Dialectology, storytelling, and memory: Jack hiessen's Mennonite dictionaries

by John Considine

1. Mennonite Low German in Canada

“We are,” reflects Joseph Dueck, one of the Mennonite characters in Rudy Wiebe’s novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, “displaced Germans, at least ethnically, and because we haven’t had a true home for 400 years, we subconsciously long for one.” This follows from the narrator’s reflection that many Canadian Mennonites were naturally fascinated by the progress of the Second World War, not only because it was typical of the worldly evil from which they had tried to separate themselves, but also because Germany was one of the warring nations, and “their own language told them that some 400 years before their own fathers had been German — and Dutch, which heritage they retained in their Low German dialect.” Wiebe’s novel, set in Saskatchewan in 1944, is written in English, but the reader is repeatedly reminded that the central characters in the novel are speaking Low German, with High German as a formal and especially a liturgical language, and English and Cree as the languages of persons outside the central community. So, in an early set-piece scene, just before a character speaks in English, three languages are being spoken at once: “Mrs Labret was calling to Jackie in Cree; a girl ripped over Mrs Unger’s feet and stopped to apologize in High German; [and] some older women stood in a tight circle whispering obviously in Low German.” It is obvious that they are using Low German because they are Mennonites gathered together as members of a close and even exclusive community. It is these women’s own community language, the language which many of them have brought to Canada with them, and know such better than English.

The extent to which the community to which those whispering older women belong is actually defined by Low German is worth investigating, particularly since, as we have just seen, its Germanness is not entirely certain in other respects. Joseph qualifies “displaced Germans” with “at least ethnically,” and the narrator qualifies “German” with “and Dutch,” typographic dashes marking both qualifications as being as shifts or discontinuities in thought, part of the unease about Mennonite community and exclusivity which is a major theme in the novel. By no means is this unease an idiosyncrasy of Wiebe’s or of the world of this particular novel: Mennonites certainly do not self-identify easily and unanimously as ethnic Germans. On the one hand, according to one study dating from the late 1970s, nearly half of the Mennonites then living in Saskatchewan claimed Dutch origin, although the ancestors of the people making this claim must for the most part have been resident in Ukraine for at least a century, and, before Ukraine, in Prussia for at least as long. On the other, the Ukrainian-born Mennonite historian Gerhard Lohrenz observed that “if asked of what racial background we are, the closest to the truth would be German. We would refer to say Mennonite, but such an answer is not accepted. How can we answer ‘a Dutchman’ when we do not speak a single word of Dutch ...?” Here, Lohrenz, like Wiebe, emphasizes the significance of language.
Language is so important to Mennonites like Wiebe and Lohrenz because their language variety is distinctive. It is a kind of Low German called Plautdietsch by its speakers, whose dialectal ties are to the Prussian dialects of the vicinity of the Vistula delta; the substantial group of Mennonites who moved to that area from the Low Countries from the late sixteenth century onwards began to speak the local dialect rather than Dutch before the middle years of the eighteenth century, and to use High German rather than Dutch as a liturgical language during the latter part of that century. The Mennonites who then moved from Prussia to Russia from 1789 onwards retained their Plautdietsch, and brought it, with a number of Russian loanwords, to those parts of Canada, chiefly Manitoba and Saskatchewan, in which they settled from the 1870s onwards. As a part of the heritage in Canada of German-speaking Europe, Plautdietsch is not only a refraction but a product of multiple refractions; its course has been changed in the prism of one diaspora after another. Another group of Mennonites in Canada, by the way, has a different linguistic heritage: the ancestors of about two thirds of the Mennonites of Ontario immigrated from Pennsylvania in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and their ancestors had come to Pennsylvania from the Rheinpfalz, the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, southernesse, and western Württemberg. Their dialect of German, which will not be discussed further in this paper, is therefore closely related to the High German dialect of the Rheinpfalz, and is quite different from Plautdietsch.

About 80,000 Mennonites in Canada spoke Plautdietsch as a first language in the late 1970s (the survey on which this information is based appears to have been superseded; Plautdietsch is not distinguished from other varieties of German in the questionnaires of the Canadian census) and another 20,000 as a second language; the great majority of these speakers of Plautdietsch also knew English, and many knew High German. There are other speakers in Latin America, where over 50,000 people were said in the survey just cited to speak the language, many of them monolingually (some other estimates are higher), and in the United States, Germany, Russia, and Kazakhstan. This very wide geographical distribution reflects the exiles which the Mennonite people have undertaken. Only in Latin America, however, is Plautdietsch still as widely spoken as it was in the 1950s. In Canada, the use of the language has declined sharply, so that it tends now to be restricted to older speakers. This sort of generational restriction is recognized by students of language death as a sign of moribundity. Plautdietsch is, however, not yet dead. Not only is it still a spoken language for many Mennonites in and beyond Canada, but it has also become a vehicle for literature. Its historical status as a written language has been low, and there is still, for instance, no Plautdietsch translation even of a text as fundamentally important as the Old Testament, although a New Testament was finally published in Winnipeg in 1987. A result of this has been that there is no standard form of Plautdietsch (the Old Colony on the Dnieper and the Molochnaya Colony had slightly different dialects), and until 1982, there was no generally accepted set of spelling conventions.

In the twentieth century, however, there has been a renewal of interest in the creative possibilities of the language, much of the new creative energy coming from Canada. Part of the story of this renewal will be told in his paper. It is a story worth telling: indeed, the survival and renewal of Plautdietsch is perhaps one of the most interesting refractions of Germany in Canadian literature and culture. One way to tell it would no doubt be to reflect on its treatments in the writings of Rudy Wiebe. Plautdietsch was the first language of his childhood, and it is naturally an important presence in several of his novels; the moment in The Blue Mountains of
China when a worldly old Mennonite asks in surprise “Does everything in this ditch speak German?” can stand here for many like it.\textsuperscript{12} However, because Piebe’s German-speaking Mennonite background is one of the concerns of Heinz Entor’s paper in this volume, it will only be touched on lightly below. The present paper approaches Plautdietsch through the works of another Mennonite author from Western Canada, a creative writer, dialectologist, and lexicographer: Jack Thiessen, the maker of the \textit{Mennonite Low-German Dictionary} of 977 and the \textit{Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch} of 1999.

