



TGDP and German Historical Institute receive a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation



Dr. Atiba Pertilla & Dr. Hans C. Boas
(Washington, D.C., May 2025)

In June 2024, Dr. Hans C. Boas from the TGDP (UT Austin) and Dr. Atiba Pertilla from the German Historical Institute (GHI) (Washington, D.C.) submitted a grant proposal to an innovative funding scheme of the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany, entitled “Open up new horizons.” The goal of the funding scheme is to support

innovative research on a variety of different topics that have never been investigated before and that have a high potential of failing.

The TGDP and GHI’s joint proposal “Let the People of the Past Speak! Turning Migrant Letters of the 19th Century into Speech” is an inter-disciplinary project that combines insights and

methodologies from several research fields, including history, linguistics, and artificial intelligence.

One of the ideas of the grant application is to use hand-written 19th-century letters (many of which contain dialectal German usage) to reconstruct spoken Texas German around 1880.

There are no recordings of Texas German from the 19th and early 20th century that we know of. Since we do not directly know what Texas German sounded like during the 19th century, researchers in dialectology, language contact studies, and historical linguistics cannot adequately explain how and why exactly Texas German emerged in the 19th century as a mix of at least five different German donor dialects brought from different regions in

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TGDP Milestones 2024-2025

- TGDP members published two papers in the Yearbook of German American Studies.
- The TGDP has interviewed 22 new speakers since November 2024.
- TGDP members presented their research at academic conferences in Dortmund (Germany), Porto Alegre (Brazil), Austin (Texas), Milwaukee (Wisconsin), and Siegen (Germany).
- Hans C. Boas was interviewed by *Texas Monthly*, *Der Spiegel* (Germany), and the *Tageszeitung* (Berlin).

How to talk like a 19th-century Texas German speaker

Thanks to the grant from the Volkswagen Foundation, members of the TGDP together with a team at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. are in the process of gathering data to build an online chatbot that can converse in 19th-century Texas German about different topics of that era. This exciting interactive tool will be built out of two

components. First, the so-called “dialect engine” described in the main story on the first page of this newsletter. This system will at some point be able to approximate the voice of a German speaker from central Texas from the 1880s. Second, a set of historical records that will form the knowledge database about people, places, institutions, and

events in central Texas during the 1880s. During our pilot phase (June 2025 – January 2026), we are processing different written historical records from central Texas in order to make them machine-readable so we can create a first prototype of the knowledge base. More specifically, we are working on processing (1) about 50

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*Volkswagen Foundation cont.***cont. from p. 1**

Europe to Texas starting in the 1830s.

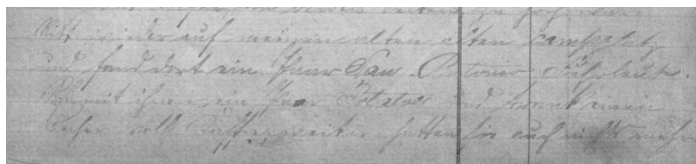
In mid-December 2024, the VW Foundation awarded Dr. Pertilla and Dr. Boas \$380,000 in research funding for the 18-month long exploratory research project. Leveraging artificial intelligence, this project will extrapolate the sound of historical German and German-American settlers from (1) transcriptions of migrant letters, (2) 19th-century linguistic questionnaires, and (3) 20th-century recordings of German dialects. The project's goal is to reconstruct the sound of historical German and German-American dialects.

Dr. Pertilla's and Dr. Boas' expertise and experience lay the groundwork for such a project. One of Dr. Pertilla's research topics is the study of 19th- and 20th-century handwritten letters that were sent from German-speaking central Europe to North America. Together with several colleagues at the GHI, Dr. Pertilla runs the research project Migrant Connections, which has collected hundreds of letters written in German, digitized them, and archived them online. Teams of volunteers help transcribe the (sometimes hard to decipher) letters and translate them into English. The GHI uses crowdsourcing and citizen science to help make their materials more accessible. The transcriptions and translations can then be accessed, together with an image of the original letter, on the Migrant Connections website. (migrantconnections.org). The letters are extremely interesting because they give a vivid

firsthand account of life in Germany, covering a wide variety of topics such as politics, culture, language, weather, food, personal relationships, etc. There is a corresponding collection of 19th-century letters written by German immigrants in the U.S. back to Germany. These are housed in the research library of the University of Erfurt in Gotha, Germany.

The Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP) under the direction of Hans C. Boas has interviewed hundreds of Texas German speakers since 2001, building an online archive where the recordings of the interviews can be accessed with their transcriptions and translations (www.tgdp.org). There are also recordings of Texas German speakers by Glenn Gilbert from the 1960s, which are currently being processed by the TGDP; these will be archived, transcribed, and translated as well.

At the same time, Dr. Thomas Schmidt of Linguisticbits.de in Germany has been exploring historical sound recordings of German dialects from the 1950s. Speakers recorded for the "Zwimer Archive" at the Institute for the German Language in Mannheim, Germany, were up to 80 years old at the time of the recording, which means that they were born in the 1870s. The way they spoke their dialects in the 1950s thus very closely resembles the way people spoke in the 1870s. Dr. Schmidt, who operates as a subcontractor on the research project, will use the sound recordings with their transcriptions, together with written inventories of dialect features collected by the



- 34 Ritt wieder auf meinen alten alten campplatz
 35 und fand dort ein Paar San Antonio Fuhrleute.
 36 Aß mit ihnen ein Paar Potatoes und trank einen
 37 Becher voll Kaffee; weiter hatten sie auch nichts mehr.

Rode back to my old campsite
 and found a couple of San Antonio wagon
 drivers there.
 Ate a couple of potatoes with them and drank a
 cup of coffee; that was all they had left.

Excerpt from Gustav Heilig's diary

Deutscher Sprachatlas ("Atlas of the German language") at the University of Marburg during the 1870s, to train an artificial intelligence system to "learn" how to speak the different German donor dialects the way they sounded during the 1870s and 1880s.

The official start of the project was on June 1, 2025. Since then, research teams at UT Austin and the GHI have been working on processing different types of historical documents, including handwritten letters, newspapers, and diaries. These materials are being transcribed and annotated with the goal of making them machine-readable so that an artificial intelligence system can process them.

As of December 2025, the processing of historical data from written, printed, and recorded sources for one of the five donor dialects, northern Hessian (the region between Marburg and Kassel), has been completed and Dr. Schmidt has begun training

the artificial intelligence system.

We expect the first phase of various tests and experiments to reconstruct spoken northern Hessian to be completed by February 2026. This will allow us to present the results of our prototype at a VW Foundation-sponsored workshop "Listening to the past" at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C., in March 2026. The goal is to have a prototype system in place, called the "dialect engine," that will be able to read 19th-century handwritten letters in the northern Hessian dialect. Based on the feedback we will receive at the workshop, we will refine the dialect engine and then train it on the other donor dialects of German brought to Texas during the 19th century. Before the end of the grant period in November 2026, we are also exploring ways to program a chatbot that will be able to converse in Texas German.



Preparing for the TGDP's 25th anniversary next year

In July 2001, Hans Boas drove from California to Austin to start his position at the University of Texas. On the way, he “encountered” Texas German and found out that it was in the process of dying out. He thus founded the TGDP to document and archive Texas German for future generations before its extinction, interviewing some of the remaining speakers of Texas German. Since then, multiple generations of students have participated in the activities of the TGDP and have benefited in and outside the classroom from the one-of-a-kind TGDP recordings. The TGDP is unique in that

there is no other long-term project that has been documenting any German contact variety for that long, creating the largest electronic collection of any German contact variety in the world. To celebrate these achievements, we are planning on hosting a one-day event on the UT Austin campus sometime in November 2026. We plan on having several different talks, a small museum-style exhibit, a film showing, and entertainment. Please stay tuned and check out the TGDP's website for more information to come.

Update: TGDP Banner Collection

In our 2023 newsletter, the TGDP reported on the compilation of a banner series about different aspects of Texas German history, culture, and language. The goal is to create a “mobile museum exhibit” that can be displayed at various meetings and events. Since 2023, five more banners have been added to our collection: “Texas Germans & WWI,” “Texas Germans & the inter-war period,” and “The rise and fall of German in Texas” (a 3-part timeline). Another six are currently under construction: “Texas German phonology,” “Texas German lexicon,” “Texas German morphosyntax” (a 3-part series), and “Donor dialects & language variation.” The complete banners are available to view at tgdp.org/banner-series/.



