



## *What Language Change Tells Us: The Amish Case*

Hasan Sađlamel<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*K*nown mostly by plain dresses, humility, closeness to nature and simple living, the Amish people achieve a high degree of community mindedness. Moreover, the use of Pennsylvania German, a variety that has been in close contact with the American English for the last few decades, is yet another domain to be associated with the Amish. Since their arrival into the USA, their conservative attitude and resistance to the mainstream culture and language, English, has been evident; however, despite this resistance language contact has been unavoidable. The aim of this study is to investigate the role of language contact between American English and Pennsylvania German, and draw some insights into the language maintenance of Pennsylvania German. The study provides a brief description of the Amish way of life and their sociolinguistic background, an analysis of the linguistic impact of English on Pennsylvania German and provides some insights into language maintenance and language planning in the Amish Society.

**Keywords:** The Amish people, language change and death, language planning

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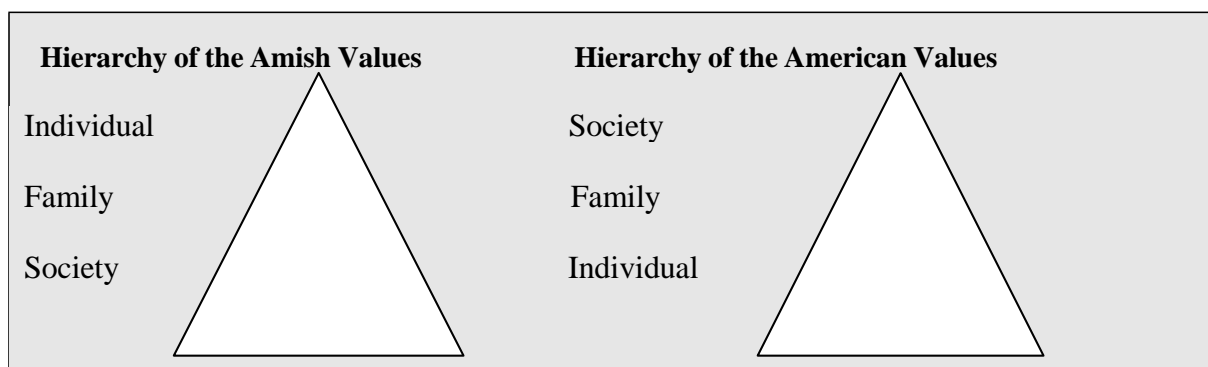
## *What Language Change Tells Us: The Amish Case*

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### **Introduction**

Around sixty miles south of Cleveland Columbus, a few hours' drive from Philadelphia and New York, there lives a world worth investigation, a world, as described in a BBC documentary, “frozen in time” (Tait, 2009). This description deserves a merit considering the fact that there has been little change in the world of this community since their forefathers first settled there. This world belongs to no one but the Amish people. Known mostly by plain dresses, closeness to nature, separation and simple living, these people achieve a high level of community mindedness.

A description of this society in a nutshell will provide us a picture of self-denial, self-sufficiency, and detachment from the outer world (Kraybill, 1994). We are talking about a society where the hierarchy of values is upside-down when compared to the ones of neighboring Americans. What is ascending for one is descending for another (Kraybill, 2006). Specifically, the Amish put the society at the bottom and individual to the top, while the Americans take individual as their primary focus and society takes place at the top of the pyramid (See Figure 1 below).



**Figure 1.**



Moreover, a closer look at the lifestyle of the Amish people could be instrumental for understanding a better depth of the events in that society. Basically, these are the people who arrived in the New World from Europe as early as 1700s. What the Amish people led in many cases was a life of modesty: a life with no electricity, no modern machinery, no tractor or no bags of commercial fertilizers (Schwieder & Schwieder, 1983). Roomy farmhouses where a team of horses were around, fertilization, cattle feeding were to be highlighted as things from the daily life. In line with this humility and separation was the plain Amish clothing. Women avoided wearing ornamentation or patterned clothing because worldly things such as jewelry and cosmetics were banned in their community. They usually wore a full skirt and solid-color dresses with long sleeves while little girls wore dark dresses and black prayer caps. As for men, they usually wore trousers with suspenders.

