading comprehension exercises (with or without translation)
- oral and written production exercises (e.g. writing or translating letters and reports)
- answering questions, describing pictures and giving presentations

Text comprehension exercise

- a gap-filling template for a wide range of classical exercises from gap-filling and cloze to reformulation or sentence composition from given elements
- a drag&drop template
- explanations templates for lexical, grammatical, pragmatic or cultural contents

Multimedia learning materials produced with TLP Pro can be organised to form integrated learning packages. Hyperlinks are used to create navigation paths; these can exist within packages, e.g. between communicative video practice and cultural explanations, or between packages, e.g. a dialogue package and a pedagogical grammar package.

The Editing Mode also provides a facility to create internal dictionaries as separate modules, e.g. English-German for beginners (including grammatical terms), and to link them to individual learning packages as required. Most of the multimedia learning templates available in TLP Pro can be used either in Practice or in Test Format, the difference being that in Practice Format learners have access to solutions whereas in Test Format they don't. Practice or Test Format can be activated for individual exercises or for entire packages. In addition to practice and test packages, it is thus possible to have "mixed" packages with a combination of practice and test tasks. Tutors can use the Editing Mode of TLP Pro to create and customise learning packages that meet the specific needs of their target learner groups. The Editing Mode can also be used by learners to explore communicative situations and to create their own exercises and dictionaries.

The System requirements are: Pentium PC, 16 MB RAM (32 MB recommended), HiColor Graphics card, CD ROM drive, Soundblaster-compatible sound card with microphone and speakers, Microsoft Windows 3.11, 95 or NT.

The Plautdietsch unit created with Telos and presented here [at the Multilinguae Congress] shows how practical it is to use this software for almost any other language. The Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. plan to produce a CD-ROM with 10 Plautdietsch units that can be used in addition to the VHS language course.

Tweeback -- an Internet Project to Promote the Use of Plautdietsch

There are about 250 Russian German churches/congregations in Germany attended by people with Plautdietsch as their mother tongue. Most of these Mennonite or Baptist groups have about 300 members each who probably very soon won't speak Plautdietsch anymore -- due to the process of integration and assimilation.

The project's idea is to find and motivate one person in each of these congregations to create and maintain a web site with Plautdietsch information from and about the people of his or her group. One of the motivation factors should be a certain amount of money granted to the person who is doing the job. The association of the Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V. would coordinate, support, and superwise the growing network of the web sites of the Plautdietsch partners all over Germany, Europe, or even world wide. The internet domain www.tweeback.de is already there, waiting to be filled with links to many more Plautdietsch web sites with much new material and many new ideas.

This way more and more people keep communicating and begin writing in their mother tongue. The project would create interesting and valuable material, such as biographies, new literature, music, photographic material and much more. The results would also be of great historical, linguistic, sociological and genealogical interest, and will be available for public use via the internet. Besides creating documents of an endangered language, this project would also increase the acceptance and popularity of Plautdietsch among its own speakers and, thus, breathe new life into this language.

But, finding and motivating the Plautdietsch partners in the Russian German Mennonite congregations would only be easy for the Plautdietsch-Freunde e.V., if they would get some financial support, a budget that they could use for the project's purpose. As soon as this problem is solved the "Tweeback Project" will start with this new way of promoting Plautdietsch.