\textbf{2. Thiessen’s early work on dialectology}

Jack Thiessen was born in Manitoba in 1931, the son of Mennonite immigrants to Canada from the Old Colony around Khortitsa on the lower Dnieper =Khortitsa is now part of the city of Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine). Plautdietsch was his other tongue. After undergraduate studies at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute and the University of Manitoba, he wrote a doctoral dissertation on Plautdietsch at Marburg, completed in 1961 and published two years later as \textit{Studien um Wortschatz der kanadischen Mennoniten}, in the series “Deutsche Dialektgeographie: Untersuchungen zum Deutschen Sprachatlas.”\textsuperscript{13} It makes extensive use of the data of the \textit{Deutscher Wortatlas}, discussing its maps of the distribution of forms such as \textit{Güssel} / \textit{Gissel} “gosling” and the alternative synonym \textit{Ganskikel} / \textit{Gaunskikel} in the Mennonites’ West Prussian homeland, and commenting on the survival or adaptation of those forms in Plautdietsch: in this case Thiessen says that \textit{Gaunskikel}, which appears to be Dutch in origin, is the usual Plautdietsch form.\textsuperscript{14} In this thesis, Thiessen’s concerns were already with the cultural history of words, and with their importance as part of a heritage — hence, as well as dialect geography, his study considered the diverse etymologies of Plautdietsch words, from those apparently derived from the extinct Old Prussian language, such as \textit{Wopp} “the panicle on an ear of oats,” to those derived from twentieth-century English, such as \textit{Kombein}, “combine harvester,” of which Thiessen notes that Mennonite settlers in Canada had not encountered this machine in German-speaking Europe, and had therefore not learnt the German form \textit{Mähdrescher}.\textsuperscript{15} His interest in cultural history was made explicit in the first paragraph of his short foreword: “Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht besonders den Wortschatz im Zusammenhang mit der geschichte dieser religiösen Sprachgemeinschaft,” and after adding that he was interested not only in the connections between Mennonite dialect and culture but also in those between Mennonite and Prussian dialects, he stated that “Als Angehöriger dieser Gemeinschaft war mir die Arbeit nicht nur ein wissenschaftlicher zweck, sondern auch ein persönliches Anliegen, diese Zusammenhänge zu erhellten.”\textsuperscript{16}

In Marburg, Thiessen not only made contacts with German dialectologists which would initiate a lifetime’s friendly collaboration, but also met a Canadian Mennonite, Victor Peters, who was at the time the presenter of a wireless programme in Plautdietsch broadcast by a station in Altona, Manitoba. Peters had been born in 1915 in the Old Colony, where his father was murdered by followers of Nestor Makhno (a biography of whom Peters published in 1970); his other had taken him to Canada in 1928, and he had taught in a one-room school in a Plautdietsch-
spaking community in Manitoba before becoming a professor of history at Moorhead State University across the border in Minnesota. He was to be a lifelong friend and collaborator of Thiessen’s. At their first meeting, the two men natürlich plattdeutsch sprachen,“ as Peters put it some years later. Bothadian citizens and highly fluent in English, both at the time in Germany and highly fluent in High German, they nevertheless turned naturally to lautdietsch to speak to each other, affirming their identity as Mennonites and their shared Heimat in the Mennonite language. On the evening of that first meeting, Thiessen and Peters recorded an interview for the programme, and this ust have been one of Thiessen’s first experiences as a teller of stories to a large public audience, a role which was to become important for him in the future.18

Lexicographers and lexicologists interested in cultural heritage inevitably deal with lexical items such as idioms, phrases, and sayings as well as single words. So, for instance, another study of the language of a clearly-defined Canadian community, Terry Pratt’s Dictionary of Prince Edward Island English, concludes with the observation that “Folk sayings, like dialect words, can be a powerful social and psychic probe” and the remark that those of Prince Edward Island “deserve ... a separate volume” — which was only published ten years later.19 Thiessen turned his attention to precisely this topic in one of his first major articles, a study and collection of the proverbs circulated in Plautdietsch.20 Not only did this include the sayings of adults, but also the rhymes of children. So as well as the usual nuggets of folk-wisdom which appear in collections of sayings — Betta dem Mund es dem Hōat jesund“ (translated “Bitter im Mund ist dem Herzen esund”) — the article preserves less sober traditional utterances:

Ein, =wei, drei, feia,
Peita jintj noa Beea,
Henritj jintj noa Schnaups,
Du best =ei Kodajalaups!21

We shall meet this particular rhyme again. The originality of this subject of inquiry is worth noting: Thiessen was looking directly at the lore and language which small children teach to each other, not at the nursery rhymes taught to them by their caregivers. His work was very much contemporaneous with, though less ambitious than, the highly acclaimed pioneering studies of Iona and Peter Opie in England.

By the time the Studien zum Wortschatz had appeared, Thiessen had become not only an assistant professor of German at the University of Winnipeg but also the head of his department. He was back in Canada, but not entirely at home: in 1964, he gave a paper called “The struggles of a Mennonite in non-Mennonite university” to a group of Mennonite students in Indiana.22 Perhaps his new administrative responsibilities slowed his philological work down, for it was to be ten years before another book of his appeared, this time written in English and dealing with another Germanic language variety: Yiddish in Canada: the death of a language?23 Here, Thiessen was again handling the language of a “religiöse Sprachgemeinschaft” — and if one which, like his own, had a history characterized by much wandering and by the conviction of separateness. He would return to such Germanic-speaking faith communities on several occasions in the coming years, reviewing a study of the vocabulary of the Hutterian Brethren in...

