

Claire Darmstadter

Hello everybody, I am so excited to be joined today by Josh Brown, Associate Professor of German and Linguistics at UW-Eau Claire, who is particularly knowledgeable about Pennsylvania Dutch. Thank you so much for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

Josh Brown

Of course!

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so before we dive into your background, it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of terminology. So can you kind of give us a 30-second explainer on Pennsylvania Dutch? I was trying to find some of the origins and what the language relates to on Google, but I was a little bit confused. Is it actually German but called Dutch over kind of a confusion with like Deutsche and Dutch? Or what's going on there?

Josh Brown

Yeah, so Pennsylvania Dutch, is a language that kind of formed in colonial Pennsylvania because of a number of Central European immigrants that were coming over at the same time, and settling the same areas of Pennsylvania. And because they were from Central Europe, there was no Germany at the time. And so the word that people use in English to refer to Central Europeans was just Dutch. And so they just became the Pennsylvania Dutch, even though they're predominantly from the Rhineland Valley, so places that we associate today with Germany and German speakers.

Claire Darmstadter

Gotcha. Okay. And then we also have the terms Amish and Mennonite and I understand that these communities are similar, but they are still distinct. So can you kind of walk us through some of the major differences, similarities, and if there's any difference in language use?

Josh Brown

Sure. So traditionally, the Pennsylvania Dutch speakers have kind of spanned a whole religious continuum. So on the one side, there are sectarians, who would be Amish and Mennonite people. And they come from what's called the Anabaptist Tradition. So during the Protestant Reformation, they were a group of people who wanted to take the Protestant Reformation even further and institute a number of things, predominantly adult baptism. And then, so they were a group of people that came to Pennsylvania at the same time as these other immigrants who were predominantly Lutheran and reformed people. So other Protestants, kind of mainline Protestants. And we call them the non-sectarians today of Pennsylvania Dutch speakers. There were a lot more of those people that came originally than there were Amish and Mennonites, but it's kind of a flip flop now. And so the people that are actively using Pennsylvania Dutch are the old order Amish and older Mennonites, today, as opposed to the Lutheran and the reform people who the language is more abundant. I mean, it's pretty much on life support among those people. But there are other religious groups that have traditionally spoken Pennsylvania Dutch, there's some Moravians. There are some Schwenkfelders and other kind of smaller

religious groups in Pennsylvania that just by virtue of the fact that they settled in the same area of Pennsylvania, who would have been Pennsylvania Dutch speakers.

Claire Darmstadter

Gotcha. Thank you for that overview and clarification. So now focusing on your work, can you just give us an overview, educational and linguistic background and how you ended up in your current position at Eau Claire?

Josh Brown

Sure. So I did my degree in German, and in Slavic and Classical Languages, in my undergrad. And while I was at my undergrad, I worked as a Pennsylvania Dutch dictionary project. So I was given word lists and kind of sent out into the environments of Pennsylvania, and we would have to get the words in context. So the people that I was interviewing would have to include the word in a sentence that explained the meaning of the word. And then I would go back and I would, you know, type up what they had said, and then standardize that to an orthography and then translate it into English. And so I worked on that dictionary project for a few years, went abroad and studied abroad for a little bit of time in Marburg, and then came back and did my PhD at Penn State in German and linguistics. I was trained predominantly as a socio-linguist and a linguistic anthropologist. So my interest is basically in the interaction of language and culture, language and society, particularly how it pertains to identity. And yeah, so right out of grad school, I accepted a position at Eau Claire, as an Assistant Professor of German, and the linguistics title was added later on when I got tenure, and was teaching linguistics courses on campus,

Claire Darmstadter

And can you speak to the current, I guess visibility or usage of the Pennsylvania Dutch language? So is it something that I think you talked about like that flip flop. So I know with Finnish, for example, there's post-vernacular language, which is kind of how they're not necessarily speaking it fluently, but like it shows up in their cultural practices and such. So is the kind of something that's used in daily life, are there revitalization practices, has it kind of morphed into English, what does that look like right now?

Josh Brown

So it depends on the speaker group. So it still is the first language and the dominant language that's used among most old order Amish and most older Mennonites today, in the United States and in Canada. But for the other kind of traditional speakers of Pennsylvania Dutch, it would be a language that's undergoing shift. I mean, you know, at a fairly rapid pace, I mean, I would say that the native speakers are elderly, of Pennsylvania Dutch who are from a Lutheran and reformed religious background. And it's among those groups that you have elements of post-vernacularity and revitalization efforts that are happening. So those are the groups who are predominantly engaged in kind of active attempts at preserving Pennsylvania Dutch, as opposed to the Amish and the Mennonites who are preserving it, just by virtue of the fact of maintaining it as their first language.

