

# The German Language in Ellis County, Kansas

by Glenn G. Gilbert

**J** Neale Carman's *Foreign Language Units of Kansas*<sup>1</sup> clearly shows that the largest and most concentrated area of German settlement in the state is in Ellis County (including a portion of northern Rush County; see Map 1). The smaller settlement in the northwest part of the county was formed by Bukovina Germans who first arrived in 1877 (see Table 1). The much larger settlement area in the southeast was formed almost exclusively by Catholic German settlers from the Lower Volga region of Russia. This group was originally from Swabia in southwest Germany; it lived for approximately one hundred years in Russia before coming to the United States.<sup>2</sup> The first settlers arrived in 1875 (Table 1).

Carman assigned a "super five-star" rating to the Russian German settlement, one of only seven foreign settlement areas in Kansas so rated. He based the rating on size, concentration, historical importance, and persistence of identity.<sup>3</sup> Not even World War II could induce the southeast area to switch from German to English. The "critical year," when a community ceased to use German habitually in the majority of homes where there were growing children,<sup>4</sup> was only reached in the 1930's and 1940's. At the time of the publication of Carman's data in 1962, the critical year had not been reached in Liebenthal.

An additional study by Carman of the surnames of landowners in Ellis County in 1940 indicates the continued importance of the German element ( see Map 2). Even after outward linguistic and ethnic assimilation to the dominant Anglo-American culture, it continues to form a cohesive unit characterized by a hybrid linguistic and cultural heritage.

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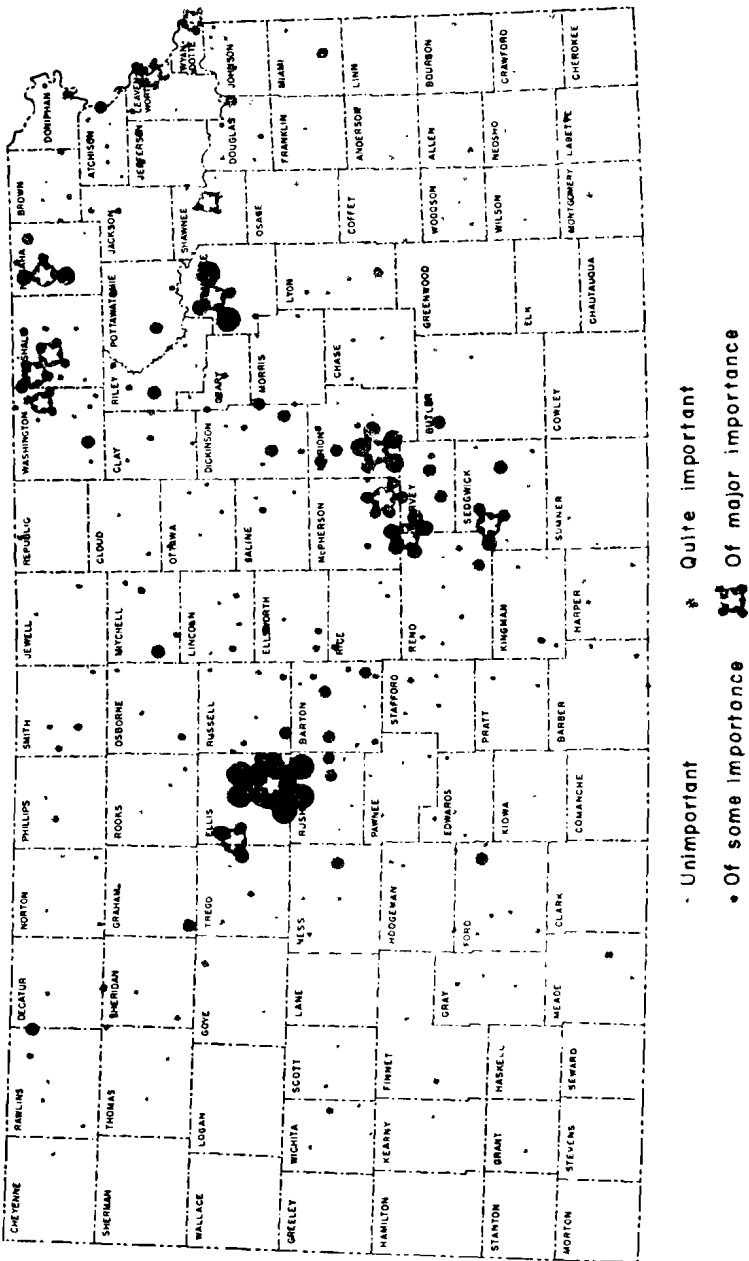
1) Vol. 1 *Historical Atlas and Statistics* (Lawrence: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1962), p. 46.