One of the banners in the TGDP collection

Update: Texas German Dialect Archive Online

At the end of 2025, the TGDP will be publishing a new data release of its Texas German audio and transcripts, available on tgdp.org/dialect-archive and ZuMult (<https://tgdp-zumult.la.utexas.edu/index.jsp>). This release includes about 400 more transcripts to the publicly available collection. Within the data available via ZuMult, we are also adding a layer of annotation (universal dependencies) that makes it easier to search for part-of-speech (e.g., noun, verb, adjective) regardless of the language

being spoken in the transcript.

A particularly exciting addition to the collection is our set of 10.5 hours of Texas German conversations from the 1960s (~100 speakers) that were donated to the TGDP by Glenn Gilbert. These recordings will allow those interested to delve into Texas German from over 60 years ago, and will allow researchers to explore how Texas German has (not) changed over the last several decades.

Featured Alumna: Ellen Jones Schoedler

Ellen Jones Schoedler, who previously worked as the Graduate Research Assistant for the TGDP in Spring 2021, completed her PhD in May 2025. She was first introduced to the TGDP in 2021 when she began working as a research assistant and at the same time took a graduate course with Karen Roesch on Texas German. Ellen also wrote her master's report, *Gender Roles and Language Loss: A New Perspective from Texas German on Language Attitudes*, about Texas German.

Ellen's dissertation, *Gender and Identity in the Maintenance and Loss of Low German in East Frisia*, examines language attitudes and community dynamics in a Low German community in East Frisia (a region of northwestern Germany) where she previously spent a year living.



Ellen Jones Schoedler

After completing her PhD this past spring, she has begun working with the TGDP as a Postdoctoral Fellow, and looks forward to the opportunity to work with Hans Boas and other members of the project again. She is also interested in examining the Low German spoken by some members of the Texas German community.

In Fall 2025, Ellen taught UT Austin's GER 369 “History of the German Language” course.

Update: Texas German dictionary

In 2022, the TGDP announced its plans to construct a Texas German dictionary. Work on the dictionary has continued steadily, with hundreds of entries added to date.

This fall, the TGDP also began developing a thematic Texas

German dictionary focusing on food and drink as a pilot study for the larger project.

As part of this effort, the team is compiling dictionary entries that document the vocabulary of traditional Texas German cuisine. Below is a sample dictionary entry

for *Schwademagen*, a traditional pressed meat dish made with pork.

The thematic dictionary will be based on TGDP interviews, as well as recipes from historical Texas German newspapers and *Eiband & Fischer's Kochbuch* (New

Braunfels, c. 1910).

If you have any German-language recipes or food and drink-related words you would like to share with us, please email texasgermandialect@gmail.com.

Schwademagen, der (das); ? noun 1 A terrine made from the flesh of the head of a pig (such as the face) • Kochwurst aus in einen Schweinemagen gefülltem Schweinefleisch und Schweineschwarten // English: head cheese; modern standard German: der Schwartenmagen ► *Speaker: Wir ham uns alle immer eigene Wurscht gemacht und Speck und Schwartemage [...] // Interviewer: Was ist Schwartemagen, wie macht man das? // Speaker: Das ist was von die Schwart und was Schweinefleisch drin 'Speaker: We always made our own sausage and bacon and head cheese [...] // Interviewer: What is headcheese, how do you make that? // Speaker: There is some of the pig-skin and some pork in it' (115-789-1-5-a); Der Schwade machen. Der war auch so, bis dies gerade mit die Nadel so ne lange Nadel, Hutnadel, hatten wir gehabt, den gestochen hat. Denn muss — wo wir das Loch gestochen hat heiß - muss das - wen es gar wär muss das klare so hart wie fett (???) sin denn dadraus gekomm dann war das Schwadmachen fertig 'The head cheese. It was also like that, you pierced it with a needle, a long needle, we had a hat pin. Then, when we pierced it, that must — when it was fully cooked, then (???) clear fat came out and then the head cheese was done' (1-167-2-32-a); Dann legt man den Schwartenmagen zwischen 2 saubere Bretter, beschwert mit Gewichten, legt nach und nach immer schwerer auf und lässt sie über Nacht liegen, worauf er in den Rauch kommt 'Then place the pork stomach between two clean boards, weigh it down with weights, gradually adding more and more weight, and leave it overnight, after which it is smoked' (Eiband & Fischer 1910: 21).*

Draft of dictionary entry for *Schwademagen*

How to talk ... cont.

