

# CHAPTER THREE

## Dialect and Standard Language

German, both as a standard language and as a collection of regional and social dialects, is related to many other languages of Europe and Asia. When we say that two languages are related we mean much the same thing as when we say that two people are related - either that one is an ancestor of the other or that they descend from a common ancestor. Sisters are related because they have the same parents. Half-sisters are related because they have one common parent. Mother and daughter are related because one is the parent of the other. German and English are related because they share a common ancestor - in this case a language referred to by philologists as Proto-West-Germanic. Also descended from Proto-West-Germanic are Dutch and Frisian. West Germanic is one of three branches of Germanic languages, the others being East Germanic and North Germanic. North Germanic languages, which are, of course, related to German but not as closely as is English, are the Scandinavian languages Norwegian, Swedish and Danish, as well as Icelandic and Faeroese. There are no modern East Germanic languages. We shall have more to say about the interrelationships of the Germanic languages at a later stage. For now it is sufficient to note that German is closely related to English, related more distantly to Danish and related even more distantly to French, Russian, Albanian, Greek, Hindi, Urdu, Persian and many other languages of Europe and Asia.

Anyone who knows a fair amount of English and German will be aware of the many similarities in the two languages. Much of the so-called "plain" or everyday vocabulary is identical, e.g. "house, Haus", "mine, mein" or close enough to be identified as somehow the same, e.g. "bath, Bad", "three, drei". In fact, the sound correspondences between English and German are constant and predictable. To see why and how this is so it is necessary to look at the continent of Europe before some of the Angles and Saxons left northern Germany and immigrated to England, which is to say in the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. At that time Germanic peoples occupied a continuous area from Scandinavia to northern Italy. At some time which we cannot determine exactly, but which was between the death of Attila the Hun (453 A.D.) and our earliest south German text, the one word *Idorih* carved into the point of a lance in about 600 A.D., certain parts of the language began to change in the extreme south. These changes then spread northwards over the following centuries until they finally ceased to spread any more. The changes affected primarily the Proto-West-Germanic sounds *p*, *t* and *k*. In the south, at the beginnings of words and when doubled, *p* became *pf*. This change never reached as far north as the area from which the Angles and Saxons migrated, which is one reason why English has *pound* and German has *Pfund*, why English has *apple* and German has *Apfel*. In other positions Proto-West-Germanic *p* became German *f* or *ff*, e.g. English *pepper*, German *Pfeffer*, English *ship*, German *Schiff*. Additional instances of these differences are easy to provide.

Proto-West-Germanic *t*, when at the beginnings of words or when doubled, became a sound which was and is usually written *z* or *tz* and which is pronounced like the final *ts* of the English word *cats*. In other positions it developed into an *s* sound which is now spelled *s*, *ss* or *ß*. Again, examples are easy to provide, for this sound change also did not reach as far north as the land of the Angles and the Saxons. Examples from English and German are "two, *zwei*", "ten, *zehn*", "timber, *Zimmer*", "cat, *Katze*" and "eat, *essen*", "water, *Wasser*", "that, *dass*".

Finally, Proto-West-Germanic *k*, when doubled and at the beginnings of words, developed to a sound which we can write *kh* or *kx*. This change did not spread very far north and hardly affected the geographical area now known as Germany, so although the sound is common in Swiss and Austrian dialects, it occurs in only a very few *German* German dialects. For most German German dialects Proto-West-Germanic *k* remained *k*, e.g. English *king*, German *König*, English *thick*, German *dick*. Proto-West-Germanic *k* in other positions developed to the sounds now written *ch*, e.g. English *make*, German *machen*, English *sick*, German *siech*. This change extended quite far north, reaching an area north of Düsseldorf in the west, but still not reaching the homeland of the Angles and Saxons. Since none of these changes reached that far north, English retains something very similar to the consonant system of the original Proto-West-Germanic language, while German in the south of the German-speaking area has instituted major changes in its consonant system.

This set of sound changes is known collectively as the High German Sound Shift, which I will refer to henceforth as "the Shift". The northernmost boundary of the Shift divides German dialects into two major groups: Low German north of the boundary, and High German south of the boundary. Since this boundary coincides with the boundary between south German *ich* and North German *ik*, the boundary is often referred to as the *ik-ich line*, although its official name is the *Ürdingen line*. North of the *Ürdingen line* the local dialects are dialects of Low German, and south of it the local dialects are High German dialects (see map 1). Note that **Low** and **High** are not indications of social class or standing and are not synonyms for *bad* and *good*. "High" actually refers to height above sea level and "Low" refers to proximity to sea level. Thus Low German is spoken predominantly in the flat, low-lying areas of North Germany and High German is spoken predominantly in the mountainous area in the south. Swiss German is thus very high German indeed.

