

A corpus-based investigation of preterite loss in Texas German: Evidence for language death?

This paper addresses Dorian's (1976: 24) claim that "the reduced use of a language will lead also to a reduced form of that language." We investigate the use of the preterite and the present perfect in Texas German (TxG), a critically endangered dialect (Salmons 1983, Boas 2005). Part one discusses previous analyses of preterite use in TxG. Eikel (1954) shows that while only half of the oldest generation of TxG speakers uses the present perfect (e.g. *Ich bin nach Hause gegangen* 'I went home') more often than the preterite (e.g. *Ich ging nach Hause* 'I went home') to express a past event, nearly 60% of the second generation and a full 100% of the youngest generation use the present perfect more often than the preterite. Similarly, Gilbert (1972) notes that TxG speakers employ both past tenses but that the present perfect is the more commonly employed of the two. More recently, Boas (2006) re-used Eikel's and Gilbert's questionnaires to elicit the same data in the same locations to determine whether the preterite has lost ground over the last 50 years. The comparison of the recent data with the older data did not yield any conclusive results, since the frequency of certain forms increased while the frequency of others decreased.

Part two discusses a much wider range of data than found in Boas (2006). It analyzes recordings based on interviews with more than 60 speakers using the Gilbert and Eikel questionnaires. It also analyzes recordings of open-ended sociolinguistic interviews that offer a much more accurate picture of language use in context. The recordings were collected by the Texas German Dialect Project (Boas (2003), <http://www.tgdp.org>), subsequently transcribed and translated, and then deposited in the on-line Texas German Dialect Archive. Searching the resulting full-text corpus of TxG (size: 305,000 words) allowed us to arrive at a more accurate description of preterite usage in TxG. We first identify the preterite forms of the 10 highest frequency full lexical verbs in German in the TxG corpus and compare these preterite forms with the present perfect forms of the same verbs. We then discuss whether semantic and pragmatic context provides insight into why the preterite form of certain verbs is so prevalent among a large number of informants. Finally, we show that while a majority of the highest frequency full lexical verbs do not take the preterite marking in TxG, several verbs (i.e., *kommen* ('to come'), *gehen* ('to go'), *wissen* ('to know')) appear stable in the speech of a number of speakers.

In part three we discuss three factors influencing preterite usage in TxG. The first factor is daily use of TxG. Across the board, all speakers who speak the dialect on a regular basis exhibit a significantly higher rate of preterite vis-à-vis the present perfect. This result supports Dorian's (1976) argument about the importance of using a language on a regular basis to maintain its full inventory of forms. We also show that frequency is a significant factor influencing preterite marking in TxG. We demonstrate that in general high-frequency verbs occur more often with present perfect marking than with preterite marking. However, the final factor appears to contradict this conclusion: so-called "heavy" verbs such as *wissen* ('to know') that describe a semantically more complex scene than light verbs such as *haben* ('to have') tend to preserve their preterite marking despite their high frequency. We thus propose a multi-factorial analysis that puts emphasis on the description and analysis of each individual verb. Our results suggest that analyzing loss of linguistic forms in language death situations requires in-depth investigations of individual items participating in a particular paradigm. This approach eventually leads to what Wolfram (2002) calls the influence of "both independent linguistic factors and external social and psychological variables."