

LOW GERMAN AS AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the status of Low German in the 21st century. Low German was once spoken widely across northern Germany and is considered the indigenous language of this region. In the 20th century, Low German began eroding on such a massive scale that the European Union added it to its Charter of Endangered Languages in the 1990s. This article examines what measures are taken to protect and to promote the language, and how Low German features in the greater, worldwide context of endangered and dying languages. Finally, this article provides an outlook on the future of Low German.

KEYWORDS

Low German, Endangered Languages, Language Policy, Language Revitalization

1. INTRODUCTION: THE TWO LANGUAGES

German is the mother tongue of more than ninety million people in Europe, making it the second-most spoken language on the continent after Russian (ca. 145 million speakers). When people think of German, they usually associate it with “High German”, i.e. the national, standard language used in Germany and studied by millions of learners around the world. There exists, however, another form of the language, Low German, which is classified as an independent member of the West-Germanic language family along with High German, English, Dutch, Yiddish, Frisian, and Afrikaans. Low German was once spoken all over northern Germany and parts of the Netherlands. In fact, during the height of the mighty Hanseatic League (13th – 15th century); a confederation of northern German merchants, Low German was a prestigious international language of trade, commerce, law, and diplomacy in many parts of northern Europe. The influence of Low German (or more correctly, Middle Low German) during this time was so profound that it acted as a donor language to several Scandinavian languages, most notably Swedish and Danish. Sanders (1982), for instance, estimates that ca. 30% of the lexicon of these two languages derive from Low German.

Over the course of the last three centuries, however, Low German has undergone dramatic shifts and changes, and has been eroding on such a massive scale that its present status is defined as a regional minority language, which the European Union added in the 1990s to its list of Endangered Languages in Europe. Parallel to its steep decrease of native speakers Low German has experienced an immense loss in prestige over the decades, which has been equally damaging. The language has been branded as a “peasant language”, as backwards, primitive, and unsophisticated; a language that children should not learn and schools should not teach. Efforts to reverse this loss of image have been in place since the 1980s in northern Germany and have proved largely successful. However, many linguists (Wirrer, 1998a, Möller, 2008) believe that the damage done to the language, particularly in the second part of the 20th century, is so extensive that the current situation of Low German must be considered “moribund” (Wirrer, 1998a: 309).

Yet, there is perhaps no other language in northwestern Europe, whose doom and demise has been so often feared and predicted, and, with the possible exception of Frisian, no other language that commands such a fierce loyalty among its speakers.

2. EROSION AND PRESENT NUMBER OF SPEAKERS

The linguistic landscape of the German speaking countries has always been very diverse with dialects that are so different from one another that they are mutually incomprehensible. Low German, known officially as *Niederdeutsch* and to its speakers simply as Platt, is distinct in this regard because among all the different dialects spoken in the German speaking countries, it is the only one that is considered an independent language¹. Low German is presently spoken from the northeastern shores of the Baltic Sea to the northwestern shores of the North Sea in Germany and extends into the northeastern Netherlands.

The historic-linguistic development of Low German, its rise to glory in the 14-16th century, as well as the sometimes tragic, often random causes leading to its gradual erosion have been amply discussed and documented, and need not be examined here in detail². The development of Low German in the second part of the 20th century until the present day, however, calls for a more specific investigation because the post W.W.II decades constitute the most significant erosion of the language.

It can be argued that until the 14/15th century Low German was the predominant and, in many regions, only language spoken in northern Germany. The gradual spread of High German in the following centuries led to a diglossic situation all over northern Germany with High German serving as the new H variety and Low German being relegated to fulfill the L variety. For several centuries, there existed a relatively stable diglossia in northern Germany until ca. the middle of the 20th century when several new historical developments caused a massive erosion of the language that continues to this day. The turmoil following World War II and the massive refugee treks from Eastern Europe to (West)-Germany generated an immense population shift. Some sociolinguists believe that the upheavals and population changes in the aftermath of World War II are the sole cause for a rise in High German and the erosion of Low German and other L-varieties in Germany³. Von Polenz also places the main factors for dialect/L-variety erosion in the 20th century but includes additional factors, such as “Massenvertreibung seit 1945, Motorisierung und berufliche Mobilität.” (Mass displacement since 1945, motorization, and professional mobility; 1999: 457)⁴

Even more detrimental to the survival of Low German than the aftereffects of W. W.II was the so-called *Hochdeutschwelle* (“High German Wave”) during the 1960s and 70s. Initiated largely by a group of young West-German linguists and pedagogues (Ammon, Löffler) and buoyed by protests and social changes during the 1960s, this movement postulated that dialects (including Low German) constitute a language barrier to equal opportunity, and that children who speak a dialect were inherently disadvantaged. In order to remedy this situation, these linguists and pedagogues recommended that children be raised “dialect-free” and that public schools’ foremost responsibility should be to instill “proper German” in children. In fact, Ammon repeatedly advocated the broad use of a unified language (“*Einheitssprache*”, i.e. Standard German)⁵. The movement was motivated by a genuine concern about the inclusivity of West-German society and quite invested in the so-called *Bildungsreform* (educational reform) of the early 1970s in West Germany. Although the group’s goals were grounded in compassionate thinking for the betterment of German society, it should be noted that many of its main proponents were prejudiced from the outset against dialect speakers. Löffler, for example, equals dialects with “*Unterschichtsprache*” (*lower class language/white trash language, 1972: 37*); while Ammon suggests that speaking Low German results in lower levels of education:

Das Beharren beim plattdeutschen Dialekt [...] ist die Folge des geringen Bildungsniveaus [...] der niederdeutschen Bauern.