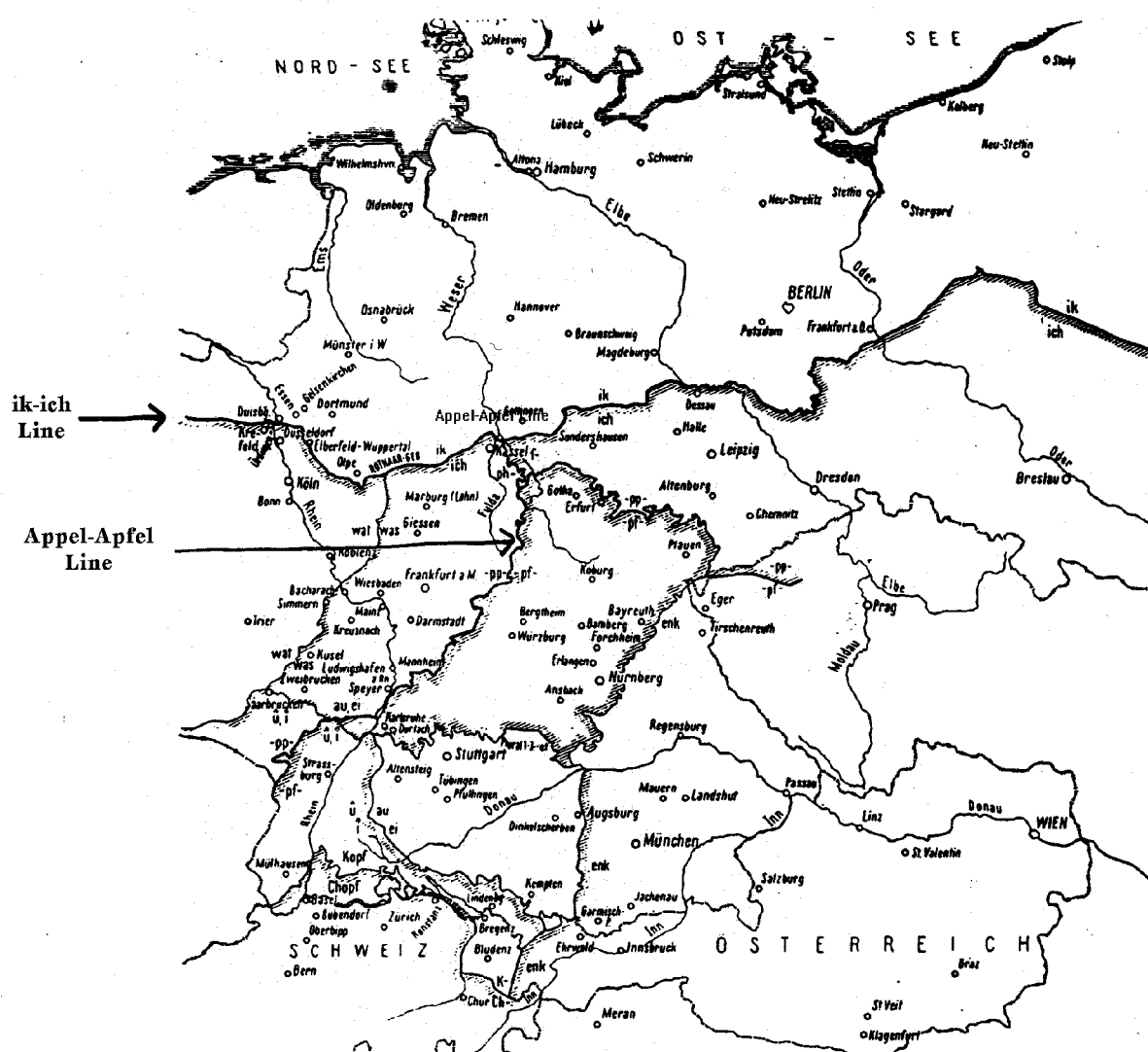
You are probably accustomed to thinking of the kind of German which you have learned as High German. The type of German which is taught as High German is perhaps better referred to as Standard German. It is, in fact, based on a particular High German dialect, but High German is traditionally used to refer to a group of dialects rather than to the Standard which is spoken throughout the German-speaking area. The dialects contained within the political entity known as Germany are so diverse as to be in many instances mutually unintelligible, which accounts for the presence of a standard language - it was necessary for communication among Germans from different parts of the country. But Standard German is a relative latecomer in linguistic terms. Standard German is, in fact, only the second language for many speakers of German, the first language being the local dialect.

