Pond, Wuta, Eewa, and *Riefa* – Lexical variation in Plautdietsch-English storytelling

Nora Vosburg

Introduction. While all lexical-semantic knowledge is subject to continuous change, multilingual speakers – by nature – navigate a larger set of lexical representations that are subject to variation dependent on the speakers' language uses across different domains. Moreover, in contact situations in which the L1 is not the majority language of the surrounding environment beyond the home and/or other limited social settings, vocabulary accessibility in one's L1 is likely susceptible to change and loss, often subsumed under effects of 'retrieval difficulties' (Ecke 2004; Schmid & Köpke 2009). Following Cohen (1986:146), these retrieval difficulties can affect different features of words: (i) the form (spoken, written), (ii) position (grammatical patterns, collocations), (iii) function (frequency, appropriateness), and (iv) meaning (concept, associations). In this presentation, I analyze meaning variation in production data from a storytelling task and discuss how lexical variation relates to sociolinguistic profiles.

Data. Narrative data from elicited storytelling was recorded in 2017 in a community of multilingual Plautdietsch-English speakers in Kansas, whose L1 is Plautdietsch. Participants are characterized by (i) a heterogeneity in age, (ii) language acquisition trajectories of English, and (iii) differing degrees of use of their L1 Plautdietsch, among other factors. These speakers comprise two groups: Group 1 are speakers who were born in Mexico and migrated directly to the US after the age of 20, had limited – if any – exposure to English before coming to the US, and who have had a minimum length of residence (LoR) in the US of 15 years. Group 2 are speakers who were exposed to English in the US or Canada early on (by entering the school system, at the latest at the age of 10), and who also have had an extended LoR in the US ($\geq$ 15 years). All nouns were extracted from the narrative data in both Plautdietsch and English, classified into items with lower and higher lexical specificity (e.g. 'boy' vs. 'pond'), and analyzed within Olshtain and Barzilay's (1991) hierarchical sequence of lexical retrieval options, replicated in Figure 1.

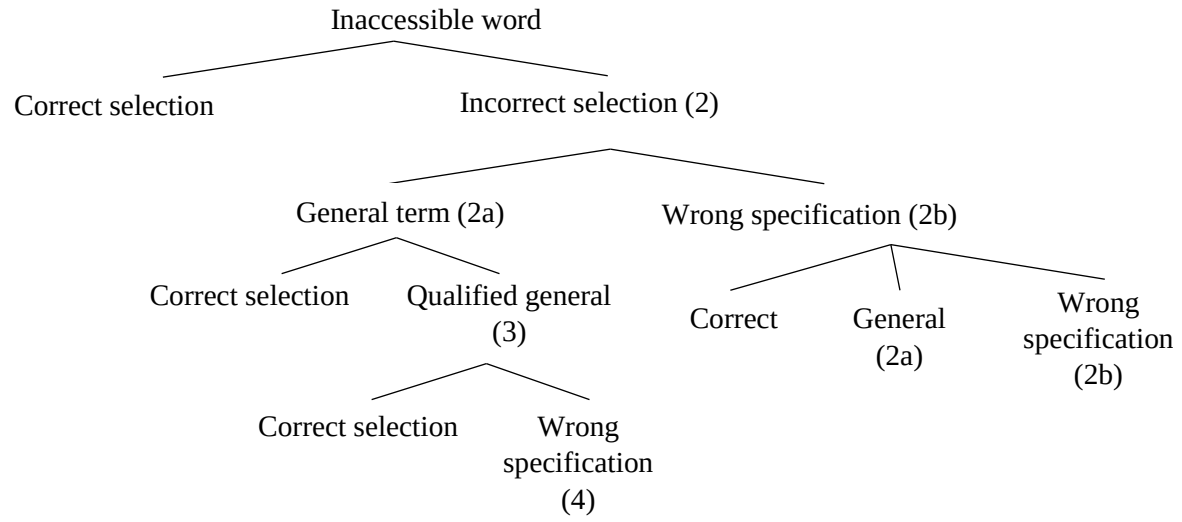
However, unlike Olshtain and Barzilay's study which analyzes *attrition* data by a comparison of long-term adult US-emigrants in Israel with a "monolingual" control group in the US, the basis for comparison in the present study focuses on variation within the Plautdietsch-English community. Because of the diasporic history of these Mennonites, a base 'control group' is difficult to determine. 'Correct selection' is therefore a relative measure of frequency within the recorded data and matched entries from two different Plautdietsch dictionaries[1].

Results. Overall, for words with higher lexical specificity, defined by taxonomic hierarchy (e.g., water > pond, river, lake; see Croft & Cruse 2004, ch. 6), speakers makeuse of numerous strategies: they paraphrase, use semantically related words (2a or 2b in Figure 1), and display systematic word retrieval processes (self-corrections, pauses, metalinguistic comments). Preliminary results for English suggest higher variation and overgeneralization of terms in speakers with later acquisition of English (Group 1), and the reverse for Plautdietsch in speakers

[1] Thiessen, Jack. 2003. Mennonite Low German Dictionary/Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch. Madison: Max Kade Institute.
Zacharias, Ed. 2009. Plautdietsch Lexicon: http://plautdietsch.22web.org/home/index.htm (as per the authors (p.c.) designed and written with the Old Colony Mennonites in Latin America in mind)

with earlier exposure to English (Group 2). However, the results also indicate a lack of linearity and emphasize the normality of individual differences which may also be due to the limited data base for the present research (see also Schmid & Jarvis 2014 for the need of larger free-speech data and fine-grained, multidimensional analyses in the assessment of lexical retrieval difficulties in bilingual speakers). The small scope of the study provides a first account of lexical variation in this community and opens the floor for study beyond storytelling production data (e.g., lexical variation in spontaneous speech or lexical retrieval in judgment tasks).

Figure 1. Lexical retrieval options in language attrition (Olshtain & Barzilay 1991:146)



Selected references:

CROFT, WILLIAM, and D. ALAN CRUSE. 2004. ***Cognitive Linguistics.*** New York: Cambridge University Press.

COHEN, ANDREW. 1986. Forgetting foreign-language vocabulary. ***Language attrition in progress***, ed. by Bert Weltens & Kees de Bot, 143-158. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.

ECKE, PETER. 2004. Language attrition and theories of forgetting: a cross-disciplinary review. ***International Journal of Bilingualism*** Vol. 8(3). 321-354

OLSHTAIN, ELITE, and MARGARET BARZILAY. 1991. Lexical retrieval difficulties in adult language attrition. ***First language attrition***, ed. by Herbert W. Seliger and Robert M. Vago, 139-150. New York: Cambridge University Press.

SCHMID, MONIKA, and BARBARA KÖPKE. 2009. L1 attrition and the mental lexicon. ***The bilingual mental lexicon. Interdisciplinary approaches***, ed. by Aneta Pavlenko, 209-238. Bristol, Blue Ridge Summit: Multilingual Matters.

SCHMID, MONIKA, and SCOTT JARVIS. 2014. Lexical access and lexical diversity in first language attrition. ***Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*** 17 (4). 729–748.