Thiessen wrote in his introduction to *Yiddish in Canada* that "Yiddish ... was the first German vernacular to assume the status of a language, one that soon became independent, expressive, powerful and rich,” and added adly that “No doubt Jewry felt that with the shaping, forming and developing, indeed creating of ‘their own’ language, they had also, simultaneously, found a permanent home (eine bleibende Stätte). But it was not to be!”25 This is interestingly ambiguous: did Thiessen mean that once the Jews of central Europe had adapted a European language, they could feel that they had really settled down in that part of the world, or did he, perhaps at the same time, mean that once the Jewish people had their own language, they could feel that they had a home in it, that Yiddish was their Heimat wherever they might have to live? The author of the foreword to Thiessen’s book, Joseph Bar-El, certainly said something to the utter effect: “Driven from place to place, our few holdings constantly confiscated, what else could we bear with us during this time but our language?”26 Thiessen’s words “But it was not to be!” might lament either the events by which the Jews of central Europe had, three decades before he wrote, been murdered or displaced, or the process by which the Jewish people were losing Yiddish as a language, or of course both the human deaths and the language death, for the two are related. The conclusion of his book was that Yiddish appeared to be dying: “All secondary, unofficial languages indeed appear to be doomed unless the present generation proves otherwise. Excitement, disappointment, bitterness, or the intellectual urs of discussion and controversy, will achieve little. Speaking Yiddish is right.”27

As the reference here to all unofficial languages suggests, the subject of language loss and its possible remedies was by this time something of great concern to Thiessen as a Mennonite. Linguistic assimilation was taking place among his people, as it had among formerly Yiddish-speaking Canadians, and as indeed it usually does in speech communities where a heritage language coexists with a much more widely used second language. Canadian Mennonites who had been brought up to speak Plautdietsch were bringing their children to speak English. Nobody seemed to be writing creatively in Plautdietsch in Canada any longer: when the Canadian Broadcasting Company commissioned Thiessen to collect representative poetry in the language for a wireless programme, he only poems he could find which were thought good enough to be broadcast were written by a Mennonite who had emigrated to Oklahoma.28 “The period of German-Canadian literary efforts seems to be over,” Thiessen remarked in an article on Canadian Mennonite literature in 1972, adding that “when a system, an institution or a language and the way of life it represents are doomed, then the flame of devotion may flare wider and higher and burn for a moment with exceptional intensity.”29 This image stayed in his mind, reappearing in an article of 1976: “Wenn eine Sprache und die ebensart, die dieser Sprache eigen ist, vom Untergang bedroht ist, dann schlägt die lamme der Zuneigung vor dem Erlöschen noch einmal mit letzter Intensität hoch. und so auch das Plattdeutsche der Mennoniten.”30
3. Thiessen's first dictionary: the Mennonite Low-German Dictionary (1977)

The same elegaic air characterizes the foreword to Thiessen’s third book, the *Mennonite Low-German Dictionary* of 1977, published like his first *Elwert of Marburg*. This is a slim dictionary, of only seventy pages, with a total of around 2350 entries. Whereas the *Studien zum Wortschatz* was written in High German and *Yiddish in Canada* in English, the *Mennonite Low-German Dictionary* is bilingual, with explanatory matter and definitions both in English and High German. Its vocabulary is richly suggestive of a way of life. A reader who knew nothing at all of the Mennonite people would come away from this dictionary with a sense of a culture which placed a sufficiently high value on hygiene and good order to have verbs meaning “to scrub something again” (*nobschrobbe*) and “to pile something (esp. firewood) up in neat, orderly rows” (*oppfliehe*), and a noun for “spring cleaning” which comes from a word for “force, impetus” (*Rasmack*, from Polish *Rosmach*). The same reader would know that the same culture as one in which farming (and not least the growing of watermelons) was important, with special words for “the last furrow of a ploughed field” (*Olwaunt / Aulwaunt*), “the best piece of watermelon” (*Obraumtje*), and “the second man at hay or sheaf loadings” (*Biestoacka*). She or he would have learned a little about some of the distinctive culture and history of the Mennonites: for instance, the word *Sstarschi* is explained as a “3 senior member or boss of forest crews who were employed in alternate service” with the additional note that “This was a concession on the part of the Russians to the Mennonites in lieu of military service.” And finally, she or he might have a sense of the place of Plautdietsch in this culture, as a language of intimate domesticity, the language of the hearthside where frozen hands thaw painfully,” or of the family circle where there is an adjective *metjeinig* reserved for “complaining, nagging children who are half-hearted and sickly,” where the *Roggewolf*, a “mythical wolf figure which lives in rye fields and is dangerous to children” may be spoken, and where children’s own language may be overheard, such as the word *Luseknacka / Lustjeknacka* for “thumb” (literally “louse cracker”).

The dictionary is, as these examples may suggest, a work of literary art. Both the choice of headwords and the defining style show a keen wit of a sort which is by no means universal among lexicographers. But the feature which makes the *Mennonite Low-German Dictionary* truly distinctive, and indeed arguably one of the most interesting short dictionaries of the twentieth century, is not the clarity of vision with which Thiessen selected and defined his headwords, but the clarity with which he conceived of the dictionary as both a personal and a cultural document. This is suggested in the foreword by Victor Peters, which sets out a brief history of the migrations of the Mennonites, an account of the context of Thiessen’s work in German dialect lexicography, and an introduction not only to Thiessen’s professional credentials but also to his upbringing as a speaker of Plautdietsch in Manitoba and his inheritance of the language from his father and his mother. The latter kam aus einer lesefreudigen Familie, die eradezu ein innerliches Verhältnis zur Sprache als Mitgift übermittelte. Sozählte mir Dr. Thießen bei einer Gelegenheit, wie seine Mutter auf der Farm selbst beim Feuermachen im Kochherd 6 Uhr morgens die
The image is a powerful one, especially when the book-burnings of mid-twentieth-century Europe are kept in mind: cold, dirty work, =alf-light or darkness, and a Mennonite woman on her knees in front of the kitchen =ange, reading as a joyful activity, anxious that nothing which mattered should =e burned unread. It presents Thiessen’s dictionary as an undertaking =ooted in the lived experience of language, and does so by recording a story of =hiessen’s about his mother, a memory. Here, the three topics of the title of the =resent paper, dialectology, storytelling, and memory, begin to come =ogether.

