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MARTIN LUTHER'S LANGUAGE IS DEAD

Marvin Folsom

This pronouncement of the death of Luther's language is in the first sentence of an article by Hans Eggers (Der Spiegel, 11 March 1968) entitled "Neudeutsch." Eggers refers to such features as:

1. The portion of sentences that have a subordinate clause or a dependent infinitive has decreased from 80% to 40%.
2. Nowadays, 60% to 70% of all relative clauses are trivial.
3. Sentence fragments of the type Das ganz gewiß nicht, Nicht im Traum constitute 2.5% of all sentences, whereas they were virtually unknown 150 years ago.
4. The subjunctive is disappearing (hülfe = würde helfen).
5. Sentences are becoming shorter.
6. Der Nachtragsstil (Was hatte er nun erreicht, durch diese Anstrengungen?) is becoming popular.
7. Pseudo-compounds (Küenndebattierer Nixon) and parathetic constructions (Das ist, das wissen wir ja alle, eine Selbstverständlichkeit) are increasing.

Eggers maintains that in the last century the literary (written) language (Schriftdeutsch) was distinct from the spoken language (Sprechdeutsch), but that this difference is now becoming less and less. Eggers attributes this development to the urbanisation which began about 1871 and has been continuing up to the present time. He also believes that both processes (urbanisation and continued movement of the standard written language in the direction of the style of the spoken language (Umgangsdeutsch)) will continue. In this paper, I would like to present data from 55 Bible translations from 1545 to the present to show not only that Luther's language as the standard written language is dead, but that the language of Luther's Bible is also dead.

Most of the data presented here concern grammatical and syntactic features. Vocabulary items still remain to be investigated, though an occasional example is included here. I have selected Menge as a point from which to measure for two reasons: (1) Most of the changes cluster around the time of Menge's first edition (1907), (2) Menge's later edi-

tion (1926) incorporates fairly systematically many of the developments that were only used haphazardly in his first edition. Unless otherwise noted, the verses are cited according to the revised Luther edition of 1956/64.

1. Verb morphology and Syntax

a. Perfect Auxiliary of sitzen, stehen

The Luther edition of 1545 has ist gesessen in Luke 19:30 which has been revised in the 1956/64 edition to hat gesessen to agree with standard German. (Acts 27:23 of the revision still has ist gestanden.) Twelve of the translations before Menge have ist gesessen and 8 have hat gesessen. After Menge, 3 have ist and 13 have hat.

b. Replacement of the Perfect by the Simple Past

The tense forms in Matthew 25:35 (Ich bin hungrig gewesen 'I was an hungered') had the simple past in 57% (12 of 21) of the translations before Menge. After Menge, 88% (23 of 26) used the simple past. The following forms of the simple past were used as indicated: wurde (1), litt (1), hungerte (4), hatte (4), and war (24). There were 12 examples of bin gewesen.

c. Replacement of the subjunctive by würde + infinitive or indicative -- The following verse from Matthew 16:26 contains four subjunctive forms.

Was hülfe es dem Menschen, wenn er die ganze Welt gewönne und nähme doch Schaden an seiner Seele? Oder was kann der Mensch geben, damit er seine Seele wieder löse?

'For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

Before Menge, 57% (48 of 84) of the forms were in the subjunctive. After Menge, only 22% (23 of 104) used the subjunctive, a drop of 35%.

d. Replacement of ward by wurde

...zu deren keiner ward Elia gesandt ... (Luke 4:26) 'for unto none was Elias sent'

Before Menge, 36% had ward in this verse (8 of 22). After Menge, only 11% (3 of 27) used

ward. Wurde is replacing ward more in its uses in the passive than as a lexical verb meaning 'to become, get'. Ward is very persistent in the phrase in Genesis 1:3: und es ward Licht. 77% (7 of 9) of the translations of the Old Testament after Menge still have ward in this verse.

e. Replacement of offenbart by geoffenbart

In Romans 3:21 ('But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifest'), four translations before Luther have eröffent, two have offenbar and six have geoffenbart. Luther and six others after Luther have offenbart, 13 have geoffenbart, 15 have offenbar and 11 have other verbs or adjectives such as enthüllen, zeigen, deutlich, klar, etc. Not only is the word offenbaren itself becoming obsolete, but the form of the past participle used by Luther is also disappearing.

f. Changes among the modal auxiliaries

Können is replacing vermögen: Gott vermag dem Abraham aus diesen Steinen Kinder zu erwecken (Matthew 3:9). The Einheitsübersetzung has: Aus diesen Steinen kann Gott Kinder Abrahams machen. Brauchen is being used more and more as a modal auxiliary (Der braucht seinen Vater oder seine Mutter nicht zu ehren, Matthew 15:6, Gute Nachricht für Sie, 1967). No examples of brauchen used as a modal were found in Luther 1545 but over 40 were found in Gute Nachricht für Sie.

