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## “The English Effect” on Amish Language and Literacy Practices

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## **“The English Effect” on Amish Language and Literacy Practices**

*Tabetha Adkins*

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Using Jack Goody and Ian Watt’s theory of literacy as a normalizing agent, I show how the presence of the English language and “English Only” values and policies have affected the Amish and their home language, Pennsylvania Dutch, and their religious language, “High” German. These changes are seen as detrimental to the Amish who, like linguistic scholars William Labov, John E. Joseph, and Joshua A. Fishman, equate language with identity.

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In *The Orality of Language*, Walter Ong describes “the oral character of languages” and writes about “the contrast between oral modes of thought and expression and written modes” (5-6). For the purposes of this article, I rely on Ong, Deborah Brandt, Robert Yagelski, and Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole’s characterizations of orality as the verbal expression of thought and Brian V. Street’s definition of literacy—specifically the “ideological model of literacy” which posits “that literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill [...] that is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles” (7).

Orality, language, and literacy intersect in interesting ways within Amish Communities in the United States. Amish communities are trilingual; they use the Pennsylvania Dutch language at home, the “Old” Amish German language in religious services, and English in (non-Amish) public. Languages in the Amish community, then, exist within specified spheres of Amish life, and these spheres rarely overlap. In this article, I show how this segmentation of language has affected literacy in the Amish community. Through this analysis, I argue that standardized English literacy and the push for English-only literacy in the United States has acted as, to borrow Jack Goody and Ian Watt’s term, a normalizing agent upon the Amish despite their historic and defining attempts to avoid assimilation. At the same time that “outsider” or mainstream American values have had an effect on Amish languages traditions, I argue that Amish language traditions, like literacy practices, have been informed by the values of the Amish community.

The information used in this article was collected during an ethnographic study of the literacy practices of an Amish community in rural southeast Ohio during the summer of 2008, and I maintain contact and relationships with many of the participants in the study today. Data for this study was obtained in three ways. First, I read *The Budget*, the International Amish Newspaper, for one year. *Budget* issues were coded for re-occurring themes.<sup>1</sup> Second, I interviewed twenty-five Amish and Mennonite men, women, and children living in the Hanley area using open ended, guide approach interviews, which, according to Michael Quinn Patton, is a strategy in which “topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance, in outline form; the interviewer decides sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview” (349). I chose this method because I wanted to be sure that the data was comprehensive while still allowing room for discussion and context to shape the results. The twenty-five interviews took place over a three-week span in June 2008 and notes from these interviews were coded for reoccurring themes. And finally, since I understand, as Kathleen Blake Yancey advises in “Feminist Empirical Research” that context matters very much to the interpretation of research data, I collected additional data—mostly contextual information to help me understand what I read in *The Budget* or learned during interviews—while attending community events like wedding ceremonies, patronizing Amish-owned businesses, and visiting with my in-laws’ Amish friends. I use pseudonyms for all participants and the names of their locations.

In order to understand the purposes of language in the Amish community, I began each interview by asking Amish participants to simply tell me about the languages they use. Participants reported that the Amish community uses three languages and the purposes are specified by Amish faith. Bethany, a shopkeeper, eloquently explained these purposes as follows: “We use English to communicate with English neighbors and for business transactions; the Pennsylvania Dutch is for home and connects us to our forefathers; and we use Old German for our religion.” To Bethany and others who participated in this study, ideas about language use are utilitarian. This attitude was reflected in the responses I received whenever I asked participants about the benefits of speaking two or more languages. Matthew, a community bishop, said it was only good to know multiple languages if you were going to use them. He said, “if you don’t use it, you lose it” and compared the practice required to maintain a language to the practice of arithmetic in order to remember how to do complicated operations like fractions. This “use it or lose it” attitude was found again during my conversation with Naomi, a greenhouse owner. When our interview was complete, she asked if I knew any languages other than English. I said I had studied Spanish in high school and college but do not really remember much

of the language now. She said, sadly, “Yes, you have to use a language in order to keep it.”

In getting to know the Amish people living in Hanley, I have come to see these kinds of statements about the “usefulness of language” as an attempt to show that their multilingual nature is not motivated by pride nor an effort to seem smarter than English-only speakers like myself. Several participants were careful to not seem as though they were bragging, which in hindsight may have been in response to my descriptions of the multilingualism of the Amish as “special” and as something from which “we in the university could learn.” A bishop, Matthew, specifically asked my informant, my (non-Amish) mother-in-law, after the interview if she felt he had disobeyed the rules given to Christians in the Sixth Chapter of Matthew, which orders Christians to avoid being judgmental or proud. As a result, I later abandoned questions that portrayed Amish literacy practices as unique or special. Instead, I talked to participants about what I had learned from previous interviews and asked them to confirm if their experiences had been similar. Although this technique typically led to more comfortable interviews, participants continued to emphasize the utilitarian nature of their languages and were eager to explain why all these languages belonged in Amish life.

