

## The forgotten people: a dialect study on a Hutterite colony in East Central South Dakota

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### Abstract.

In this study, the English variety of three Hutterite women from East Central South Dakota is described. The Hutterites are a communal society that immigrated to the northern United States and later to southern Canada in the 1800s and are one of few ethnic groups in the United States that have retained their mother-tongue—Hutterisch—as well as their religious language, German. To communicate with the outside world, all Hutterite children also learn English, making all Hutterites trilingual by adolescence. Their variety of English has been strongly affected by Hutterisch, a dialect of German that all Hutterites learn as their first language. In the instance of language contact examined in this study, the women's use of English showed the influence of Hutterisch in the areas of pronunciation, topicalization, preposition usage, and intonation.

### Introduction

The English language is one of the *lingua francas* of the modern world. It is spoken on every continent and is a symbol of power and success. As it has spread, it has changed. Regional, political, and social divisions amongst people have created divisions amongst their respective varieties. In his article on language variety, Preston (1993, p. 23) argues that despite the belief that modern technology's effect on communication would eventually merge all of the dialects in the United States into one standard, no such assimilation has occurred. In some cases, modern communication has actually served to fortify these divisions even more. Linguistic variety is invariably linked with cultural norms and identity by its speakers. According to him, modern communication made people more loyal to their own cultures and forms of English by making the population more aware of the linguistic differences and variations (Preston 1993). The study of dialects is necessary to identify and bridge gaps between cultures within the United States. One particularly unknown and understudied speech community is the Hutterites of the Upper Midwest and Canada. This paper will attempt to analyse and describe the effects of language contact and the aspects of the English variety of this group.

### Hutterite language

The Hutterites possess a rich history that is matched by an equally rich language situation. All of them share a first language—their own unique, unwritten Austro-Bavarian dialect of Upper German, known as Hutterisch. It is not mutually intelligible with German and has been largely influenced by Russian, Carinthian, and English. The children learn High German in elementary school so that they can read their German bibles and understand their German church services. In order to communicate with the outside world, they also learn English at about the same time. Therefore, all

who grow up in colonies, whether in South Dakota, Canada, Minnesota, or Montana, are trilingual by default, creating an interesting language mix that develops without much influence from the mainstream standard that exists in the rest of the country, or even on the farm down the road. Unlike most other immigrant groups in the United States that lose their native languages, Hutterisch remains strong and dominant among the Hutterites, even while its speakers have picked up the language of their new homeland.

### **Language contact and dialect**

In other situations in which multiple languages exist in close proximity, mixing naturally occurs. Japan is one such country. McKenzie (2008, p. 278) noted a study done by Kay (1995, pp. 68–72), which explained that Japanese and English words have become mixed in Japan through loan words. Words are borrowed from English, yet they use Japanese substitutes for the English sounds that the Japanese language does not have. He also cites instances where compound words in English are translated directly into Japanese, creating unique compounds that sometimes even use half English and half Japanese (McKenzie 2008).

According to Fishman (2000, pp. 13-14), as long as the languages in a community do not compete but rather have clear roles, they have a better chance of retaining their independence from one another. If this is the case, in a language situation such as in the Hutterite community, the fact that each language serves such a separate, distinct purpose would prevent the languages from needing to mix. Other situations, like that of English and Japanese in Japan, do not have a distinction between the roles of different languages in their society. In those situations, the languages would be more likely to mix.

In her overview article regarding language contact, Silva-Corvalán (1995, p. 10) cites five language strategies that occur in bilingual situations that speakers use to lessen the differences between their languages:

In the use of the subordinate or functionally restricted language, beyond phonology, these strategies include (1) simplification of grammatical categories and lexical oppositions; (2) overgeneralization of forms, frequently following a regularizing pattern; (3) development of periphrastic constructions either to achieve paradigmatic regularity or to replace semantically transparent bound morphemes; (4) direct and indirect transfer of forms from the superordinate language; [and] (5) code-switching, which involves the use of two or more languages by one speaker in the same turn of speech or at turntaking points. Silva-Corvalán (1995, p. 10)

One of these strategies, the application of the superior language's structures onto the second language, was found to exist in the language contact situation of the Hutterites. I would argue that although the languages in a bilingual or trilingual community may be preserved due to the fact that the languages have distinct and understood roles, the types of mixing cited by Silva-Corvalán are still bound to occur.

