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Introduction

One of the most prominent features of linguistic research is the examination, description and explanation of language change. Comparing languages such as English and German makes us realize that their similarities in syntax, phonology and lexis are not accidental, but that some set of changes occurred in the past which can account for the differences between the two modern languages. However, it is not only the systemic properties of a language which can change, for instance changes in the pronunciation or the regular positioning of words in a sentence, but its sociolinguistic properties, such as the geographic area in which a language is spoken, the situations in which the use of a language is acceptable and the folk-linguistic status of a language. In this paper aspects of the history of a particular language are presented to demonstrate how certain sociolinguistic changes can affect the way a language is used and perceived both by its speakers and in the outside world, in particular with respect to the question of whether a linguistic variety is seen to be an independent language or ‘merely’ a dialect of a supra-variety. I will focus on Low German (Niederdeutsch, Plattdüütsch), a language predominantly spoken in Northern Germany which has been subject to a wide range of sociolinguistic changes during its history.¹

¹ My gratitude goes to Annelie and Hans Voss who initiated my first encounter with Low German in 1976. Also, I wish to thank Elspeth Buchanan and Rachel Spiller for interesting and illuminating discussion on the subject. Finally, thank you to Geoffrey West for his patience and help in correcting my English.
Low German

Low German is a language variety predominantly spoken in Northern Germany. German dialects are traditionally divided into two major groups, High German (HG) and Low German (LG), with subdivisions of High German into Upper German and Central German. This division was suggested as early as the thirteenth century with Berthold von Regensburg’s famous quotation (cited in Glück 2002: 25):

Ir wizet wol, daz die Niderlender und die Oberlender gar unglîch sint an der sprâche und an den siten. die von Oberlant, dort her von Zürich, die redent vil anders danne die von Niderlande, von Sahsen, die sint ungelîch an der sprâche.

Today, the traditional distinction between LG and HG is almost solely based on the absence (in LG) or presence (in HG) of the Second Sound Shift, that is, the shift from voiceless stops to affricates and fricatives which distinguishes High German from all other Germanic languages. This is an important point for our discussion. As we will see below, the ‘language or dialect’ question has had important political repercussions in the very recent history of LG, in that LG was eligible for protection under the European Charter for Minority or Regional Languages only if classified as a language, not a dialect. Hence, knowing the vast range of criteria that distinguish languages from each other (in their phonology, morphology etc.) we should keep in mind that the oldest and most fundamental grouping of German language varieties rests principally on the absence of a sound change that affected a mere three consonants, and that hence it can be argued that LG is not as different from HG as the traditional view claims. This is particularly important for the question of whether LG is an independent language or ‘only’ a German dialect.

Apart from the Second Sound Shift, there are other systemic differences between LG and HG, such as the lack of the Central German diphthongization (LG min niebes bus vs. HG mein neues Haus) or the loss of nasals in fif’ (vs. HG fünf), goos (vs. HG Gans). Syntactically, there is little difference between HG dialects and LG though there are significant differences between the morpho-syntax of Standard German and LG, for example in the much greater use of analytic constructions such as periphrastic possessives
or auxiliary *do* in subclauses. With regard to vocabulary, LG texts are by and large comprehensible to a Standard German speaker, not least because of its high degree of borrowing from High German, as shown for example in the following sentence uttered by an Emsland farmer contrasted with its ‘pure’ LG translation:

\[
\begin{align*}
die Ems \, / \, di \, ï \, soll \, nich \, so \, schöö\,n \, asn \, Rhein \, / \, aber \, wi \, Emsländer \, / \, wi \, sind \, doch \, einigermaßen \, schtolz \, up \, unsen \, fluss \\
\text{(actual speech sample; my bolds – NL)}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
de Ems \, / \, de \, mag \, wal \, nich \, so \, moj \, wern \, as'n \, Rhein \, / \, men \, wi \, Emsländer \, / \, wi \, bint \, doch \, orig \, scholt \, up \, em \\
\text{('correct' Emsland LG: Stellmacher 2000: 94)}
\end{align*}
\]

Die Ems, die ist wohl nicht so schön wie der Rhein, aber wir Emsländer, wir sind doch einigermaßen stolz auf unseren Fluss.