### **“There are a lot of Words I Don’t Know in this Book”**

“Old” Amish German is the language used least often by the Amish community and exists entirely for religious purposes. Amish German can be heard only during religious ceremonies such as church services, weddings, and funerals. The German language used by the Amish, however, is not the same German taught and spoken in modern day Germany. Amish German, called High German or Old German by the Amish community living in Hanley, is also referred to as Alemannic German. To illustrate the difference between Amish German and modern German, Matthew told me this story: I had an uncle who was stationed in Germany and fought in World War II. When the war was over, he decided to stay in Germany. I was very sad that he did that because it is against our beliefs to move away like that. Whenever my Uncle visited, I had a very hard time understanding his words. His German was different than ours. The words were even different.

An example of this variation in word meaning can be found in the name the Amish give to their religious language, “high German.” Native speakers of modern German use the term *hooch Deitsch* to refer to the German used by the elite class—similar to the term “Queen’s English” used by English speakers. However, I asked two of my interview participants who describe themselves as fluent readers of the German Bible if they recognized

the term *hooch Deitsch*, and neither of them knew the meaning of the phrase, thus illustrating the disconnect between modern and Amish German.

Another important point to note about the Amish religious language is that Amish German is only spoken or read by the Amish; they never write this language. The Amish Bible is printed in Amish German and is purchased by Amish church members in Sugar Creek, Ohio. Matthew, my first interview participant and a local church Bishop, showed his Bible to me, and it looked much like an English Bible with old-fashioned font and two columns on each page. While Amish schools teach Amish German spelling with Friday afternoon spelling bees each week, the purpose of these bees, participants told me, was so that students could read the Bible. While these bees certainly aid in that learning, participants told me that Amish German is mostly acquired by listening to sermons at Church and singing Amish German hymns during church services.

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“...[T]hat’s why the language has changed so much. People can’t farm. They have to own businesses or work for English business owners. It’s a loss to our heritage.”

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All twenty five interview participants stated that of the three languages, they were least fluent in Amish German. This situation may seem contradictory to those who understand the Amish to be an especially spiritual group, but this is not to say that church and faith are not at the center of Amish life; to the contrary, there was general agreement

among participants that preserving Amish German for religious services was important. This concept is not foreign to readers who are familiar with the Catholic Church’s practice of holding sermons in Latin although most Catholics do not understand much Latin. In the interest of full disclosure and ethical ethnographic practice, I must acknowledge I cannot with complete confidence argue that the Amish do not understand Amish German at the same rate they understand English or Pennsylvania Dutch, as I myself do not understand the language and have no way of testing language comprehension. However, I can attest to what I was told and what I saw during a wedding to which I was invited. During the wedding reception, I was seated with several unmarried Amish men in their early twenties. When the Amish German hymnals were passed around for after-supper singing, I asked the man sitting across from me if he would tell me the title of the hymn book. He looked at the title, and then asked the two men sitting beside him if they knew the title. They did not. He then leaned in close to

me and said “there are a lot of words I don’t know in this book.” Yuet- Sim D. Chiang and Mary Schmida’s analysis of ethnic language and cultural identification seems applicable to this scenario; Chiang and Schmida find that students “identify with their heritage language, even if they do not speak it... It is as if by claiming the language, they claim a linguistic identity that perhaps exists in their minds, but not in their tongues” (87, qtd. in Bruce Horner and John Trimbur 613). To Chiang and Schmida’s research populations and to the Amish, language and identity share an intimate connection.

### **“To Speak Pennsylvania Dutch is to be Amish”**

The Pennsylvania Dutch language is a dialect of German. This dialect is still used by the Amish in order to preserve their faith and culture. Linguistic scholars generally agree, as linguist David Crystal puts it in *Language Death*, that “two speech systems are considered to be dialects of the same language if they are (predominantly) mutually intelligible” (8). I specify that Pennsylvania Dutch is a dialect of German in order to point to the language’s connection to Amish ancestral identity and history. Pennsylvania Dutch is spoken by several groups residing in the United States whose ancestors immigrated during the same period as the Amish, but today, the language is most closely associated with the Amish.