The consequence of the low level of education among Low German peasants is the maintenance of the Low German dialect. (Ammon, 1973: 137)

In addition, the group considered language loyalty and the rather strong emotional ties that dialect speakers have towards their respective dialects as one of the main obstacles to their mission:

Mag der Dialekt auch besonders vielseitig mit Erlebnissen verflochten und tiefer verinnerlicht sein als viele andere Gegenstände, so wäre dennoch ein Festhalten daran lediglich [...] regressiv.

Although dialect may be intertwined with experiences and be more deeply internalized than many other objects, adhering to it would only be regressive. (Ammon, 1978: 257)

The bipartisan efforts of West-Germany's *Bildungsreform* during the nineteen sixties and seventies were successful insofar that more students from low-income families were accepted at German universities thanks to curricular improvements at secondary schools and the introduction of student grants. However, the reform's emphasis and favoritism of Standard German, and the particular criticism levelled against Low German by the linguists and pedagogues associated with the reform package, entailed that an entire generation of children in northern Germany essentially grew up with High German only.

It is difficult to assess with some certainty how many Germans in northern Germany still speak the language in the 21st century. There are no reliable data from the early 20th century nor from previous centuries, and to this day, there exist only three significant surveys that tried to investigate the state of Low German. The first of these, the so-called GETAS study from the mid-eighties, has been subject to much controversy since it was claimed that the interpretation of the survey's results has been too positive and even methodologically erroneous (Menge, 1997: 30-45; Wirrer, 1998a: 309-340).

The next comprehensive survey took place in 2007 and was conducted by researchers and scholars from the *Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache*⁶. This survey included the federal states of Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Lower Saxony, Bremen, North Rhine-Westphalia, and the northern parts of Brandenburg and Saxony-Anhalt. Referring to the 1984 GETAS study but without mentioning concrete numbers, the report arrives at a rather alarming conclusion:

In den vergangenen 23 Jahren ist die Anzahl der kompetenten Sprecher des Niederdeutschen drastisch, um mehr als die Hälfte, zurückgegangen.

In the past 23 years, the number of competent speakers of Low German has fallen dramatically, by more than half. (Möller & Windzio, 2008: 12)

The last exhaustive survey dates from 2016 and was again carried out by a team of researchers from the *Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache*. Similar to the 2007 study, the authors refrained from calculating exact numbers. Their results show that the erosion of Low German has apparently somewhat stabilized since 2007:

Betrachtet man die Daten im Vergleich zur letzten Umfrage aus dem Jahr 2007, zeigt sich eine Stabilisierung der Zahl der Plattdeutschsprecher und von denjenigen, die die Sprache verstehen. Die erwartete Fortführung der rückläufigen Entwicklung in den vorausgegangenen Jahrzehnten scheint zunächst aufgehalten.

If one compares the data to the last survey from 2007 it shows that the number of Low German speakers and those who understand the language have stabilized. The expected continuation of the decline in the preceding decades seems halted for now. (Adler et al., 2016: 38)

The 2016 results suggest that Low German has neither gained new speakers in the last decade nor lost a significant portion of active speakers. It is difficult, though, to translate the 2007 and 2016 results into any kind of precise numbers due to the uncertainties surrounding the results of the GETAS survey. If one considers the GETAS numbers as a starting point and relativizes them with Menge's and Wirrer's interpretations, and then applies the 2007 and 2016 results, one would arrive at ca. one to one and a half million active, competent Low German speakers for the 2010s. Although such numbers might sound solid and even impressive for an endangered regional language, it is the predominance of older speakers and the extreme dearth of young speakers that has scholars worried about the language's future. The impact of the "High German Wave" of the 1960s and 1970s can be clearly gauged from the two surveys of the new millennium. The 2007 survey, for instance, showed that only 10% of Low German speaking parents used the language with their children. This number includes parents who speak Low German "gelegentlich" (*occasionally*) with their kids. The same study revealed that only one percent of all informants under thirty-four years of age spoke Low German very well, and four percent in the same age group who stated to speak Low German well. Fifty-two percent in this age group professed that they do not speak the language at all. Although the 2016 survey reported an overall stabilization in the number of Low German speakers, it nonetheless also demonstrated that the number of young speakers had declined even further. The results are illustrated in table one:

Table 1: Low German Language Competency according to Age (2016 Survey, Adler et al.)

Age Group	Very good	Good	Somewhat	Only a few words	Not at all
20 and younger	0%	0.8%	6.8%	21.1%	71.3%
20-29	3.2%	5.8%	3.6%	30.6%	56.9%
30-39	0.8%	3.2%	12.8%	32%	51.2%

The dwindling number of younger speakers has led to almost regular media reports in northern Germany about the potential impending collapse of existing Low German speech communities. Several reports from the coastal region of *Ostfriesland* (northern Lower Saxony), traditionally a Low German stronghold, may be regarded as representative of the current situation. Cornelia Nath, director of the *Kulturverband Ostfriesische Landschaft* (Culture Association of Ostfriesland), reported in 2016 that only 5.1% of children in the region still learn Low German at home and concluded:

Jede Sprache braucht Muttersprachler. 5.1 Prozent der Kinder sind zu wenig für den Erhalt des Plattdeutschen.

Every language needs native speakers. 5.1 percent of the children are not enough for the preservation of Low German. (Tagesspiegel, September 8, 2006)

In an earlier report Nath also made clear that numerous, often state sponsored initiatives to engage young people with the Low German language in *Ostfriesland* were by and large fruitless: Nach über 20 Jahren Engagement fürs Platt ist die Heimatsprache für junge Leute heute kaum noch interessant. Die Jungen können es nicht oder wollen es nicht.

