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The Emergence and Maintenance of Bilingualism Among the Old Order Amish

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1. Introduction

Heritage languages in the diaspora are typically lost within three generations (Fishman, 1966; Montrul, 2011). Yet the Old Order Amish in North America have successfully maintained languages descended from varieties brought by their ancestors from German-speaking Europe in the 1700s and 1800s. These languages–Pennsylvania Dutch and Amish Swiss–are "for the most part not written down, not taught in schools, and not subject to norms of 'correctness'. [They] enjoy neither governmental support nor legal protection nor much respect from outsiders. And most of [their] speakers are fully fluent in the language of the larger society in which they live, English" (Louden, 2016, p. 355). These communities' commitment to bilingualism is further underscored by the choice of English as the sole medium of instruction in Amish parochial schools. As reflected in (1), the Amish are keenly aware that fluency in English is essential for their communities to thrive alongside their mainstream American neighbors, whom they broadly refer to as "the English."

(1) English (...) should be spoken by teacher and pupils at all times while classes are in session, except in German classes. A child will need to be able to express thoughts, ideas, and concepts in the English language in order to converse, conduct business, and work with members of surrounding society.
(from *Regulations and Guidelines for Amish Parochial Schools of Indiana,* 2021, p. 13) [1]

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[1] No author or source information is available for this document, which was shared with the authors by a teacher from the community.

The Amish thus present a remarkable example of successful long-term maintenance and continued intergenerational transmission of immigrant heritage languages in the face of stable bilingualism with the majority language. As such, they may be seen as illustrating how bilingualism can act as a "protective factor" for language maintenance (Pearson & Amaral, 2014). Notably, they view their bilingualism not only as an integral part of their socio-religious identity, but as a privilege, as illustrated by the quotes from community members in (2) and (3).

(2) "Knowing two languages is a privilege God has provided for us"
(Benuel S. Blank, 1986, in *Family Life*, an Amish monthly magazine;
https://padutch.net/benuel-s-blank-what-is-a-language)

(3) "We are lucky to grow up with two languages without having to go to school to learn them." (Amish mother, Adams County, p.c., 6/19/2024)

The Amish, however, are rarely mentioned in the heritage language or bilingualism literatures (for a notable exception, see Louden and Page, 2005). Especially little is known about the dual language development of Amish *children*, and the language practices in their homes and communities that support it. As part of a larger project documenting the Amish Swiss variety, or *Shwitzer*, spoken by Old Order communities in northern Indiana (Hasse & Seiler, 2024a), we were able to gather data from children and families in these settlements in a first systematic attempt to capture the emergence of bilingualism among Amish children. Here we present initial findings and observations from fieldwork in the Adams, Allen, and Elkhart-LaGrange Amish settlements in 2024 and 2025, focusing on data from bilingual object naming tasks conducted with 23 children aged 5 to 17 years, and parental questionnaires and interviews with their caregivers.

2. The Amish: Historical and Linguistic Background

The continued use of German varieties among Old Order Amish is an important expression of their socio-religious identity. Being part of the *Anabaptist*[2] Christian denomination, the Amish trace their religious roots back to the Protestant Reformation in 16th-century Switzerland. In the first half of the 18th century, approximately 500 Amish migrated to Pennsylvania from Central Europe, especially the Palatinate region (*Pfalz*) as part of a larger movement of German speakers from the same area (Hostetler, 1963; Louden, 2025). Dialectal leveling and contact with English led to the emergence of a new linguistic variety that closely resembled Palatine German and came to be known as Pennsylvania Dutch (PAD). Today, PAD is the first language acquired by most Old Order Amish in

[2] The term *Anabaptist* is based on the German *Wiedertäufer* 'rebaptizer', a label that was used derogatorily by outsiders and pointed to the fact that the first members of the movement had already been baptized as infants. Anabaptists originally referred to themselves as *Brüder* 'brethren' (Gratz, 1953, p. 1).

the United States and Canada. In 2025, the estimated number of Amish speakers of PAD in North America was 377,890 (Stoltzfus, 2022; Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, 2025).