A dialect is a regional form of a language. German dialects differ greatly from each other, the major difference being that between Low and High German dialects, based on whether or not the Shift occurred in the region in question. A dialect which shows any evidence of the Shift whatsoever is a High German dialect. Low German dialects show no evidence of the Shift. English, which shows no evidence of the Shift, is therefore, in its origins at least, a Low German dialect.

## Map 1

### The major dialect boundaries

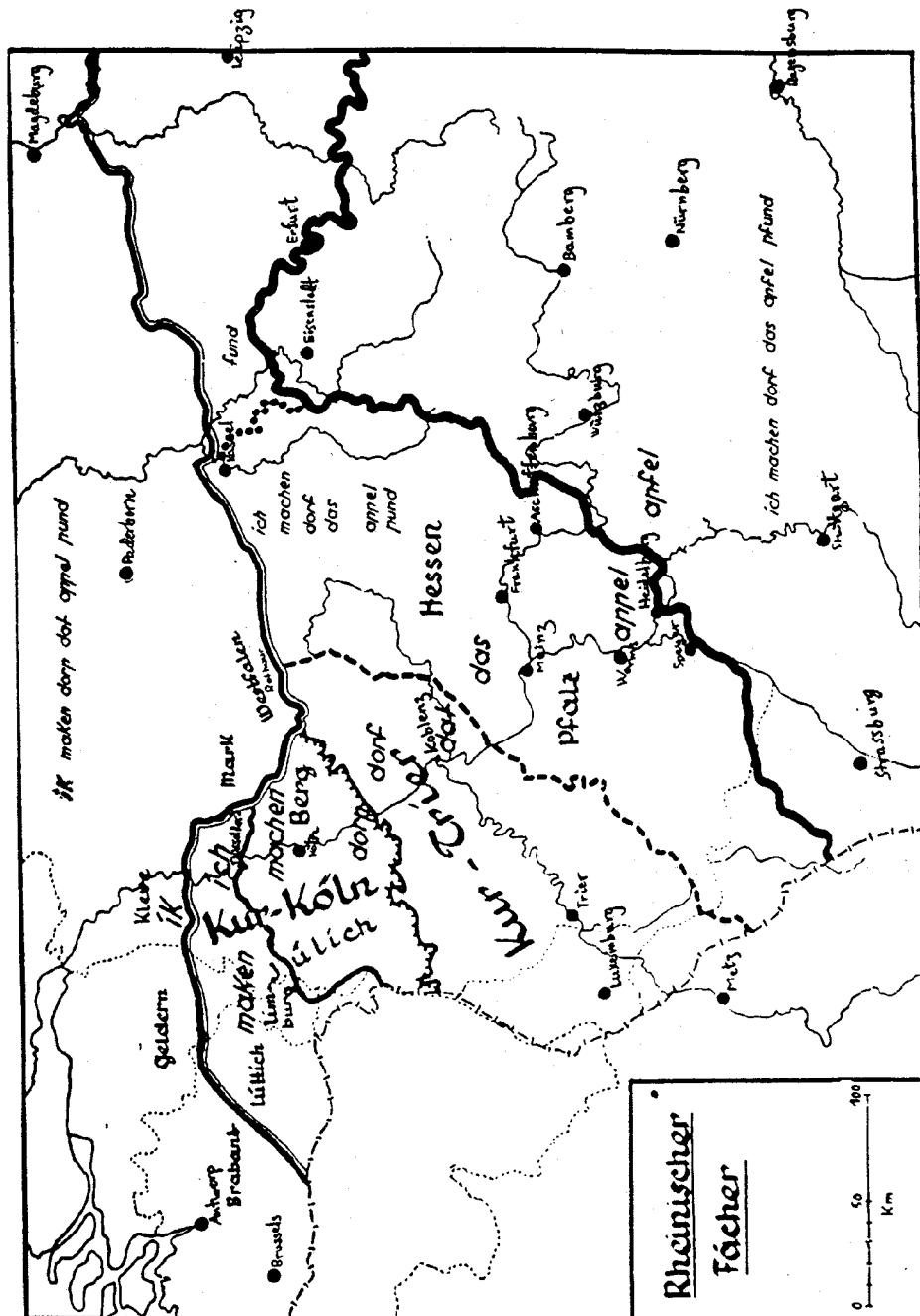
(Adapted from Weifert 1964f. and used with the kind permission of the author's daughter)