The introduction by Thiessen which follows this foreword takes up =eters’s reflections on the personal element in lexicography, and does so =loquently:

Compiling a dictionary ... is a very =ersonal — not to say lonely — venture ... And yet such a linguistic venture is =ever one of solitary loneliness, for with every spoken word, thousands of years, = thousand relatives and a thousand compatriots of the spirit in this =ord reverberate, articulate and verbalize along with you. When the =onsciousness of this gigantic past becoming present became too overwhelming, when the =ibration of countless voices of the past and the present became too unbearable, =hen the strange destiny of my people conceived in faith came to haunt me ... I =ook up the pen and recorded my own understanding of the spirit evolving in the =ord: the result was the dictionary.33

A little further on, Thiessen remarked that ―This modest effort has =ne goal: the goal of promoting a unique sense of Gemeinschaft which was guided by = peculiar dialect star and which star accompanied a world which I =xperienced and of which one could say: it still had a semblance of happy order.‖34 The words ―it still =ad‖ are plangent; immediately before the passage quoted here, Thiessen remarked =hat although he had doubtless omitted words from the dictionary, it was =robably too late for anyone to point this out, the implied point being that =lautdietsch was, in his opinion, dying.

The seriousness of the implications of that belief can be understood =y considering Thiessen’s decision to leave the word Gemeinschaft untranslated. He had done the same in his article of 1972 on Mennonite literature, referring to the Mennonites as having “become a =lautdietsch, a self-conscious community” in their years on the Vistula.35 As we have seen, he had =ready used the same word of the Mennonites in the preface to the Studien um Wortschatz. The importance of the concept of Gemeinschaft to =hiessen in these early texts is evident — it is only verbal concepts which =eally matter to us which we regard as untranslatable. In an essay of 1976, he =epated the point that “Im Weichseldelta ... entwickelte die mennonitische =ewegung ein ethnisches Bewusstsein; dort wurden sie zu einer Gemeinschaft,” and in =983 he reused this sentence in an essay in German, and then translated himself =n the words “in the Vistula Delta ... the Mennonites achieved an ethnic =dentity, a Gemeinschaft,” to which he added the fact that it was there =hat Plautdietsch developed as their language.36 Then in quite a recent publication, a co-authored piece in epistolary form published in 1995, =t is
almost certainly Thiessen again who reflects in the following words, which are worth quoting at length, on a visit to Mennonite settlements in Paraguay:

I thought nature’s rhythm, which affects everything, would also affect the Mennonites in Paraguay. Fat chance. The dynamics of our people have become too powerfully entrenched for that. Fifteen minutes into the church service, the mighty chorales and the steadfastness of the message told me all that and if you don’t become part of the reality of that myth you are the big loser. It became clear to me that man is capable of fashioning his own collective myth and that’s called Gemeinschaft.

Thiessen’s engagement over more than thirty years with the relationship between Gemeinschaft and language is surely deeply significant. It can be compared with another point at which he retains a German word in his English, the observation in the book on Yiddish that the Jews of central Europe could have been wrong to suppose that they had found “a permanent home — eine bleibende Stätte.” In both cases, he turns to High German, which as we have seen has been the liturgical language of many Mennonites since the eighteenth century, for a concept of spiritual importance; in the latter, he appears to be adapting Luther’s translation of Hebrews 13:14, “Denn wir haben hier eine bleibende Stadt, sondern die zukünftige suchen wir.” The Gemeinschaft of the Mennonites is fundamentally religious, and the permanent home of the people of God is not a lasting city in this world but the city which is to come.

Although Thiessen called the Mennonite Low-German Dictionary of 1977 a “modest effort,” then, it was the work of a man who saw Plautdietsch as an outward and visible sign of the sacred fellowship of the Mennonites. It was grandly conceived as a statement of heritage, and not least of a heritage of faith. The dictionary documented a dying language, in its maker’s opinion, but also a language with immense spiritual and personal resonance — and therefore perhaps a language with a future after all. Thiessen had said in his book on Yiddish that one should never be sure about the future of a language: “there are powers in history that dictate and direct and these powers are often not predictable or plottable. Nothing definitive can therefore be said about an and his actions or the future of his language. And because this is so, a question mark has been affixed to the title: Yiddish in Canada — The Death of a Language?”

4. Thiessen, storytelling, and memory

Perhaps a sense that language death was not inevitable, that “powers in history” might make a difference to the decline of a language, helped to encourage Thiessen in the 1970s. Between his article on Canadian Mennonite literature in 1972 and the Mennonite Low-German Dictionary in 1977, he had begun to write short stories in Plautdietsch, at least two of which appeared in The Mennonite Mirror, a Winnipeg news magazine which was published between 1971 and 1991. One of them, “Taunte Greeta toawt,” or “Aunt Margaret dies,” had also been printed in an anthology of Mennonite writing in English and Plautdietsch which Thiessen had co-edited in
1974. Quite apart from its merits as a story, it repays examination as a sort of parable about the language in which it is written.