The Amish settlements in Adams and Allen counties trace their origins to a later migration in the 1800s. Bernese Swiss German-speaking Anabaptists settled in Indiana and other states (Weaver, 1994), bringing with them their Alemannic (Swiss) variety. Through linguistically mixed marriages with PAD-speaking Amish (Hasse & Seiler, 2023), PAD features found their way into their variety.[3] The resulting contact variety, known as Amish Shwitzer (AS), is mainly spoken in Adams County and daughter settlements in Indiana and other states (Hasse & Seiler, 2024a; Seiler, 2017, 2025). The 2025 estimate of AS speakers was 33,105 (Stoltzfus, 2022; Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, 2025). While the Adams County settlement is still considered to be mostly AS-speaking today, the settlement in Allen County is linguistically mixed, as many PAD and AS speakers live in close proximity there (Seiler, 2025; Thompson, 1994). The Elkhart-LaGrange settlement is predominantly PAD-speaking but includes several AS-speakers who moved there from Adams or Allen County.

The use of a German vernacular is a central marker of a distinct ethnic, religious, and cultural identity (Hasse & Seiler, 2023; Kloss, 1966). Adult Old Order Amish are multilingual, with oral fluency in at least one vernacular (AS and/or PAD) as well as English, with the latter also serving as the main medium of written communication. For in-group interactions, the Amish use either PAD or AS, depending on the settlement in which they reside and their family background. Many AS speakers understand and some even speak PAD (Hasse & Seiler, 2023), whereas PAD speakers only acquire AS under specific circumstances, such as in linguistically mixed marriages. The language of choice in interactions across settlements thus depends on the linguistic abilities of the interlocutors and is typically either PAD or English. Finally, all Amish have receptive knowledge of an archaic form of written standard German, as it is the language of their devotional literature. This knowledge is facilitated through instruction in written German in school.

Amish communities in North America are growing rapidly. Donnermeyer et al. (2013) estimate that the Amish population doubles roughly every 20 years, making them one of the fastest growing communities in North America. Thus, rather than having declining number of speakers–as is the case in other Germanic heritage language situations in North America (Johannessen & Putnam, 2020)–, the German vernaculars spoken among the Amish are gaining speakers exponentially, due to large average family sizes and high retention rates.

[3] For an overview of such features see Fleischer and Louden (2010) and Hasse and Seiler (2023, 2024a,b).

3. This Study

The present study is based on data collected during fieldwork in Indiana in 2024 and 2025. Here we focus specifically on information relevant to documenting and understanding the concurrent development of two (or more) languages among children in these communities. The firm resolve among the Amish to limit the use of modern technology means that any form of recording is generally not possible, thus our main instruments consisted of tasks that could be conducted using pen and paper only. Here we report data from two such instruments: a spoken word elicitation task, in which children were asked to name body parts that the experimenter pointed to in all languages they knew (3.2.1), and a questionnaire about the child and family's language background and usage, conducted through interviews with caregivers (3.2.2).

We would like to acknowledge that this study was facilitated by the unique positionality of our research team, comprised of speakers of Swiss German from Switzerland and a fluent speaker of PAD. While the Amish generally limit social interaction with those outside their community, shared Swiss ancestry and the ability to communicate in a (largely) shared language enabled interactions that may otherwise not have been possible.

3.1 Child Participants

A total of 23 children from 17 different families (including 1 ex-Amish)[4] in Adams (12 children from 9 families), Allen (5 children from 4 families), and Elkhart-LaGrange (6 children from 4 families) counties completed a word elicitation task. Caregivers from 13 of these families participated in interviews structured by a parental questionnaire. In 4 families (with a total of 5 children), no caregiver was available to provide systematic questionnaire responses. In one of these cases, the questionnaire was completed with the child (aged 17) herself. In another case, the questionnaire was completed with a caregiver available intermittently and the child (aged 10) responding to some of the questions herself. For the remaining two families (3 children), we considered relevant information from other interactions with the family and from publicly available sources (Amish community directories) when applicable.

Children (15 female, 8 male) were aged between 4;11 and 17;11 years (M_{age} = 9;5), came from families with 2 to 14 children ($M_{familysize}$ = 6.8 children), and ranged in birth order from 1st to 13th ($M_{birth.order}$ = 5.3). At the time of testing, the eight youngest children had not entered school yet; the remaining children were attending either Amish parochial or public schools, or had recently finished the eight years of schooling that the community expects children to complete (and that all adult caregivers reported having completed themselves). While teachers

[4] The one ex-Amish family lived in the same community and retained a largely Amish lifestyle, critically including the use of AS as their family language. We thus decided to include their data here.

in Amish parochial schools are typically members of the community and speakers of the vernacular, the language of instruction is English only. The Amish do not send their children to preschool or kindergarten, and thus school entry, which occurs at age six or seven, typically marks a sudden increase in exposure to English.