2. Clause and Sentence Syntax

a. Word Order

The rather free word order of Luther's Bible (all editions except the most recent published in 1975) is becoming more and more rigid. There are fewer Ausklammerungen in the modern translations. In Matthew 16:18, Luther has: Du bist Petrus, und auf diesen Felsen will ich bauen meine Gemeinde, whereas more modern translations are more likely to have something similar to the Einheitsübersetzung of 1972: Du bist Petrus, und auf diesen Felsen werde ich meine Kirche bauen 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church'.

b. Incapsulation vs. Linear Order of Clauses

damit, wenn ihr den Vater bittet in meinem Namen, er's euch gebe (John 15:16)
'That whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you'

Luther has the clause beginning with wenn inside the clause beginning with damit in the same way English has juxtaposed the two clause introducers that whatsoever. This encapsulated order has yielded to a linear order of clauses, as for example in Rosalino (1781): dass der Vater euch alles gebe, was ihr in meinem Namen bitten werdet. The average number of encapsulations in the ten verses examined in bibles before Menge is 6.86. Three of these bibles showed encapsulation in all ten verses. The average number in bibles after Menge is 2.6, a decrease if 4.7 out of ten. Five of the 25 did not have a single example of encapsulation.

3. Prepositions

a. Replacement of gen by in, or nach

Da kamen Weise vom Morgenland gen Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1) 'there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem' In this meaning, no Bible after Grundl (1904) uses gen. There are only 18 examples of gen out of a possible 255, or only 7%.

b. Replacement of gen by auf zum

was steht ihr und sehet gen Himmel? (Acts 1:11)
'Why stand ye gazing up into heaven?' In the verses examined in the bibles before Menge, 42% used gen (70 of 168), but in those after Menge, only 12% used gen (22 of 182), a 30% reduction.

c. Replacement of darin, etc. by in ihnen, in ihr, etc.

denn ihr meinet, ihr habt das ewige Leben darin (Luther 1545 drinnen) (John 5:39)
for in them ye think ye have eternal life'

20% of the verses in bibles before Menge (66 of 325) had a preposition plus a personal pronoun. After Menge, 37% (131 of 352) had a personal pronoun. The earlier edition of Menge has two

more da-compounds than the later edition. Seven translations (including Luther) have da-compounds in all the verses examined. Interestingly enough, Mentel (1466) has no da-compounds in any of these verses. In this respect, Mentel anticipated the development of modern German. It remains to be seen in what other areas this may also be true. Specifically in John 5:39, 42% (11 of 26) before Menge had in ihnen, after Menge 69% (18 of 26) had in ihnen, an increase of 27%.

4. Pronouns

a. Replacement of welcher by der

In 13 verses in 21 bibles before Menge, 40% have a form of the relative pronoun welcher (109 of 273). In the same verses in bibles after Menge, only 1% used a form of welcher (4 of 338), a decrease of 39%.

b. Replacement of darin/worin by in der, etc.

zu der Gnade, darin wir stehen (Romans 5:2) Before Menge, 4 used darin, 2 used worin, 4 used in welcher and 6 used in der. After Menge, no one used darin, one used worin, 18 used in der and two used in dem.

c. derjenige is dropping out in favor of jener or der.

d. niemand (acc.) is being replaced in many instances by keinen and in some recent translations the ending is being re-introduced (niemanden in Wilckens 1972).

5. Other

a. Replacement of wo ... hin by wohin

wir wissen nicht, wo du hingehst (John 14:5) 'we know nor wither thou goest' In the verses examined (15) in the bibles before Menge, 66% showed separation (249 of 375). In those after Menge, 23% showed separation (95 of 405). Seven translations showed no separation in any of these verses. Menge's earlier edition has separation in 4 instances but the newer edition has none. Mentel has only wo or da but no compound forms.

- b. Replacement of the Saxon genitive (der Witwen Häuser = die Häuser der Witwen)

sie fressen der Witwen Häuser (Mark 12:40) 'they devour widows' houses' In a seminar paper, Charles Green examined 54 examples in 53 translations, only two have retained 30% of the Saxon genitives found in Luther. Mentel (1466) and Jedermanns-Bibel (Leipzig 1930) have only one each. In the verse cited above in the example, 52% of those before Menge (13 of 25) have a Saxon genitive, whereas only 10% (3 of 28) after Menge have a Saxon genitive, a decline of 42%.