After more than 20 years of commitment to Low German, the native language is hardly interesting to young people today. Young people cannot speak it or do not want to. (Ostriesen-Zeitung, March 3, 2012)

Even before the most recent numbers of younger speakers were published, scholars had begun to issue more and more dire warnings about a possible collapse of Low German due to the ever-increasing decline of its domains and everyday functions:

“As a spoken everyday language, it [Low German] has undergone such extreme losses that we are justified in speaking of the patient as being in imminent danger of dying.” (Kremer, 1997: 114)

3. THE GREATER CONTEXT

Like every language, Low German’s history is unique. Langer (2009) summarized it as follows: The history of LG [Low German] demonstrates a range of linguistic processes. It changed from a tribal language in the Old Saxon period to an international language in the Middle Ages and then became almost extinct in the Early Modern Period. Although its revival [...] gained substantial momentum very recently, it seems unlikely that its death as a native language can be prevented in the mid-term future. (2009: 228)

Notwithstanding its uniqueness, Low German is joined by more than 3.000 other languages in the 21st century that are all considered endangered. In their report about endangered languages to the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*, Rogers and Campbell (2015) mention that of the roughly 6.900 living languages in the world, according to *Ethnologue*, one of the foremost authorities in the field, 45% are seen as endangered with an additional 203 languages that are “listed as having no known speakers.” (Rogers & Campbell, 2015: 3)

In the developed world, particularly in Europe and North America, people often view language endangerment as a “third-world-problem”, i.e. something that is afflicting the continents of Asia, Africa, and South America. The truth, however, is that endangered languages and language extinction are very much problems of the developed world, too (and perhaps even more than in developing nations). Auvergnat and Breton in France; Gaelic in Ireland; Welsh and Scottish Gaelic in the UK; Low German, Romani, Sorbian, and Sater Frisian in Germany; and Friulian, Piedmontese, and Sardinian in Italy are just a few examples of endangered or severely endangered languages in Europe. Some numbers from the U.S. state of California show that the damage on the North American continent is not only done but also largely irreparable:

California had some 100 American Indian languages at the time of the Gold Rush, ca. 1850, but only 18 are still spoken today; none of them is being learned by children through intergenerational transmission. (Rogers & Campbell, 2015: 3)

With the exception of climate change, the crisis of the world’s languages is considered one of the gravest problems of the 21st century:

The endangered language crisis is believed by many to be one of the most serious issues facing humanity today, posing moral, practical, and scientific issues of enormous proportions. [...] A large number of the world’s languages are endangered, and it is in this sense that humanity faces a crisis. (Rogers & Campbell, 2015: 1).

The reasons as to how it has gotten to this point are manifold, precisely because every language is unique. Colonialism and colonization by European powers have inflicted incredible harm to the world’s linguistic equilibrium:

Colonization by European powers has exerted perhaps the most devastating damage in the way of language loss. The languages of the European powers spread to other parts of the world and exterminated, or least diminished, a large number of aboriginal languages. (Tsunoda, 2005: 4)

Although its aftereffects still linger, colonial practices or methods are usually no longer a major factor for the disappearance of the world's languages, as Fishman (2001) points out:

Whereas heretofore dangers arrived from the superior armed might, wealth and numbers of immediate neighbors or specific conquerors from afar, today's dangers are more ubiquitous. Today the worldwide process of the globalization of the economy, communication and entertainment media, not to mention modernization-based consumerism as a way of life have threatened to sweep away everything locally authentic and different that may stand in their way. (2001: xiii)

Significant post-colonial factors that contribute to languages becoming endangered and/or extinct often include but are not limited to: lack of intergenerational transmission, a decrease in domains of use, and a decrease in the number of speakers over time in general, which usually is the result of the first two factors mentioned⁷. In addition, the loss of a spoken language is not always involuntary. This is often the case when socio-economic factors are involved, which can influence language shifts and language loyalty to a great degree, as Tsunoda points out:

If people recognize no economic value in their language, due to the lack of job opportunities, then they will be likely to switch to a dominant language and not to teach their language to children. (2005: 59)

Dixon (1991), for example, reports that the last twenty-five years of the 20th century saw the near-total disappearance of Dyrbal, an indigenous language in Australia, as its speakers switched to English for economic gains⁸.

A major cause of language endangerment and/or language death of the 20th and 21st centuries is the presence of what Fishman (2001) calls a "Big Brother":

A recurring cultural reality of all RLS [Reversing Language Shift] efforts is the ethno-linguistic omnipresence of Big Brother. He is often literally co-present in the living-space of the threatened language. (2001: 10)

The "Big Brother aspect" certainly is and has been a reality for the present and past state of Low German with High German being the "Big Brother." Fishman further defines this linguistic situation, which is different than stable diglossia, by pointing out that speakers of the threatened language are almost always fluent in the dominant language and may often read or write it much better than "their own": another significant factor that characterizes the current state of Low German:

It is also another recurring ethnolinguistic reality that the speakers of the threatened language are mostly bilingual, almost always speaking and often also reading and writing the mainstream language as well as or even better than and in preference to their own. (2001: 10).

Attempts to do something about the worldwide crisis of dying and endangered languages have been late and divisive, as the following section will illustrate.