3.2 Methods and Procedure

3.2.1 Vocabulary Elicitation Tasks

To assess children's relative language strength, we used an adapted version of the HALA (Hawai'i Assessment of Language Access) task originally developed by O'Grady et al. (2009) as a tool to gauge adult speakers' relative language strength in contexts of language documentation and revitalization. The original task consisted of 43 test items comprised of words referring to body parts (e.g., *ear, ankle*). The semantic field of body parts was chosen because it includes vocabulary that is presumably relevant in all cultural contexts, is typically acquired at an early age through informal language use, and is relatively resistant to replacement by borrowing (O'Grady et al., 2009, p. 102). The original task is delivered by showing participants images on a computer screen, which they are asked to name aloud as quickly as possible; audio recordings are then scored for naming accuracy and speech onset latency, and mean accuracy and response speed are compared across the speakers' two (or more) languages to yield measures of relative vocabulary knowledge and lexical access speed. Since the use of recording technology was not an option in the present context, collecting response speed data was not possible. To obtain measures of naming accuracy without the use of technology or other external materials, we adapted the task by having the researcher simply point to parts of their own body, asking the child to name them, and writing their responses down on paper. If the child's first response was a word in the vernacular, the researcher followed up by asking whether they also knew the English word, and vice versa.[5] Our task included a subset of 31 items from the original task that had been used in previous adaptations (e.g., Siegman et al., 2024).

After administration of this task during the first fieldtrip, it became clear that 11 of the items could not provide meaningful information for the purpose of estimating relative language strength in AS (or PAD) versus English, for one of the following reasons: (i) the vernacular (and German more generally) does not have a direct translation equivalent for the English word (e.g., *palm*, for which the equivalent of *hand* is used in all varieties of German), (ii) translation equivalents are cognates that are too close phonologically to be distinguished clearly between the two languages (e.g., *finger*), or (iii) feedback from adult community members

[5] For children regularly exposed to PAD in addition to AS and English (n=9), we tried to elicit words in all three languages. For present analyses, we counted an item as correctly supplied in the vernacular if it the child provided it in either AS or PAD. Providing an item in both German vernaculars did not affect the score.

indicated that the English word had largely replaced the vernacular term in community usage, thus children would have been unlikely to have heard the vernacular term (e.g., *heel*). As a consequence, only responses on the remaining 20 items were retained for analysis.

In addition to this limitation, we found that we were also typically unable to collect data from more than one child in a family because siblings were often present in the same room, observing and overhearing while the task was administered. As Amish children are raised in large extended families, one-on-one child-adult interactions are atypical, and thus isolating a child for data collection would not be appropriate. To try to address these limitations, we created a second, analogous task comprised of 30 common nouns (animals, household items, nature terms) that were selected so that translation equivalents were easily distinguishable phonologically, and the vernacular words commonly used in the community. A picture book with simple illustrations of each item was created to elicit words in both languages in otherwise the same procedure as described above. This task (henceforth "Task 2") was used alongside the original task ("Task 1") during the second fieldtrip. Despite our efforts to include only items for which we believed the vernacular term was widely used, feedback from the community indicated that this was not the case for 4 items; in addition, images for 4 other items turned out to be unclear. Thus only the 22 remaining items were retained for analysis.

Thirteen children completed only Task 1, 7 only Task 2, and 3 completed both. For the 3 children with data from both tasks, their relative response accuracy in the two languages was broadly similar when each task was analyzed separately.[6] We thus decided to combine the data from both tasks for the analyses presented in this paper.