With respect to retaining and preserving religious beliefs, these people are considered to be a utopian group as they lead a superior life. What makes their life superior from non-Amish communities is their devotion to church services. Schwieder and Schwieder (1983, p.23) describe the commitment to churchgoing, saying: “A long string of black buggies can be seen moving slowly down the road, all headed for a particular farmstead”. Regular Church meetings, in which people sing, pray, listen and preach are held every Sunday. One important note about their religious life could be that they are Anabaptists, that is, they are rebaptized when they get mature. The idea of rebaptism is that it is individuals, rather than parents, who make their choice to believe (Schwieder & Schwieder, 1983). From what has been written so far, anyone who has read this paper so far might have some connotations of resistance to change and rejection of worldly. However, when linguistically analyzed, the frozen world described at the very beginning of the paper seems to be evaporating.

The aim of this paper is to provide a discussion about the language contact between the Pennsylvania German and the American English and analyze the reasons for language maintenance and language change in Pennsylvania German. Before embarking on the linguistic aspects, some descriptions about the social structure as well as cultural and religious norms of the community will be explored because any description, as Campbell argues, detached from its socio-communicative environment or qualitative grounding is an “unhealthy division of labor” (cited in Howe, 2004, p. 44).



## **Review of Literature**

### **A Sociolinguistic Description of the Amish Society**

The Amish discipline to resist change in religious and social contexts does not seem to be equally reflected in preserving their language. Linguistically speaking, the Amish are usually trilingual: they use Pennsylvania German within their group, American English in their commerce, in schools and in non-Amish interactions (Hurst & McConnell, 2010), and use the Amish High German or Standard German for their religious affairs (Huffines, 1997). Pennsylvania German is usually a spoken dialect and High German is usually demonstrated in reading the Bible or in church contexts (Hostetler, 1980). The mother tongue of the people born to the Amish parents is Pennsylvania German. This, in fact, is a distinct dialect of German, “not garbled English” or “corrupted German” (Hostetler, 1980, p. 242). English is usually spoken with non-Amish in forced occasions and is learnt as a second language at school. High German is usually spoken in religious services, such as when worshipping, preaching and so on, but the Amish comprehend little of it, if any. Meindl (2009) uses the term “preacher’s dilemma” when describing the High German variety because the audience and the preachers usually do not have enough proficiency to process the input provided through the sermons.

The speakers of Pennsylvania German still continue speaking this language; however, their language is influenced by English because learning English rather than High German seems to be the priority. This priority or attachment to English is made visible in Mackall (2007):

Although many people assume the Amish speak English only when conducting business or conversing with their non-Amish neighbors, the Amish I know are too pragmatic a people for that. Samuel and Mary have told me that when they’re alone with their family and discussing things they don’t want the youngest children to hear—like which of the kids will be going for a trip into town and who will be staying home—they speak in English, secure in the knowledge that only the bilingual of their brood will understand. (pp.45-46)

As it is indicated above, the attachment to Pennsylvania German is sometimes replaced by pragmatic needs and English begins to take the lead as the medium of communication. Moreover, it is also possible to argue from Mackall’s (2007) accounts that Pennsylvania Dutch was influential on English: “Because English is his second language, Jonas has a



habit of pronouncing certain English words with Pennsylvania Dutch consonants. The *th* sound in the middle of the word *brother*, for instance, Jonas pronounces as a *d* sound” (p. 60).

