

University researchers are trying to record state's unique, and dying, German language

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NEW BRAUNFELS — Sitting at his kitchen table across from a University of Texas researcher, Bill Moltz helps record some of the last gasps of a dying language. Texas German phrases

"A rat is larger than a mouse," the researcher says, glancing at a list of English phrases.

"*Eine ratte ist grösser als eine maus,*" the 66-year-old Moltz responds, translating the phrase into the patois of his childhood, a dialect known as Texas German.

"She had the flowers in her hand," the researcher says.

"*Die hat die blumen in die hand,*" Moltz replies.

Beginning in the mid-1840s, a steady stream of German immigrants — lured by the promise of cheap land and economic prosperity — poured into sparsely populated Central Texas. Strangers in a strange land, they clustered in their own communities where they worked together, played together and prayed together, all the while clinging to their German language and culture.

In its heyday at the turn of the 19th century, the so-called "German Belt" encompassed most of the Hill Country, where 95 percent of the population was either German-born or descended from German immigrants. In 1910, Texas had 110,000 residents who spoke German as their first language.

Today, there are fewer than 8,000 native Texas German speakers.

German immigrants in Texas and their descendants developed their own dialect by adopting English words, retaining now-archaic expressions or modifying German phrases. The following are phrases used by researchers to detect differences between standard and Texas German.

1. *Ich habe mich behaved.*

(Texas German)

Ich habe mich benommen.

(Standard German)

I behaved myself. (English)

2. *Die Eichkatz sitzt auf meine Tools.*

Das Eichhoernchen sitzt auf meinen Werkzeugen.

The squirrel sits on my tools.

3. *Die Stinkkatz frisst die Bull Nettles.*

Das Stinktier frisst die Brennesseln.

The skunk ate the bull nettles.

4. *Wir sind nach den War nach Comfort gemoved.*

Wir sind nach dem Krieg nach Comfort umgezogen.

We moved to Comfort after the war.

5. *Ich war kalt auf der Porch.*

Mir war kalt auf der Veranda.

I was cold on the porch.

Source: Hans Boas, Department of Germanic Studies, University of Texas

Hans Boas, an assistant professor in the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, is on a mission to record the language before it is lost.

"The language is dying out," says Boas, a native of Germany. "It will be gone in 25 or 30 years."

Texas German is an amalgam. The original German pioneers brought their own dialects from Bavaria, Prussia and other area parts of Germany when they journeyed to the New World. As the immigrants and their children socialized and intermarried in the American melting pot, their *Deutsche* grew into its own unique dialect. Eventually, the wave of new immigrants slowed to a trickle, which cut Texas German off from further standard German influences.

As a result, in some ways, Texas German is a time capsule of some of the words and phrases used in standard German many years ago. Take the word for airplane, for instance. In Texas German, it's *luftschiff*, a word that actually means "dirigible." An airplane is *flugzeug* in standard German.

Gilbert J. Jordan, a professor of German at Southern Methodist University, highlighted many of the differences between standard and Texas German in a paper titled "The Texas German Language of the Western Hill Country." Over the past 150 years, he noted, native Texas German speakers added their own words to adapt to changes in society, culture and technology.

"Meanwhile," Jordan wrote, "the people in Germany experienced the same changes — indeed in some cases they produced them — and they coined a whole new vocabulary largely unknown to the isolated German settlers in Texas.

"So while Germany built up its new vocabulary in Europe, the German Texans borrowed the needed terms from English and hundreds of English words slipped in easily by default."

Usually, the Texas German speakers pronounced their adopted English words with a German accent when they said *das Boxsupper*, *der Cowboy*, *der Helicopter*, *die Napkin*, *der Sixshooter* and *der Taxcollector*.

German culture thrived in the hardscrabble Texas Hill Country. Almost the entire population of towns such as New Braunfels and Fredericksburg spoke *auf Deutsch*. Everyone studied in German, read German newspapers, listened to German music, attended German-language church services and sang in German-language choirs.

In San Antonio, so many prominent Germans lived along the San Antonio River near C.H. Guenther's flour mill in the 1880s that pundits dubbed the area "Sauerkraut Bend." The city passed an English-only law to prevent the German-speaking members of local government from holding meetings that many constituents couldn't translate.

Experts such as Boas talk about "domains" when they explain why some languages thrive while others die. As long as Central Texas remained relatively isolated — and Texas German remained the primary language used in the private and public domains of home, school, work and church — the language survived.

Then came World War I.

In the United States, everything German became anathema, almost overnight, including the German language. A series of laws in 1917 and 1918 made English the only language of instruction in schools.

"Children would walk into their schools and all of a sudden, they weren't taught in German and they weren't allowed to speak German anymore," Boas says. "They had very little knowledge of English, if any, but the teacher switched to English. Or the German-speaking teacher was fired and they hired an English-only speaking teacher."

Some parents, determined to help their children get ahead and avoid the stigma of German, made the decision to stop teaching them the language as well.

Children born just prior to World War II — a conflict that drove local German culture even deeper underground — often were the last ones who grew up speaking Texas German at home. As adults, some of them married spouses who didn't have any German ancestry. Their children often can't even say *Guten Tag*, a common greeting that means "good day."

