

Russian Mennonite Plautdietsch in Paraguay

The term 'Plautdietsch' specifically refers to the Low German dialect spoken by Russian Mennonites. Historically, Plautdietsch speaking Mennonite communities are insular and maintain their language and traditional way of life (Loewen 2008). However, many of these communities have contact with external groups of people ("Weltmensch") for things like business and doctor's visits (Ostendorf 2018). Depending on the extent of this contact and how socially progressive the community is, the community's language is influenced by the languages with which it has contact (Thomason 2001). In the case of Plautdietsch in Paraguay, the main contact languages are Spanish, High German, English and Russian. This research will shed light on how communities with the same mother tongue and exposure to many of the same foreign languages undergo distinct linguistic changes as a result of their individual histories, sociocultural ideologies and practices.

A preliminary study has shown that there are indeed sound differences between two major colonies in Paraguay. One of these differences is found in the use of rhotics. There is more frequent use of rhotic approximants among speakers in the Menno colony which migrated to Paraguay from Canada. The Fernheim colony, which migrated from Russia to Paraguay, frequently produces a rhotic tap in the place where the Menno colony produces the approximant rhotic. These findings are harmonious with the study conducted by Moelleken (1993) which discusses the differences in rhotics among Russian Mennonite groups after the first mass migration of Old Colony Mennonites to Canada in the 1870s.

From March to April 2022, linguistic fieldwork will be conducted in Paraguay to collect audio recordings via interviews with native Plautdietsch speakers. The recordings will be analysed for evidence of further contact induced changes manifesting phonetically and phonologically in Plautdietsch speaking Mennonite communities with differing backgrounds and ideologies in Paraguay. The phonologies of the languages involved as well as the sociocultural contexts of the speakers and communities will be considered to analyse the collected data. To this end, the study will be conducted and analysed using mixed methods, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The conference presentation will focus on the initial findings of the upcoming fieldwork.

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