The interactions with the mainstream culture have brought about some changes with the lifestyle and the language of this society. Recently, English use is not only reduced to concealing meaning so as not to let others understand the decisions. The interaction with the mainstream culture let them become less conservative about some certain values including language. What was once unheard of or unorthodox has now become established and the enviable level of community mindedness fall into question. Fuller (1999) portrays the changing spirit of the once unquestioned values:

The participants in this study report that the Midwestern Anabaptist communities in which they grew up are gradually becoming less conservative, although they remain Old Order Amish-telephones are common in barns and are creeping into homes, clothing colors are getting lighter, and the women's hair coverings are shrinking. In addition, as farming becomes a less viable lifestyle for all community members, contact with the mainstream society-and with it, use of English-increases. (p. 39)

It is clear from the given accounts that there is a kind of mutual interaction between English and Pennsylvania German. How should we read this linguistic interaction then? Is it a natural outcome of cultural interaction between the two societies or should we attribute this to language loss? Or should we interpret the language contact between these two languages optimistically as English, in Fuller's words, “the role of best supporting actress rather than the leading lady.” (p. 53). An Amish woman implied her reaction to English influence on their language as follows, "We have a lot of English in our German, but it has always been like that" (Meindl, 2009, p. 1). According to the author, this sentence has two implications: the first is that there is a great influence of English language and the second is that this impact is quite normal.

The scope of this paper is limited with the loss of Pennsylvania German with reference to language loss and language planning. It is better to see what sort of linguistic changes have taken place in their life.

### **Linguistic Changes in Pennsylvania German**

There are controversial findings with respect to the language change and language maintenance in the Amish community. Hurst and McConnell (2010) point out that the most distinguishing aspect of the Amish community is the use of Pennsylvania German and according to them this language is neither endangered nor supported by continual arrivals of immigrants. Moreover, it is also true that it has survived more than most immigrant languages in the USA (Fuller, 1999). The general length of a minority language is usually three generations (Romaine, 2000). When the first generation Amish people arrived in the USA, they were speaking the minority language. Afterwards, the common expectations are bilinguals in English and Pennsylvania German and, with the third generation, the majority language is usually acquired. However, this was not true for the Amish because remaining detached from the mainstream culture or outside world, they maintained their language for many years. However, change was unavoidable and the impact of English language became visible at linguistic level.

Huffines (1997) provides an analysis of the outcomes of language contact between English and Pennsylvania German. According to him, Pennsylvania German has been influenced by English both at the surface and the underlying structures. He groups the impact of English language on four grounds, namely vocabulary, noun system, verb system and syntactic constructions. To mention each precisely, at lexical level, the Amish speakers are deeply influenced by the English word borrowings. Even for a simple and commonly used word such as “Auto”, they substitute its English corresponding: car (See Appendix for further examples). At morphological level, we see the disappearance of the Dative Case. Both through the use of personal pronouns and prepositions, they tend to avoid the use of the dative forms which are normally used in the Pennsylvania German and this affects pronouns, articles and adjective endings. Moreover, the expressing aspect in the verb system, particularly on expressing duration and iterations could be noted as changes which are in the direction of English. At syntax level, the placement of participles (e.g., position of the past participle in independent clauses) and the use of infinitive marking all resemble or smell English. Finally, phonology is an area where the influence of English is least experienced. Specifically, the American retroflex “r” is apparent both in English and Pennsylvania German.



As seen in above examples, the changes are usually externally oriented. In other words, it is not because the Amish people borrow words or forms as they are absent in their language. Instead, things which appear in their language indeed, are somehow imported from the neighboring Americans and such attempts of contact or transference are likely to result in language change. So what could be the reasons for such changes?

### **Reasons for Linguistic Changes**

A comprehensive list of factors that might contribute to language loss is provided in Conklin and Lourie (1983). The causes of language shift could be established at various levels such as political, economic, psychological, and sociolinguistic levels. Baker (2001) categorizes the reasons for language maintenance and language loss into three groups, namely political, social, and demographic factors, cultural factors, and linguistic factors. Moreover, he tabulates the reasons for language shift (see Table 1).

The beginning line for a possible language loss, in a wealth of reasons, could be lack of adequate opportunities to develop literacy. Despite some attempts to transcribe Pennsylvania German into written language, it usually does not go beyond a colloquial dialect. Therefore, the connection with the future generations might be lost at somewhere.