2) See J. Neale Carman, "Germans in Kansas," *American-German Historical Review*, April-May 1961, 4-10; also, Sister Mary Eloise Johannes, *A Study of the Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1946).

3) Carman, *Foreign Language Units of Kansas*, p. 2.

4) Carman, p. 2.

# GERMAN SETTLEMENTS IN KANSAS



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IDENTIFICATION OF LETTERED LINGUISTIC AREAS SHOWN  
ON MAP OF F-LANG USERS IN 1895

Linguistic Area	Importance <sup>1</sup>	Landmarks Included See Map I	Name of Area	Forl. Population by 1000s	Year First Forl. Settler	Critical Year
A	U-Hi****	1, 2	Ellis Bukovinan Germans.	1.3	1877; 1884	1935
B	Super*****		Primary Catholic Russian Germans. K 5, 6 Catherine District. N 7, 8 Victoria District. M 10, 11 Munjor District. P 12, 13 Pfeifer District. S 14 Schoenchen District. L S of 14 Liebenthal District	4.3	1875	1945 1940 1945 1948 1945 not yet reached 1935 1935
C	Mid m (klmn)		H 3, 4 Hays District. Walker Germans.	.2	1871	1935 1935

<sup>1</sup> Code explained, p. 2

The village organization is important.

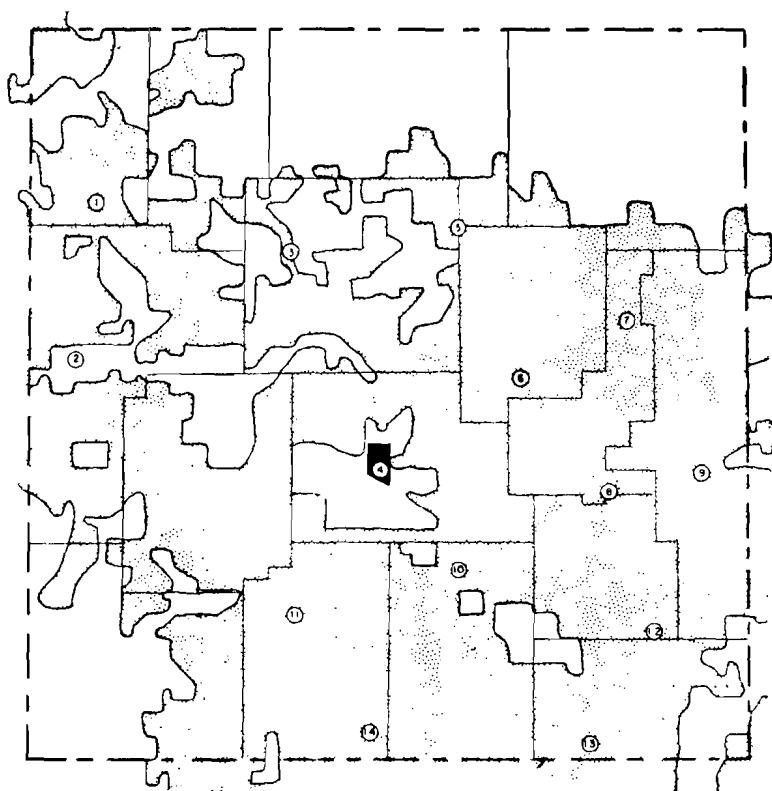
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There exist three separate collections of data on the German dialect(s) spoken in Ellis County, and there is additional material on Russian loans into German and German loans into English.<sup>5</sup> Further study of the nature and use of language in its social context in Ellis County would not only be of local interest but would form a substantial case study in sociolinguistics and the sociology of ethnic groups in American society. We would like to study such problems as: 1) from exactly what area(s) of Germany did the 18th century emigrants to Russia come; 2) how does the German language as it is now spoken in southeast Ellis and northern Rush Counties differ from the German dialects presently spoken in the areas of Germany located in (1); 3) what portion of the divergences identified in (2) are due to a) Russian loans or "influence," b) English loans or "influence," c) internal development; 4) what Russian loans or influence remain in Ellis County English; 6) in what localities is German still spoken, how often, by whom, under what circumstances; 7) what styles or dialects of German (including Standard or High German) are used; 8) what are the attitudes of the speakers toward the use of German and English, and especially their attitude toward certain socially diagnostic linguistic variants within these languages; 9) what are the social and/or linguistic rules governing the alternate use of the two languages; 10) what forms does ethnicity take, especially as expressed in style of life,

<sup>5</sup> J. C. Ruppenthal in *Dialect Notes* 4: 101-114, 161-162, 319-331 (1914); 5:245 (1923). S. J. Sackett and Lawrence A. Weigel, unpublished data on the German spoken in Victoria, Pfeifer, and Catherine, Ellis County, Kansas, 1966. Glenn G. Gilbert, 25 hours of tape recording and unpublished bibliographical, folkloric, and linguistic data on the German of Ellis and Rush Counties, Kansas, 1968.