(Standard written German)

Sociolinguistically and historically there are fundamental differences between LG and HG. HG dialects were ‘full languages’ up until the emergences of supraregional written languages (*Schreibsprachen*) in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when a sociolinguistic verticalization of the language varieties in Germany took place (Reichmann 1988). In the seventeenth century, this verticalization resulted in the creation of a prestige standard language, accompanied by an intense metalinguistic discussion about which dialect, if any, would be appropriate to become a national / standard German language. With this, the dialects became restricted to the oral domain so that, by the late seventeenth century, one was no longer able to deduce the regional origin of a text from its language. Today, the use of HG dialects is almost exclusively restricted to oral and private language. Compared to their Northern counterparts, almost all of whom are monolingual Standard German speakers, a much higher percentage of speakers in Central and in particular Southern Germany can comfortably switch between the local / regional dialect and (a regionalized form of) Standard German. However, just as in Northern Germany, dialect use in the South and in particular in Central Germany is on the decline, especially amongst younger speakers.

The early history of Low German parallels the histories of other German varieties in that it was increasingly used as a written language from the eighth and ninth centuries and as the vernacular spoken language of its region at least
up until the fourteenth century. From the fourteenth century, HG and LG developed in different ways: LG became the lingua franca of the Hanseatic League and was used as an international written language throughout Northern Europe. From the sixteenth century, LG lost its international importance and its geographical domain became reduced to Northern German territories. Subsequently, the language suffered a loss of prestige and was stigmatized as unacceptable in all public and most private domains for at least four hundred years. It lost its status as a written language and its oral domains became ever fewer so that today, LG as a native language is on the whole restricted to older speakers in rural areas. However, since the 1970s there has been a renewed interest in LG (and German regional varieties as a whole), and public and private initiatives are concerned with promoting both use and awareness of the language. After lobbying, LG became the only German language variety to meet the qualifications for inclusion in the European Charter of Minority or Regional Languages.

The beginnings

The first Low German texts to survive date from the ninth century, which marks the beginning of the Old Saxon period (OS, c. 800–1100). Before this, all linguistic evidence is in the form of place and personal names; there are no surviving texts as such. During the Old Saxon period, the written language of Northern Germany was almost exclusively Latin (Peters 1998: 113) and the few vernacular texts (literary and theological) that were produced and copied were written in a small number of monasteries. There are no surviving LG texts at all from the twelfth century and consequently the Middle Low German (MLG) period begins in the thirteenth century (c. 1200–1550) with legal and business prose texts (documents and charters, legal codices (Sachsenspiegel)) but also general prose (Sächsische Weltchronik) (Niebaum 1986: 18). Interestingly, poetry was not written in MLG but in the ‘poetic language’ of the time, Middle High German (MHG), showing that Northern poets such as Heinrich von Veldeke and Heinrich von Halberstadt were aware of the greater prestige and wider geographical range of the Southern
*Dichtersprache.* Importantly, this difference in prestige between a MHG and a MLG variety only pertained to *poetry* and did not spread to other text types. Thus so far, we can witness linguistic *processes* in the history of LG in the form of a change from oral to written communication, the range of text types in which the language is used (from none to literary/theological to business/legal/theological) and in the prestige of the language (sufficient prestige to be used in prose but not in poetry).

**LG = Hansesprache?**

The most distinctive feature of the history of LG is its function as the language of the Hanseatic League from 1370–1500. Recently, scholars have been keen to dispel the myth that Middle Low German can be identified as the *Hanse sprache* since there was both a lot of MLG outside the Hanseatic League, and a lot of Hanseatic business that was not transmitted in MLG (Peters 1987: 66), especially since the language reached its peak in the late fifteenth century when the economic power of the Hanseatic league had already been declining for a couple of generations. However, it cannot be denied that without the international success of the Hanseatic League, LG would not have become an international language.