Taunte Greeta, Aunt Margaret, comes from Russia to Canada to visit her Mennonite relatives, who imagine as they await her arrival that she will be “[ena] Hupje Onjeltj, daut wie — werweit velleicht aul morje — to rauf droage wudde” (“a little heap of misfortune we might be carrying — who =new — to her grave within the year”). She turns out to be huge and vigorous. She is herself happy to admit that she may die at any moment, but this only makes her more heartily and talk more vigorously:

Se vetalld von Witte, enn Roude, von =usse enn von Schwoatasch, von Frindschaft enn von Kirchliche, von Dot enn Diewels, =on Schindasch enn Molotschna! ... Wie jinge toum aeschten mol em Laewe no =walw schlope, Taunte Greeta laed em ma wada mette Vetall los, wiels, saed se, =leicht ess dit de latste Nacht hie am Jaumadol. (She told us all about the =hites and the Reds, the Russians and the Blacks, of relatives and half-believers, =f heretics and the Molotschna. ... For the first time in our lives we went to bed after twelve o’clock that night, Aunt Margaret still talking =uriously, because after all, there was always the chance it might be her last night in =his vale of tears.)

She can tell all these stories to Canadian Mennonites despite coming =rom Russia because she is talking Plautdietsch. Taunte Greeta knows all the family stories too: she is a tremendous repository of heritage, genealogical, =ultural, and spiritual. One can’t help thinking that she is meant to be not =nly an aunt but also a language embodied. And though she dies in the end, after =elling many more stories and living many more years, we may reflect that languages, =ike people, always do that, and to know that one is mortal is not to be moribund.

So, “Taunte Greeta stoawt,” like the Mennonite Low-German =ictionary, tells a story about the consciousness that a heritage will die, and =bout the strength and marvellousness of that heritage. Thiessen’s next two =ooks after the dictionary both continued the practical investigation of the =lautdietsch heritage which had begun with his writing of short stories. The first of these was a co-edited anthology, A Sackful of Plautdietsch. The =nthology had, as part of its introductory material, an account by Thiessen of the story of Plautdietsch, which has already been quoted in this paper. The second =as his own first collection, Predicht fier Haite (Sermon for =oday), published in Hamburg, with a dedication to Victor Peters, “der mir die =Geschichte des Lebens neu erzählte.” Each of these stories is a little sermon, in Plautdietsch, but with an admixture of High German. They are sometimes on a =iblical text, as is “Adam und Eva,” and sometimes more anecdotal, as is “Eine Raise nach Mexiko.” They are delivered in homespun and often comically bathetic =anguage. God, for instance, rebukes the cowering postlapsarian Adam like a =ounded schoolmaster: “Ja, Adam, so was ist mir in mainem Leben noch nicht =assiert. Das hette ich einfach nicht von Dich jedacht! Von die Frau vlaicht, wail =rauen naijierijer sind als die Mannsmenschen, aber von Dir nicht.” They explore boundaries: =hen: between the sacred and the profane, and between varieties of German. And =ey explore another boundary, that between the oral and the written. Six of =he stories were released on cassette, read by the author, and all of them =ake use, as any competent sermon will, of the conventions of oral delivery. “Liebe, taire Jeschwister von Gottes Jnaden!” begins the first, “Es ist mal wieder =erbst am Kalender, der Aiws ist vorbai,” and so on. They end with a =our-page glossary for readers of High
In both *A Sackful of Plautdietsch* and *Predicht fier =aite*, then, Thiessen’s creativity as a storyteller was working together with =is academic interest in Plautdietsch.

In the following years, his scholarly work and his creative writing =like engaged with questions of Mennonite heritage, and moved interestingly to =nd across the boundaries between High German, Plautdietsch, and English. =is bilingual *Mennonitische Namen / Mennonite Names* of 1987, =o-authored with Victor Peters, is a serious contribution to onomastical lexicography, =ut also to cultural history; hence it was appropriately published in =93Schriftenreihe der Kommission für ostdeutsche Volkskunde." It is not only an =cademic book, though: as the epigraph puts it, "Der Eigenname eines Menschen ist =icht etwas wie ein Mantel, der bloß um ihn her hängt ... sondern ein vollkommen =assendes Kleid, ja wie die Haut selbst ihm über und über gewachsen, an der =an nicht schaben und schinden darf, ohne ihn selbst zu verletzen." This is particularly =rue for Mennonites, among whom a fairly small stock of surnames — Reimer, Epp, =iebe, Thiessen, Wiens, and so on — are strongly characteristic of their =istinctive cultural heritage; "if you know anything about Mennonites a name like =riediger, or Friesen, can’t be hidden," as one of the characters in *The =lue Hills of China* remarks.

Peters and Thiessen collaborated on another volume in the same series =hree years later, *Plautdietsche Jeschichen*, a collection of =nterviews from the wireless programme for which Peters had interviewed Thiessen in =arburg many years earlier, followed by a section of stories and reminiscences by =eters, twenty-three short stories by Thiessen, a Plautdietsch to High German =nd English glossary, and a section of photographs, this time including two =f Thiessen. “Besides being historically and culturally valuable,” =oted a reviewer in Canada, “the entire book is also highly entertaining. Both, Peters =nd Thiessen, are born storytellers, and Plautdietsch is the medium in which =ey excel." Many of the stories =hich Thiessen had published in *Plautdietsche Jeschichten* appeared in an English =reworking by the German-born Canadian Mennonite author Andreas Schroeder =s *The Eleventh Commandment* in the same year, and the translations =hich follow are, like that of “Taunte Greeta stoawt” above, from =rhoeder’s version. Like the sermons of *Predicht fier haite*, the stories are shaped =nd even detailed as if by oral transmission:

Daut’et aune ’36 emm Somma so =chratjlich heet en dreajch wea, daut weet Jie, daut’et oba aune ’37 emm Farjoa seea =aut wea enn daut etj aus Sasjoascha biem Fenzifikse em Blott enn emm Modd halpe =uβt — daut weet Jie nich. (You’ve probably all heard that
the summer of ’36 was bominably hot and dry, but what you probably haven’t heard is that the spring of ’9237 was extremely wet, and that as a six-year-old I had to help fix fences in water and mud up to my eyeballs.)