In Holmes County, Ohio, where Naomi grew up, many of the non-Amish people speak Pennsylvania Dutch, too. She told me, “When I was a little girl there, a lot of people—especially the older people—spoke Pennsylvania Dutch, even if they weren’t Dutch [Amish].” Similarly, Naomi’s husband, Ezra, said, “in some of the areas where there are a lot of Amish people living, like in Paradise, Pennsylvania, or Holmes County, Ohio, or even in Sugarcreek, Ohio, a lot of the older English people speak Pennsylvania Dutch. It’s just their heritage.” Many participants reported that their English school teachers could speak some Pennsylvania Dutch. Ruby, a woman who invited me to drink coffee with her at her kitchen table, told me a story about meeting a non-Amish woman who could speak Pennsylvania Dutch. She said:

I was in Oklahoma with my girl [daughter] and a woman heard us speaking to one another. She started speaking to me in the same language, and I was so surprised! She had German ancestry too, and her family had passed this language down through the generations. I really liked talking to her. I felt like we had something in common. She wasn’t Amish, but she sounded Amish.

Similarly, Daniel, a former Amish man living in the community who is now a Mennonite, told me that despite the fact that he no longer uses the Pennsylvania Dutch language in his own life or faith, he still remembers the language from the time in his life when it was important and occasionally finds uses for the language. He told me:

Whenever Amish children from the neighborhood come to our house for ice cream, I speak Pennsylvania Dutch to them. They are so amazed and confused because here I am, living in this house that they see as being very worldly—and I speak their language. <sup>2</sup> They know I'm not Amish—I don't look Amish, I don't have the beard, I drive a car—but yet I sound Amish to them. They don't understand, and they love it. It doesn't scare them; it makes them laugh.

These stories, the fact that non-Amish people are referred to as “English,” and the practice of referring to people who have left the Amish faith as those who “aren't Dutch anymore” all corroborate arguments by scholars like William Labov, John E. Joseph, and Joshua A. Fishman that language and identity are intimately related in this community.

Although Pennsylvania Dutch is a derivative of German, the language no longer resembles German as it once did. In fact, interview participants described the language as “low grade German” or “German slang.” Perhaps because it is seen as a slang language, the Amish do not regard this language in the ways they regard English or German. For example, Pennsylvania Dutch was never a standardized, written language. This fact causes anxiety for some of my interview participants, and especially for Caleb, who spoke at length about the subject during an interview in his blacksmith forge. He said that it was “ironic and sad” that Pennsylvania Dutch is not a written language, but he had heard there was an attempt to print and preserve Pennsylvania Dutch at a college in Wooster, Ohio. Part of this effort, he said, involves putting books and The New Testament into Pennsylvania Dutch. Regardless of my efforts, I could find no evidence of this project. <sup>3</sup> While I was disappointed to find no evidence of this effort, Caleb's comments led to some of the most interesting findings in this study. First of all, his anxiety regarding the fact that Pennsylvania Dutch is not what Joshua A. Fishman refers to as a “language of literacy,” not only indicates his understanding of how languages are but may also demonstrate a cultural anxiety about the legitimacy of their language in a world where print text is obviously privileged. The Amish, after all, certainly understand and subscribe to the concept of privileging printed language, since they belong to Christianity, a religion based on a printed text. I believe, too, that this rumor may have been the result of an awareness on the Amish's part that mainstream

Americans exoticize Amish people and their lifestyles, in ways that span from covertly photographing Amish men during a barn raising for the local (mainstream) newspaper to writing romance novels featuring young Amish women. Their specialized language, then, may be subject to mainstream interest, as well.

While English is the only language in which the Amish write, every interview participant reported that they felt they had a better knowledge of Pennsylvania Dutch than of English. Abigail, a quilt-maker who said she'd feel "handicapped" without knowledge of the English language, said Pennsylvania Dutch is "the language that's always on the tip of my tongue." When I asked her if she thinks and dreams in Pennsylvania Dutch or English, she said she "suspect[s] it's Dutch." I asked Grace, who at 20 years old is younger than Abigail (who is 48), if she thinks in Pennsylvania Dutch or English. She said "I think in both. They come equally easy to me." I

inquired if she thinks older people in the community think in Pennsylvania Dutch or English, and she replied, "they probably think in Pennsylvania Dutch. We younger people probably use English more than they did when they were younger." These generational differences certainly point to the pace at which language and literacy practices are changing in the Amish community, and they also point to a potential difference in ideology. Perhaps the older generation of the Amish

feel more of responsibility to preserve the traditions of their faith, culture, and ancestors while the younger Amish generation is not yet committed to preserving these traditions. Or perhaps the young generation, in the face of the economic realities facing young Amish men and women today, see English literacy are critical to individual and family survival. To illustrate this problem, Luke, a bishop, explained that the amount of English present in Pennsylvania Dutch resulted from the fact that seven percent of the Amish in Holmes County are farmers now, whereas when he was a child, the number was closer to ninety percent. He said: "that's why the language has changed so much. People can't farm. They have to own businesses or

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work for English business owners. It's a loss to our heritage." His comments and other off-hand remarks I heard from multiple community members illustrate that younger members of the Amish community seem to perceive the economic necessity of using and even embracing English language and literacy practices more urgently than the older generation who may still have family farms to depend upon for income.