The Hanseatic League (*Hanse*) was the dominant commercial union in Northern Europe from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. It began when German merchants formed associations with each other to provide protection against robbers and pirates. Using Lübeck as their base, Westphalian and Saxon merchants expanded northwards and eastwards across the Baltic to trade with cities in Scandinavia, Russia and what are now the Baltic states, supporting the foundation of cities such as Riga, Tallinn, Gdansk and establishing permanent trading enclaves (*Kontore*) in many cities such as Brugge (Flanders), Bergen (Norway), Novgorod and London. In the fourteenth century, about a hundred towns and cities were members of the Hanseatic league (Friedland 1991: 203ff.). The organization was always commercial rather than political in nature and had no permanent army, navy or government. However, there were periodic assemblies (*Hansetage*, the last one in 1669) and an authoritative
Law Court in Lübeck, which grew to become the second-largest city in Germany (after Cologne) with 25,000 inhabitants. The prominent position of Lübeck was further strengthened by its central geographic location on the cross-roads between Scandinavia and the Alps, and Russia and England. The League declined when cities’ individual interests started to grow apart in the early fifteenth century, with a simultaneous strengthening of the territorial states (Lithuania and Poland merged in 1386, Union of Denmark, Sweden and Norway in 1397, increase of Dutch and later also English powers in controlling the seafarade). The League was never dissolved, but it lost its dominant position by the sixteenth century.

The League’s most pre-eminent city was Lübeck whose language was LG. Hence if any language was to replace Latin in international communication, LG would be the first candidate. Most chanceries changed from Latin to LG in the early fourteenth century and the Hanseatic institutions in Lübeck were in fact rather late in their switch, which took place in 1369 with the first writing of the Hanseatic protocols in LG (Peters 2000a: 1413). Why the Hanseatic league abandoned Latin is not clear – it certainly had enough power and prestige to continue with Latin. But the use of LG was probably just much more convenient as it was an easier means of communication for North Germans and speakers of other Germanic languages such as Swedish and Flemish. The foundation of German writing schools (dudesche scryfschoLEN) in the fourteenth century, where future merchants and administrators were trained in accountancy but also the reading and writing of (Low) German, corroborates the impression that Latin was not considered functionally adequate in the trading world. Thus, here we see the continuation of the linguistic process of extension of functional domain: the vernacular language continued to replace Latin in an increasing number of text types.

Nonetheless, this is a process that occurred all over Europe. The history of LG and other vernacular languages is similar in this respect. However, LG was so prestigious during the Hanseatic period that it exceeded the prestige of other language in the area. LG was adopted as the primary lingua franca and was used, not just in communications between Hanseatic trading enclaves (Kon-tore) across Northern Europe, but also in correspondence between Hanseatic cities and Scandinavian rulers and Flemish cities (Dollinger 1989: 342). There is some evidence that interpreters were used, especially in Kontore which were outside the Germanic world such as Reval (Tallinn) and Novgorod.
Here trade with locals was conducted through intermediaries and it is likely that some merchants learnt Russian,\(^2\) thus showing that the prestige of LG did not extend to making fur or honey traders in Eastern Europe learn the language. Depending on the specialist area of trade, merchants would have a knowledge of French, English, possibly Italian, and certainly Dutch and High German (Peters 2000b: 1502). Anecdotal evidence includes the correspondence from 1375 between two Hanseatic merchants giving advice that when coming to London, one should enlist the services of an interpreter who speaks French (Peters 1987: 79), or the fact that in 1351 the Brugge Hansekontor would use Flemish when corresponding with the city council of Brugge, but Latin (not LG!) when communicating with the Hanse in Hamburg (Peters 2000b: 1499). The use of LG outside the native German areas was particularly prominent in the Baltic, especially in Scandinavia where the use of LG was facilitated by the relative similarity with Scandinavian languages\(^3\) and the general bilingualism of parts of the Danish and Swedish bourgeoisie (Peters 2000b: 1502). However, the idea that ‘pure’ LG was used as a means of communication has recently been challenged in favour of the suggestion that in Northern Europe a type of semi-communication was employed (cf. articles in Braunmüller and Diercks 1993), as is still the case within Scandinavia today (albeit without LG of course).