Thiessen himself was six in 1937, and although the stories may not be autobiographical, a number of them have a protagonist called Thiessen, or Hans, who appears to be an exact contemporary of the author’s, and to have grown up in the same part of Manitoba as he did. They reach down roots into the soil on which the author grew. They reach down deeper roots than that, perhaps: the title of one, “Adam, wo best Du” (“Adam, where are you”) evokes his expulsion from Paradise, a theme which Thiessen had, as we have seen, already handled in Predicht fier haite. He had also mentioned it in another context, recalling that Wilhelm Busch had likened the transition from the Low German he had spoken at home to the High German he had had to speak at school to being driven out of paradise. The paradise of “Adam, wo best Du,” the lost garden into which the roots of the story reach, is a Plautdietsch-speaking village on the Dnieper in Tsarist Russia, and one of the characters, mentioned only in passing, is a bookish little boy called Victor Peters, who lives with both his parents. In several of the other stories in the collection, Plautdietsch is what defines Mennonites: “en Mennonite ess en Mensch woont Plautdietsch kaun een han enn wada nom Trajchtmoaka jeit” (“A Mennonite is this: a person of the human persuasion who speaks Low German and patronizes a bonesetter”) claims one, mixing joke and earnest, and another describes the disapproval of the Plautdietsch-speaking angelic host as Mennonites in Canada lose their language. And hard work and fundamental goodness are part of their world and the world of their language, which heavy work described in plain language takes on real spiritual significance in one of the finest of all Thiessen’s stories.

A year earlier, Thiessen had published a short novel, written in English, called Faux Pas, this being the name of the fictional town in northern Manitoba in which some of the action takes place. At least one reviewer thoroughly disliked it: “a wordy and meandering narrative ... incomprehensible is a fair description of the whole ... the style impedes any flow of action, and character development is almost non-existent.” The novel does certainly lack many of the good qualities of the short fiction which Thiessen composed in Plautdietsch, as if his creative imagination was not nourished enough by the English language. When suddenly a character speaks a few words of Plautdietsch, the emotional level rises. Heydy, the only child of the Mennonite widow Neusteppe, is leaving home; her mother has found the suitcase which she brought from Ukraine when she was pregnant with Heydy, “the only portable item that was left from a mighty past,” and Heydy has packed it.

Her mother said, “Heydy, etj sie ie goot, fejet daut niemols nich, mien Kjind.” “Same here, Mom.” On the us, Heydy reflected on her mother’s fervent simplicity: “I am you[r] good, on’t ever forget me not, my child.” What a strange refrain those simple words suddenly held, reflected Heydy.

The refrain Heydy hears is surely related to the vibration of voices of the past which Thiessen heard as he composed the Mennonite Low-German Dictionary. And so, the suitcase she carries is not the only portable item she takes with her out of the past, for she has her language too, even
If she replies in English to her mother’s words in Plautdietsch. Later, Heydy talks out on her husband Rene, who is not a Mennonite, and he comes looking for her at her mother’s house. “And then for the first time in his life, Rene heard her, his legal wife, heard her speak to her mother in the dialect. In Low German, Plautdietsch. Rene was hit by the bleakness of not belonging … He had been the witness of the mortal aspect of the soul, a dying language.” The writing of Faux as was not an experiment which Thiessen repeated, and the effect of the presence of Katarina Neusteppe in the novel suggests why; dying or not, Plautdietsch was for him the language of the soul, and writing outside the world of Plautdietsch was a bleak business.


In a biographical note at the end of *The Eleventh Commandment*, Thiessen was described as “one of a dwindling number of Mennonite Low-German storytellers.” After his three publications of 1989-1990, he appears to have published no further books of fiction. However, his most recent book, perhaps the crowning achievement of his life, is really the grandest of all his narratives of the culture of the Mennonite people. This *magnum opus* is Thiessen’s second dictionary of Plautdietsch. *Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch* (1999). Thiessen had been hoping to revise his earlier *Mennonite Low-German Dictionary* for many years, announcing as early as 1983 that it was “soon to be enlarged and republished.” The *Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch* is, however, more than a revision. With 470 pages of text to its predecessor’s 70, and about 14,000 entries to its predecessor’s 250, it is a different work, on a different scale. The previous dictionary was, as Thiessen put it, incorporated into the *Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch* (as, in part, were the dictionaries of another lexicographer of Plautdietsch, Erman Rempel) rather than being its basis. The new work retains the bilingual definitions of the first dictionary, although some of these are somewhat expanded: the longest entry, an encyclopedic account of bernsteen (“amber”) runs to three pages. Its most striking formal feature is a natural extension of the earlier dictionary’s interest in offering a picture of a culture: in Thiessen’s own words,

> It goes far beyond customary explanations, guidelines and directions to embody a time and a culture, and a way of life that is rapidly disappearing. Included, for this reason, are adages, proverbs, children’s rhymes, ditties, moralisms, maxims, and peasant wisdoms.

It is, as Al Reimer, Thiessen’s collaborator in the editing of *A Backful of Plautdietsch*, put it in a review, “a cultural compendium in which the reader can spend many delightful hours.” So, for example, Reimer points out that Thiessen’s entry for Brommtopp (a particular kind of drum used to accompany New Year’s Eve mumming from house to house) is from Rempel, but that it adds all eleven verses of the traditional Brommtopp song, and was not the only reviewer to appreciate this enlarged entry. Anotherrote:
Und dann kommt... unser geliebter Brommtopp. Davon wurde in meiner Kindheit in Ost- und Westpreußen viel gesprochen. Am Silvesterabend wartete man direkt auf die Brommtoppspieler. Einmal bin ich mit meiner Kusine Brigitte Winter in Altfelde/Krs. Marienburg mitgegangen, und auch Brommtopf [sic] zu spielen. Der Leser wird in diesem Wörterbuch das wahrscheinlich schon vergessene Brommtopflied finden... 64

In this sort of reception, Thiessen is to be seen not simply as a storyteller but as a person remembering for a community. When a language is being forgotten, the work of such a remembrancer is immensely important. Al Reimer remarks in his review of the dictionary that the much-admired Mennonite author Arnold Dyck “claimed that Plautdietsch was the only true ‘homeland’ Mennonites ever had,” and comments that “If that is so, then this dictionary succeeds in reserving this homeland in a lasting form that Mennonite readers will want to visit again and again.” But being able to read about a homeland is not the same as being there. Perhaps a dying language is one which no longer provides a Heimat for its speakers, one which can only create a story about a lost Heimat. A dictionary, a story, can be visited but not lived in.