4. LINGUISTICS, ACTIVISTS, AND INTERVENTION

It is certainly not a new phenomenon in the history of humankind that languages become extinct, as Sallabank (2013) points out:

Of course, languages have developed, changed, grown and waned in importance, and ceased being used throughout human history. (2013: 1)

It is, however, the rapid pace of language extinction and language endangerment in the 20th and 21st centuries that is so alarming. It is interesting in this respect how late linguistics as an academic field has taken notice of the problem and, to a certain degree, how little linguists still seem to care about this ongoing tragedy. Sallabank notes that “widespread concern” about the loss of the world’s languages did not really occur until the late 20th century. (2013: 1) Indeed, it was really not until a special issue dedicated to language loss of the influential American journal *Language* appeared in 1992, and particularly Krauss’ seminal article “The World’s Languages in Crisis” in that journal, that linguistics as a discipline began to take at least note of the problem. Paul Newman, himself a linguist, offers a vivid description of the profession’s preoccupation with more abstract and theoretical issues, which made many linguists almost oblivious to the plight of the world’s languages prior to the mid-to late 1990s:

Linguistics has branched off from its anthropological and philological roots and has essentially become a branch of cognitive psychology. The lack of concern about the endangered languages problem is an extension of the general lack of interest in descriptive empirical research. [...] This lack of interest is reflected in the structure of graduate linguistics curricula, the content of linguistics courses at the introductory as well as advanced levels, and in professional hiring practices. (1998: 13)

Since the turn of the millennium, a number of significant books that discuss and deal with endangered languages/language extinction have been published (e.g. Crystal, 2000; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Dalby, 2002; Harrison, 2007) and have helped considerably in creating a more general awareness of the problem. This is not to say, however, that the profession’s overenthusiasm with formal, theoretical linguistics has waned (at least, in North America). Neither does it mean that all linguists necessarily agree on the scope of the problem, or even that dying languages might constitute a problem at all. A famous and highly publicized example of this was Ladefoged’s assertion (1992) that intervention on behalf of endangered languages can come across as condescending:

Let me challenge directly the assumption [...] that different languages, and even different cultures, always ought to be preserved. It is paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for the community. One can be a responsible linguist and yet regard the loss of a particular language, or even a whole group of languages, as far from a ‘catastrophic destruction’. Statements such as ‘just as the extinction of any animal species diminishes our world, so does the extinction of any language’ are appeals to our emotions, not to our reason. (1992: 810)

Rebuke from Ladefoged’s colleagues in the field was swift. Dorian (1993), for instance, questioned how many languages would have to die before it is reasonable to speak of “catastrophic destruction”:

If a fifth, say, of all buildings in the world were threatened with destruction, architects might well speak of a catastrophic destruction, even though more buildings might be built in the future. If a quarter of all folk tales in the world disappeared, folklorists might speak with some justification of a catastrophic loss, even though more folk tales might yet come into being. [...] Just what proportion of humankind’s languages must disappear before the phrase “catastrophic destruction” is warranted? (1993: 578)

Outside the field of linguistics there is an even more tempestuous debate whether people, be it governments, activists, or academics, should intervene on behalf of dying and endangered languages. Since the last decade, it seems that the conflict between language activists and those who advocate against intervention has become increasingly bitter including arguments that border

on Social Darwinism on the opponents' side. In an article for the internet magazine Prospect, the British author, lecturer, and radio host Kenan Malik, for example, stated:

Neither a culture, nor a way of life, nor yet a language, has a God-given 'right to exist'. [...] So what if half the world's languages are on the verge of extinction? Let them rest in peace. (Prospect, November 2000)

The arguments put forth by Ladefoged and Malik sound brutal to those who fight for endangered languages, and particularly to those, whose own native language is endangered or dying. Yet, in some cases, one has to ask how realistic attempts to save endangered or dying languages really are. If the development of a language has reached a point, where its own speakers do not wish to use it anymore for communication, or if they want their children to learn a mainstream language to have a better life or future, then what is an outsider sympathetic to that language to do? Can an outsider legitimately and accurately contest that these speakers must keep their native language? These are, above all, ethical questions as Dorian pointed out in her rebuttal to Ladefoged (1993). In addition, if a major purpose of Reversing Language Shifts is to preserve local ways of life and local culture, what is one to do if the local realities are "often degrading and back-breaking", as Malik cautions his readers?

Although proponents and opponents of intervention seem to come from diametrically opposed directions, they ultimately share the same goal: to preserve the dignity and improve the lot of those people whose languages are endangered or dying. The difference is that proponents would like to preserve local culture as much as possible while opponents believe that such endeavors would exclude the people affected from modern mainstream society. While their arguments may sound harsh, it would be difficult to argue that all opponents of RLS act out of callousness. In the end, it might be impossible to say if one side is wrong and the other right. Time, however, is on no one's side in this matter, and what can be said is that the almost chronic debate on moral leadership is harming rather than helping efforts to do something about the ongoing tragedy that is language death.

One point where activists and opponents seem to agree is that wanting to "save" languages that only have a handful of speakers left is near impossible. One example is Ponosakan, a language that is spoken on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi and has four speakers left. As of 2016, two of its speakers were in their seventies, one in her eighties, and one in his nineties. Jason Lobel, a California linguist, who has documented and tried to preserve Ponosakan for several years, sums up efforts to save the language: "This language is four funerals from extinction."