With the dominance of Lübeck and the use of LG as its language in supra-regional communication, Lübeck LG gained in prestige and a process of standardization can be observed in the Hanseatic period: ‘Im klassischen Mnd. tritt die Variantenvielfalt zugunsten großräumiger Vereinheitlichung zurück. Das bereitet der lübischen Norm den Boden’ (Stellmacher 2000: 40). This should not be compared with ‘traditional’ processes of standardization (cf. Haugen 1984, and Langer 2003 for an application of Haugen 1983 to LG), but rather involved the avoidance of certain non-Lübeck LG variants. Crucially, there is no evidence that Lübeck LG was explicitly taught as a prestige variety, nor is there any substantial metalinguistic evidence for its prestige.

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2 The importance of learning Russian, but also the continued use of LG as a native language, is attested in foreign language grammars published as late as Tönnies Fenne’s *Manual of Spoken Russian* (1607; cf. Hammerich and Jakobson 1970).

3 It is estimated that between 33% and 50% of modern Swedish words are loans from LG (cf. Jahr 1995: 126)!
Nonetheless, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, LG texts show an increasing tendency towards uniformity where in general Lübeck-specific linguistic features – lexical (*vaken* rather than *dicke* ‘often’), morphological (<en>-plural) and phonological (*uns*, not *us*) – are preferred over others and used in areas outside the Lübeck language domain (Peters 2000b: 150ff.).

In sum, LG was subject to various processes in the Middle Ages: its use as a written language increased dramatically (*Verschriftlichung*) at the expense of Latin, its geographical range and number of speakers expanded beyond the native area of Northern Germany, and its prestige increased as seen in its use as an international lingua franca as the language of the Hanseatic League. Finally, there was a process of standardization, although this was never completed.

The decline of Low German: from international language to little dialect (1500–1650)

The Hanseatic League went into decline in the fifteenth century and had lost its dominant position as a trading union by 1500 due to a range of factors, including the discovery of new markets in America and India, and the strengthening of territorial powers (Scandinavian countries, Russia, the Netherlands etc.) (cf. Dollinger 1989 or Friedland 1991 for discussion). The language of the Hanseatic league remained relatively unaffected by this, and many scholars see the fifteenth century as a period when LG flourished rather than declined. From 1500 onwards, however, we see a marked decline of LG as a written language, leading to the virtually complete replacement of printed LG by HG by 1650. Whilst MLG was used by everyone, after 1600 LG was a language of the lower classes (Lasch 1926: 422). A number of reasons have been suggested for this change of the ‘official’ language of the area but overall, scholars are somewhat at a loss to account for its speed and completeness: ‘Der vollständig und relativ schnell ablaufende Schreibsprachenwechsel ruft auch heute noch eine gewisse Ratlosigkeit hervor’ (Peters 1998: 122).

One frequently cited factor is the invention of printing in 1450 when many HG books were increasingly traded in LG-speaking areas. Whilst it is
true that this meant that relatively cheap HG texts became available in Northern Germany, printers had no reservations about publishing in LG, and Lübeck became a major LG printing centre around 1500 when its geographical and economic position as the gateway to Scandinavia became a major factor in the dissemination of books. The sheer number of printed books shows that lack of texts cannot have been a reason for the decline of the language:


Nevertheless, statistics document very clearly the decline of the language in printed, i.e. public, discourse:

Low German Prints:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C16</td>
<td>2,466</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C17</td>
<td>1,103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C18</td>
<td>992</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in total: 4,920

(Borchling/Claußen 1931–6: Einführung, no page)

The Reformation was another radical development in the sixteenth century. A key aspect of Lutheran thought was that the Bible should be directly accessible to the believer and hence it was necessary to convey its message in a language comprehensible to the target audience. Luther himself emphasized that for his Bible translation, he was keen to use a type of German that was genuine and not wooden or stilted (cf. his Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen). Hence one would expect the Reformation to promote the use of LG as the vernacular language in Northern Germany, and consequently we find the publication of as many as 2.4 LG Bibles⁴ between 1522–1621 and the use of LG in church services (Dollinger 1989: 343). It is not entirely clear why LG ceased to be used in church services but reasons cited in the secondary literature include:

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⁴ Incidentally, the first LG Bible was published in 1494 in Lübeck, well before the Reformation. For a discussion of the ‘quality’ of the most famous LG Lutheran Bible, the Bugenhagen-Bible, cf. Francis (2001).
• the relative lack of LG universities so that vicars had to be trained in the HG universities such as Wittenberg or Erfurt
• the large number of clergymen from HG-speaking areas who occupied important professional positions in the North
• the prestige of Luther’s own (HG) German as the ‘real’ language of the Lutheran Bible.