Reading the Table 1 simply, one can come up with some reasons for the language maintenance of Pennsylvania German by looking at the left column and language loss in the right column. There is an implied “if x, than y” equation in the table, even though the relationship between language maintenance and language shift is not that linear in some parts. To be more specific, some languages might still disappear despite the precautions of language maintenance or language safety cannot be guaranteed by the efforts (Crystal, 2003). Or if we put this for the Amish people, Pennsylvania German have not survived because all factors encouraging language maintenance were valid for this society. Thus, rather than going into overgeneralizations, it is better to see what was valid and what was not, so that better inferences could be drawn.



**Table 1**

*Factors Encouraging Language Loss and Maintenance*

Factors Encouraging Language Maintenance	Factors Encouraging Language Loss
A. Political, Social and Demographic Factors	
1. Large number of speakers living closely together.	Small number of speakers well dispersed.
2. Recent and/or continuing in-migration	Long and stable residence
3. Close proximity to homeland and ease of travel to homeland.	Homeland remote or inaccessible.
4. Preference to return to homeland with many actually returning	Low rate of return to homeland and/or little intention to return
5. Homeland language community intact.	Homeland language community decaying in vitality
6. Stability in occupation	Occupational shift, especially from rural to urban areas.
7. Employment available where home language is spoken daily.	Employment requires use of the majority language.
8. Low social and economic mobility in main occupations.	High social and economic mobility in main occupations.
9. Low level of education to restrict social and economic mobility, but educated and articulate community leaders loyal to their language community.	High levels of education giving social and economic mobility. Potential community leaders are alienated from their language community by education.
10. Ethnic Group identity rather an identity with majority language community via nativism, racism, and ethnic discrimination.	Ethnic identity is denied to achieve social and vocational mobility; this is forced by nativism, racism, and ethnic





	discrimination.
<b>B. Cultural Factors</b>	
1. Mother-tongue institutions (e.g. schools, community organizations, mass media, leisure activities).	Lack of mother-tongue institutions.
2. Cultural and religious ceremonies in the home language.	Cultural and religious ceremonies in the majority language.
3. Ethnic identity strongly tied to home language.	Ethnic identity defined by factors other than language.
4. Nationalistic aspirations as a language group.	Few nationalistic aspirations.
5. Mother tongue the homeland national language	Mother tongue not the only homeland national language, or mother tongue spans several nations.
6. Emotional attachment to mother tongue giving self-identity and ethnicity.	Self-identity derived from factors other than shared home language.
7. Emphasis on family ties and community cohesion	Low emphasis on family and community ties. High emphasis on individual achievement.
8. Emphasis on education in mother tongue schools to enhance ethnic awareness.	Emphasis on education in majority language.
9. Low emphasis on education if in majority language.	Acceptance of majority language education.
10. Culture unlike majority language culture.	Culture and religion similar to that of the majority language.
<b>C. Linguistic Factors</b>	



1. Mother tongue is standardized and exists in written form.	Mother tongue is non-standard and/or not in written form.
2. Use of an alphabet which makes printing and literacy relatively easy.	Use of writing system which is expensive to reproduce and relatively difficult to learn.
3. Home language has international status	Home language of little or no international importance.
4. Home language literacy used in community and with homeland.	Illiteracy (or alitercy) in the home language.
5. Flexibility in the development of the home language (e.g. limited use of the new terms from the majority language.)	No tolerance of new terms from majority language; or too much tolerance of loan words leading to mixing and eventual language loss.