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pages of New Braunfels Academy meeting minutes, (2) over four hundred pages from the Solms-Braunfels Archive (the records of the Society of Noblemen ("Mainzer Adelsverein") that helped bringing thousands of German settlers to Texas during the 1840s, (3) about 80 pages from Gustav Heilig's 1874 diary, and (4) about 50 pages from Otilie Goeth's memoir *Was Großmutter Erzählt* (1915). In addition, we will use hundreds of digitized pages from several

German language newspapers from central Texas from the 1880s. All of these materials will be fed into a knowledge database that will form the backbone of the chatbot. We plan to conduct several experiments to see what types of data and what amounts of data are needed to build a functioning chatbot that can talk about people, places, and events in central Texas during the 1880s. The goal is for users to be able to converse with the chatbot in a way as if it were a person.



Schwademagen at the Sauer-Beckmann Living History Farm (Stonewall, Texas, 13 Feb 2020)



Featured Alumna: Sandy Schwalen

Sandy Schwalen worked for the TGDP during her undergraduate studies at UT Austin from 2014-2018, after which she moved to Berlin, Germany to pursue a master's in international affairs at the Hertie School. After graduating, she worked as a public sector consultant in Berlin on projects in several German federal ministries. In 2024, Sandy returned to Texas and worked for the German American Chamber of Commerce in Houston. This fall, she began a new position at the newly re-opened Goethe-Institut Houston where she



Sandy Schwalen

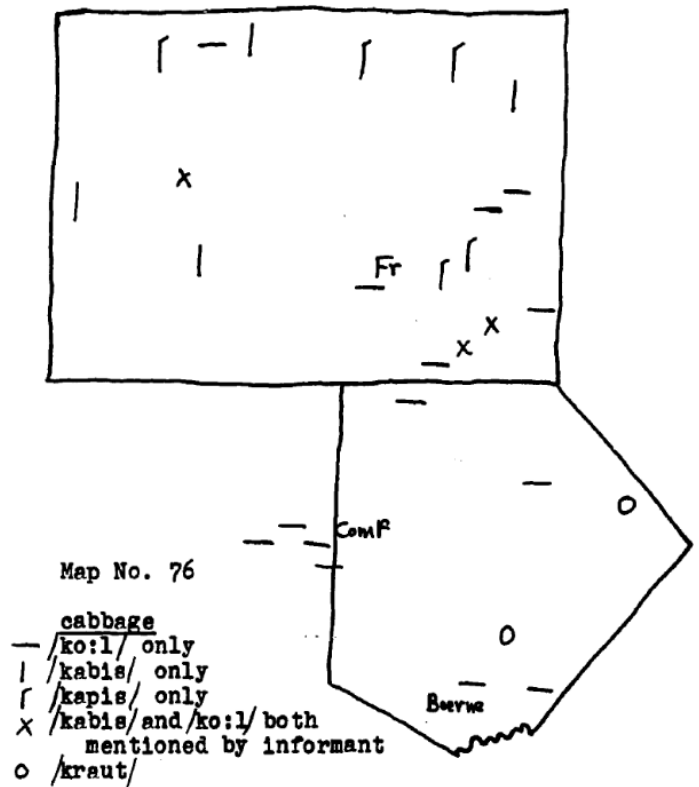
serves as program coordinator. Sandy is excited to bring German cultural programming to Houston and Texas at large in her capacity with the Goethe-Institut.