This list of reasons is not entirely compelling, since one can just as easily imagine the Reformation using LG in the LG areas. After all, the Reformation in Sweden and Denmark used Swedish and Danish respectively as its languages, not HG, so why did the same not happen with regard to LG?

We have descriptions only of what happened, not why it happened. Overall, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the change from LG to HG in many different stages, differing from town to town, institution to institution and text type to text type. For example, compare the marked decline of the number of theological printed texts after the second half of the sixteenth century, the change from LG to HG in city chanceries, and the change in schools:

Low German Theological prints

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year range</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1550–1559</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1620–1629</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1670–1679</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1699</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lindow 1926, cited in Stellmacher 2000: 75)

Language change in city chanceries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berlin</td>
<td>1504</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wernigerode</td>
<td>1550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madgeburg</td>
<td>1570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostock</td>
<td>1598</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dortmund</td>
<td>1610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandenburg</td>
<td>1525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goslar</td>
<td>1565</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Münster</td>
<td>1571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bochum</td>
<td>1599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schleswig</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lübeck</td>
<td>1615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danzig</td>
<td>1550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiel</td>
<td>1570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Göttingen</td>
<td>1590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braunschweig</td>
<td>1600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husum</td>
<td>1608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emden</td>
<td>1640</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Stellmacher 2000: 70)
Sociolinguistic Changes in the History of Low German

Change from LG => HG in schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark Brandenburg</td>
<td>1550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdeburg</td>
<td>1580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braunschweig, Westfalen, Lüneburg</td>
<td>1630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecklenburg, Pommern</td>
<td>1640</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lübeck, Hamburg, Bremen, Schleswig.-Holstein</td>
<td>1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oldenburg, Ostfriesland</td>
<td>1670/80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Gabrielsson 1932/3: 78f.)

Thus, here we see a general process in the form of the change from LG to HG which can be witnessed in many different smaller changeovers (processes) dependent on a range of factors.

Plattdeutsch – ‘ein Grund zum Lachen’

By the seventeenth century, LG survived only privately and orally with very few exceptions where it was printed, such as in poems commissioned specially for family events such as funerals or weddings (Ahlmann 1991) or in comic or mocking references to peasants in Baroque drama. LG underwent the process of sociolinguistic stigmatization. Not only was it not considered fit to be used in formal writing, but its use also brought up a range of connotations which identified the speaker as being of lower birth, poorer education, ill manners, and so on. The transformation from an international lingua franca to an undesirable dialect had taken less than 200 years.

As a spoken language, LG survived in private conversations even amongst the bourgeoisie until the late eighteenth century. From then on, however, the upper and middle classes would use LG only when addressing servants, peasants or craftsmen (Niebaum 1986: 21). Peters (1998: 124) places the change from LG to HG in oral language in the mid-nineteenth century for the bour-

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6 *Meißnisch* or Upper Saxon underwent a similar loss of prestige from being the most revered variety of German in the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century to being the least esteemed dialect in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.
geoisie and city population, and for the rural population from the 1930s onwards. This change has not yet been completed (there are still a number of native speakers of LG), but neither has the trend from LG to HG been reversed, despite the efforts since the 1970s (see below). This change from LG to HG over the last 400 or so years has led scholars to suggest that LG underwent the process from language to (a collection of) dialect(s) (e.g. Gernentz 1980: 85).