### **Hutterite history**

The Hutterites live in communal colonies that spread across the Upper Midwest. Founded by Jacob Hutter in the 1530s, the Hutterites form a branch of the Anabaptist movement that moved through Europe, chased by religious persecution, and eventually into North America. They are the least known of the three Anabaptist groups that exist today—the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Hutterites. Like their

Anabaptist cousins, they are historically pacifists, are uninvolved in government affairs and wear the traditional, conservative dress of the original Hutterites. The Hutterites are unique among the other Anabaptist groups in that they practise a community of goods, in which all possessions and resources are pooled for the common good and use, and in that they take advantage of modern farming and industrial technology. Friesen (2006, p. 573) credits the Hutterites with having more success than any other utopian commune, lasting for almost 500 years thus far.

The Hutterites have, however, met with outside opposition. They arrived in the Dakotas in 1874, and up until the early 1900s, the Hutterites enjoyed more freedom than they had in centuries. As Hostetler (1974, pp. 127-31) writes, peace ended when the United States entered World War I in 1917, when Hutterite men from South Dakota were forced to enlist in the military service. Because four of them resisted their work orders, they were sentenced to 37 years in prison and sent to Alcatraz, where two of them died of starvation and illness. This motivated most of the Hutterite colonies in South Dakota to move to Canada. During the Great Depression, many of those colonies returned to South Dakota where they remain to this day, and over time provisions have been made by the government to allow for conscientious objectors (Hostetler 1974, pp. 132-3). They now face very little of the kind of persecution that their ancestors endured.

Today, the Hutterites live much the same as before, except for their use of modern farming practices. Their presence in the United States and Canada goes widely unnoticed, except by those who live near them. In their local communities, even their closest neighbours tend to look upon them, at best, with confusion and, at worst, with suspicion and distrust. The misunderstandings that result in these communities are often linked to a lack of knowledge and respect on both sides, which could be remedied in part by outsiders making an effort to become informed about the rich history of the Hutterites.

## **Methodology**

My research seeks to describe the effects of language contact on the Hutterites' variety of English. For this research project, I visited and conducted recorded interviews with three Hutterite women from a Hutterite colony in East Central South Dakota. Their names were Karen, Grace, and Melissa, and they asked that only their first names be associated with the study. My data was collected in two visits. On my first visit, they filled out a questionnaire asking them for their birthdays and for a list of the places, if any, that they had lived prior to their current home colony. I then asked them questions about their everyday lives to elicit conversation from them on familiar topics. That visit lasted two hours, and I retrieved about an hour of language data. My next visit consisted of two parts: another conversation-based interview and a time of more direct elicitation during which I asked questions about their language use and the nature of Hutterisch itself. For this visit, only Grace and Melissa were able to be present. This visit also lasted about two hours, and I again recorded about an hour of data.

Once I had collected all of my data, I analysed the conversations and was able to divide the data into the areas of pronunciation, topicalisation, prepositions, and intonation. For my analysis, I used Standard American English (SAE) as the model. My comparison with the Standard was not an issue of right speech versus wrong speech, and I do not believe that any one person speaks SAE. This standard was

meant only to serve as a tool for analysis. Each time that I listened to the data, I focused on a different category. I also paid attention to the strategies discussed by Silva-Corvalán, and I tried to find examples of borrowed words and phrases. Unfortunately, these were difficult to elicit. The women, to facilitate better communication with me, used words that I would easily recognise, and, when asked directly, they were unable to give examples of any borrowed words.

The interviews of the language participants were easily conducted in English. The language participants all demonstrated excellent fluency in English and each woman attested to her own fluency in both Hutterisch and German.