# ELLIS COUNTY

## LANDHOLDINGS ABOUT 1940.



### Immigrant Language Stocks

Germans

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sense of identification, primary group attachments, associational memberships, and cultural characteristics"; 11) what part does language play in the ethnic matrix.

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6) See the excellent analysis and bibliography in Timothy Fiedler, "Ethnicity in Later Generations: The Case of German-Americans," Dissertation Prospectus, Dept. of Sociology, Southern Illinois Univ., Carbondale, 1975.

Unfortunately, such a study will have to remain on the wish list. The extant data do little more than indicate that further inquiry along this line would be both feasible and fruitful. For now, I would like to present a number of impressions and examples dealing with dialectal differences between Standard German and Ellis County German, and with internal differences within Ellis County German. The following examples are from Sackett and Weigel's unpublished material (see footnote 5): three versions of the same German sentence as rendered by a local informant in each of three centers of settlement (Pfeifer Victoria, and Catherine), with Standard German and English equivalents. Sackett and Weigel's orthography is generally retained.

1)

English: My house is yellow with a brown roof.

St. Ger.: Mein Haus ist gelb und hat ein braunes Dach.

Pfeifer: Unser Haus is gehl mit am braune Dach.

Victoria: Mei Haus is gehl mit a braunes Dach.

Catherine: Mei Haus is gelb mit e braunes Dach.

P and V use an old alternate of the word for 'yellow' *gehl*, which has passed out of standard spoken usage in Germany. P retains the dative case after the preposition *mit*; V and C use the nominative-accusative (non-dative, unmarked) case. P substitutes 'our' for 'my.' P, V, and C loan-translate the English prepositional phrase 'with a brown roof.'

2)

English: Send us a bill for it tomorrow.

St. Ger.: Schick uns morgen die Rechnung. (daruber).

Pfeifer: Schick uns die Bill morche.

Victoria: Schick uns a Bill vor des Morche.

Catherine: Schick uns die Zettel morge.

In St. Ger. the time adverb *morgen* comes between the indirect and direct objects; P, V, and C follow the English word order (indirect object + direct object + time adverb). *Bill* is borrowed from English as a feminine noun.

3)

English: Give me three of those potatoes.

St. Ger.: Gib mir drei von *den* Kartoffeln.

Pfeifer: Geb mir drei von denn Kadofel.

Victoria: Geb mir drei von denna Kadofel.

Catherine: Geb mich dreie von die Kartoffel.

Again, P and V use dative forms (as in St. Ger.), C uses non-dative.

4)

English: Ask those men how to fix these cars.

St. Ger.: Frag' die Leute da, wie diese Autos ganz zu machen sind.

Pfeifer: Froch die Männer wie mir die Car fixe kenne.

Victoria: Fro die do Männer wie mir die Cara fixa dut.

Catherine: Frag dort die Männer wie mer die Cara fixt.

P, V, and C retain subordinate word order (and thus resist, or remain uninfluenced by, the English word order). They share the common German dialectal variant *mir, mer* for St. Ger. *wir* 'we.' All three have borrowed *fix* and *car*, the latter showing a regularized plural *Car-a*. V shows the common dialectal verb auxiliary *tun* and *dun*, a continuative or emphatic particle, or equivalent of St. Ger. *können* or *würden*, a subjunctive marker. The deitic pronouns for near and far things reflect German dialectal usage.

5)

English: I thought you said you would work.

St. Ger.: Ich dachte, du sagtest, du würdest arbeiten.

Pfeifer: Ich hun gedenkt, du hest gesagt, du dedest schaffe.

Victoria: Ich han gement, du hest g'sat, du dehst schafa.

Catherine: Ich dacht, du hest gesagt, dass du schavve wollst.

Again, P and V use forms of *dun* as a subjunctive marker. *hun* and *han* are dialect forms corresponding to St. Ger. *habe(n)*. P and V use the common German colloquial present perfect in the highest clause (*hun gedenkt/han gement*); C has the more formal and literary simple past (*dacht*). All three use forms of the regional word *schaffen*, which corresponds to St. Ger. *arbeiten*.

Assuming that informant at Catherine was matched with those at Pfeifer and Victoria for knowledge of Standard German (literacy), these materials would indicate a considerable divergence of the Catherine dialect from the other two. Although all three share many common features which separate them from Standard German, Catherine is closer to Standard German in every respect except for the absence of dative forms. In this respect Catherine shows an inflectional system similar to that observed among German speakers in Central Texas, while Pfeifer and Victoria are more like Pennsylvania German.