If English is the only written language of the Amish and German is the language used for religious services, one may ask why Pennsylvania Dutch is necessary at all to the Amish. Mennonites, for example, have mostly abandoned Pennsylvania Dutch. In the Mennonite community, Pennsylvania Dutch is not a requirement but an option. Anna, a Mennonite woman known for her homemade jelly, has always spoken English, although her grandmother spoke Pennsylvania Dutch. She said "the church in my area decided against passing that language on to their children. We only use English, and this is a change that has occurred within the last few generations." When I asked her if she had any emotional tie to Pennsylvania Dutch because it was the language of her grandmother, she said "No. The only reason I'd want to know how to speak it is because it would be convenient to know to speak to the Amish people living in this neighborhood and especially to the children who haven't learned to speak English yet."

But the Amish associate Pennsylvania Dutch with their identities as followers of Christ and the Amish faith. Caleb, who said that Pennsylvania Dutch "defines a sense of home" for him, called Pennsylvania Dutch an "Amish birthright" and sees preserving the language as part of maintaining Amish beliefs. He told me:

Our ancestors came to what became the United States between 1730 and 1735 to preserve our beliefs. We had to preserve Pennsylvania Dutch, but we had to learn English to exist in the United States. Protecting Pennsylvania Dutch is about protecting our rights to our faith. When we pull away from Pennsylvania Dutch, we lose it. Whenever young people start to leave the Amish faith, the first thing they do is start to insist on only speaking English. To speak Pennsylvania Dutch is to be Amish.

Equating a language with a set of values or religion is not uncommon. John Duffy found similar patterns among the multi-lingual (but often mistaken as illiterate) Hmong people of Laos. In fact, Duffy found that "Hmong narratives link the loss of a writing system to the death of the Hmong king and the exile of the Hmong from their homelands in China" (37). But Caleb's statement also reveals that he sees the Pennsylvania Dutch

language much like M. M. Bakhtin, who says language is “not a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather...a world view” (271). This attitude is seemingly prevalent in the Hanley Amish community, as other participants made similar assertions. Bethany, a dry foods store keeper, said she saw Pennsylvania Dutch as an important way to link her to her forefathers. She explained: “it’s very important for the Amish to stay connected to our ancestors. Speaking this language is one way we do that.” Joel, a furniture maker, also mentioned his ancestors when he talked about Pennsylvania Dutch. He said “Pennsylvania Dutch connects me to my ancestors. Maintaining our language is our way of maintaining our connection to our ancestors. This language is our mother tongue, but we wouldn’t get too far if we couldn’t speak, read, and write English in this country.” The fact that the Amish cling to Pennsylvania Dutch for religious and ancestral identity and yet consistently convey the necessity of English points to the reality that despite the Amish desire to live “not of” this world, they, as an immigrant group, have at some point been affected by what Horner and Trimbur call “the tacit policy of English monolingualism” present in the United States (594).

Despite the reverence with which the Amish community regards Pennsylvania Dutch, the language is suffering and may be in danger of what linguists like Michael Krauss call “language endangerment” or even what David Crystal calls “language death.” A language is, Crystal says, “dead when no one speaks it any more” (11). Speakers I interviewed report that the language is on the decline. Instead of being a language independent of any other linguistic influence other than its German origin, Pennsylvania Dutch is now saturated with English words and phrases because the original Pennsylvania Dutch or German translation has been forgotten by or never taught to the native speakers. According to participants, this language saturation and change has occurred more rapidly in the last three decades. This phenomenon, it seems to me, has been caused by two major influences: the material needs of individual Amish families and the assimilation of the Amish into mainstream American—and, thereby, English only—literacy practices. While Caleb seemed the most explicitly concerned about Pennsylvania Dutch and its future, other interview participants shared their concerns about the current state of their home language. Sometimes these concerns were stated only as observations about vocabulary knowledge. The private Amish school teacher, Hannah, for example, noted that her grandmother knows many more Pennsylvania Dutch words than she does. She said “being around English speaking people so often seems to make Pennsylvania Dutch less recallable.” Similarly, Samuel, a small engine mechanic, stated that there were many Pennsylvania Dutch words he simply does not know, and English words often stand in the place of the gaps in Pennsylvania Dutch vocabulary. This idea was repeated by Faith, a woman

who invited me to sit beside her as she sewed a quilt for her granddaughter and said:

I've noticed more and more English words mixed in with the Pennsylvania Dutch words. For example, I had always thought that the Dutch word for porch was just "porch," but then I remembered that my grandmother called it something else. My friend across the road said that she remembered her grandmother calling it something else, too, but she can't remember what the word was. Seems like the older people always knew more of the language.

Other participants, however, spoke more gravely about the amount of English present in Pennsylvania Dutch. Caleb told me: "there is an alarming amount of English in Pennsylvania Dutch. I'm concerned that if we continue to pull away from our home language, we'll pull too far away from our ancestry. The language keeps Amish people in the circle." He later added, "It's already to the point where children from Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Holmes County, Ohio have such different dialects that they have a hard time understanding one another." Likewise, Naomi told me: "I heard that Pennsylvania Dutch is the hardest language to learn because there are so many varieties. And you have to know how to speak English in order to understand all of Pennsylvania Dutch because there is so much English in the Dutch."

As is shown not only by my findings with the Amish but also in texts like Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole's *The Psychology of Literacy* and Niko Besnier's *Literacy, Emotion, and Authority: Reading and Writing on a Polynesian Atoll*, communities who use languages originating from foreign sources often experience some kind of change in their home language. As in the Nukulaelae community of which Besnier writes, English has become essential for, as Besnier puts it, "academic and economic success" for the Amish (55). Similarly, the result of multiple languages converging in the Amish community is that one has lost favor—Gilbertese, in the Nukulaelae's case, Pennsylvania Dutch in the Amish's case—and as Besnier says of the Nukulaelae, "will probably disappear within a generation" (54). If we apply Besnier's argument to the Amish, one could argue the lack of an ability to write or produce Pennsylvania Dutch is the cause of the decrease in Pennsylvania Dutch usage, and like Gilbertese, I suspect that Pennsylvania Dutch will be lost or abandoned by most speakers within the next few generations. Indeed, Fishman, in his argument on why English-only anxieties in the United States are misinformed, writes that with some exceptions, "ethnolinguistic minorities in the United States lose their ethnic mother tongue fairly completely by their second or third generation

of encounter with American urban life” (168). As Amish families interact more and more with non-Amish families and participate in the U. S. labor force and business economy, they become less isolated; the historic isolation of the Amish, if we apply Fishman’s theories, has helped to preserve the community’s ethnic languages, but as I have shown, this trend is on the decline and explains the simultaneous language decline.

Despite these implications, there were some interview participants, however, who are not concerned about the state of the language. Ezra noted that just as Amish children pick up words from English speakers, there are many instances of English people learning Amish words, too, and this is the natural result of different cultures living among one another. He said “my wife, Naomi, told me that her friend said ‘nay’ to her instead of no. ‘Nay’ is a Dutch word. She learned that by listening to the Amish.” In the same vein, Adam, another furniture maker, said he is not worried that the Pennsylvania Dutch language has changed much. He said, “these changes are just like the changes you see in English with dialects—the slang words people use in Boston aren’t the same words used in Atlanta. And in the Amish community, you don’t have to go too far to hear these different dialects. It makes it hard for the children, but the adults figure it out.” Yet I could not help but wonder, however, if some interview participants were making the problem seem less serious than it is because I am an outsider. Thus, when I attempt to be a reflexive ethnographer and follow in the traditions of ethnographers whose research I respect (Charlotte Davies; Pamela Takayoshi and Katrina Powell; Patricia Sullivan; Mary Louise Pratt; Thomas Newkirk; Gesa Kirsch), I can understand why this intensely private community might be hesitant to share the community’s language problems with me—an individual who, to them, represents the mainstream education from which their parents fought to protect them. Participants who did express concern over the language issues in the community did so only after reemphasizing that their thoughts were not criticisms of the teachers or of the school. Luke, the bishop who talked to me about the lack of farming opportunities for the Amish leading to an emphasis on English education in Amish schools amended his comments with this explanation:

Every school district is different. Our school district is doing a really good job. They’re hosting German spelling bees for the children so that they can learn German spelling and language. The school doesn’t teach Pennsylvania Dutch, you know. Just English and German. Pennsylvania Dutch is for home and family. But when people have to leave their home to work for English people, they speak English more often, and the Dutch suffers.