### **Limitations and assets**

As my study began, I realised its various limitations. The most important of these is that I do not speak Hutterisch or German. Speaking one or both of those languages would have allowed my research and analysis to be much more efficient. However, I was able to overcome some of this by familiarizing myself with the basics of German as well as by asking questions about Hutterisch to my language participants. Another limitation to consider is that I was only able to spend limited time at one colony and with only three women, so the results of this study can only be applied with confidence to their particular situation, not to the entire group of Hutterites in the United States today.

A major asset to my study was my Hutterite heritage and my family's close connection to the colony. Not only was I able to build upon a previous positive relationship, but also I was able to be sensitive to their way of life. The risk of causing problems in the colony and using unethical practices during my study was lessened because I was strongly aware of the importance of respecting their way of life and maintaining a good working relationship with them.

### **Analysis**

My analysis can be divided into four categories: pronunciation, topicalization, prepositions, and intonation. The examples in this section are samples of the larger body of data.

#### ***Pronunciation***

One of the most salient aspects of the women's variety of English was their pronunciation. I was able to recognise five basic characteristics that were different from what would be considered a standard pronunciation, although their pronunciation varied within individual sentences. It was very obvious that the women had been taught standard American pronunciation and were influenced by their first language.

The first two differences in pronunciation were more frequent than the others and were ones that I had known from past casual conversations. They tended to replace their voiced and voiceless interdental fricatives, [ð] and [θ], with voiced and voiceless alveolar stops, [d] and [t], respectively. In (1a) below, we can see that the sentence has multiple interdental fricatives, all of which are in bold. In (1b), we can see which sounds were replaced with their respective alveolar stops.

- (1a)        There's—there's lots of small things, but the main things are the same.  
              (Grace)

- (1b) [ð]ere's—[d]ere's lots of small [t]ings, but [d]e main [t]ings are [d]e same.

In (2), we can see a similar example, in which the same word is used in two different ways.

- (2) Our minister doesn't [t]ink it's safe enough, I [θ]ink. (Grace)

Below, (3) shows that the fricatives can become stops even at the ends of words.

- (3) And one in Crystal Springs in Canada, for a mon[t]. (Grace)

The pronunciation of German consonants, particularly in regards to the occurrence of fortis/lenis pairs versus voiced/voiceless pairs, needs to be investigated in more detail. However, at this point the analysis shows that the speakers either devoiced almost all voiced alveolar sibilants, [z] to [s], or replace them with glottal stops [ʔ]. Of all the characteristics of Hutterite English, this one was the most constantly present. Most often, the change to the voiceless sibilant appears in nouns that use the voiced forms of the plural morpheme—words that would not overtly use the voiced sibilant but would be spelled with an s.

- (4) There're million[s] of differenc[es]. (Karen)

- (5) Our minister doe[ʔ]n't think it's safe enough, I think. (Grace)

In (4), the two plural words, millions and differences, would in Standard American English, use one of the voiced plural morphemes, but in this case the speaker devoiced the sibilant both times. The change to the glottal stop, in the case of (5), came in the middle of a word.

One of the more difficult changes to analyse was the alteration of the close-mid back rounded vowel, [o]. After a lengthy analysis, I came to the conclusion that the sound is not unrounded, but rather raised and without the glide that would exist in standard pronunciation. The sound is not quite fronted enough to be the near-close near-back vowel [ɔ].

Finally, in the variety of the Hutterite women, in many words that contained a mid-word or word-initial alveolar lateral approximant [l], the approximant became more velarised than the traditional “dark l” would be in SAE (Bronstien 1960, p. 125). Thus, in words like couple and poultry, which would have a velarised secondary articulation, the velarisation was more pronounced. In this context, it is interesting that according to Ladefoged (2006, p. 67-8) the alveolar lateral approximant also has a velarised secondary articulation in SAE.