Support for Low German

Despite the radical decline of Low German as a written and official language from 1500 onwards, there were still learned voices, albeit rarely, who objected to the dominance of HG and who lobbied to promote LG:


In his Veer Schertz Gedichten (1652), Johann Lauremberg presented a dialogue between a HG and a LG speaker who discuss the merits of their respective languages. In the following excerpt, the LG speaker wonders why HG appears to be worth more than LG. He opposes the claim to higher value, arguing that it is LG which is consistent and which has not changed over the years, in contrast to HG, which changes every fifty years or so, as can be seen from older texts.

Ick spreke als myns Grotvaders older Môme sprack.
Wät kann man bringen her vör Argument und Gründe,
Darmit jemand von juw richtig bewisen kunde,
De Mening, dat van der Hochdüüdschen Sprake mehr
Als van unser Nedderdüüdschen tho holden wehr?
Unse Sprake blifft altidt bestendig und vest,
Als se ersten was, even so is se ock lest.
Juwe verendert sick alle vöchristig Jahr,
Dat köonen de Schriften bewisen klar. (cited in Stellmacher 2000: 79)
The most prominent ‘virtues’ of LG over HG are presented as being its greater antiquity ⁷ and a purer pronunciation. In his dissertation *Von unhiliger Verachtung der Plat-Teutschen Sprache* (1704), Bernard Raupach complains about the general discrimination which LG suffers: old LG texts were used as food for mice or packaging material by shopowners! He also claims that the pronunciation of LG is clearer and more exact that the hissing (*Zischen*) of the High Germans. The appeal of LG pronunciation was also noted by HG grammarians such as Adelung: LG is

unter allen deutschen Mundarten in der Wahl und Aussprache der Töne die wohlklängendste, gefälligste und angenehmste, eine Feindin aller hauchenden und zischenden und der meisten blasenden Laute, und des unnützen Aufwandes eines vollen mit vielen hochtönenen Lauten wenig sagenden Mundes. (Adelung 1782: 79)

The support for LG continued in a different way with the publication, in the 1850s, of original poetry by writers such as Klaus Groth (1819–1899), whose work was also partially translated into Dutch, West Frisian and HG, Fritz Reuter (1810–1874) and John Brinckman (1814–1870), who collectively achieved a re-evaluation of LG as something positive (Debus 1996: 20). Their poetry, novels and plays were important for the ‘LG-movement’ in the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century and they are still read and performed in schools and amateur theatre today.

Not everyone agreed with the praise of LG, however. In the early nineteenth century, Ludolf Wienbarg (1834, ‘Soll die plattdeutsche Sprache gepflegt oder ausgerottet werden? Gegen Ersteres und für Letzteres beantwortet’) and Jonas Goldschmidt (1846, ‘Ueber das Plattdeutsche als ein großes Hemmniß jeder Bildung’) argued strongly against the use of LG. Goldschmidt asserted that HG was the official language of Northern Germany and hence political debates and official acts were conducted through the language. This, he felt, prevented monolingual LG speakers, who were still the majority amongst the lower classes of his area, from participating in political processes: ‘[W]ahre Bildung und Plattdeutsch [gehen] heut zu Tage *nicht* Hand

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⁷ This is a contemporary argument which was very popular in the seventeenth century to ‘show’ that one language is ‘better’ than another, as greater antiquity ‘proved’ greater proximity to the Original Language(s) of Babel (see also McLelland and Jones, this volume).
in Hand!’ (Goldschmidt (1846) in Schuppenhauer 1980: 14). He gives the example of a farmer unable to express his views clearly at a council meeting, simply because he does not know HG, rather than because of any lack of intelligence. Thus Goldschmidt’s proposal to extinguish LG is based on rather modern ideas of an ‘applied’ democratization of the people, though nowadays, we would not necessarily agree with his conclusion that one must extinguish LG in order to achieve the goal of spreading democracy.

Thus during the process of decline in actual usage and prestige, a lobby of LG supporters initiated a process of increasing prestige which resulted in the renewed use of LG as a literary and poetical language from 1850 onwards. However, this movement did have its opponents and up until the 1970s, the promotion of LG had little effect in the non-academic population, in that it did little to stop the decline of LG as a native language.

Low German today: ‘An de Wöörd vun Menschen dörf nich röökt warrn’

This LG version of the first sentence of the German constitution⁸ was stamped on all outgoing letters from the previous Prime Minister of Schleswig-Holstein. It shows that today, LG is highly valued as a ‘high status’ token of northern identity and culture.