The southwest German origin of the Ellis County dialect(s) - at least of those spoken at Pfeifer and Victoria - is even more apparent in the dialect vocabular data collected in 1968 (see Footnote 5). Some examples (grouped into semantic categories):

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7) Glenn G. Gilbert, *Linguistic Atlas of Texas German* (Marburg, Germany and Austin, Texas: Elwert Verlag and Univ. of Texas Press, 1972), Carroll E. Reed and Lester W. Seifert, *A Linguistic Atlas of Pennsylvania German* (Marburg, Germany: privately printed, 1954), Carroll E. Reed, "A Survey of Pennsylvania German Morphology," *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3, Sept. 1948

## 1. tools and implements

	<i>St. Ger.</i>	<i>Ellis Co.</i>
'broom'	Besen	Besem; Besen
'whip'	Peitsche	Beitsch; Grut; Knut; Vip
'match (for lighting fire)'	Streichholz	Hölzche
'rake'	Harke; Rechen	Reche
'awl'	Pfriem	Seiel
'rope'	Seil	Strick
'wash tub'	Waschkessel	Zuber

## 2. foods

'carrot'	Mohrrübe	Gelriebe
'strawberries'	Erdbeeren	Strauberes

## 3. days of the week

'Saturday'	Sannabend; Samstag	Samstach
'Tuesday'	Dienstag	Dinstach

## 4. kin and age names

'boy'	Junge	Jung; Bup; Bu
'godfather'	Pate	Petter
Godmother'	Patin	Got; Get
'son-in-law'	Schwiegersohn	Dochtermann
'daughter-in-law'	Schwiegertochter	Schnürich; Schnerich; Sohnsfrau; Schwieger -dochter

## 5. parts of the body

'eyebrow'	Augenbraue	Augehor
'scar'	Narbe	Schramme
'heel'	Ferse	Ferscht

## 6. diseases

'toothache'	Zahnschmerzen	Zahnweh
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7. insects		
'butterfly'	Schmetterling	Fledermaus
'horse fly'	Viehbremse	Geilsmik
'ant'	Ameise	Omütz

#### 8. mammals; amphibians

'male duck'	Gänserich	Gänsert
'rooster'	Hahn	Ginkel
'hen'	Henne	Hingel
'male dove'	Taüberich	Daubert
'piglet'	Ferkel	Seicher
'mole'	Maulwurf	Suslik
'tadpole'	Kaulquappe	Grötcher

#### 9. farm topography

'hill'	Hügel	Berich
'place where direction of plowing is reversed'	Pflugwende	Eck(e)

#### 10. toys; beads

'glass beads'	Glasperlen	Karellen
'(children's) top'	Kreisel	Dotschker

#### 11. Activities (verbs) in housekeeping and on the farm

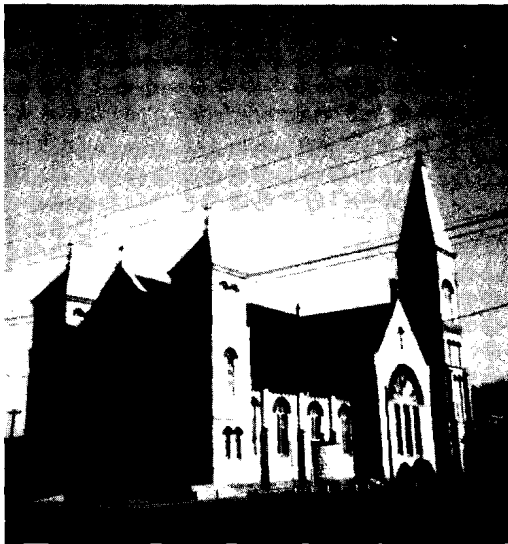
'to wring out (clothing, etc.)'	auswringen	ausdrehen
'to sweep'	fegen	kehren
'to harvest (potatoes)'	ernten	ausmachen
'to weed'	jäten	rüpfen
'to rake'	harken	rechen
'to plow'	pflügen	ackern
'to cackle' (hens)	gackern	gakse

This is not to imply that all the Ellis Co. variants are "coarse dialect" or in some way non-standard. In many cases, both the Standard German word (which is often "northern oriented") and the Ellis



Co. variants (which are commonly regionally circumscribed in Germany) are equally "correct." In other cases, the dialect has preserved archaisms which have largely gone out of use in Germany, or shows loans from Russian and English.

Despite these differences, speakers of "German German" and of Ellis Co. German would probably understand each other surprisingly well if they were to come into intensive, extended contact once again. This is one of the chief reasons that instruction in Standard German in the County's elementary and high schools would probably be much more successful than is generally realized.



St. Mary's Church, Ellis.