Breathing new life into old maps

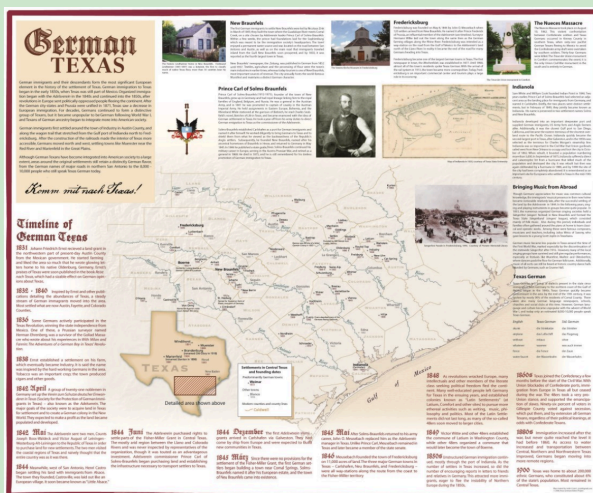
Linguists have long made maps to depict how people speak in different areas. For example, in Glenn Gilbert's 1963 dissertation on the Texas German spoken in Gillespie and Kendall Counties, he created dozens of hand-drawn maps showing how people trans-

lated a list of English words and phrases into Texas German. The map to the right shows that Texas Germans in Gillespie and Kendall used three different words for 'cabbage': *Kohl* (/kɔ:l/), *Kabis* / *Kappis* (/kabis/ &

cont. on p. 8



Map of different words for 'cabbage' in Gillespie and Kendall counties (Gilbert 1963: 245)



The German Texas map is available exclusively from the TGDP for \$40.00 (includes shipping and handling). See enclosed order form for details.

Featured: Texas German Map

Show your Texas German pride and contribute to the Texas German Endowment at the University of Texas at Austin by purchasing one of our high-quality prints of the history of German immigration into Texas!

Designed by mapmaker and German-American Justin Cozart and donated to the TGDP for fundraising purposes, this **beautiful 34"×28"** map includes a chronology of the history of Texas Germans dating back to 1831, when Johann Friedrich Ernst first fell in love with the wide-open country and wrote a book about it, *Reise nach Texas*. It also explains key concepts in German immigration, such as the role of the *Adelsverein*, an organization that was instrumental in the settling of Texas, the founding of Texas German towns, basic differences between Texas and Standard German, the popularity of German music, and more. **Contact the TGDP for yours today!**



Support the Texas German Endowment at the University of Texas at Austin: Purchase a Texas German Map!

The Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP) is proud to offer a beautiful 34"x28" map of German Texas for purchase (see p.5 for image). Surrounding the map of Central Texas are several paragraphs about important Texas German people, places and events, and an extensive timeline of German Texas from 1844 to 1900. The maps cost \$40.00 each, including shipping in a 36" cardboard tube mailer via USPS.

Please fill out this order form completely and return with payment to:

Department of Germanic Studies
Texas German Dialect Project
505 University Ave, C3300
Burdine Hall 336, 3rd Floor
The University of Texas at Austin
Austin, TX 78712-1802

All proceeds from this map benefit the Texas German Endowment. Delivery will take 3-4 weeks.

Billing information:

Name (Last, First) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Home Phone _____ Other Phone _____

Email _____

Would you like to include a donation amount of your choice with your purchase?

(Donations are tax-deductible.)

☐ Yes! I have added an extra donation in the amount of \$ _____ ☐ No

Number of maps _____ Total amount \$ _____

Form of payment:

☐ **Check** enclosed made payable to University of Texas at Austin. Please write "Texas German Endowment" in the memo line

☐ **Credit card:** ☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Discover ☐ American Express

Credit Card Number _____ Expiration Date _____

Name on Card _____

Shipping address: ☐ Same as above ☐ Alternative address – indicated below

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Signature x _____ Date _____

Further questions? Contact the TGDP at (512) 910-5047



TGDP welcomes new members

In 2025, the TGDP welcomed several new collaborators on the project, including (in alphabetical order by first name): Alex Adney, Dayon Ketchens, Drew Ian Brady, Lucas Baker, Allison Frank, Andreas Saunders, Elisabeth Berman, Marisol Bayona Roman, Floyd, Blayne Burke, Bryce Erin Osterhaus, Fiona Pravida, Nikon Kovalev, and Utpal Cruise, Damian del Bosque, Julia Haberland, Kaplan Pandey.