I suspect because I am an English teacher, Luke thought I was asking questions in order to write about Amish education specifically.

But as Luke's comment indicates, the problems with Pennsylvania Dutch are not failings of the Amish school system. Instead the schools—seen by many Amish as the primary site of English acquisition—do their job too well. The Amish are perhaps too good at speaking, writing, and reading English, and as time passes, the Amish seem to become even more English literate with each generation. There is even a very noticeable difference between the accent of different generations of Amish people living in Hanley today; the older people living in Hanley have a thick, distinctively Amish accent, while the young people sound more like southeast Ohio English speakers. The effect of Amish families turning away from traditional farming is not only the appearance of more Amish business and Amish workers in English-owned business, but Amish families have had to relocate and, therefore, scatter what were once cohesive, large Amish communities across the United States. Now, Amish communities are much smaller than they were three decades ago, and Amish people are appearing in places where they were once unfamiliar. The effect of this scattering of Amish communities is that even though the Amish population as a whole is growing, communities are shrinking, and as Crystal shows, as minority communities are scattered on the fringes, their “chances of [...] keeping their ethnic language alive are minimal” (11).

### **“An Alarming Amount of English”**

The Amish learn to speak English upon going to school; the Amish schools' language curriculum could be described as “English Plus,” which, as Horner and Trimbur remind us, “encourages the teaching of English plus one or more additional languages to all students in the U. S.”<sup>4</sup> Some Amish children are exposed to English-speaking outsiders more often than other children, and thus, these children go to school knowing more English. Regardless, the Amish see school as the primary site of English acquisition, and as my interviews and scholars like Andrea Fishman, John A. Hostetler and Gertrude Enders Huntington, and Stephen Bowers Harroff show, school is conducted entirely in English with the exception of German reading and spelling lessons on Friday afternoons. In this section, I show that English, a language to which the Amish reportedly feel no real ties, is a function of practicality and especially of economic and nationalistic imperatives dictating the use of English in the United States.

Because I saw strong emotional attachments to the Pennsylvania Dutch language in the interviews I conducted with Amish and Mennonite individuals, I asked interview participants to talk about the role of English in their lives. I asked Ruth about instances in which she uses English. She

said, “I use your language whenever I talk to my English neighbors, when I go to the grocery store, or when I go to the doctor.” I noticed she used the phrase “your language” whenever she referred to English, as if she did not feel English belonged to her—or she belonged to English, so to speak. Before I knew the Amish do all of their writing in English, I asked a few interview participants why they thought church appointed “scribes” write letters for *The Budget* in English. Ezra said he thought it was in English so “you (English speaking) people can read it.” Like Ruth, Ezra’s words demonstrate an ideological detachment from the English language. These statements point to the distance the Amish feel from the language they know best and reflect the findings in psycholinguistics by scholars like Aneta Pavlenko, Mary Besmeres, Jean-Marc Dewaele, and Michèle Koven who show that speakers of multiple languages often choose the language to which they attach the most emotion, as in the case of “Wendy,” a case-study subject of Pavlenko’s who reacted most to emotions expressed in her fourth language, Italian. As another model of how emotion and language intertwine, Carlos Alberto Montaner claims “anybody who learns to love in one language will never be able spontaneously to translate his expressions of affection into a language acquired later” (164). What these examples illustrate is that emotional ties to specific languages—no matter what the language’s role may be in the speaker’s life—are very real to the speaker, and the lack of emotion with which the Amish regard English is especially interesting considering that the Amish do all of their writing and most of their reading—two acts many participants expressed love for—in English.

Other participants talked about the importance of knowing English. A nine year-old boy, David, told me that it was important to learn English so he could “work with English people like you and be a good neighbor.” Bethany, who owns and operates a dry goods store, said: “I couldn’t imagine life without speaking English. I wouldn’t be able to talk to my neighbors, and running this business in this area would be impossible. I have a lot of English customers. The Baptist church over in Grover Fields buys a lot of my angel food cakes for their church suppers.” I asked Bethany if she used English for any interactions other than with those who exclusively spoke English, and she replied, “No, English is only for business and neighbors.” Indeed, some participants told stories about the trouble they had interacting with English speaking adults when they were children who had not yet gone to school. Naomi told me this story:

When I was a girl, my mother would send me and my sister to the store to pick up a few items for the household. She’d write a note in English, and we’d go in and give it to the shopkeeper who would read the note and get the items for us. He tried to make small talk with us, but we couldn’t understand. I think

he thought we were shy. People often see Amish children and think they look American and assume that they speak English. I don't know if that shopkeeper ever figured out that we couldn't understand him.