3.2.2 Caregiver questionnaires

To obtain information about children's language background and exposure, we created a parental questionnaire following the structure of the PABIQ (Tuller, 2015), a tool developed and piloted as part of a multinational project for use with parents of children growing up in various multilingual contexts. In addition to demographic questions about the child and family, the questionnaire contained specific questions about the child's early (< age 4) and current skills in each language, the language(s) spoken between the child and people they regularly interact with, and the language(s) used for different activities (e.g., playing with friends, storytelling) in the home and in the community. For most items, response options were provided on ordinal scales with 3 to 5 points (e.g., 0: never, 1: rarely, 2: sometimes, 3: usually, 4: very often/always). We additionally included a question about caregivers' attitudes about code-mixing (*Generally, what do you*

[6] Child 1 (5;6): accuracy in English: 0.70 (Task 1), 0.86 (Task 2) vs Vernacular: 1.0 (T1 & T2); Child 2 (11;6): English 1.0 (T1 & T2) vs Vernacular 0.25 (T1), 0.57 (T2); Child 3 (15;2): English 1.0 (T1 & T2) vs Vernacular 0.80 (T1), 0.91 (T2).

think of mixing languages in the same conversation?), adapted from the more recent web-based Q-BEx tool that aims to quantify children's bilingual experience (De Cat et al., 2021).

Questionnaires were completed on paper by a member of the research team in conversation with caregivers. Focal respondents were mostly mothers, yet since these conversations/interviews typically took place in the family home, other family members were usually present and often joined in the conversation. Responses from all family members were considered in completing the questionnaires. In some cases, specific questionnaire items gave rise to wider, more general conversations that often included highly relevant information and insights about language use, practices, and attitudes. In the absence of recordings, we took handwritten notes of relevant comments and information to the extent possible.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Vocabulary Knowledge

Children's responses for each item and language were scored for accuracy, with responses in any variety of the vernacular (AS, PAD) counting toward a collective score for "German". Items for which the child's response could not be clearly classified as English or German, or the child did not have an opportunity to provide a response either due to interference from another family member or accidental omission of the item by the experimenter (3.3% of data), were excluded from the denominator when calculating proportion-correct scores. Figures 1-3 present scores for each child and language, with children ordered by age within each of the three larger communities within which they lived. Brackets indicate siblings.

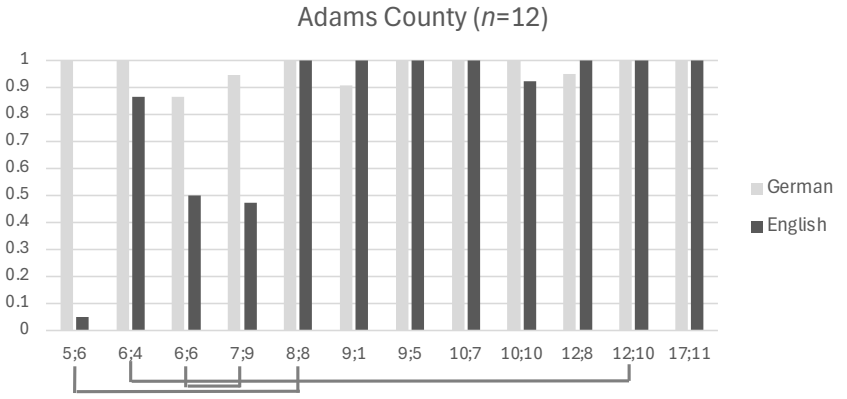

Figure 1. Proportion of correctly named items per language and child: Adams County.

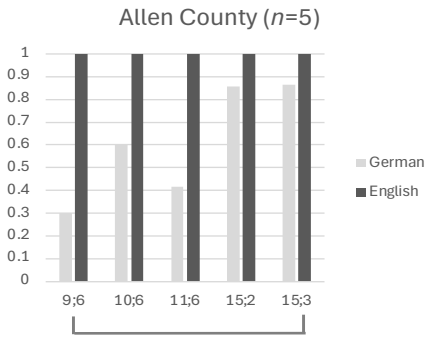

Figure 2. Proportion of correctly named items: Allen County.

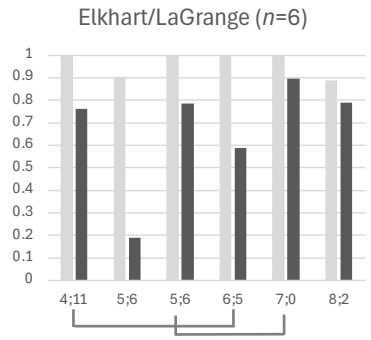

Figure 3. Proportion of correctly named items: Elkhart-LaGrange counties.