Alex Adney



Alison Frank



Andreas Floyd



Blayne Burke



Bryce Cruise



Damien del Bosque



Dayon Ketchens



Drew Saunders



Elisabeth Berman



Erin Osterhaus



Fiona Pravida



Julia Haberland



Kaplan Brady



Lucas Baker



Marisol Bayona Roman



Nikon Kovalev



Utpal Pandey

From L to R:
Lena Braun, Margo
Blevins, Utpal
Pandey, and Hans
C. Boas at the
German Abroad 5
Conference (Porto
Alegre, Brazil)



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AS REPORTED BY

TexasMonthly



Plans for 2026

- Record more Texas German speakers
- Host a symposium on language contact varieties at UT Austin (January 2026)
- Celebrate the TGDP's 25th anniversary in November 2026
- Continue to work on the Texas German dictionary pilot project

Breathing new life into old maps, cont.

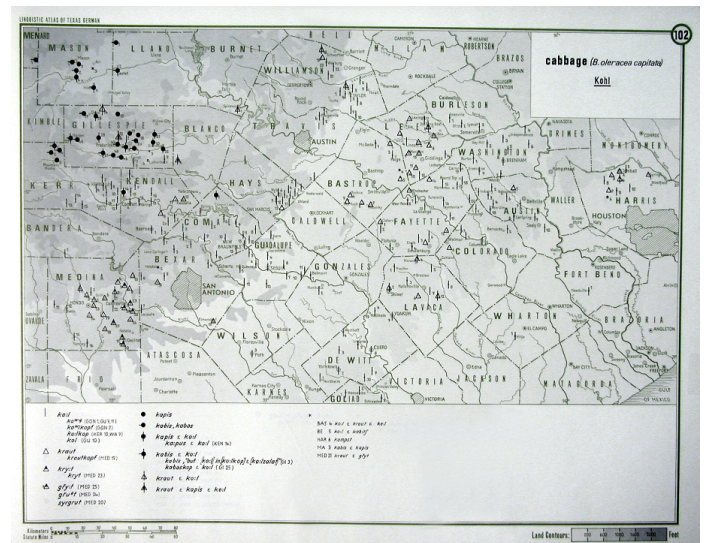
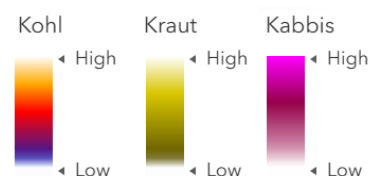
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/kapis/), and *Kraut* (/kraut/).

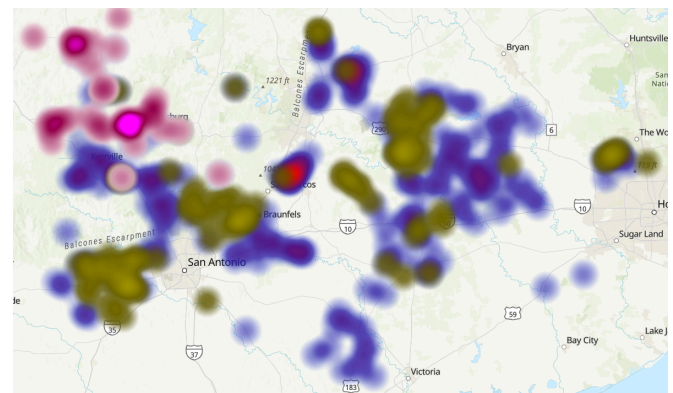
In 1972, Gilbert interviewed dozens more Texas Germans and then compiled linguistic maps of the entire Texas German Belt (see image to the right).

The TGDP is currently taking the information captured within Gilbert's (1963) and (1972) maps and importing it into modern Geographic Information System (GIS) tools to be able to perform more sophisticated analyses of linguistic patterns within Texas German (see map below). In the future, the TGDP would like to create comparable maps using the interviews the TGDP has conducted over the last 24 years.

The digital map images that the TGDP creates will be available on the TGDP website. The TGDP will also use the maps in physical resources, such as books, articles, and other publications.



Map of different words for 'cabbage' throughout the Texas German Belt (Gilbert 1972)



Heat map of different words for 'cabbage', based on Gilbert (1972)