Likewise, Jacob says the Amish have to speak, read, and write English “to know what was going on.” Caleb took this a step farther by saying that “we had to learn English to exist in the United States.” Comments like Caleb's and Naomi's who exclaimed “We have to speak English! What would we do when we went to Wal\*Mart?!” suggest the Amish believe that just as to be Amish is to speak Pennsylvania Dutch, to be American is to speak, read, and write English. Like Duffy's finding that the Hmong were “invited” to literacy “as a necessary tool for economic advancement and for political participation on the national level” (122), the Amish feel invited, as Edwin Black puts it, “not simply to believe something but to *be* something” (172). In this case, the Amish are invited, through English literacy and language, to be American. Only through English literacy do they feel like a part of what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community;” the Amish feel that speaking, reading, and writing English makes them part of the American community, while mainstream America still sees the Amish as outsiders. But it's also important to note the Amish do not necessarily feel American, either. Caleb, after all, said the Amish had to speak, read, and write English in order to *exist* in the United States—not to *be* American.

The interview participants, no matter how separate from the world they may seem or aim to be, are motivated at least in part by the material and global value of English, the language appropriately described by Catherine Prendergast as “capitalism's first language” (2). To illustrate this point, two interview participants mentioned the “buying power” English provides to them; Naomi says she had to learn English “in order to get along.” She continued, “without English, I'd be handicapped! What would we do when we went to Wal\*Mart?!” This sentiment was repeated by Abigail who also used the word “handicapped” to describe how she'd feel without knowledge of English. These statements illuminate the fact that when it comes to language and literacy, the Amish are very much aware of how, to borrow their term, “crippled” they would be, both financially and socially, if they did not write, read, and speak English—and I believe that Caleb would argue that the corollary is true, as well—that the Amish are being “crippled” as a culture by the increasing focus on English in their culture. Although most participants claimed their primary motivation for learning English and practicing English literacy skills was to communicate with English speaking people in order to, as they often said, “be neighborly,” upon prompting, most acknowledged that English was necessary for, as Jacob put it, “getting along financially in the U. S.” Similarly, J. Elspeth Stuckey argues the “usual

speculations about the nature and need for literacy are misguided” and what seems like values for reading, writing, and speaking in this country are simply veiled values for the ability to pay (vii). In the case of the Amish, not only is the ability “to pay” becoming more and more important, but what is also arising as a result of the farming conditions mentioned in chapter two is the increasing importance of the ability to work in English-centric settings. Like so many other citizens who were “invited” to literacy—which Claude Levi-Strauss called “an instrument for the enslavement of mankind”—the Amish are working in English-owned businesses like saw mills, factories, and contracting companies with increasing frequency, thereby reinforcing the importance of English literacy skills for Amish community survival.

The increasing frequency with which Amish community members are forced into the American workforce by changing local and global economic conditions certainly affects this prioritization of English literacy. Even before the effects of this change were felt in the Amish community, the 1972 Supreme Court Case *Wisconsin V. Yoder* found that Amish children could not be forced into compulsory education after 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and to do so would violate their parents’ right to freedom of religion. The court’s opinion states explicitly that students in Amish schools “are taught subjects such as English, mathematics, health, and social studies,”—notice that the court puts to rest any fears that the students may not be learning English in Amish schools—but even more importantly, the dissenting opinion written by Justice William O. Douglas points specifically to how Amish education affects the future careers of Amish students. Justice Douglas writes:

On this important and vital matter of education, I think the children should be entitled to be heard. While the parents, absent dissent, normally speak for the entire family, the education of the child is a matter on which the child will often have decided views. *He may want to be a pianist or an astronaut or an oceanographer.* To do so he will have to break from the Amish tradition. It is the future of the students, not the future of the parents, that is imperiled by today’s decision. If a parent keeps his child out of school beyond the grade school, then the child will be forever barred from entry into the new and amazing world of diversity that we have today. (emphasis mine)

Both the Majority and Dissenting Opinion show concern for the instruction of English literacy and how this instruction may affect Amish students’ potential to enter the (non-Amish) workforce and even leave the Amish community and faith to do so. This corresponds with Brandt’s analysis of literacy and economics in which she states:



If the ability to read and write was once regarded as a duty to God or democracy, it is now, according to the government, a duty to productivity, and one with increasingly sharp consequences for those not in compliance. Unrelenting economic change has become the key motivator for schools, students, parents, states, and communities to raise expectations for literacy achievement. (25-26)

Therefore, the fact that Amish schools focus almost entirely on English literacy in a time when Amish men and women are entering the mainstream American workforce with increasing frequency is probably not accidental. In fact, drawing on Fishman and Harold Schiffman, Horner and Trimbur argue that “it’s often accepted *that possession of the English language by itself accounts for the socioeconomic status of ethnic groups*” (617, emphasis in original). Amish school organizers understand, as Brandt says, “no teacher or policymaker at any level can ignore the power of the country’s economic system, its direction of change in the twentieth century, and the implications that change brings, especially now, for literacy and literacy learning” (43).