(Adapted from Baker, 2001, pp. 60-61-62)

### **Political, Social and Demographic Factors**

With respect to social, political and demographic factors, it could be maintained that language loss for the Amish people is not remote. However, how such a language could achieve survival from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century on needs reasoning. To begin with, how Pennsylvania German survived for years is not a coincidence. When discussing language shift and vitality, Baker (2001) attracts attention to the demographic factors which might play a key role on the topic. He argues that the strong religious ties of the Amish people let them not interact with the majority language and revive its continuity. The commitment to religious life is also mentioned in Huffines (1997), who predicts that Pennsylvania German will survive more than two or three decades. As in the case of Arabic in Islam and Hebrew in Judaism, religion could be a cement to keep a language tied together to its linguistic conventions. Similarly, arguing that sometimes a special function might play a key role to retain language, Romaine (2000) attributes language maintenance to strong religious ties, “if an immigrant language has a special function, such as German for the Pennsylvanian



Dutch in their religious ceremonies, the language will more likely keep a stronghold within the community” (p.50).

Moreover, emotional attachment to identity and relatively little emphasis on education in minority language are some other factors which could extend the possibilities of language maintenance. The Amish consider themselves different from the outside world; therefore, the need to establish and maintain a separate identity has been a long-term aim. As Johnson-Weiner (1997) argues, English is taught to the Amish people without exposing them to the majority language. Therefore, establishing a genuine need to help learners get exposed to the authentic situations is not aimed in language instruction materials. Moreover, that the American and the Amish culture are considerably different, as stated above, adds weight to the idea of language maintenance.

However, considering the growing linguistic impact of English on their language, it is possible to have some concerns for the present and future. Taking the many factors that create language loss into consideration, and that apply to the Amish people in most cases, it is possible to suggest that the future of Pennsylvania German is bleak. To begin with, places where they live are quite dispersed, even if they live tied up within the society. In 2010's figures, there are 249.000 Amish people living in the USA, but these people usually in different places such as Pennsylvania, Alabama, Illinois, Kansas, Mississippi, Ontario, Canada and so on. Thus, detached settlement could trigger language loss in that settlements with smaller numbers might be prone to feel more bounded by an English speaking world. Moreover, despite the fact that the Amish people are known for their mobility which goes back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, resistance to chance and use modern vehicles could be hampering their opportunities to maintain their language. What modern vehicles such as cars and buses have to do with language preservation, in fact, is opportunities to transmit the language into other settings. As the Amish people moved to the New World to practice their religion freely, they do not seek for a return to their homeland.

Stoessel's study (2002) shows that quality and quantity of language contacts on social network compositions may have an influence on language maintenance. Stossel wanted to learn whether the immigrant women who live outside support groups were maintainers or shifters. Of the people interviewed, the ones having stronger networks were found to be



more language maintainer. When the same is applied to the Amish, there is great food for thought for their centuries old language maintenance.

### **Cultural Factors**

As for the cultural factors that might lead to a language loss, religion, which has been cited to be playing a cementing or facilitating role for the preservation of the High German does not seem to be equally supportive for Pennsylvania German. Since institutions and institutionalization are religious-led or governed by Confessions, lack of opportunities to practice in mother tongue in those institutions could result in a language loss. One side of the coin is that religious activities are not held, at least in the majority language. However, the other side tells that the language spoken in those institutions are not usually intelligible to the audience (see above).

The emotional attachment to identity, which resulted in the separation and less contact with Americans also results in attachment to language. This is probably a reason why Pennsylvania German, among other immigrant languages that faced or have been facing extinction in America, still survives. The speakers of this language are strongly tied to their identity through language. If nationalistic aspirations which make them remain different from the outside world and the Amish people's strong commitment to family ties are taken into account, it is possible to argue that it is these cultural reasons that greatly contribute to the preservation of this linguistic variety.

### **Linguistic Factors**

Linguistic indicators usually point to a language loss. To begin with, the mother tongue is transmitted to the new generations orally. Therefore, passing the language from written sources is not still a common practice. Moreover, this language and people might have widespread recognition, but since this variety is not used apart from local contexts, it is quite difficult for this language to become widespread. This situation puts the responsibility of language maintenance on its native speakers' shoulder. Moreover, since the speakers of Pennsylvania German are usually illiterate in the sense that they cannot read and write in Pennsylvania German, it makes the task of transmission far more difficult. American English is thought at schools; however, there are many Amish people who are not in favor of schooling as the topics taught at schools are not relevant to them (Meindl, 2009).



