

Is there bad German? By Anne Marie Fuhrig, Ph.D.

If you have grown up in a family where the language was not English, congratulations! Whether you first learned to call a little girl „Maid, Maidli, Mädchen, Dirne, Deern, Pänze, Wonnepoppen, Mäuschen, or Meisken“ your little head absorbed sounds, concepts, meanings and structural regularities called grammar and you learned to express yourself with it. Learning German or a dialect, you developed concepts on which to build when your next language came along. If you were lucky and continued your home language or dialect, you probably also gained a stronger than average sense of identity, after all, being just plain German or American can get much more boring than being an Upper Franconian, Saxon, Austrian, Hamburger, or Pennsylvania “Dutch!” For example, how could you have more fun than trying to figure out whether „Kamellen” is supposed to be a caramel (lower Rhine) or a story to tell (Plattdeutsch)!

Now let’s talk about Plattdeutsch (low German)! Some purists among teachers of German have been known to assign value to speaking standard “high” German, assuming that, since it is called “high,” it must have high value. By implication, any other version of German is called “bad” because it is “low.” To my unending surprise, that’s what American-born speakers of a German dialect will claim their home dialect is, worthless! Don’t let Johann Wolfgang von Goethe overhear you say that! When he grew up in Frankfurt in the 1750s and 60s, a standard German language existed at best for formal situations, such as in church or the courts, and was usually replaced by French. The language of his town, Frankfurt, was „Frankfurtisch,” a version of “Hessisch” and that’s what he spoke and learned and what his vivacious mother made him feel proud of. While his circle of student friends built on literary forerunners, like Herder they strove much more actively for a German identity based on a fully expressive German language; the vehicle for this identity. Their poetic flexibility came from their dialects which allowed them to constantly try out new variations. Opposing the dominance by French—both the language and the empire—was a biggie. As we know, political liberation alone took until 1815. For example, was it not still French cultural domination when my grandparents’ generation (born in the 1870s) had French terms in their German?

Friedrich Schiller who was but ten years younger already benefited greatly from the language basis laid by Goethe and his „Sturm und Drang” friends. German changed during Goethe’s lifetime so that in the 1820s, he felt compelled to reedit his works. In the middle of the 19th century, interest in regional identity really awakened and dialect literature exists to this day. German newspapers may carry Sunday columns in a standardized regional dialect and there is also dialect theater. The language that was spoken around their kitchen table continues to be the easiest and make people happy and that includes Germans in this country! So, if a teacher in German class calls your mother tongue “bad,” pull out this article and insist on your rights!

If that won’t work, recommend a Website that is devoted to German dialects spoken in the United States, that is part of the American Languages Project funded by the Institute of US Museum and Library Services. Go to <http://csumc.wisc.edu/AmericanLanguages> ,

click on "German dialects," and explore the site. All dialect speakers are also invited to complete a brief user survey, which is linked under "Evaluation" at the upper right. Although the survey questions are formulated in English, answer can be in German or English.

For teaching, there are of course differences in grammar between dialects and the standard. Teachers can use variations as examples of how language, sometimes particular to a very small valley in the mountains, has different functions. There are only minimal differences between the formal standard versions of German in Austria, Switzerland and Germany. However, all are influenced by the fairly unchanged dialects of their territories—and now also English—and that results in on-going change and renewal. Now, let's take a tour through geography and history and map out today's German dialects. Hurray for you if you can find yourself in there!



German and some Dutch dialects since 1945

The guides on our tour are first of all the brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm of fairy tale fame who contributed greatly to the definitions of systematic differences and similarities of the Indo-European languages. Along with English and Frisian, German is considered to be in the West Germanic branch. Western tribes that ended up inhabiting regions that are German today were mostly in their territories by 500 AD. Some Angles left the lower

Elbe region at that time and established the beginnings of English on the British Isles. When British soldiers came to the area after 1945 they were still able to communicate with the country folks there. Around 850 AD, a German political entity evolved and unifying influences entered from Latin, the administrative language, and from the Italian economic domination. In the next few centuries, Bavarian spread into today's Austria while other settlement areas developed mixed dialects, depending on the origin of the settlers.

To understand the system of the differences between German dialects, it helps to think in two sets of threes. There are to this day three major dialect regions, 1. Nieder(low)deutsch, 2. Mitteldeutsch, and 3. Oberdeutsch (upper German), divided on the map (from 1965) [insert "dialect"] by two wavy dark lines. Dialects are within their regions, except for the Franks, who resided in all three. The region of Niederdeutsch contains lower Franconian, actually today's Dutch standard, the region of Mitteldeutsch contains Moselfranconian and Rhinefranconian and the Oberdeutsch region contains Eastfranconian and Southfranconian, largely not understood by each other.

The second set of threes refers to the standard literary language during three ages. A. Old High German is documented in mostly southwestern documents until about 1050 AD. After that, certain hard initial consonants followed the example of Italian and pater became fater, k became h and t mostly became d. That formed B. Middle High German limited to the southwestern area, which was soon represented by an extensive written literature, love songs and long heroic ballads of the Beowulf type lasting for about 200 years. By 1250, the central power in this region disappeared and literature stalled. The trading cities of the Baltic and North Sea ports, however, shared a culture with the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries and also resisted the second sound shift of 1050 keeping the hard initial consonants. C. New High German, begun with Luther's translation of the Bible, was not based on the Middle High German standard but rather on east-central Thuringian and for reasons of political disunity took a long time to take off. That's why Goethe was still improving on it.

A closer look at the map shows some tribally-based dialects, such as the greatly reduced Frisian that was shared with parts of today's Netherlands. Among the Eastern mixed dialects, the map shows Mecklenburg and Mark Brandenburg, there were more, such as Pomerania, East Prussia, Silesia, the Böhmen and Sudeten areas of today's Czech Republic, the Banat Swabians, the Germans from the Bucovina, the Ukraine, the Crimean, the Volga River, and more, so, if that's what you speak, don't feel left out!

Generally, no German dialect is completely inaccessible for a native speaker of German, except maybe Swiss. One can normally catch the sound and grammar patterns fairly quickly. Words and idiomatic expressions specific to an area--or sometimes, just a village--have to be learned gradually by use. Some people actually pride themselves in learning a dialect just for the fun of it, such as the members of one of the Pennsylvania "Grundsau Lodsch" clubs that convene groundhog day events every spring. If you love your life, don't ever suggest to them that their dialect is bad! Here is a test. Anyone who understands this, can skip reading this article:

„Gang, Maidli, mach e Fiir in Herd,
daß widder Wäirmi inekehrt.
Und nimm Di klei weng ummen aa,
er mas verliide, s isch en Maa.“

“Go, girl, light a fire in the stove
so that warmth returns
and take a little care of the man,
he suffers, he is a man.”

Originally published in *Germania*, a monthly paper out of Cleveland, OH, October 2006