Claire Darmstadter

And can you speak a little bit more broadly, maybe outside of language about the Amish Mennonite community in Wisconsin? Are there any, like common misconceptions or stereotypes that might not be correct? Or is it often just like, people don't really talk about the community, and so there aren't really stereotypes because it's not like a topic of conversation?

Josh Brown

Yeah. So we have the fourth largest population of Amish people in the United States, here in Wisconsin. And we've kind of leveled out in terms of the size, we sometimes flip flop back and forth with New York in terms of population. But currently, we're at position four, so behind Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio. And I think one of the common misconceptions that people have about the Amish, particularly here in Wisconsin, is that they're all the same. So when people see a buggy in Wisconsin, a horse drawn buggy, they just automatically assume that that person is Amish. But here in Wisconsin, we do have old order Mennonites, who live in the same areas as the old order Amish. We have several different types of older Amish that are here, ranging from very progressive Amish, who would have come from Pennsylvania. And they have gray buggies, to the very conservative Swartzentruber Amish, who have black buggies, without the slow moving vehicle triangle, without lights on their buggies, those types of things. And then we also have new order Amish here. And they would be people who drive buggies just on Sunday, and during the week, they drive around on ATVs, and things like that. So I think that's the biggest misconception that people have is that, you know, if you've seen one Amish person, you've seen them all, so that they all look the same, that they all have the same religious traditions. But, there's really so much diversity that exists, especially here in Wisconsin, I mean, each congregation has its own set of rules. And so theoretically, each congregation could be different from every other congregation in minor ways, and then they kind of cluster together, but there still is significant diversity.

Claire Darmstadter

It's not a monolith. Right? So if people wanted to learn more about these communities, or kind of self educate themselves, are there any resources or like classes they could take in the UW system or anything like that?

Josh Brown

Yeah. So at Madison, I believe Mark Loudon teaches a course on the Amish. And then he's published things on the Wisconsin Amish, particularly as it pertains to medical care. I teach a course at Eau Claire on the Amish with a specific focus on the Wisconsin Amish, both in-person and online. I teach that class. And I have information on my website that kind of focuses on Wisconsin Amish. Yeah, those are kind of there's no book that well, there is a book on Wisconsin and Minnesota. Or maybe it was just Wisconsin Amish by Richard Dawley. That's more of an anecdote, personal narrative of his experiences with Amish people in a variety of settlements. And there are other touristy type books like, Down a Country Road, is like a tourist area in Cashton, Wisconsin, I believe. And I think that the person that owns it wrote a book about her experiences, again, kind of a person narrative type thing about her experiences with

the Amish in Wisconsin. So there are limited books solely on Wisconsin Amish, but with the large majority of those being more of these personal tourist-type narratives.

Claire Darmstadter

I will for sure link those in the transcript if people want to check them out. And you mentioned your website. And after going a little bit of perusing on your website, it looks like you're involved in a bunch of different groups and departments and organizations. So can you talk a little bit about how you find community, whether it's inside the UW System outside the system, if it's like a professional group, or just a Facebook group? How do you kind of interact with the larger academia community?

Josh Brown

Most of my interaction comes through conferences really. So going to conferences and going to conferences that are smaller in scale, but really producing great kinds of work. So like the workshop on Immigrant Languages in the Americas, which was, you know, first held in Madison, and has grown into a really great organization of international quality, and scholarship, on all sorts of aspects of immigrant languages in the Americas. And that's probably been the best part of networking that I have, or creating community that I have. In terms of my own work, it's kind of informed, the trajectories that I'm moving more into work on historical language use, historical sociolinguistics, those types of things would be would come from kind of the connections that I've made within that group, and then, you know, working on different communities. I don't really work on Pennsylvania Dutch much these days. I've kind of, you know, through that group have been working more on Wisconsin German, on Swedish, heritage Swedish in Wisconsin, and Minnesota. And heritage, Danish in Wisconsin, those types of things heritage, Dutch in Wisconsin. So it's because of those connections that I've worked. I've spread out more in terms of what languages that I look at.

Claire Darmstadter

Gotcha. And you know, German is a really interesting language to teach and study in Wisconsin particular, because so many Wisconsinites do have a German background, but might not necessarily speak the language, me included. So how does this kind of influence how you teach? Or do you have classes that are often a lot of students that have that background and want to learn language? Or what is that like in your classroom?