## Map 2

### West Middle German Dialect Areas

(Adapted from Frings 1957, which is no longer in print. The publishing house also no longer exists. I have tried to find out who owns the publishing rights and have been unsuccessful. If the owner of those rights sees this and wishes to be acknowledged, I will be only too happy to do so.)



Within the High German dialects there are many subdivisions, which are, for the most part, based on how far north the various stages of the Shift reached, for not all reached equally far north. Some stages petered out before others. The stage of the shift to reach **least** far north was the shift of Proto *k* to *kh*. This change did not affect the dialect upon which Standard German is based, and therefore there is no evidence of it in the Standard. The next stage to peter out was the shift of *-pp*<sup>1</sup> to *-pf*. The line, known as the *Appel-Apfel line*, which divides the area in which this shift took place from the area in which it did not is used to mark a major subdivision in High German dialects, that between Upper German (Oberdeutsch) to the south of the line and Middle German (Mitteldeutsch) to the north. High German dialects are thus divided into two subgroups: Upper and Middle German. Upper German dialects are spoken in the south of the German-speaking area and fall into three major groups spoken in five countries. *Alemannic* dialects are spoken in southwestern Germany, in Alsace (the adjoining part of France), in Switzerland, in Liechtenstein and in one province of Austria (Vorarlberg). *Bavarian* dialects are spoken in most of Bavaria and in all of Austria except Vorarlberg. *East Franconian* dialects are spoken in the area of Germany which includes the cities of Nürnberg, Bamberg, Bayreuth, Erlangen, Würzburg, Koburg, Gotha and Erfurt. East Franconian territory includes a small amount of territory in what was until recently the German Democratic Republic.

Lines like the *ik-ich* line and the *Appel-Apfel* line are referred to as isoglosses. The major divisions among High German dialects are marked by isoglosses of one kind or another. In the western part of the Middle German area are a number of isoglosses which divide the area into three main dialect areas (see map 2). Proceeding to the northwest from the *Appel-Apfel line* we encounter, first of all, the *dat-das line*. The dialects spoken between this line and the *Appel-Apfel* line are referred to collectively as Rhine Franconian (Rheinfränkisch). The dialects spoken between the *dat-das line* and the *dorp-dorf line* are referred to collectively as Moselle Franconian (Moselfränkisch), and the dialects between the *dorp-dorf line* and the *ik-ich line* are referred to collectively as Ripuarian (Ripuarisch). Within Ripuarian there is another important isogloss, the *maken-machen line*. North of this line but south of the *ik-ich line* the dialects have *maken* but *ich*. South of the line the dialects have *machen* and *ich*. This isogloss is known as the Benrath line (Benrather Linie) because it runs near Benrath, now a suburb of Düsseldorf. All of these isoglosses in the West Middle German area coincide with earlier political boundaries, a fact about which more will be said at a later stage.

West Middle German is divided from East Middle German (Thuringian, Upper Saxon, Silesian) by the *pund-fund line*. In West Middle German dialects initial *p* does not shift to *pf*, as is the case south of the *Appel-Apfel line*. In East Middle German dialects there is a shift, although not to *pf*. The shift is to *f*. Thus Standard German *Pfund* is *fund*, *Pferd* is *ferd* etc.

The individual isoglosses which divide the West Middle German dialect area join together by the time we reach Kassel, and this bundle of isoglosses continues towards the east until it reaches Berlin, where it divides up again, some isoglosses going south of Berlin, some to the north. Residents of Berlin routinely say *ik* and *dat* but say *machen*.

It should be borne in mind throughout the previous discussion that we are discussing local dialects, not the local version of the Standard language.

---

<sup>1</sup> *-pp-* indicates *pp* in the middle of a word.