These descriptive results reveal a strikingly different pattern in Allen County (Figure 2) compared to the other two settlements (Figures 1 and 3). In the latter, we observed consistently strong vocabulary knowledge in the German vernacular from the earliest ages we were able to test. This knowledge remained strong through the teenage years, with no evidence of decline due to more intensive exposure to English after school entry. Knowledge of English, on the other hand, was variable among younger children, but quickly reached ceiling within the first couple of years after school entry, at least in Adams County. While only one school-aged participant was included in the Elkhart-LaGrange sample, our observations in that settlement indicated that English skills were also strong among older children there. The overall developmental pattern reflected in the data from these two communities is thus indicative of early sequential bilingualism, with clear dominance in the German vernacular prior to school entry, followed by rapid acquisition of English, leading to balanced and stable bilingualism by later childhood.

Of note, the variability in English skills among the younger children in these two communities was not straightforwardly related to demographic factors such as age or birth order. Despite the fact that several caregivers pointed to older children "bringing English home from school" as a potential source of English exposure for younger children, those with lower English scores included both early and later born children; notably, the child with the lowest English score overall was the youngest of 13 siblings. Instead, we believe the amount of regular contact that individual families have with non-Amish, English speakers, such as drivers, neighbors, or customers in family businesses, is a more likely source of the variability in younger children's emerging knowledge of English. Further research will be required to support this largely anecdotal observation.

Turning to the findings from Allen County, we must begin by acknowledging the very small sample size, which allows for only very cautious inferences. We also note that children in this community were generally more reluctant to participate. Our impression is that this was due at least in part to their and/or their

families' insecurity about their knowledge of the vernacular. At least one additional, younger child was initially keen to participate, but the task was abandoned when it became clear that she could not provide any words in AS or PAD. These informal observations align with the naming accuracy scores from the 5 children who completed the task, all of whom showed ceiling performance in English and lower and more variable knowledge of German. Interestingly, it was the two oldest participants who had the highest scores in German. One of them explicitly commented that she recalled learning some of the common nouns (on Task 2) in German classes in school and that she feels she sometimes mixes and confuses the German she learned at school with the *Shwitzer* spoken at home. The same participant also noted that she feels her family used to speak more *Shwitzer* when she was younger. This aligns with other comments from adults in this settlement, which we return to below, in that they point to an ongoing language shift toward English in this community. In sum, the limited vocabulary data from Allen County suggests a developmental pattern of early, potentially simultaneous bilingualism that is and remains unbalanced and English-dominant throughout childhood.

3.3.2 Caregiver Questionnaires and Interviews

While the questionnaire was originally intended for primarily quantitative analysis, following previous research on childhood bilingualism that developed and employed such questionnaires, we found that many questionnaire items did not yield easily quantifiable responses. This was due in part to differences in respondents' usage of labels for the different languages and varieties involved. For example, while some distinguished between *Shwitzer*, or *(Amish) Swiss*, to refer to the Alemannic varieties used in the Adams and Allen County settlements, and *Diitsch*, or *Deitsch*, to refer to Pennsylvania Dutch, others used *Diitsch*, or *Schlabbacka (slop bucket) Dutch,* collectively to refer to vernacular varieties, and *Hochdiitsch*, or *German*, to refer to the written variety used in church and taught in schools. This terminological diversity, together with some speakers' fluid use of multiple varieties, made it difficult to obtain easily quantifiable information regarding differential frequency of use and exposure. Our report thus relies only partially on the original questionnaire items and response categories, and is supplemented by more qualitative, descriptive analysis and quotes from the broader conversations that often arose around the questionnaire.

In response to the question *Which language do you feel your child feels the most at home with?*, all caregivers in Adams (n=7, 1 missing response/NA) and Elkhart-LaGrange (ELG, n=4) said their child was most comfortable in the vernacular (AS or PAD), while all respondents in Allen (n=3) indicated English as their child's most comfortable language. These preferences align with information provided about children's early language exposure (prior to age 4): Adams and ELG caregivers unanimously reported their children were exposed to AS/PAD "very often/always", and the majority of them (n=8) reported early exposure to English only "sometimes" (1 "usually", 1 "very often/always", 2 NA).