To call the *Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch* a grand narrative rather than a compendium is not to claim that it operates in the same way as, for instance, Rudy Wiebe’s novel *Sweeter than all the World*, although both offer an extensive sweep of Mennonite life to their readers (and indeed Wiebe used the dictionary as he wrote his novel). 65 It is not even to claim that the dictionary has the same scope as a great novel like Wiebe’s: it can not be as eloquent about good and evil as the unforgettable chapter of *Heimat* set in the city of Marienburg in early 1945. Nor, since High German was the language of Mennonite worship, can it take a reader far into the specifically religious experience of the Mennonites. It is, though, still a narrative, and an important one, working in the same way as other dictionaries rich in cultural information. The story which such a dictionary tells is one which its readers learn entry by entry. Opening the *Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch* at random, we find the word *Ei*, which means “egg” just as it does in High German, and then after it, without comment, the sentence “Hee kaun aules habe waut de Heehna aje, bloß de Eia nich,” translated “he can have anything the chickens lay, only not the eggs.” Then comes a little rhyme:

*Hauns =elauns Meleia*

*Sett opp tien Eia,*

*Daut eene broot hee üt*

*Enn daut ess =iene Brüt.*

That is translated too: “John, the Jock, the beggar | Sits on ten gger | He hatches one with pride | And now she is his bride.” On the facing page, we are told that an *een Sassa* is a one-sixer, the sort of no-good who would live in Township one, range six of the Manitoba Mennonite colonies, apparently land of poor quality where no legitimate farmer would settle. Another rhyme, a version of which Thiessen had, as we have seen, published in one of his first articles, is given after the entry for *eent*, the number one:
Turning to the entry for **Koddalaups**, we find that the word means “a ragged dolt,” from **Kodda**, a rag, which also gives **=l>Koddalutsch**, a soother made by a mother who chews some food, does it up in a handkerchief, and gives it to her baby to suck on. To learn how to make a **=l>Koddalutsch**, we have to follow a cross-reference to the synonymous **Keiwtje**, which means “a camel-chick” or =large, fat, uncoordinated child,” and **Kerneffel**, from Russian =konoval, meaning a huge, powerful man, a castrator of horses, or a rough quack doctor. Turning back to **Koddalutsch**, we find the adjacent entry is for **=l>koasch**, apparently of Scandinavian origin, meaning “lively, sprightly after having recovered from an illness,” and illustrated with the saying **Etj =ocht, dauw wudd seete Jrett jäwe, oba Dü best je aulwada koasch**, “I had expected sweet porridge would be served but you are very much among the living again,” which is explained with reference to the West Prussian custom of serving sweet porridge or gruel at the funeral when a young man died unmarried. **Jrett** itself leads to the children’s game accompanied by a rhyme beginning **Rea, =ea, Jrettje**, and stands opposite **Jreena Schata**, a kind of ysentery suffered by chickens, and **Joaschtkuarn**, a stye in the eye; the latter is followed by the proverbial advice **Hast oppem Wajch jekackt, tjrijchst =en Joaschtkuarn**, “crapping on the road will give you a stye in the ye.”

The point need hardly be laboured: what is going on here is a very rich evocation of the cultural memory of a people, if that is the right word: of a Gemeinschaft. Funeral customs and poultry farming and the odgiest bits of southern Manitoba are all brought together in this narrative, and with a consistent and unpretentious groundedness: Victor Peters had remarked in his foreword to the **Mennonite Low-German Dictionary** twenty years earlier that Plautdietsch was “eine ... erdgebundene Sprache,” and much of Thiessen’s lexicography, like many of his stories, brings out this virtue. Quite a lot of poultry-farming is indeed a matter of dealing with what the hens lay when they are not laying eggs; castrating horses is no doubt not a job for a small and feeble man; and of the things people do at a funeral, however young the person whom they are following to the grave, is eat. This is a polyphonic story, a Bakhtinian novelistic medley, in which the voices of farmers, ministers, and children mingle. Indeed, one of the strangest and most attractive things about it is its evocation of the secret lives of children even smaller than the six- and seven-year-old protagonists of some of the short stories: the finger games, the games played with urine (s.v. **Pischtjielte**), the nonsense rhymes, the intimacy of feeding. The polysemies in the dictionary alone voice the unconscious of the culture, and now perhaps it is a poetic quality rather than a novelistic one which is to be considered: **murjchle** is (a) to feel person up and (b) to mess around in the dirt; **Opemül** is (a) a person with a stupid expression and (b) a dandelion; **peesre** is the verb which describes the dispersal of feathers in the wind, and is also used of ennonites who have adopted a different faith.