The English imperative in the United States has affected the Amish in another manner I did not anticipate. On six occasions during twenty-five interviews, I encountered attitudes toward other non-native speakers living in the United States I can only describe as xenophobic and racist. These attitudes were apparent whenever the participants explained that, in their view, speaking Pennsylvania Dutch in front of English-only speakers was rude and “unneighborly.” Adam told me: “English is our public language. It’s rude to use our language in front of the public.” Likewise, Eden and I shared this exchange:

Eden: Before I married Adam, I worked one summer as a strawberry picker. I worked with a lot of Mexican men. There weren’t any other Amish. These men only spoke Spanish. I thought it was really rude that they spoke Spanish in front of me. They knew I couldn’t speak Spanish. It made me really uncomfortable. I always wondered if they were talking about me.

Researcher: What language did you think they should speak?

Eden: English.

Researcher: Do you think they could speak English?

Eden: Well, I don't know. But this happened in the United States.

I heard similar stories from other participants when I asked them why they thought it was important to speak and understand English. Immigrant groups and especially Mexican immigrants were mentioned by several participants who saw English speaking and understanding as a necessity of living in the United States. This conversation and others like it illustrate not only that the Amish have been assimilated into the imagined community that holds that they, as Americans, should speak, read, and write English but also that all immigrants should speak English. As Horner and Trimbur show while drawing on Judith Rodby, “[t]o shore up the reification of an individual’s national identity against one’s actual, the very notion of identity is itself tied to language (as in the injunction ‘Speak American!’)” (Rodby 34, Horner and Trimbur 611). And to further illustrate this common attitude, Montaner shared an experience of walking along Miami Beach speaking Spanish to his wife, only to be informed by a woman he described as “somebody performing a sacred patriotic duty” that he should “Talk English—you are in the United States” (163). While I would not claim this attitude is universal throughout the entire Amish community, I found it often enough in my interviews to mention it here.

In this article, I argued that the normalizing force of literacy and especially English-only literacy in the United States have changed Amish literacy practices, and language practices have followed. Amish literacy and orality are dictated by four major ideals: religious faith, heritage, nationalism, and economic and personal utilitarianism and therefore it is evidenced that the values of the community inform their language and literacy practices. Religious beliefs motivate the Amish to maintain their home language, Pennsylvania Dutch, and to preserve religious ceremonies and texts in Amish German. Negative attitudes toward immigrants and English literacy in the United States have caused the Amish to conduct all written business in English and abandon any writing in Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish German. Because of these attitudes, the Amish educate their children almost exclusively in English because, as the Amish understand, English literacy is necessary to their survival and acceptance in the United States. Despite the fact that tenants of Amish faith commands followers to live by I Peter 2:11 which says to behave as though they are “of this world,” English literacy is undeniably important in this country, and as a result, to the Amish who have been forced into “this world.”

## Endnotes

1. For more about *The Budget*, see Adkins, Tabettha. “‘To Everyone Out There in Budget Land’: The Narrative of Community in the International Amish Newspaper, *The Budget*.” *Issues in Writing* 18. 1. Spring/Summer 2010.

2. When Daniel referred to his “worldly house,” he was referring to the electricity in his house and the modern appliances such as a dishwasher, an electric stove, and the seemingly brand new energy efficient washer dryer set I observed Anna use whenever I came into their house. As Mennonites, Daniel and Anna’s faith allows for these modern conveniences.

3. I contacted four different professors at Wooster College, a small liberal arts college: professor of anthropology David McConnell who researches the connections between education and modernity in the Amish communities in northeast Ohio; McConnell’s research partner and professor of sociology Charles Hurst; and Beth Muellner and Mareike Herrmann, professors of German. Although McConnell, Hurst, Muellner, and Herrmann all seemed interested in my work, none of them had heard of or were involved in this project.

4. Among the many groups supporting English Plus are NCTE’s Conference on College Composition and Communication, Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, and the Linguistic Society of America (625).

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