Despite the efforts by Klaus Groth and his colleagues in the nineteenth century to make LG acceptable in written and poetical discourse, and despite the strong movements to promote Northern-ness and LG (cf. the Aldietsche Bewegung, Debus 1996), the suspicion that LG is not a language to be used in official discourse has not (yet) been overturned. Its connotations remained ‘rurality’ and ‘backwardedness’. Knüppel (1997) reports on the transition from LG to HG in his home village. He contrasts the time during WWII, when children from the city of Bremen were sent to the countryside for protection, with the postwar period, when a very high number of German refugees from

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⁸ HG: ‘Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar.’
the East arrived in Northwestern Germany. During the war, the HG-speaking city children had to acquire the countryside LG in order to fit in with the other schoolchildren, whereas after the war the incomers, that is, the refugees, appeared to have a better command of HG⁹ and were thus at an advantage in school lessons (which had been taught in HG since the seventeenth century). According to Knüppel’s informants, the native children of the village were ridiculed by the refugee children for their poor command of HG in schools, to the extent that parents who had gone to school in the late 1940s and early 1950s chose not to speak LG to their own children to prevent them from undergoing the same experience that they had. Knüppel’s study rests on interviews and hence it is difficult to determine how accurate the informants’ assessment of the situation is. For our purposes it is sufficient to note that the actual speakers of the language perceived it to be such a disadvantage to speak LG that they decided not to pass on the language to their children, despite the notable efforts by ‘respectable’ men such as Klaus Groth and others to promote the language and to persuade speakers that LG is a ‘real’ language. This episode shows the distinction that we have to make between language promotion in learned circles and language use in ‘real’ discourse. The former continues today and has found plenty of support since the 1970s, with the foundation of the *Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache* (INS) in Bremen, the inclusion of reading in LG in the school curriculum, the continuation and establishment of professorial chairs at northern universities and the performance of LG play by amateur drama groups in virtually all major villages and towns. The use of the language, however, continues to decrease despite all this. The typical native use of LG is still restricted to private conversations to speech amongst the elderly and in the countryside. In some areas, such as East and North Frisia and Dithmarschen (SW Schleswig-Holstein), children still become native speakers to some degree, but this is very much an exception.

A 1984 survey conducted to find out to what extent LG was still a living language (Stellmacher 2000: 102ff., cf. also Stellmacher 1997) asserted, to the surprise of many, that 56% of the informants claimed to speak LG

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⁹ This is somewhat surprising since most refugees who settled in the North came from East Prussia and Pomerania, which were also LG-speaking areas. Therefore it is not immediately clear why they would have a better command than the local children in Knüppel’s village.
(35% speak it well or very well) and 66% said that they could understand LG well or very well. These results, implying that 8 million people still knew LG, did not tie in very well with the overall perception that LG was a language on its deathbed. Menge has criticized parts of the survey and its figures, noting for example that in the crucial discourse between parents and children, only 3–5% of parents use LG, while the survey contains no figures at all on the use of LG between children (1995b: 667). Menge claimed that in fact, we can only speak of 2.5 million LG speakers, of whom perhaps as few as 124,000 speak LG to their children, thus confirming the overall impression that LG is a dying language.

The European Charter of Minority or Regional Languages

Since 1999, LG has been protected by the European Charter of Minority or Regional Languages. It is the only variety of German that is protected and was eligible only because it was ‘decided’ that LG was an independent language, not a dialect of HG: ‘Das Niederdeutsche ist bis heute eine eigenständige Sprache geblieben, ist also keine Dialektform des Hochdeutschen’ (Erster Bericht 2000: 10). The impossibility of distinguishing in any rigid and convincing way between language and dialect is well known amongst academic linguists but not ‘folk-linguists’. That the Federal Government’s First Report on the European Charter simply states that LG has remained an independent language rather than being a dialect may well have more to do with the political ambition to have LG included in the Charter, rather than attempting to make a scholarly statement on the linguistic status of LG.

