Chapter 8


B. Richard Page

1 Introduction

As mentioned by Page and Putnam (this volume), changes in bilingual grammars can be bidirectional. In cases of L1 attrition, the heritage language grammar may influence the dominant L2 grammar (Schmid and Köpke 2007). In fact, phonological features of the heritage language can be found in the speech of monolingual speakers of the majority language in areas of heavy immigration. For example, Purnell, Salmons and Tepeli (2005) show such a substrate effect in Wisconsin English where final fortition is found in communities that were once predominantly German speaking. It is therefore no surprise that phonological traces of Pennsylvania German are well attested in areas of Pennsylvania where Pennsylvania German was once (or still is) commonly spoken (see, e.g., Huffines 1980, 1984; Raith 1981; Burridge 1998; Anderson 2011).

This study examines the frequency of the laxing of unstressed /i/, a pervasive feature of Pennsylvania German English, among Pennsylvania German Anabaptists in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania. Previous studies of Pennsylvania German English, such as Huffines (1980, 1984), Raith (1981), Enninger et al. (1984), and Burridge (1998), have largely focused on how differences in socio-religious affiliation correlate with the occurrence of contact-induced features in the English of Pennsylvania Germans. Studies examining the verbal behavior of Anabaptists often divide them into three groups: (1) Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites, (2) Transitional Anabaptists, and (3) Progressive Mennonites (e.g., Raith 1981, Burridge 1998, Keiser 2009). Perhaps surprisingly, the group of bilinguals who speaks English with the fewest number of contact-induced features in all studies are the Old Order Anabaptists (Huffines 1980,

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Raith 1981, Burridge 1998). Huffines (1980), Raith (1981) and Burridge (1996) all attribute the lack of interference from Pennsylvania German to diglossia among the Old Order Anabaptist for whom Pennsylvania German is the L(ow) variety used for oral communications with other Old Order sectarians and English is the H(igh) variety learned in school and used for writing and for communications with outsiders. In contrast, the Transitional Anabaptists and non-plain Pennsylvania German speakers do not exhibit diglossia and are undergoing language shift. Even though these speakers are more assimilated to the English-speaking society surrounding them, their English phonology exhibits more contact-induced features from Pennsylvania German than does the English of the Old Order Anabaptists (Raith 1981, Burridge 1998).

This study departs from previous research by looking at the speech of Pennsylvania German Anabaptists who belonged to different denominations but were born before 1940, a time when Pennsylvania German was actively transmitted in Mifflin County across the Anabaptist continuum and when the division between Old Order Amish and the Beachy Amish, a transitional group, was manifested theologically but not yet in terms of dress, use of automobiles and electricity, or the maintenance of diglossia. In addition, this study examines the laxing of /i/ among bilingual speakers who were raised in an Amish home but later joined a progressive Mennonite congregation. Not only do the manifestations of identity for a socioreligious group like the Beachy Amish evolve over time and possibly lead to language shift, but children who grow up in the diglossic environment of a plain Anabaptist community may choose to join a progressive Mennonite church as an adult and marry a monolingual spouse. Thus, this study will look at the extent to which the laxing of /i/ corresponds to childhood church membership and bilingualism as well as to current church membership.

The chapter is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a brief history of the Pennsylvania Germans with particularly attention paid to Kishacoquillas Valley, popularly known as Big Valley, in Mifflin County, Pennsylvania. Section 3 surveys the phonological characteristics of Pennsylvania German English and a justification for an examination of unstressed /i/. Section 4 describes the methodology and the participants. Section 5 presents the results. Section 6 discusses the findings of the study. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2 Pennsylvania German and Its Speakers

The ancestors of today’s Pennsylvania Germans came to Pennsylvania and surrounding areas primarily prior to the American Revolutionary War. Of the approximately 81,000 German immigrants in the period from 1717–1775, close