### ***Topicalisation***

According to Ocampo and Klee (1995, p. 71), ‘Word order has been one of the most studied features of syntactic transfer. Thomason and Kaufman (1988, p. 55) state that it “seems to be the easiest sort of syntactic feature to borrow or acquire via language shift.”’ My analysis of the word order of the women’s variety confirms this claim. Topicalisation in their variety was found in two types of constructions.

First, the most common construction consisted of fronting of direct objects or prepositional phrases for emphasis. This is a common feature in German and possibly in Hutterisch as well because it is related to German. Such possibility for variation in word order reflects a key difference that exists between German and English: inflection. The inflection of verbs and the different declensions of nouns and adjectives in German allow for a more variation in word order that would account for the high rate of topicalisation that showed up in the English variety of the Hutterite women. For example, in (6), the direct object has been fronted.

- (6)            DO            SU   V     PP  
String beans we have in that meal. (Karen)

In other cases, topicalisation was used to emphasize certain parts of the sentences. Sometimes, the topicalised noun came right next to the pronoun it renamed, as in (7). Elsewhere, as in (8), it came at the end of the sentence.

- (7)            The minister, he has a prayer that he recites. (Melissa)
- (8)            Like, when she has to go to town, my aunt, I go up there and take care of her.  
(Melissa)

### ***Prepositions***

Learning prepositions in another language tends to be a very difficult task for language learners. The analysis of the use of prepositions in the women's variety of SAE demonstrated that their use of prepositions differed also from the ways in which prepositions are used in SAE. In (9)-(11), we see four examples of sentences with prepositions used differently than they would be in SAE.

- (9)            Some years you can go straight through the night, but this year they have to quit about at twelve. (Grace)
- (10)           We don't boast of our hair. (Grace)
- (11)           Have the oven in the right temperature. (Melissa)

In (12), although the sentence is still completely understandable, there seem to be missing prepositions.

- (12)           Sunday, you go 9:30 to church. (Karen)

In (13), we have another example which uses topicalisation to emphasise a prepositional phrase, creating a word order that would most likely not appear in Standard English.

- (13)           So instead of crackers you eat the kanedle with the soup. (Karen)

Another way of saying this would be to put the prepositional phrase at the end, as in, 'So, you eat the kanedle with the soup instead of crackers.' (Kanedle is a soft, dumpling-like dough commonly used in Hutterite cooking.)

### **Intonation**

According to Pike (1963, p. 23), most of the mistakes that are made in the attempt to determine the intonation patterns of a language stem from too little data. However, the data in this study seem to indicate that the intonation pattern of the women's variety of English differed from Standard English. For the most part, their English was much more evenly pitched than the Standard. They rarely used pitch to signal stress. Instead, they used length to denote emphasis in their sentences; the most important words were the longest words. In the following example, the most important words of the sentence were marked by length rather than pitch. The intonation of the sentence itself went steadily down until just after the word boring and from there remained monotone.

- (14)       The mu:sic to me: was bo:ring because I don't care about Renaissance and all that stuff. (Karen)

### **Conclusion**

The analysis outlines the preliminary findings of the study. Although this data must be applied with caution to the wider scope of the entire Hutterite population and even to the entire Hutterite colony that I visited, the English variety of three young Hutterite women is marked by some characteristics which may be contact-induced. Silva-Corvalán predicted the application of the superior language's structures onto the second language. This strategy was most apparent of the five strategies that she identified and was reflected in all four aspects of the analysis.

More data would further refine what has already been analysed, but for now we can identify that the English variety of the Hutterite women differs from SAE in the areas of pronunciation, topicalisation, preposition usage, and intonation.

Especially in the area of pronunciation, additional data could help to determine the variation that appeared in their use of interdental fricatives. In a follow-up study, we could investigate whether the replacement of the interdentals is a matter of register of the interview situation, if this phenomenon occurs in a set pattern, or if it is only present in careful speech.

More analysis of the Hutterisch language would also be very helpful, both in attempting to better describe the English variety that they speak and in learning more about the people themselves. My hope is that this study will motivate researchers and scholars to explore this area of linguistic research and that it will encourage others to seek out an otherwise forgotten people.

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