

A Comparison Of Adjective Endings In Pennsylvania German and Standard German

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Abstract

Pennsylvania German, also known as Pennsylvania Dutch or the language of the Amish, is a language that is closely related to Standard German. The two are different enough, however, to make communication difficult. The purpose of this study is to explore one aspect of those differences, adjective endings, which are a complex grammar feature of German that does not exist in English. The data was gathered by having a total of eight participants record an oral narration of several picture stories in Pennsylvania German. All contexts in which adjectives were used were analyzed. All participants are either Amish or formerly Amish and all are fluent in both Pennsylvania German and English. This study examines how the use of adjective endings in Pennsylvania German differs from standard German, how it may be different between generations of speakers, and how it may have been influenced by English. As a native speaker of Pennsylvania German, I am interested in learning more about how languages change within a bilingual community.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said, “Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own.” Language is a hugely underappreciated element of daily life and few people make any effort to understand it better. Foreign languages, more specifically, can help people to have a much greater appreciation for their own language and how it serves them. As a native speaker of Pennsylvania German (PG) and American English and a student of Standard German (SG), I am interested in better understanding how these

languages influence each other and change over time.

The ancestors of the Amish, who are a subgroup of Pennsylvania German speakers, came from Switzerland and parts of southwestern Germany, particularly the Palatinate (Louden, 2016, p.13). The language (which is only spoken and never written) is a very important part of their cultural and religious identity and one of the things that binds them all together. An Amish interviewee stated that, “To be Amish is to speak Pennsylvania German” (Adkins, 2011, p.32). However, Adkins

(2011, p.34) believes that even though the tightness of the Amish community helped them to maintain their PG-speaking heritage in the past, as they continue to integrate more with other Americans, it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep the language alive. Adkins also wrote in his article (2011, p.33) that there are ever more English words and phrases in Pennsylvania German. He believes that PG will die out within the next two or three generations (2011, p.34). Another one of Adkin's Amish interviewees stated that there are many words for which he does not know the Pennsylvania German word in which case he simply uses the English word (2011, p.33).

On the other hand, there is a theory called "Convergence as a strategy of language maintenance" in which the argument is made that, the changes in the PG of the Old Order Amish that have shifted it away from SG does not mean that PG is an inferior and decomposing language. Instead the changes show that it has effectively adapted itself to the needs of its speakers (Ferré, 1991, p.164). Louden (2016, p.25-26) argues that PG's English-influenced elements do not make it inferior to German or English but rather strengthen it. For example, the fact that Pennsylvania German has a progressive form, like English but unlike German, gives speakers more ways to express themselves.

My project compared the use of adjective endings in the PG of the Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania and the SG that is commonly used today in Germany. Adjective endings are an element of grammar that does not exist in English. The ending added to an adjective changes based on the gender and the case of the noun it describes. My assumption at the beginning of the project was that PG has some adjective endings

which are used similarly to how SG uses them but that there are fewer endings and, in fairly many cases, no endings at all. This would provide support for the idea that PG has dropped many of the SG endings and become less complex.

To do the research, I recorded eight members of the Amish or ex-Amish (sectarian) Pennsylvania German speaking community answering a prompt which I gave them. There were three participants from mine and my parents' generation and two participants from my grandparents' generation bringing the total to eight participants. Using a series of pictures, they told three stories in PG. I analyzed all the instances where an adjective was used. I also asked the participants to choose which of three endings sounded better for seventeen different adjective-noun combinations. The varieties of combinations included: indefinite versus definite articles, presence of an article versus absence of an article, masculine versus feminine versus neutral gender, plural versus singular, and inanimate versus animate objects. SG and the PG of the nonsectarian speaking community (as found in a published grammar book) do distinguish between these categories by varying the adjective endings. I wanted to see if the PG of the Amish also distinguishes between these categories. I also wanted to see if the use of adjective endings would be consistent between the picture stories, where participants had to produce adjectives on their own, and the other part, where participants had to choose the ending that sounded best.

