

CHAPTER FOUR

The Language Situation in Germany

Many Germans speak both a local dialect and the Standard. Some speak only the dialect and some speak only the Standard. The situation is further complicated by the fact that there are also local varieties of the Standard, influenced by the local dialect. Thus it is common for speakers of the Standard in Cologne and Berlin to use *wat* and *dat* in their Standard German. In the Standard German of Hamburg, which is in Low German territory, initial *sp* and *st* are routinely pronounced as *sp* and *st* are pronounced in English rather than as *schp* and *scht*. The *sp* and *st* pronunciations reflect the situation in the local Low German dialect of Hamburg. Swabians do the opposite and pronounce **any** *st* combination as *scht*, e.g. *Durst* is *Durscht*. And, finally, the situation is further complicated by the fact that sometimes dialects of large cities have a regional standard status.

This last point is illustrated in Engel (1961, 1962). This case study involves the Swabian village of Neuler, near the small city of Aalen. In Neuler there are four different varieties of German which are used to different types of people under different circumstances. Engel uses as one of his examples the equivalent of the English sentence:

"I am very thirsty, but I don't like beer."

When at home or in a totally local environment, e.g. at the local *Gasthaus*, some residents might say:¹

- 1) i hoo' ən Mordsduurscht, aber koe' Biir maa'g e net.

When speaking to people in the general Neuler area, including residents of nearby villages, a resident of Neuler might say:

- 2) i han en Mordsdurscht, aber Biir maa'g e net.

When speaking to local "respectable" people like the mayor, the doctor, the preacher, the teacher, or to other Swabians from outside the local area a resident might say:

¹The transcription is Engel's own. The symbol ' after a vowel indicates that the vowel is *nasalised*, i.e. spoken so that some of the air passes through the nose as well as through the mouth. A double vowel indicates a *long* vowel, e.g. *-ii-*, and ə indicates what Engel (1962:257) calls an "unbestimmter Laut zwischen a und e, meist unbetont". This sound is equivalent to the unstressed "e" of words like *habe*, *gehe* etc.

- 3) i hab en Mordsdurscht, aber Biir mag e net.

And when speaking to non-Swabians a resident might say:

- 4) ich habe einen Mordsdurst, aber Bier mag ich nicht.

Sentence 4) is, of course, the Standard. 1) is the village dialect of Neuler. 2) is the dialect of Aalen, the local provincial city and 3) is the dialect of Stuttgart, the state capital. The Stuttgart dialect plays the role of the *Swabian* standard, while the Standard language plays the role of the pan-German standard. The dialect of Aalen is the regional standard, and the dialect of Neuler is used only in village context and only among village intimates, and not by all of them. Engel used the terms *Bauernsprache* for the village dialect, *Bürgersprache* for the dialect of the provincial city and *Honoratiorensprache* ("dignitaries' language") for the Stuttgart dialect.

Engel's investigation took place in the 1950's, a full generation ago, and the results, even then, showed that the village dialect (*Bauernsprache*) was declining in favor of regional standards (*Bürgersprache*). The situation is now even more advanced. Engel remarked (1962:258) that the older speakers of the *Bauernsprache* usually could speak only that dialect and had great difficulty with Standard German. There was a tendency among younger rural speakers not to use *Bauernsprache*, although those who did were also able to use forms of German closer to the Standard with more ease than were older dialect speakers. *Bürgersprache* was used in most provincial cities and by many younger speakers of *Bauernsprache*, who used it along with *Bauernsprache*. Most speakers of *Bürgersprache* were also able to use forms of German closer to the standard with reasonable ease. Users of *Honoratiorensprache* are to be found in provincial cities, but primarily in Stuttgart. People who use this dialect usually do not also use *Bürgersprache*. It is thus not the case that all three forms of Swabian German would normally be used by any one resident of a village or provincial city.

The German-speaking area has for hundreds of years been characterised by a multiplicity of village dialects, each separated by one or more isoglosses from the dialect of the next village, which may be only a couple of kilometres away. What seems to have been happening in recent decades is that village dialects are becoming more and more restricted in their use and that regional dialects such as the dialect of Aalen are taking over many of the functions which had previously been served by the village dialect, i.e. that *Bürgersprache* is taking over many of the roles of *Bauernsprache*. One reason for this is the emergence of a social group sometimes referred to as *Industriebauern*. These are people from farming villages who no longer farm exclusively for a living but rather work in factories in nearby small cities, returning home to the village each evening or even sometimes only at the end of the week. People of this type are in constant contact with people from outside the village but still from the general local area. The dialect of the town or city in which they work becomes the normal form of German used. In fact, the main users of village dialect *only* tend to be older females who live in rural areas and who do not work outside the home, i.e. those who are least likely to come into contact with outsiders.

Mobility in general seems to be the major cause of the spread of regional dialects at the expense of village dialects in Germany. Commuting from one municipality to another is a fact of life in Germany today. Today only 50 % of the inhabitants of settlements of less than 500 population are involved in farming (Clyne 1984:54). It is also not uncommon for people who were born in villages to move into nearby cities. Indeed, many German cities have expanded to surround and include nearby villages, with the result that the former village dwellers are in frequent contact with speakers of different forms of German, with predictable results for the village dialect. Ironically, many city dwellers have moved to nearby villages, bringing their city language with them.

Finally, the spread of television and radio, both Standard German domains, and the universality of education, the school also being a Standard German domain, have led to an increase in the use of Standard German among the younger generations in West Germany.

In Germany people who speak only the dialect tend to live in the south, in High German territory. More north Germans speak the Standard only than south Germans, and in north Germany in particular dialect use in cities is much less universal than in the south, e.g. only 30 % in Hamburg (Löffler 1985:146). A census in 1965 showed that 70 % of males and about 65 % of females in Schleswig-Holstein could speak Low German (Plattdeutsch), but only between 15 % and 40 % of children between the ages of 3 and 14 could speak it. In the over-65 age group 81 % of females and 85 % of males could speak Low German. A questionnaire in 1966 which covered all of West Germany found that 31 % of the population claimed not to be able to speak a dialect at all and that the people most likely to be able to speak dialect were over 45, had only a primary school education, worked in agriculture, lived in villages south of the Main river (i.e. in Bavaria or Baden-Württemberg) and did not earn much money, whereas the typical West German who could not speak any dialect at all lived in a *Großstadt* north of the Main, had at least high school education, did not do manual labor and made a lot of money. Remember that this questionnaire was done in 1966, over 30 years ago. Therefore people who speak only dialect now would be 70 or older.

Since Standard German, which is a dialect of High German, is on non-native linguistic territory in the north, the accent which north Germans use for Standard German tends to be more or less uniform throughout the north, just as English-speaking people who learn German tend to speak with much the same accent, regardless of which English-speaking country they come from.

This completes part I of our discussion of Dialect and Standard Language in the German-speaking countries. This chapter has concentrated on the actual physical features of German dialects and on dialect usage in western Germany. The next chapter will concentrate on the other German-speaking countries and will include the eastern part of Germany, the former GDR.