The case for protection was brought forward by Northern parliamentarians, and debates on the issue in parliament, both at federal and regional level, were conducted in LG by those who were able to speak it, both to demonstrate how serious they were about the issue and to show that LG was a proper language suitable for serious debate. Thus LG underwent a process of extension of text type, from only spoken in the eighteenth century, to literature and poetry from 1850, and to official political debates in the 1990s. However, all
participants and observers were aware that the parliamentary debates had a ‘light-hearted’ flavour and they were clearly seen as ‘one-off’ affairs.\textsuperscript{10}

It is debatable to what extent the Charter will initiate or promote processes of extension to other text types, reversal of the decline in native speakers, or achieve acceptability in formal discourse for LG. In general, the Charter promotes the idea of language protection without requiring governments or authorities to take any active steps. In the case of LG, most of the actions to support the language, such as the inclusion of LG matters in schools at primary and secondary level, had already been in place before the Charter.

Due to the federal nature of Germany, its member states deal with the issue of language protection in different ways. Whilst in Schleswig-Holstein, the German department at the University of Kiel requires all students to take at least one unit in LG or Frisian, the University of Hamburg teaches LG but prohibits students of German from including LG units in the assessed part of their degree. In schools, the Land Mecklenburg-Vorpommern reports that over 80\% of all primary schools make LG an important part of their teaching – a figure that is envied by other regional states. In her tentative study, Buchanan (2002) found that very few kindergartens and schools used LG in any way. She reports that teachers generally estimated the percentage of children that speak and understand LG at under one percent, or at most between zero and five percent, with one notable exception from a Rostock primary school where the teacher estimated that 10\% spoke LG and 60\% understood the language. The authorities do not force the promotion of LG, for example in the form of mandatory classes in schools or bilingual signposting on the roads, but rather rely on private initiatives to stage plays, or interested teachers in schools to bring LG to the speakers. This will not stop the decrease in the number of native speakers, but it will increase the prestige of LG. Most people in Northern Germany would nowadays agree that LG is part of the cultural identity which should be cherished and protected – but few go to the trouble of promoting the language or even learning it.

\textsuperscript{10} During the two debates in the Schleswig-Holstein Landtag (Bericht: 65-83), parliamentarians from different parties speaking in LG addressed each other by first names, lending support to the general ‘feel’ of LG as a warmer, friendlier language than the official language, HG.
The overall impression is that fighting for the protection of LG is like fighting a losing battle but also a battle worth fighting. Schuppenhauer (1994: 7) soberly states that it has not been possible to stop the decline of LG in everyday use, but he feels that its decay has certainly slowed. Peters (1998: 126) predicts that the present dialect decay will eventually lead to a dialect loss and that, despite the dwindling numbers of native speakers, no serious efforts are being made to introduce the teaching of LG as a second native or first foreign language in schools. One can only concur. However, due to the increasing prestige of the language, LG will not be subject to ridicule as it was until the 1970s and its part in the cultural heritage and North German identity appears safe:

Wer heute ein Stück Sachprosa niederdeutsch abfaßt, sei es ein wissenschaftlicher Aufsatz, ein kunsttheoretischer Text oder bloß das Wahlprogramm einer Partei, erregt sicher nach wie vor Aufsehen. Einfach auslachen oder für hoffnungslos überspannt erklären, dürfte man ihn aber schwerlich. (Schuppenhauer 1994: 6f.)

Conclusion

The history of LG demonstrates a range of linguistic processes. It changed from a tribal language in the Old Saxon period to an international language in the Middle Ages and then became almost extinct in the Early Modern Period. Its revival began in the mid-nineteenth century, and although this development gained substantial momentum very recently, it seems unlikely that its death as a native language can be prevented in the mid-term future. LG has undergone linguistic processes in relation to changes in the area in which it was used, the number of speakers who spoke the language, the mode in which it was used (from oral to written to oral to written over the period of a thousand years), the functional domains, text types and situations in which its use was appropriate and folklinguistic prestige which was attached to the language. Thus LG shows what kind of linguistic processes can take place in a language’s history, but also how linguistic processes can be both the cause and the result of a changing history.
References


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