For the picture stories, adjectives accompanying nouns in the singular did not have an ending in 63% of all occurrences. In the remaining adjectives I found three different adjective endings that are sometimes used. The first and most common one was the equivalent of the masculine "er"

ending in German which is unlike the sound that we attribute to those two letters in English. The IPA symbol for it is “v̥” and it sounds similar to the “o” in “hot”. It was used a total of 21 times. The second ending I found was what would be equivalent to the feminine “e” ending in German. The IPA symbol for it is “ɪ”. It is similar to the “i” in “it”. It was used a total of 15 times by my participants. This ending should not be confused with the plural ending which sounds exactly the same. The third ending I found was a peculiar case because it was only used once. It is the equivalent of the neutral “es” ending in German and sounds very similar to how it looks. The neutral endings have almost completely disappeared from the language but there are clearly rare cases where they do appear.

The most consistent ending by far is the plural “e” ending. As I mentioned before, it sounds exactly like the feminine ending, but it is different because it signals a plural noun. In every instance of plural in the picture stories, this ending was added to the adjective. Also, when participants had to choose which of three options (the “er” ending, the “e” ending, or no ending) sounded better, they almost always chose this ending. I believe that the four times they did not choose this ending were due to mishearing and not understanding that the noun was plural.

My expectation at the beginning of this project was that the younger participants would use adjective endings less than the older participants because I was assuming that endings are being used less as time goes on and as the language gets passed from generation to generation. I was surprised to find that the younger participants actually used considerably more endings. The youngest participant (17 years old) followed my prediction and used no endings. The

other two participants from the younger generation used endings for 77.3% (18 years old) and 50% (22 years old) of their singular adjectives, respectively. The three participants in the middle used the least adjective endings. They used adjective endings for 16.7% (49 years old), 0% (53 years old), and 18.2% (55 years old) of their singular adjectives, respectively. Lastly, the two oldest participants used endings for 28.6% (77) and 20% (78) of their singular adjectives, respectively. According to my data, younger people actually use more adjective endings than older people do. I find this surprising because PG seems to be losing endings rather than gaining them. It could also be that the two young participants who used many endings are rare cases and used so many endings because of special circumstances or the way they may have been prompted.

The part of the data where participants had to choose from three options did have different results, interestingly. It appeared to make a difference whether participants produced adjectives while telling a story or chose from three options that were given to them. When adjectives accompanied singular nouns, participants chose an ending 47.5% of the time as opposed to 37% in the storytelling component of the study. For the remaining adjectives accompanying a singular noun (52.5%) participants chose the no ending option. Participants were more likely overall to add an ending onto an adjective when it was presented to them as an option as opposed to producing it in free speech. On the other hand, the 18-year-old participant who used an ending for 77.3% of her adjectives accompanying singular nouns, thought that endings sounded better for only 40% of adjectives accompanying singular nouns when she had to choose one of the three options. This individual participant and

most of the others lacked consistency both within and between the two parts of my study in how they used adjective endings. These results show that hard and fast rules for how adjective endings are used are lacking. However, adjectives without endings do seem to be more common while it seems to be perfectly acceptable and comprehensible in many cases to either use an ending or to simply leave it off. This is not the case in SG where every adjective must have an ending and native speakers use them consistently according to the grammatical context.

One of the glaring limitations of this study is that there were so few participants. While the study allowed many more questions to be raised and some basic things to be discovered it is difficult to say anything substantial with certainty based on my results. Another limitation is the relatively low number of adjectives that I was able to elicit with the picture stories. It

is difficult to elicit something so specific while still ensuring that it came freely and was not prompted by something the researcher said. I would have liked to have more and more varied contexts for adjective endings to make my findings stronger.

It is easy to see how closely SG and PG are related when comparing something like adjectives. Although PG has taken on rules of its own and may have borrowed some from English (namely that adjectives do not have endings), there are still many remnants of German declension present in PG. This analysis allowed me to show how PG is related to SG but also how it has changed. Further studies on the extent to which PG differs from SG would be very interesting and would deepen our understanding of how languages change over time.

References

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