The example of Ponosakan might seem unusual or even extreme; however, in the last few decades languages with very few speakers have become more and more commonplace rather than exceptional. The Ethnologue currently lists 151 living languages with one to nine speakers, 316 with ten to ninety-nine speakers, and 1,047 that have between one hundred and nine hundred and ninety-nine speakers. In addition, 1,969 living languages have between one thousand and ten thousand speakers. This means that approximately one-half of the world's languages have ten thousand or less speakers. Harrison (2007) mentions that speakers of endangered languages are often losing hope with respect to the survival of their language. A rather agonizing example are the words of Marta Kongarayeva, one of the last speakers of Tofa, a moribund Turkic language spoken in Russia's Irkutsk Oblast region (southeastern Siberia) that had less than one hundred speakers left according to a 2010 census:

You've come too late to learn our language, you should have come earlier. Nowadays we are a numbered people. (Harrison, 2007: 3)

Krauss (1992:7) estimates that a language needs ca. 100,000 speakers to sustain itself in the long-term (“safety-in-number limit”). Newer studies, however, show that this number seems to depend on whether a language is part of the mainstream western world or not. Ravindranath and Cohn (2014), for instance, suggest that Javanese, one of the main languages of Indonesia with over eighty million speakers, could be an “at risk” language because of a lack of “robust intergenerational transmission” (2014: 64). Similarly, Crystal (2000) warns that Yoruba, one of the main languages of western Africa (Benin and Nigeria) with over twenty-five million speakers, is “deprived because of the way it has come to be dominated by English in higher education.” (2000: 13).

A relatively new development in efforts to help endangered languages is the use of technological devices, such as smartphone apps (applications that one can download to a mobile device) in indigenous languages. One example is the “Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program”, which includes a smartphone app that teaches people interested in the language the alphabet and essential words and phrases. It also includes recordings of native speakers of Chickasaw. Likewise, social media companies, such as Twitter and Facebook, have gone to great lengths to make their services available in indigenous languages around the world. These new high-tech solutions may hold tremendous promise in preserving or revitalizing endangered languages. Their efficiency, however, is rated very differently. Within the U.S., smartphone apps and social media seem to be regarded as a cure-all for endangered languages, as the following headlines from various U.S. media outlets suggest: “Globalization helps prevent endangered languages!” (Yale Global News, December 2013); “For rare languages, social media provide new hope” (National Public Radio, July 2014); and “Technology to the endangered language rescue!” (Huffington Post, January 2014). Outside the U.S., the assessments of such technologies are not nearly as enthusiastic. In 2013, the mathematical linguist Kornai and his team from the Budapest Institute of Technology conducted a survey on the online presence of endangered languages, which is widely seen as one of the most comprehensive and substantial studies completed so far. The team’s conclusion concerning the use of smartphone apps is rather somber:

Heritage projects are haphazard [and] resources are squandered on feel-good revitalization efforts that make no sense in the light of the preexisting functional loss and economic incentives that work against language diversity [...]. For the overwhelming majority of languages, the glorious digital tomorrow will never arrive. (2013, 10)

This section discussed some of the many attitudes and approaches to endangered and dying languages. The next section examines which concrete actions are taken to halt the erosion of Low German, and whether they might be effective.

5. WHAT TO DO?

While positions are being drawn online and offline, Sallabank reminds us that people, who might be for the most part uninvolved in this debate, are ultimately at the center of it:

People and their language practices are at the core of language endangerment; not only the most basic aspect, i.e. language choice and usage, but also their reactions to language shift, including attempts to halt or reverse it. (2013: 2)

It often seems problematic to compare endangered languages in Europe to those in Africa or Asia since the geopolitical and economic situations are usually very different, or to paraphrase Malik, the local realities in Europe are generally not degrading and backbreaking. In spite of these differences, almost all endangered languages share some major commonalities regardless of location. One key factor is a lack of transmission, i.e. the language in question is no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers. Another common factor that has plagued and is still plaguing many endangered and minority languages (Irish, Low German,

Kashubian, and Frisian to name but a few in Europe) is scorn by speakers of mainstream languages, i.e. the speakers of indigenous and/or minority languages are considered “backwards”, “unsophisticated” and “peasants”. In order to counteract stigmatization, many federal states in northern Germany have included the protection of Low German in their constitutions. The constitution of Germany’s northernmost state Schleswig-Holstein, for example, has added the following clause:

Das Land schützt und fördert die Pflege der niederdeutschen Sprache. (Article 13, paragraph 2)

The State protects and promotes the cultivation of the Low German language.

By signing the European Language Charter in 1992, Germany as a country entered into legally binding commitments under international law. On January 1, 1998, the language charter came into effect in Germany, and since then five languages have been given special protection: the languages of the recognized national minorities - Danish, Frisian, Sorbian and Romani - and Low German. Official commitments to protect Low German are beneficial provisions that many other endangered languages outside of Europe lack. Such commitments, however, do not translate automatically into new speakers.

Because children rarely learn Low German at home anymore, many elementary schools and kindergartens in northern Germany have begun to teach Low German to their pupils, often by hiring volunteer instructors from local communities. The fact that Low German is now promoted by educators represents an interesting turnaround of events considering that schools were at the forefront of discouraging the use of Low German in the 1960s and 1970s (compare section two). In fact, the latest survey on the state of Low German from 2016 shows that 67% of all surveyed were in favor of more promotion of Low German in public schools and kindergartens regardless of their own language competency. Adler et al. (2016: 32-34) comment that these relatively high numbers are related to the fact that many parents would like their children to know Low German but do not feel linguistically competent enough to teach their children the language at home. Robben & Robben offer the following explanation:

Es darf [...] vermutet werden, dass die Eltern, nachdem sie ihre Kinder mehr oder minder ausschließlich in der Hochsprache bis ins schulfähige Alter erzogen haben, nun doch der Schule zubilligen oder sogar von ihr wünschen, dass sie die Heranwachsenden an die Mundart herantühre. (Robben and Robben, 1993: 119)

It may be assumed [...] that parents, after having raised their children more or less exclusively in the standard language until they started school, allow schools or even demand of them to introduce their children to Low German.