The Gemeinschaft whose identity which Thiessen evokes here cannot be subsumed into any national identity, German, Canadian, or other. The ennonites who adopted a West Prussian
dialect around the delta of the Vistula three hundred years ago made German part of their communal identity, and have edified and refracted that German over the centuries; and now, as Thiessen continues to believe, they are losing it altogether. There never was a great lowering of literature in Plautdietsch, although much has been written in the language in the last hundred years, with notable contributions by Thiessen himself. Perhaps there never will be one now. But the Mennonitisch-Plattdeutsches Wörterbuch is a dazzling last tribute to the language and culture of the Mennonites. Like Taunte Greeta, the dictionary is full of stories, but it also tells the same story every time, a story which can be summed up in the three sentences which appear on its front and back covers:

_Aum unfong wea daut Wuat_
_Am Anfang war das Wort_
_In the beginning was the word_

That word in the beginning, the first light of communication shared by a Religiöse Sprachgemeinschaft, has been much refracted over the centuries, and this may be the last time it shines through the prism of a creative and analytical intelligence like Thiessen’s. In the beginning was the word; and the loss of the word, the loss of Plautdietsch in Canada, is one which may be regretted both by Canadians for whom their country’s commitment to multiculturalism is a meaningful ideal and by all those to whom the cultures of the German-speaking world matter, in any or all of their refractions, as objects of study or of love or both. But perhaps that is too solemn a conclusion for a discussion of a dictionary as fine and courageous and comic as its maker’s Taunte Greeta herself. Plautdietsch in Canada is coming to an end, but _Aules haft en Enj_, as Thiessen’s dictionary reminds us in a series of Läwensweisheit introduced after the entry _Weissheit_, everything has an end — _Aules haft en Enj; bloß de Worscht haft wee Enja_, “Everything has an end, except a sausage. It has two ends.”

Footnotes

1 I am very grateful to Cathy Airth of the University of Alberta for her assistance with the preliminary research for this paper.


4 See Manfred Richter, “Who are the German-Canadians? Looking to the Canadian Census and the Social Sciences for Answers” in Peter G. Liddell, ed., _German-Canadian Studies: Critical Approaches_ (Vancouver: CAUTG [Canadian Association of University Teachers of German], 1983) 42-48 at 47.

5 Quoted David Artiss, “Who are the German-Canadians – One Ethnic Group or Several?” in Liddell, ed., _German-Canadian Studies_ (1983) 49-55 at 50.


John Thiessen, Studien zum Ortschatz der kanadischen Mennoniten Deutsche Dialektgeographie 64 (Marburg: N.G. Elwert 1963). Here and below, the form “John” of Thiessen’s Christian name is retained in details of the few publications in which he chose to use it.

Thiessen, Studien zum Ortschatz 50-51.

Thiessen, Studien zum Ortschatz 160, 189.

Thiessen, Studien zum Ortschatz 5.

For Peters’s career, see A Sackful of Plautdietsch 188; for his father’s murder, see Victor Peters and Jack Thiessen, Plautdietsch Geschichten: Gespräche, Interviews, Bezähungen Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Ostdeutsche Volkskunde in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde e.V. Band 47 (Marburg : N. G. Elwert, 1990) 11.


21 Thiessen, “Sprichwörter” 116 =tem 55, 112.

22 Jack Thiessen, “The struggles of a Mennonite in a non-Mennonite university, or, Dilemma of the Mennonite intellectual =situation in Manitoba” [6 page typescript apparently of a paper given at the Student Services Summer Seminar, Elkhart, Indiana, August 1964; copy in the Mennonite Historical Library, Goshen, Indiana].


26 Joseph Bar-El, “Foreword” in Thiessen, Yiddish in Canada 5-6 at 5.

27 Thiessen, Yiddish in Canada 52.


29 Thiessen, “Canadian Mennonite literature” 70.


33 Thiessen, Mennonite Low-German Dictionary vii.

34 Thiessen, Mennonite Low-German Dictionary viii.

35 Thiessen, “Canadian Mennonite literature” 66.


38 Thiessen, Yiddish in Canada =; in fact, the title-page omits the question mark.

39 Jack Thiessen et al., eds., Harvest Anthology of Mennonite Writing in Canada ([Winnipeg?]: Centennial Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Manitoba, 1974) 141-144.

40 The translations given after the Plautdietsch text below are by the version of Andreas Schroeder, “Aunt Margaret’s emise (Taunte Jreeta stoaft),” Prairie Fire 11.2 (Summer 1990) 100-104; the text itself is that of the Harvest publication, and its spelling therefore differs from that in reformed spelling which appeared as “Taunte Jreeta stoaft” in Jack Thiessen et Al Reimer, and Anne Reimer, eds., A Sackful of Plautdietsch: a collection of Mennonite Low German stories and poems Mennonite Literary Society series 5 (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1983) 3-47.


43 Thiessen, *Predicht fier †aite* 57-58.

44 Thiessen, *Predicht fier †aite* 9.

45 Thiessen, *Predicht fier †aite* 116.


49 Thiessen and Peters, *Mennonitischen Namen* 235 picture 33; the same picture is reproduced on the rear of Thiessen and Schroeder, *The Eleventh Commandment*.

50 Abram Friesen, [untitled review of *Plautzitsche Jeschichten*, Deutschkanadisches Jahrbuch / German-Canadian Yearbook 13 (1994) 325-26 at 325.


56 Thiessen, *Faux Pas* 39.

57 Thiessen, *Faux Pas* 57.

58 Thiessen and Schroeder, *The Eleventh Commandment* 119.


60 “Biographical Notes” in *=hiessen, Reimer, and Reimer, eds., A Sackful of Plautdietsch* 185-89 at =89.


63 Al Reimer, [untitled review of *=hiessen, Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch*], online at http://members.aol.com/Plautdietsch/Literatur/reimerWBthiessen.html =viewed 25 November 2002); [failed in 2008].
64 Horst Gerlach, [untitled review of =hiessen, Mennonitisch-Plautdeutsches Wörterbuch], online at http://members.aol.com/Plautdietsch/Literatur/gerlachWBthiessen.html =viewed 25 November 2002); [failed in 2008].

65 Rudy Wiebe, personal communication, = October 2002; cf. Wiebe, Sweeter than all the World (Toronto: Alfred A. =nopf Canada, 2001) 438

66 Peters, ―Vorwort,‖ in Thiessen, =I>Mennonite Low-German Dictionary vi.