Josh Brown

Yeah, I think that predominantly, the students that are in my classroom are those of German heritage, who kind of took the language in high school and were interested. At least at the start, I think they're interested at the start, because their family spoke German, but then they develop their own kind of interest along the way, and their own kind of reasons for continuing with the language that are not as connected to family reasons. And more about, you know, personal travel or personal fulfillment, or, you know, whatever comes with wanting to learn a language. But I would say a number of my students are those types of people. But we do have, you know, I would say, maybe a little bit less than an equal proportion of students who are in German classes because they started because of their own interest in the language. It isn't any sort of

family connection at all. It's just kind of an interest in learning language and an interest in learning German in particular, and they would have their own individual reasons for that. And so we have a nice mix of both, and I think you need, it makes for an interesting classroom to have both because the reasons that people continue learning a language are often really fascinating to me. And especially if they don't have that kind of family connection. What is the connection? What's the drive? What's the motivation for wanting to continue in a language that they have no, like genetic connection to, I guess.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. Yeah, that is so interesting. And before we finish, so correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you've done some work with the Somali population in Barron. And I've gotten to know those folks pretty well. And they are some of the nicest people ever. Can you just talk a little bit about your work there? And how, you know, it's kind of a 180 it would seem from German, so what your work in that space is like and how you interact with them?

Josh Brown

Yeah. So one of the great things about UW-Eau Claire is that we fund a lot of undergraduate research, with money and support to present at the Capitol building and financial support to present at conferences and things like that. And so I've had some really great students who have been interested in language and, you know, from a variety of perspectives. And that was one of the projects that I worked on a few years ago with one of my students, Ben Carpenter. And it was, what we basically did is we went to Barron, because I had some connections with the ESL teacher that was working in the elementary schools with some of the community members. And I had gotten to know her through UW-Eau Claire, she was taking, like continuing education courses and things like that. And I was really fascinated that you have this very rural situation in Wisconsin, and that there's a huge Somali population there. And through talking to her, and through talking to them, I kind of realized that there was this interesting position that refugees have in terms of language and the country they're in. So that's often very generationally based. So some people are just like, you know, well, we're going back at some point, we're refugees, and that's temporary. And so we want to, you know, keep up with the best Somali that we can in speaking. And then there are others who are like, well, I've never been to Somalia. And I really don't want to go or well, maybe just, you know, because my family's from there. And they kind of don't have that same interest in speaking Somali fluently. And so what we did for the project is we were interviewing people from a variety of generations, and getting their kind of attitudes towards speaking Somali and speaking English, and how they were kind of navigating their own identities as refugees in rural Wisconsin. And then, as an outgrowth of that, I then did some work in Minneapolis with the Somali population in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, predominantly on the linguistic landscape. So what ways is Somali made public, in public spaces, just language coming out in a particular neighborhood over time, and then compared that as well with how Somali is used publicly in Barron. So it's different, but also similar. I mean, they're heritage languages. I was interested in this as immigrant languages in the Americas. And as heritage languages, but from different time periods, and for very different reasons of immigration. And it was interesting to look at groups who are very different from the majority population in terms of religion, and race, ethnicity. It was interesting to get a kind of a

different angle in terms of how heritage language is navigated in Wisconsin, for a group that's so different from the rest of the majority of Wisconsin, I would say.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and that part about the generational shift, I think, is really important. It's interesting, but it's kind of sad, because often with this, whether it's Somali or other languages, you run into situations where the parents may be stronger in one language, and then the kids might be stronger English. And it becomes even sometimes difficult for the parents and the kids to communicate. And it's just, it's fascinating, but it can be very sad. So to end on, perhaps maybe a happier note. So we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English or any other language that you would like, or a mix of both, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

Josh Brown

It's a superpower because you can see how your brain is working from the outside looking in. So you can see how your brain is — kind of how fast your brain is going, how it mixes up two languages, how you forget things in your native language and only remember them in your second language, how maybe your second language and your third language are more similar than they are to your first language. And how you might mix them up more than you would with your first language. It's a way of seeing how the human brain works, kind of like with X-ray vision or something like that, that you can see the workings of your brain in something that is so commonplace, right speaking a language. But it's fascinating when you can involve another one and can kind of shock your brain to an extent.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, for sure. Well, thank you so much. So well said I learned a lot in the last 25 minutes and I think other people will have as well. So I really appreciate you taking a couple of minutes at the end of the busy semester to chat and have a great rest of your day.

Josh Brown

All right. You too.