The city of Hamburg was first in 2010 to offer Low German lessons as an elective subject in elementary schools and kindergartens. Since then, the other federal states of northern Germany have followed suit. The pedagogical concept of teaching Low German is quite similar to teaching foreign languages, i.e. pupils have language instruction and discuss culture topics. Low German as a school subject is primarily offered at the elementary level, although the state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and the city of Hamburg plan to introduce Low German at higher school levels and even as an examination subject for the “Abitur” (a battery of tests that German students need to pass in order to study at a university). It should be pointed out, though, that by far not all elementary schools in northern Germany offer Low German as a subject. According to the newspaper Hamburger Abendblatt, in 2017, ca. 2.000 girls and boys were learning Low German at public elementary schools in Hamburg and approximately 2.200 in Schleswig-Holstein. Schools in Lower Saxony are encouraged to include at least one text in Low German per semester in their regular German lessons. The state of Schleswig-Holstein has gone further

than other states and provinces and introduced Low German as a regular subject at several of its universities and colleges. Students interested in linguistics or history can take courses and even graduate in Low German, and all prospective teachers of German are encouraged to take at least one course in Low German in Schleswig-Holstein.

The teaching of Low German at public schools is often met with positive responses from parents, according to several northern German newspapers (Hannoversche Allgemeine, 1 February 2011; Hamburger Abendblatt, 7 March 2017). In some cases, parents even began to learn Low German along with their children. There are many communities in northern Germany that offer a whole range of additional activities to keep the language alive, such as Low German theater groups, Low German evening classes or get-togethers, Low German choral societies, etc. One of the most popular activities are Low German reading competitions (Plattdescher Lesewettbewerb) in local schools. These events, often sponsored by local businesses, encourage children to become familiar with a particular text in Low German, focus on its pronunciation, and then compete against other kids by reading the texts aloud.

One potential drawback of any language revitalization effort are conflicts between language purists and language compromisers, i.e. should revitalization efforts aim to be as conservative as possible, or should they allow room for neologisms, new grammar concepts, and changes in pronunciation. Low German is affected by such discussions, which Wierer characterizes as “konservative und nichtkonservative Dialektpflege” (= conservative and non-conservative dialect maintenance, 1998b: 10). Purism is not only a problem for endangered languages but also for well-established languages. Many Arab-speaking countries, for example, use a codified form of Classical Arabic from the 8th century as a norm. Ibrahim (1989) reports that the modern varieties of Arabic have become increasingly distant from its rather fossilized linguistic ancestor:

The grammar books teach a lot which long ago ceased to be of any relevance to standard Arabic as it is practiced today. (1989: 42).

Dorian (1994) comments that puristic attitudes can often be a serious issue for smaller, endangered languages, especially if they have a “Big Brother” (see Fishman, section three):

Puristic attitudes [...] are widespread enough to create problems for efforts to support minority languages with a small native-speaker base, when these come under heavy pressure from neighboring languages of wider currency [and] with larger speaker populations. (1994: 480)

Dorian further observes that “unrealistically severe older-speaker purism can discourage younger speakers.” (1994: 479). Both of Dorian’s points apply to the current situation of Low German. Because of the close proximity and predominance of Standard German, speakers of Low German have inevitably borrowed freely from the “Big Brother” language, in particular lexical items from technological fields (Low German, for example, does not have a word for Staubsauger= vacuum cleaner). Likewise, although there are no empirical studies, anecdotal evidence suggest that many people are somewhat afraid to try to speak Low German because it “doesn’t sound real”, or “it isn’t good enough.” For Low German, problems regarding traditional canons are magnified by the fact that the language does not have and never has had a common orthography. In fact, Low German has never truly been a unified language per se, but rather a number of linguistically very similar varieties of a language. In terms of purism, this has at times led to considerable problems due to what Dorian terms “rival authenticities” (1994: 479).

Despite such disagreements, Low German likely commands one of the fiercest language loyalties in continental Europe, which might be the strongest factor in keeping the language alive. Some of the results from the 2016 survey illustrate the love of Low German in northern Germany. For example, 32.1% of all respondents associated Low German with having a “soft and melodious”

sound compared to 21.5% who believe that Standard German possesses such attributes (Adler et al, 2016: 26-27). This language loyalty manifests itself not only in the desire that children should learn the language but also in an overall feeling that Low German and northern Germany belong together; or, in other words, northern Germany would no longer be what it is if Low German were to die out. The results from the 2007 survey show that even most non-speakers consider Low German an essential component of northern Germany's cultural heritage and identity (Möller & Windzio, 2008: 24). Some of northern Germany's biggest media companies share these feelings and thus offer a considerable amount of institutional support. The Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR), for instance, founded in 1956, is northern Germany's premier broadcasting station. With its main seat in Hamburg, the NDR has had traditionally a strong commitment to Low German. To this day, the NDR is producing a sizeable number of its radio and television programs in Low German, such as news, radio plays, daily sermons, podcasts, several television shows in magazine-style format, and even sitcoms.

In spite of the above-mentioned policies, initiatives, and developments, the general outlook on the future of Low German is negative. The 2007 survey revealed that 62% of all respondents believe that the language will die out in the next few decades (Möller & Windzio, 2008: 24).