Meanwhile, responses from the three caregivers in Allen were more varied, with only one indicating "very often/always" for early exposure to the vernacular (1 "usually", 1 "sometimes"), and one indicating "very often/always" for English (1 "sometimes", 1 NA). When asked *Generally, do people in your home (including yourself) have a preference for which language to use together?*, ten out of twelve respondents from Adams and ELG said they "(almost) always" preferred using the vernacular, with the remaining two saying they typically use a mix of languages in the home. By contrast, two of the three respondents from Allen indicated the family "(almost) always" prefers using English, with one reporting mixed usage. The same pattern emerged from responses to the question about preferred language usage within the *local community*: whereas all respondents from Adams and Elkhart-LaGrange indicated either only the vernacular (n=8) or a mix of both (n=2; 2 NA), all three respondents from Allen reported that English was "usually" or "always" preferred within their local community.

The greater prevalence of English in Allen County was also reflected in caregivers' self-ratings of their own language proficiency (*In your opinion, how well do you speak your languages?*). All caregivers rated their proficiency in both the vernacular and in English at one of the two highest points on the scale provided ("3: well" or "4: very well"), thus confirming they are fluently bilingual. However, while all caregivers in Adams and Elkhart-LaGrange rated their skills in AS/PAD higher or equal to those in English, the two caregivers from Allen who responded to this question both rated their English higher ("4: very well") than their German ("3: well").

Taken together, the information that was obtained from caregivers' responses to specific questionnaire items complements and aligns with the findings from children's relative vocabulary skills in showing consistent differences between the Adams and Elkhart-LaGrange communities on the one hand, and the Allen County community on the other. Whereas the vernacular appears to remain dominant and stable in homes and within the community in Adams and Elkhart-LaGrange, there are clear indicators of increasing use of English and diminishing use of the vernacular, in homes and within the community in Allen County.

Information shared by caregivers and community members in conversations that went beyond the questionnaire itself provided additional and largely consistent insights into the different patterns of language use in these communities. One mother from Allen County commented on her daughter's willingness to use the vernacular: "[she] knows what you're saying, but would rather not speak it." Another mother from the same county reflected: "Children can understand it but can't talk it. That bothers me. I am afraid it's going to hurt their salvation. German is all there is in church." Expressions of regret and concern about language loss were common in interactions with community members in Allen County. Meanwhile, consultants in the other settlements rarely raised serious concerns about language loss, except for the increasing use of English loanwords in the vernacular.

A notable theme that emerged from responses by caregivers in all three settlements was the ubiquitous use of code-mixing, and the (almost) consistently

positive attitudes toward it, as illustrated by some of the responses provided by parents to the question *Generally, what do you think of mixing languages in the same conversation?* reproduced in (4)-(7), with (4) and (5) also directly illustrating their fluid intersentential switching.

(4) "Mir tüen gäng. It's alright."
'We do it all the time.'

(5) "I don't know. We do it a lot. S'hot noch nix gschaadt."
'It has never done any harm.'

(6) "Weiss nit. Wär besser wenn mer net tät. Mir sin so gwöhnt."
'I don't know. Would be better if we didn't. We are used to it.'

(7) "It's okay. [It would be] stupid not to."

One family pointed out that they would sometimes switch to English deliberately with their younger children so as to help them learn English and be better prepared for school. Another family that lived in Elkhart-LaGrange, a predominantly PAD-speaking community, but spoke mainly AS at home said they would intentionally mix PAD words into their AS to facilitate their child's interactions with PAD-speaking children in the community. The Amish thus view code-mixing as a natural and beneficial practice rather than a threat, and deliberately utilize it as an opportunity for language learning.

4. Discussion

The goal of this paper was to present a first, descriptive report of findings from recent fieldwork in three Old Order Amish settlements in Indiana, aiming to document how bilingualism emerges across development among children in these communities and how community language practices support this development and the maintenance of societal bilingualism across generations in a diaspora context. Employing tools from previous research on childhood bilingualism and striving to adapt them for appropriate use in a community that does not embrace the use of modern technology, we assessed children's vocabulary knowledge in their German vernacular–Amish *Shwitzer* and/or Pennsylvania Dutch–and in English and conducted questionnaire-based interviews with their caregivers about language usage in the home and community.

A critical finding that emerged from this initial exploratory investigation was that the status of the vernacular and the stability of societal bilingualism varied between settlements. In Adams County, the heartland of the Swiss Amish, children prior to entering school were consistently dominant in the vernacular, with variable knowledge of English. Contrary to reports in older sources, we did not find evidence that "[u]pon entering school the child frequently has no English vocabulary" (Hostetler, 1963, p. 139). It is likely that as the interactions between

the Amish and the mainstream American communities in which they live have increased over the past decades, so have the opportunities for exposure to English for Amish children. Our impression, based on the limited data we have gathered so far, is that the variability in younger children's knowledge of English is related to the amount of regular contact their family has with "English" acquaintances, such as neighbors and drivers. Contrary to what one might have expected based on previous research on childhood bilingualism and heritage language maintenance (e.g., Bridges & Hoff, 2014), birth order did not appear related to early knowledge of English, although the small sample in this study does not allow for definitive conclusions in this regard.

