Dialects, we all know American dialects— you’、“all-yins, or the southern ‘my white knight” becomes “mah whaat naat”, Boston’s Haavaad Yaad, whether you say pop, soda, soda pop or cola, all that.

Are German dialects really more extreme than American dialects?

Are they ever! The Old World dialects in general are far, far more extreme than New World ones— American and Canadian dialects only go back four centuries, if that, and Australian and New Zealand have had half that time for dialects to diverge. What would become German, on the other hand, has had over twenty centuries to diverge, and even after multiple centuries of efforts to unify German, regionalisms continue, some as de facto independent languages. That dialect map above shows the Dutch dialects as related to German dialects, which they are— but the Dutch broke off from the Holy Roman Empire before a single German standard existed, so Dutch was always a cousin of German, but not German (more on that in this blog).
With German, the three main divisions are North, Central and Southern German, versus the formal High German standard. Within each of the three are further divisions, and within those subdialects, going all the way down to each village. A highly trained linguist can often, based on localisms in how they talk, locate where a German comes from, down to the village or part of town.

When we say German, we are mostly thinking of High German, *Hochdeutsch*—so what is this whole High German-Low German business? Originally it was just altitude—up north, the land is at sea level, and that’s Low German (and to the west, the Netherlands and Belgium are the Low Countries). Middle German is in the hills of central Germany, and High German was getting up to and into the Alps.

South Germany had the most connection to the economy and elegance of the Mediterranean, and so was the most admired of the many dialects. By the 1700’s, however, society and economy had shifted to central Germany, so the version of German being spoken there became the must-speak variety, and took over the name of High German. That’s the area circled in purple in the previous map.

Low German came to be called Plattdeutsch or just Platt. *Platt* means flat, plain— the rural language of the flat northland. Old High German, Old Saxon (Old Low German) and Old Dutch had already split into separate languages by the Dark Ages; the latter two were actually closer to Old English than to Old High German.

The Anglo-Saxons, who left for Britain, for their part were siblings of the Old Saxons, who stayed; they even called the Old Saxons *Ealdeaxen*, ‘the Old Saxons’. Along the North Sea Coast of Germany and the Netherlands, there are also still pockets of Frisian dialect. You could call the Frisians the English who stayed on the continent; Frisian is still closer to English than to Plattdeutsch. "Bûter, brea, en griene tsiis is goed Ingelsk en goed Frysk," a sentence that still, after 15 centuries, sounds nearly the same in both English and Frisian: "butter, bread and green cheese is good English and good Frees." The name de Vrees? It means 'the Frisian'.

[Image of the map with highlighted areas]
High German came to mean the language of the educated; the old South German came to be called Oberdeutsch, ‘Upper German’. High German increasingly displaced the regional dialects in the 1600’s in writing, and displaced dialects from speech to some extent since the 1800’s. The good news is, almost all the genealogical records are in the standard language! High German and Latin, that is. The messy news is that the dialects continue to leak through, to this day.

We’ll get into examples of that, next time.

Do you have any German, Danish, Dutch, Swedish or Norwegian documents you can’t read? We can help. Find out more here.

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