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Grammatical Gender in Three Germanic Varieties

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Pennsylvania Dutch (PD) is a German variety spoken in North America. It originates from German-speaking immigrants of various groups and origins. Though PD is the result of dialect leveling, the Palatinate dialect spoken in the eastern part of the state of Rhineland-Palatinate in Germany (*Vorderpfalz*) is the continental German dialect that bears the greatest resemblance to PD (Ferré 1994). Contemporary Yiddish (CY) – a minority language primarily spoken by ultraorthodox Hasidic Jews – differs from pre-war varieties due to World War II and post-war conditions (Belk/Kahn/Szendrői 2022). Like other Germanic languages, each of these varieties inherited a three-way gender system consisting of masculine, feminine, and neuter. Gender agreement is marked on determiners, adjectives, and pronouns. However, each variety does not fully adhere to their respective prescribed paradigms. How are we to understand this variation?

The PD data come from linguistic tasks – elicitation and acceptability judgments targeting determiners, adjective inflections, and pronoun use – conducted with 8 Amish native speakers from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Palatinate data are taken from written sources such as Karch (1975) and from online corpora and language atlases (Wenker 1889-1923; Bellmann/Herrgen/Schmidt 2002). CY data are provided by recent journal publications (e.g., Belk/Kahn/Szendrői 2022).

Formal (grammatical) gender can be linked to a noun's morphological and/or phonological shape (Corbett 1991). Assignment of grammatical gender is, however, difficult to establish when agreement markers are inconsistent. PD – as spoken by the Amish in Lancaster – has undergone extensive case syncretism (Ferré 1994) and also shows signs of gender syncretism. Neuter marking is drastically reduced (only 14.69% of neuter nouns appeared with the neuter definite article) and masculine *der* and feminine/plural *die* definite articles are difficult to distinguish. Interestingly, gender marking is better maintained on adjective inflections (over 70% were target-like) though some evidence of syncretism is found in the overextension of masculine {*-er*} to both feminine and neuter. Palatinate, like Standard German, maintains a clearly tripartite system of gender. However, the shortened definite article *de* is attested both for masculine *der* and feminine *die* (Karch 1975: 23) and adjective inflections are variable (Bellmann/Herrgen/Schmidt 2002) showing that gender marking is not as rigid as grammar paradigms typically suggest. Belk/Kahn/Szendrői (2022) consider determiners and adjectives and conclude that grammatical gender and case have been lost in CY.

In accordance with Corbett's (1991: 226) agreement hierarchy, semantic gender – governed by biological sex and animacy – regulates pronominal reference more than attributive aspects like adjective inflection. Krogh/Petersen (2018) for example show that the CY neuter pronoun is commonly used to refer to masculine and feminine inanimate nouns while the

masculine and feminine pronouns can be used in violation of grammatical gender for biological male and female referents. This pattern is also attested in PD (the neuter pronoun was preferred for inanimates).

Examining Palatinate shows that PD did not inherit a rigid, invariable gender system though it was tripartite. By considering CY (comparable to PD in its connection to an ethno-religious group identity, complicated history of formation, and status as a minority language), we see that a variety similar to PD can undergo extensive gender syncretism culminating in the loss of gender. These findings shed light on the origins of this PD gender system which is clearly in flux, illuminate its potential trajectory, and have implications for the development of gender systems more broadly.

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