Moreover, since most the written media used by the Amish people are printed in American English, it is also possible to question the chances of exposure to the mother tongue. The absence of elites, who have been the catalysts for changes, might also contribute negatively to the promotion of the language.

## **Conclusion**

### **Implications for Future: Language Planning and Maintenance**

Considering the above analysis, it is possible to come up with some suggestions for future, though a language loss for Pennsylvania German is not the case for near future.

Though the number of language is not known for certain, there is one thing that is obvious: many of the languages are dying or subject to death. In the last five hundred years, about half of the known language in the world died. Now a majority of people, as far as 90% use the most used languages and only as few as 600 out of an estimated 6000 are thought to be safe (Nettle & Romaine, 2000).

Several studies in literature seem to stress the role of religion as an institution contributing considerably to language maintenance. It is not only the language but also the social life which is governed by religion. With all these in mind, it is possible to suggest some insights into language maintenance and language planning. Even though religion or religious institutions should be credited as they govern most walks of Amish people's life along with their mother tongue, there is no warranty that this will be the case forever and, considering that there might be people who reject Church allegiance in this community, it is not certain that it will apply to all Amish people either. Possible changes in values might put the hierarchy of values upside down and language maintenance, which is closely related with the Amish people's devotion to religion, should not be reduced to religion or religious institutions.

In the long-run, resistance to change and contact with the outside world does not sound to be a sustainable deed. When describing language death, Thomason (2001) points to the shrinking role of stigmatization. Following the same line or argument, once the Pennsylvania German starts to shrink in various domains, the situation may get worse and this minority language might be stigmatized.



Moreover, when three routes to language death, which Thomason (2001) described - attrition, grammatical replacement and no change at all- are considered, further reasons to get worried about the future of Pennsylvania German may appear. For the Pennsylvania German, two of the mentioned reasons seem to hold true: attrition, which refers to the contact induced changes such as lexical borrowings, and grammatical replacement which is apparent through semantic changes and the loss of dative case.

Although there are no linear formulas for language maintenance and language death (Holmes, 2008), a tentative formula might be better than none. I think, in the case of a threat of a language loss, the world will not be insensitive to the revival needs of this community. However, rather than taking deliberate actions, as was the case for Maori language, something could be done to avoid possible language loss or death. Therefore, as the saying goes “it is better to be safe than sorry”.

Since there are three languages spoken in the Amish community, a status planning should be made so as to decide where and when to use which language because such a planning might make norms and rules clearer (Spolsky, 2010). The domains where Pennsylvania German is used should be increased. Corpus planning and language acquisition planning should also be the next steps to let this language go out of the boundaries of its institutions and native speakers. As Cooper (1996, p. 31) put it, “restricting language planning to the work of authoritative institutions might be restrictive”. That is to say, people from different language origins and different circles should be supportive for maintenance. However, with the English-only policies imposed (Adkins, 2009), the maintenance of this language might be really difficult.





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*Appendix*

Table 2.

*Examples for Loans in the Core Vocabulary*

<b>Family</b>	trailer	shed
aunt	van	shop
brother in law	<b>Health</b>	<b>Plants &amp; animals</b>
dictionary	dementia	alfalfa
family	doctor	clover
family reunion	hospital	corn (some: welschken)
nephew	wheelchair	crop
niece	<b>Daily life</b>	guinea chicken
uncle	cabinet	milo
<b>Food</b>	color	peacock
breakfast	furniture	skunk
gravy	nap	<b>Verbs (integrated, with PG inflection)</b>
hamburgers	sale barn	to babysit
ice cream	retired	to butcher
meal	settlement	to chose
sandwich	<b>Farm &amp; work</b>	to fix
supper	chores	to judge
<b>Machines</b>	construction	to move
refrigerator	custom bailing	to retire
generator	dairy farm	to switch
heater	factory	to wrap
phone	fence	
tire	fertilizer	
tractor	lumber	

*Adapted from Meindl, 2009, p. 57.*