Information from parental questionnaires and interviews confirmed that the vernacular remains the dominant language in homes and in the community in Adams County. Adults consistently rated their proficiency in *Shwitzer* at the top of the scale, and their English equally high or only slightly lower. Beyond occasional remarks about increased use of English loanwords, few concerns were raised about loss of the vernacular in this community, and speakers generally showed no signs of linguistic insecurity about their vernacular.

Similar findings generally emerged from data collected in Elkhart-LaGrange, although we must caution that our consultants may not be representative of the larger, dominantly PAD-speaking Amish community in this settlement, as they all belonged to families with ties to Adams and Allen counties and all five children from this sample had consistent exposure to both AS and PAD, in addition to English. It is nevertheless notable that even in this more complex, trilingual environment, we did not encounter any clear indications of language shift or loss. On the contrary, we found several spouses in marriages between speakers of AS and PAD in this community who reported it was natural for them to learn to speak their spouse's variety to communicate more easily with their in-laws, and to help their children acquire both varieties, in addition to English.

In marked contrast to the signs of stable bi-/multilingualism in these settlements, the data from Allen County presented a different picture. Children in this community were reported and observed to be reluctant to use the vernacular, and the five children who participated in the vocabulary elicitation task showed consistently stronger skills in English than in the vernacular. This finding aligned with information from parental questionnaires and interviews, which revealed increasing use of English in homes and within the community and suggested a subtle shift in language dominance toward English even among adults. Importantly, the community voiced deep concern about this ongoing shift toward English. Yet when asked what they perceived to be the causes of this shift, informants typically expressed that they did not know. A point that was regularly raised concerned increased contact between speakers of different varieties of the vernacular, including Amish from more distant settlements, creating situations in which some reported it was easiest for everyone to just speak English. This is reminiscent of observations about the language situation in Allen County by Thompson (1994) more than 30 years ago, who wrote: "It is a common perception in the Allen County Amish community that the importance and use of English has

increased in recent years" (p. 76). Yet Thompson noted that at the time, "none of the Amish interviewed considered English a direct threat to the local Alemannic dialect and several made it clear that use of German is an essential part of their Amish identity" (p. 76). The findings from our recent fieldwork indicate that while the Amish in Allen County continue to consider the vernacular an important part of their identity, they are no longer confident that the increased use of English does not present a threat. The weaker German skills that we found among children in this community underscore the reality of this threat.

In an early discussion of German language maintenance in the U.S., Kloss (1966) observed that for sectarian groups such as the Old Order Amish "religio-societal insulation (...) has been the decisive factor in safeguarding their language maintenance potential" (p. 247), emphasizing that this factor is "so powerful as to enable those groups endowed with it to resist assimilation on the ground of this one circumstance, no other factor being necessary" (p. 206). It is without doubt that this factor has played a critical role in the maintenance of *Shwitzer* and PAD in these communities and it is particularly notable that the Amish have successfully maintained their vernaculars while fully embracing bilingualism with the majority language. As such, although not directly generalizable to other diaspora communities not endowed with this factor, the language practices among the Old Order Amish may nevertheless serve as proof-of-concept that embracing bilingualism with the majority language does not have to lead to the loss of the community's minoritized heritage language. At the same time, however, the observations we made in the Allen County settlement highlight that the socio-religious identity factor alone may not be powerful enough to ward off language shift altogether if other factors conspire to create what has been called a "shift ecology", that is, "situations of unstable bi- or multilingualism where speakers, and in particular younger speakers, do not use their ancestral language but rather speak the majority language" (Grenoble & Osipov, 2023, p. 1). Understanding what these other factors are in the context of the Old Order Amish communities in Indiana remains an important focus for future work. What is clear is that children and the languages spoken to them in their homes and communities are the key drivers of both language maintenance and shift, thus future language documentation as well as community efforts to support the continued use of the vernacular must critically involve children from the youngest ages.

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