- c. Replacement of ein Stück gebratenem Fisch/ein Stück gebratenen Fisches by ein Stück gebratenen Fisch

Und sie legten ihm vor ein Stück gebratenem Fisch (Luke 24:42) 'a piece of broiled fish'

Before Menge, 57% have von, 19% have a genitive and 24% have an accusative. After Menge, 22% have von, 26% have a genitive and 52% have an accusative. The genitive actually increased slightly (from 19% to 26%), the use of von dropped drastically (from 57% to 22%), but the accusative registered an increase of 28%.

- d. Use of zwei for zween, zwo, zwei

Luther has zwo hende, zween Füße, zwey Augen (Matthew 18:8-9) but Kistemaker (1825) is the last translation to make a distinction in the gender of the numeral 'two'.

- e. The loss of the dative and accusative forms of Jesus (Jesu, Jesum)

After Kistemaker (1825), only the Mülheimer Ausgabe of 1924 (with Jesu Christo, Jesum) and Bruns 1959 (with Jesum) have inflectional endings for the accusative or dative. After 1825, inflectional endings are virtually non-existent, except for the genitive endings which are retained by most of the translations. Gute Nachricht für Sie (1967) has no genitives on the four verses examined, usually replacing it with von. The revision (Die Gute Nachricht 1971) re-introduced the genitive in two of the four verses. In the 1971 revision, 38 examples of the phrase von Jesus Christus were replaced by Jesu Christi.

f. Replacement of auf Erden by auf der Erde

Dein Wille geschehe auf Erden wie im Himmel (Matthew 6:10) 'Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven' 20% of those before Menge (36 of 184 in 8 verses) have auf der Erde, after Menge 30% have auf der Erde, a 10% increase. Luther has auf Erden throughout. Menge's earlier edition has 4 examples of auf Erden and 4 examples of auf der Erde, but the later edition has auf der Erde in all eight verses. Strangely enough, Wilckens (1972) has auf Erden in all eight verses.

6. Vocabulary

One looks in vain for such words as mitnichten, sintemal, afterreden, Schnur 'daughter-in-law' in modern translations. So far one example has been checked in the 55 translations. denn ein Geist hat nicht Fleisch und Bein (Luke 24:39) 'for a spirit hath not flesh and bones' Some have Gebein in place of Bein. Menge (1907), Jedermanns-Bibel (1930), Tillmann (1961), Fotobibel (1965), Die Gute Nachricht (1971), Die Einheitsübersetzung (1972) and Wilckens (1972) all have Fleisch und Knochen. All others have Fleisch und Bein in agreement with Luther.

Additional work is being done on the optional dative -e, the use of diminutives, the double negative, the use of the subjunctive in als ob-clauses and in indirect discourse, and other aspects of the decline of the genitive.

The work already done and now in progress allow us to draw the following conclusions:

- 1) Around 1900, numerous changes in various aspects of biblical German manifest themselves in the translations.
- 2) At least three such changes (the use of der instead of welcher, the use of preposition + personal pronoun instead of a da-compound, and the absence of the Saxon genitive) were well developed in Mentel (1466) and have re-emerged after having been overshadowed by Luther's language for over 300 years.
- 3) The style of Luther's translation of the Bible has gradually but inevitably deteriorated to the point where we can now say that it has been dying slowly over the centuries and we can now, without any legal delays, remove the artificial life support

systems, fill out the death certificate and declare Luther's biblical language officially dead.

Summary

1. Verbs
 - a. ist gesessen = hat gesessen
 - b. ich bin hungrig gewesen = ich war hungrig
 - c. hülfe = würde helfen, hilft
 - d. ward = wurde
 - e. offenbart = geoffenbart
 - f. vermögen = können
2. Clause and Sentence Syntax
 - a. werde ich bauen meine Gemeinde = werde ich meine Kirche bauen
 - b. damit, wenn = damit ..., wenn ...
3. Prepositions
 - a. gen = in, nach
 - b. gen = auf zum
 - c. darin = in ihnen, etc.
4. Pronouns
 - a. welcher = der
 - b. derjenige = wer, der
 - c. niemand = keinen, niemanden
5. Other
 - a. wo ... hin = wohin
 - b. der Witwen Häuser = die Häuser der Witwen
 - c. ein Stück gebratenem Fisch/gebratenen Fisches = e. St. gebratenen Fisch
 - d. zween, zwo, zwei = zwei
 - e. Jesus, Jesum, Jesu = Jesus, Jesu
 - f. auf Erden = auf der Erde
6. Vocabulary
 - a. Bein = Knochen