A wave of new residents into the state's former "German Belt" — an influx that continues today — has served to drive one of the last nails into Texas German's coffin.

Boas started his study of Texas German about three years ago. His project is called "The Dynamics of Language Change and Dialect Death in Texas German." Boas and a team of university students who have worked in the program have interviewed about 80 Texas German speakers. Most are in their 60s or older.

Boas and his researchers find people to interview from a variety of sources, including local German heritage societies, church groups and other Texas German speakers who have already participated in the program.

Last year, Boas interviewed an 81-year-old New Braunfels woman who had been interviewed in another Texas German language study in 1938. Even more amazingly, Boas also found a 78-rpm record of the original interview that will allow him to chart changes in the woman's speech pattern over a 66-year period.

All of the interviews that Boas and his team conduct are taped and transcribed.

"You're not going to be able to keep the language spoken, but at least you can save the data," Boas says. "When you're doing research, you can always go out and dig up some old scripts or dinosaur bones or so on, because they don't go away.

"But a person dies and they're the last speaker, then that language is gone."

Boas and Jana Thompson, a graduate student at UT, recently interviewed Bill and Diane Moltz in New Braunfels. The researchers presented the couple with a potted yellow mum — "I always bring a little gift," Boas says earlier — before splitting up to conduct separate interviews.

The Moltzes love their German heritage. Bill Moltz, who is retired from the Texas Water Development Board, is one of the directors of the United German-American Committee of the USA, a national German cultural organization. The Moltzes have visited Germany several times. They make their own authentic sausage and wine. They both sing in the New Braunfels Gemischter Chor Harmonie, a mixed voice choir. Every year, they do volunteer work at Wursthfest, the city's annual celebration of German culture.

But did they teach their four children to speak Texas German?

Nein.

The Moltzes raised their family in Buda, which had few Texas German speakers.

"I thought, 'If I teach them German, who are they going to speak to?'" recalls 64-year-old Diane Moltz, a retired elementary schoolteacher. "I thought they wouldn't even know how to play with other kids, because they wouldn't understand them.

"But, if I had it to do over again ..."

Ivarene Voight Hosek has gotten that chance, although it has skipped a generation. Married to a man who speaks English and Czech, Hosek opted not to teach her children Texas German. But now, whenever she's baby-sitting her grandsons, the 61-year-old grandmother sings them a song or two in German and slips in a word or phrase or two to get them accustomed to the language.

"*Nein, nein, nein,*" Hosek tells 5-year-old Cory Dworaczyk, coaxing him down from a coffee table in her living room. "Can you sing your song? Sing your song for us."

Taking a deep breath, the boy launches into a Texas German version of an old song from the Rhineland region.

"*Alle Fische schwimmen,*" he sang. "*Bloss der kleine blatt nicht.*"

All fish swim. Just not the flat fish.

"Oh Susanna, Wie ist das Leben doch so schön!"

O Susanna, Nonetheless how life is good!

Little Cory is on a roll. Completely from memory, he sings verses about dogs barking, roosters crowing and cats scratching. Then, before he heads back to his toys, Hosek tries to talk her grandson into joining her in singing *"Ach du lieber Augustin."*

"I don't know that," he says matter-of-factly, in a tone that suggests he's not ready to learn it, either.

Hosek sometimes worries that her own Texas German skills might fade over time. She regularly spoke the language with her mother, but then her mother died.

"That's why I learned it and remembered it," Hosek says. "Now, I find a lot of people who tell me, 'That's all I spoke before, but now I can't remember it.'"

Like Hosek, Clarence Scheel hopes memory and music will help keep the Texas German language and culture going, at least a little longer.

Scheel, 67, is one of a trio of hosts of a weekly audio program called "Musical Journey," a one-hour show that highlights the music of local, national and international German bands and vocal groups.

Until 2002, "Musical Journey" had enjoyed a 52-year run on KGNB-AM in New Braunfels. Then the station, which features a sports and talk format, dropped the show from its lineup.

With the help of an acquaintance who runs an Internet site featuring Czech music, Scheel learned some basic Web page design and put "Musical Journey" online. The show is recorded at the home of Roy Haag, one of the hosts of the show, who has crammed a recording studio into an 8-by-8 foot room.

Each week, one of the hosts takes a one-hour stint in front of a microphone, where they announce songs while simultaneously spinning CDs, audio tapes and old 45 and 78 rpm records.

The program is a labor of love. Scheel, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and computer systems engineer, says it takes him between six and eight hours every week to gather his material, tape his show and then upload it to the Internet for release on Thursdays. All of the hosts are volunteers. Scheel helps Haag pay for repairs when something in the studio goes *kaput*.

"I just think the show is a great way to keep our German heritage alive," says Scheel, a Garden Ridge resident who traces his lineage to three of the German immigrants who helped found New Braunfels.

"Musical Journey" can be heard at www.NBGermanMusic.com.

But the program has run into one probably permanent problem: Many members of its target audience — mostly aging Texas Germans and anyone else who appreciates polkas, waltzes and other *oompah* music — often don't own computers, not to mention having the know-how to navigate the Internet.

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