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Racing Against Time

UT professor strives to document dying German dialect

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By Lori Slaughenhoupt

\n\nDaily Texan Staff

\n\nIt all began when he was eating at a restaurant in Fredericksburg, Texas.

\n\nDuring lunch, Hans Boas, an assistant professor of Germanic Studies at the University, overheard a conversation that he quickly found would impact his life.

\n\n"\"People were sitting next to me speaking German, and I thought, 'Hey, what's going on?'\", said Boas, who is from Gottingen, Germany. \"When I got back to Austin, I went to the library, and there was all this stuff on Texas-German [dialect] from research done in the '50s and '60s.\"

\n\nAfter reading the research, Boas found that English, Spanish and German were once the primary languages spoken in Texas. He decided to research the dying Texas-German dialect before it was gone forever.

\n\n"\"What struck me about Texas-German was that after reading descriptions from the '50s and '60s, I realized that all of the sudden, it's different,\" Boas said. \"In just 40 years, the sounds, grammar and word use has changed.\"

\n\nAlthough he knew funding for language-revival programs is often hard to obtain, Boas applied for a grant from the University. In September 2001, after receiving one from the dean of liberal arts, Boas founded the Texas German Dialect Project.

\n\nThe goal of the TGDP is to interview as many of the remaining 6,000 to 8,000 fluent speakers of Texas-German and to document the dialect. Boas expects the dialect to be gone in about 25 to 30 years, as most of the speakers are of an older generation.

\n\n\"I want as large a data pool as possible,\" Boas said. \"Not only do I want to do as many interviews as possible, but also archive them online. The goal of archives is to preserve these interviews for future generations. My primary objective right now is to get as many speakers as possible, archive them and make them available to the public.\"

\n\nThe archival process begins with Boas or his colleagues going to interview Texas-Germans, many of whom still reside in German communities within cities such as New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

\n\nThe interviews are recorded on a mini-disc player using a microphone. Recordings are then digitized, and six students involved in the project transcribe and translate the interviews into English. About 90 percent of the project's estimated \$52,000 in funds goes toward paying personnel, who, along with Boas, hope to have about 100 interviews by the end of the year.

Hans Boas, an assistant professor of Germanic studies, teaches class Thursday. Boas founded the Texas German Dialect Project in September 2001 after receiving a grant from the dean of liberal arts. The project's goal is to document the dialect from interviews with remaining fluent speakers.

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\n\nOne student working on the project, Jarrod Slocum, a mathematics senior and student technician for the Department of Germanic Studies, said the interviewing process is often tedious, but that he has learned a lot.

dean of liberal arts. The project's goal is to document the dialect from interviews with remaining fluent speakers.

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\n\n"I transcribe and translate the interviews onto this program on the computer called [English Language and Nonproliferation Program]," Slocum said. "The program allows you to annotate the wave files from these interviews and see the annotation and the translation."

\n\nInterviews are translated and transcribed in two-minute time segments by participants such as Slocum, and are then put into a "for review" folder that is later assessed by a native German speaker to ensure accuracy.

\n\nWith each interview divided into about 20 segments, the transcribing and translating process can consume about one to two hours of time, but documentation of the interviews is important, Slocum said.

\n\n"I think this is essentially kind of a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do something like this, and I think it's a very worthwhile thing to do," Slocum said.

\n\nAlton Rahe, 71, was raised in a German community in Texas. As a child, he and his friends spoke German fluently until they went to school, he said.

\n\n"We ran around bowling alleys and had fun and always spoke in German," Rahe said. "We would laughingly say that if my parents didn't want us to understand what they were talking about, they'd speak English because we as children were only speaking German."

\n\nGermans settled in much of Central Texas after the 1840s. It was then that the Adelsverein, the Society of Noblemen &€" was organized in what is now Germany and encouraged thousands to go to Texas.

\n\nKnown only as the "Verein" in Texas, the group secured land for German immigrants in Texas under a constitution formed March 25, 1844. The constitution promised "to protect the emigrants on their long journey and in their new home, and to employ every means to secure for them a new home across the seas."

\n\nRahe's family, who are all German immigrants, kept up with the German language for generations. Rahe said that Texas-German is going away largely because of the incorporation of American culture into families.

\n\n"My parents pretty much kept up with [German] all these years &€" everybody's come from Germany," Rahe said. "I'm full-blooded German, and, therefore, the opportunity of German continuing has been better than had we married into some other Czech family or whatever. If you end up getting married to someone who isn't German, the odds of the German culture continuing in your family aren't very good."

\n\nThe American culture, which especially began to become incorporated after World War I in the 1920s and 1930s, is the reason Texas-German has not been passed to future generations, Boas said. The introduction of English-only laws after the world wars made it even more difficult for the German culture &€" especially the language &€" to be passed on.

\n\n"Because of the war situation, everything German was bad," Boas said. "Parents didn't want to pass on the language to their children because they would have a disadvantage over English-speaking students; they would be the minority and laughed at."

\n\nA little of the anti-German sentiment in Texas extends through today, Boas said. Many parents did not teach their children German, so the knowledge of the Texas-German dialect is contained only in the older generation who still speak it on occasion.

\n\n"A lot of Texas Germans still feel to some degree stigmatized or that it's not cool to speak German," Boas said. "In combination with social, political and economic developments, the English language is the predominant language. Many don't speak German anymore because business, religious, education and legal systems all are in English. German is no longer necessary to get along in life."

\n\nThe English-speaking culture was practically imposed on the German Americans, as they were not allowed to speak German in public or in school, so many settlers succumbed to the transition of a German culture to an American culture, Rahe said.

\n\n "To me at the time, it was a real effort for everybody to be part of the melting pot," Rahe said. "If you lived in America, you're going to speak English and live the

American way and not insist on carrying your ancestors' ways into your life â€” and you did this unconsciously. At the time, we were all desperately working to become more American, and of course, the two world wars didn't help the German issue at all."

Though German traditions were slowly being forced out of the communities because of the anti-German war sentiments, a few German traditions have recently been reinstated into Texas communities such as in New Braunfels.

"We have a lot of ethnic celebrations nowadays that would never have taken place 50 to 60 years ago, like New Braunfels' Wurstfest," Rahe said. "I don't think that organization would have ever gotten off the ground if somebody had suggested that after the second world war."

Besides striving to document the Texas-German dialect before it's gone, Boas also thinks it is important to educate people about the large German cultural background in Texas.

"I find that hardly anybody here realizes that much of Texas was settled by German immigrants," Boas said. "I think one of the most important missions of the University is to combine research with teaching and community outreach."

The Texas German Dialect Project combines all three aspects.

"Texas has this rich history of culture in terms of language and, up until World War I, Texas was trilingual," Boas said. "What makes Texas so unique is that it is much more open toward cultures that are different. You don't see that in other states."



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