The language loyalty discussed above does not necessarily mean that everyone living in northern Germany is invested in it. There are quite a few people, who are not opposed to the language per se, but who consider the use of Low German as somewhat outmoded and as a relic of the past. A commentary by Alexander Drechsel, a contributing author to Radio Bremen, is representative of a kind of indifference toward the future of the language:

Ich schätze mich als heimatverbunden ein. [Aber] das Plattdeutsche wird von den meisten Menschen in Norddeutschland nicht mehr gelebt. Platt ist vielleicht gelebte Tradition der Vorkriegsgenerationen. Heute aber sind die Meisten nicht mit Platt zu Hause aufgewachsen, haben es nicht täglich auf dem Spielplatz, beim Einkaufen oder im Sportverein gesprochen. [...] Platt ist ein Opfer der Globalisierung. Das Rad zurückdrehen zu wollen, ist weltfremd – im Gestern verhaftet. (Radio Bremen, 31 December 2017)

I consider myself attached to my homeland. [But] Low German is no longer a part of life for most people in northern Germany. Platt is perhaps a lived tradition of pre-war generations. But today most of them did not grow up with Platt at home, did not speak it daily on the playground, or while shopping or in sports clubs. And yet people here feel connected to their North German homeland. [...] Platt is a victim of globalization. To turn back the wheel is unrealistic – stuck in the past.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Drechsel views endeavors to teach Low German in schools as a waste of time:

Seit Jahren gibt es zahlreiche Versuche, Plattdeutsch wiederzubeleben. Nur der Erfolg bleibt aus. Platt ist kein Massenphänomen, weil es als Alltagssprache nicht mehr taugt. Trotzdem gibt es an Grundschulen in Bremen Plattdeutsch als Unterrichtsfach. [...] Das ist falsch. Traditionspflege ist keine schulische Aufgabe. Die in Platt investierte Zeit fehlt an anderer Stelle. Ein Beispiel: Kinder benutzen soziale Medien, die den Alltag tatsächlich prägen. [...] Wer meint, dass Plattdeutsch wichtiger sei als das systematische Erlernen von Medienkompetenz in der Schule, der kann Kindern auch Feuermachen in einer Steinzeithöhle beibringen. (Radio Bremen, 31 December 2017)

For years, there have been numerous attempts to revive Low German. Only the success is missing. Low German is not a mass phenomenon because it is no longer suitable as a common language. Nevertheless, there are primary schools in Bremen that teach Low German as a subject. [...] That is wrong. The cultivation of traditions is not a school task. The time invested in

Platt is missing elsewhere. An example: Children use social media that actually shape everyday life. [...] Anyone who thinks that Low German is more important than the systematic learning of media literacy in schools might as well teach children how to make a fire in a Stone Age cave.

Drechsel's comments, which must be considered representative for a portion of northern Germany's population, illustrate that he feels as strongly connected to his homeland as Low German speakers do. The difference is that he and others can envision the region moving forward without its native language. Drechsel's arguments are framed and driven by concerns that the region has other, more pressing problems to address. Indeed, the 21st century has created a host of new problems, chief among them deep-seated concerns that globalization will destroy the last vestiges of cultural authenticity in northern Germany.

Finally, the educators, who so enthusiastically teach Low German, do not have high expectations for a language revival. Heidrun Schlieker, a volunteer teacher for Low German at various elementary schools in Lower Saxony, judges the future prospects of Low German in her region as follows:

Platt wird bei uns nicht wieder zur alltäglichen Umgangssprache werden.(Hannoversche Allgemeine, 1 February 2011)

Low German will not become our everyday language again.

Schlieker's assessment illustrates that intergenerational transmission remains the main problem. Langhanke (2018) offers a telling appraisal with respect to passing on Low German to the next generation:

Die ersprachliche Kompetenz im Niederdeutschen [ist] ein Privileg, ein Geschenk in der Biographie eines Sprechers und einer Sprecherin. (2018: 181)

Competency of Low German as a native language is a privilege, a gift in the biography of a (male or female) speaker.

Langhanke's assessment does not only apply to the present but it is in all likelihood an indication of Low German's future in general. It is possible that the somber outlook is a reflection of a general feeling of impending doom regarding endangered and minority languages.

6. IS IT TOO LATE?

The warnings of language death on an unprecedented scale that scholars began to issue more than twenty-five years ago have become a reality in the 2000s. In fact, some linguists believe that it is too late now to prevent the worst of it. McPherson (2017), for instance, thinks that "we can't stem the tide of language death" anymore. (Los Angeles Book Review, 19 October 2017). The only thing left, according to McPherson, is to document and archive the affected languages before they are gone. One might ask why people are not doing more to stem the tide. One reason seems to be, as is so often the case, a lack of available money. Indeed, the monetary aspect of this problem has reached such implausible dimensions that in spite of recently established external funding programs (e.g. the British-based Endangered Language Documentation Program), even documenting all the languages that are in imminent danger of extinction is no longer a feasible undertaking due to financial and personnel shortages:

It [documenting dying languages] is meticulous and time-consuming work, and there are more languages at risk of extinction than linguists and funding to do the job. (McPherson, 2017) Another reason, which is rarely mentioned in the research literature, is the fact that many people

around the globe are facing problems that are worse than or at least as pernicious as language death; such as hunger, disease, war and torture, modern day slavery, sexual and economic exploitation, climate change, mass migrations, and the ever-widening gap between rich and poor. To a certain extent, these conflicts and conditions are also driving language death, and thus creating an endless vicious circle. Harrison (2007) sums up the current situation as follows:

The last speakers of probably half of the world's languages are alive today. As they grow old and die, their voices will fall silent. Their children and grandchildren – by overwhelming majority – will either choose not to learn or will be deprived of the opportunity to learn the ancestral language. (2007: 3)

More than ever, the question is what we lose if a language dies. There are so many compelling answers by scholars, linguists, and activists that it would warrant several additional articles to discuss this question satisfyingly. Below are three arguments by some of the most eminent scholars in the field:

A) Loss of Cultural Diversity

As a species, humans display remarkable cultural diversity despite a high degree of genetic uniformity. This diversity is at risk when languages become extinct because languages are a critical vector for cultural diversity. (Romaine, 2015: 43)

B) Loss of Knowledge

Language disappearance is an erosion or extinction of ideas, of ways of knowing, and ways of talking about the world and human experience. [...] An immense edifice of human knowledge, painstakingly assembled over millennia by countless minds, is eroding, vanishing into oblivion. (Harrison, 2007: 7)

C) Economic Losses

There are strong economic arguments available to counter the 'many-languages-wasteful' view. For example, from the viewpoint of human capital theory, language is part of the resources people can draw upon to increase the value of their potential contribution to productivity. [...] Language exercises a strong influence on the economy. (Crystal, 2000: 31)

Nettle & Romaine (2000) and Romaine (2015) mention that there seems to exist a correlation between deforestation and language death, i.e. some of the most ravished ecosystems in the world, e.g. the Amazon and Indonesian rainforests, have sustained some of the heaviest tolls in terms of number of languages that have disappeared. In general, it seems that biological diversity coincides with linguistic diversity:

As the world becomes less biologically diverse, it is becoming linguistically and culturally less diverse as well. (Romaine, 2015: 43)

According to Harrison (2007), the current pace of languages dying is so unprecedented that, at least presently, no one may be able to make accurate predictions about what the losses will mean for humankind:

We do not even know what exactly we stand to lose – for science, for humanity, for posterity – when languages die.” (2007: 3)

For individual languages and on a local level, it is easier to make predictions, particularly if they come from local speakers. Harrison (2007) likens the situation of language communities with one hundred or less speakers to being unnoticed and unseen by mainstream societies:

It means to be nearly invisible, surrounded by speakers of another, dominant language who do not even acknowledge yours. (2007: 5)

The situation of Mary Smith Jones is symbolic of the final phases of language death. Mrs. Smith Jones was the last remaining full-blooded member of the Eyak Nation in Alaska, and the last native speaker of Eyak, a Native American language once widely spoken in the Cordova region of Alaska. In an interview, she described her anguish in the face of the imminent extinction of her native tongue:

I don't know why it's me, why I'm the one. I tell you, it hurts, it really hurts.
(Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 14)

Mary Smith Jones passed away in 2008.

The situation of Low German is different. On the one hand, it is not nearly as moribund as some of the languages discussed in this article are; on the other hand, people who truly consider it their native language are slowly dying off. Although Langhanke (2018) pointed out that some children are still raised with Low German as a first language (Erstsprache, see section five), there are no more monolingual speakers of Low German in northern Germany left since at least the 19th century. Unlike Eyak, Tofa, Ponosakan and many other languages, the loss of a mother tongue is in most cases not (anymore) at stake here. What is at risk can again be captured best by looking at local communities.

The Grafschaft Bentheim (ca. 136.000 inhabitants as of 2016) is a small region (140 square kilometers) in the far northwestern corner of Lower Saxony bordering the Netherlands. The region, particularly the more rural localities, has traditionally been a stronghold of Low German. In spite of this, there have been increasing signs since the 1960s that the language is eroding in this area, too. Below are comments by local speakers from various sources in chronological order concerning the decline of Low German in the Grafschaft Bentheim:

- Das Sterben eines Dialektes bedeutet immer einen geistigen Verlust, eine Verarmung.
(Hilckmann, 1961: 837)

The death of a dialect always means an intellectual loss, an impoverishment.

- Etwas unendlich Wertvolles droht durch unsere eigene Schuld unterzugehen, weil wir seinen Wert nicht erkennen; etwas, ohne das wir nicht mehr wären was wir sind. (Hilckmann, 1965: 202).

Something infinitely precious is on the verge of vanishing through our own fault because we do not recognize its value; something without which we would not be what we are.

- Mit dem Rückzug von Platt [werden] ebenfalls alte Grafschafter Sitten und Gebräuche verloren gehen. (Elfers, 1993: 266)

Old Grafschafter customs and traditions will be lost with the decline of Low German.

- Plattdeutsch ist hohes Kulturgut, das die Individualität der Region ausmacht und prägt, und darf deshalb nicht verloren gehen.

Low German is an important cultural asset, which accounts for the individuality of the region, and therefore it must not disappear. (Wiggers (a), 2015: 56)

- Das Plattdeutsche wird zur Folklore für wenige werden und in diesem Rahmen in einer Art Sprachreservat erhaltbar sein. Für das alltägliche Leben bin ich sehr pessimistisch. Das Plattdeutsche, das kaum noch durch das alltägliche Erleben im Elternhaus gelernt wird, wird auf verlorenem Posten stehen. (Wiggers (b), 2015: 272)

Low German will become a folklore for a few, and it might be possible to preserve it in a kind of language reservation. I am very pessimistic about [its use in] everyday life. Low German, which is rarely learned at home anymore, is fighting a losing battle.

The comments by the Graftschafter Low German speakers illustrate profound worries and anxieties that their local traditions and with it an essential part of their identity will disappear if the erosion of Low German is not stopped in their region. Hundreds of years of lived history would slowly fade away as well.

Given all the protections and initiatives to save Low German, its institutional support, and the strong language loyalty by a significant portion of the population, it seems conceivable that its continuing erosion could be halted and that language revitalization efforts might prove to be fruitful. Considering the severely low numbers of young and new speakers, however, it remains to be seen whether and how much longer Low German will exist as a living language.

Dedicated to the memory of my grandmother and her siblings, whose first language was Low German.

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