

## Some Consequences of Case Loss in Texas German

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### 0. Introduction

Research on case reduction and loss in German-American dialects has traditionally focused on analyzing the extent to which the functional load of a formerly three or four case system has been taken over by an evolving two or three case system, respectively (see, for example, Gilbert 1965, Huffines 1989, Louden 1994, Salmons 1994, Van Ness 1996, among others). This paper contributes to this line of research by reporting new data on how the case system of the rapidly eroding Texas German dialect has evolved over the past forty years. Here the focus will be on the loss of the possessive genitive and how its functions have been taken over by a variety of different cases and grammatical constructions. An earlier description of the case system of Texas German as spoken in New Braunfels reports that there are a “small number of genitives employed by each informant,” (Eikel 1967: 89) typically of the older generation. Consider the following example.

- (1) Dies ist ein Schwarzwalnusspult meines Grossvaters. (cf. Eikel 1967: 89)  
*this is a blackwalnutdesk:NOM my:GEN grandfather:GEN*  
‘This is my grandfather’s desk out of wood from a black walnut tree.’

In (1), possession between *mein Grossvater* ‘my grandfather’ and *ein Schwarzwalnusspult* ‘a black walnut desk’ is indicated by the genitive marker *-s* which is suffixed to the constituents constituting the noun phrase *mein Grossvater*. A more frequently found alternative to the possessive genitive as in (1) is the use of dative forms in possessive constructions as the following example from Eikel (1967) illustrates.

- (2) Er war bei dem Doktor sein Haus. (cf. Eikel 1967: 91)  
*he:NOM was at the doctor:DAT his house:ACC*  
‘He was at the doctor’s house.’

In contrast to Eikel's data, recent fieldwork conducted by members of the Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP) (see Boas 2002) found no instances of possessive genitives. Furthermore, the absence of dative case marking on noun phrases in possessive constructions (e.g., *von* 'of' in (3)) and elsewhere also indicates that the dative case has dropped out of use.<sup>1</sup>

- (3) *Zwei von meine Onkels*            *waren in der Krieg.*  
*two of my uncles:ACC were in the war:NOM*  
'Two of my uncles were in the war.' (Speaker 1)

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section one compares and contrasts the distribution of cases in Texas German as reported by previous descriptions, with special focus on how possession is marked. Section two gives a more in-depth description of different possessive constructions in the speech of seven Texas German informants from the New Braunfels area in 2002. The data illustrate the complete loss of the genitive and a massive reduction in the distribution of the dative case in possessive constructions. While this development is a continuation of a trend already noted some four decades ago (see, e.g., Wilson 1960 and Gilbert 1965), the main part of the paper reports on a preliminary analysis of a variety of previously under-described possessive constructions. Of particular interest here is the question of how the syntax of Texas German possessive constructions has changed over the past forty years under the influence of a drastically reduced case system. Section three briefly discusses the question of whether the recent developments in the case system of Texas German can be primarily attributed to external factors (language contact with English) or internal factors (developments parallel to those found in Central European German dialects). Finally, section four summarizes the main points of the paper and gives directions for further research.

## 1. Case Marking in Texas German

Texas German (henceforth TxG) is a unique dialect spoken by the descendants of German immigrants who settled primarily "in the areas west to southwest of Houston and in a band stretching south from Mason County (west of Austin) down to east and west of San Antonio" beginning in the 1830s (Salmons 1983: 187). Established as the dominant language for upward of 100,000 speakers at its peak in the early 1900s, TxG is now in its sixth and final generation of fluent speakers, with approximately 6-8000 fluent speakers remaining across central Texas.

The case system brought to Texas by the German settlers is difficult to determine post hoc because of the great number of different donor dialects that formed the basis for what has been described as TxG in the literature (North Saxon, Pa-

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<sup>1</sup> Dative case marking is still found occasionally, e.g., following certain dative-governing prepositions such as *bei* ('by') or *mit* ('mit').



German. In comparison, members of the middle-aged generation used an average of 5.66 genitives in their responses, and members of the younger generation used only an average of 2.66 genitives (cf. Eikel 1967: 90).

The distribution of genitives among Eikel's informants reveals two important patterns. The first is an irregular distribution of genitives among informants from three different generations. That is, there is an increase in use of genitives among the middle-aged generation in comparison with the older generation. Then, there is a considerable drop in the use of genitives among the younger generation in comparison with the middle-aged generation.<sup>2</sup> The second pattern emerging from Eikel's work points to differences between New Braunfels German and the varieties of TxG described by Wilson (1960), Gilbert (1965), and Jordan (1977). Whereas the former exhibits a considerable number of genitives, the latter varieties show a dramatic loss or complete absence of genitive case marking.

There are at least two possible explanations for the discrepancies between the different accounts. First, the discrepancies may be due to a corpus problem. That is, Eikel's (1967) work sheets elicited data that differed from those elicited by Wilson, Gilbert, and Jordan. This may explain why Eikel's study reports the presence of genitives whereas the other authors' studies do not. A second reason for the discrepancies could be due to the great number of different donor dialects brought to Texas by the German settlers beginning in the 1830s. With distinct mixes of German dialects spoken in geographically different areas, one would expect diverse patterns of linguistic convergences in the case systems. Given that the collection of data on the current state of Texas German is only in its preliminary stages, we are at this point not in any position to come to definite conclusions about the causes underlying the discrepancies between the descriptions by Wilson (1960), Gilbert (1965), Eikel (1967), and Jordan (1977).

In contrast to the differences in attestations of genitive case markings, all four studies point out a clear trend towards the loss of dative case and its replacement by the accusative, ultimately leading to what Gilbert (1965: 288) calls "a two case system: nominative and non-nominative." With respect to possessive constructions, this means that instead of employing the dative case to mark possession as in (2) above, the dative is replaced by the accusative case as the following example from Eikel (1967) illustrates.

- (6) Er war erst bei den Doktor sein Haus. (cf. Eikel 1967: 94)  
*he:NOM was first at the doctor:ACC his house:NOM/ACC*  
 'First, he was at the doctor's house.'

Comparing example (6) with the sentence in (2) above we see that the word order in possessive constructions remains the same. However, whereas the preposition *bei* 'by' governs the dative case in (2), this is not the case in (6) where it governs

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<sup>2</sup> In this connection, see also Salmons' (1994) description (based on Gilbert's (1972) data) on how the dative-accusative distinction differs by age and region across central Texas.



tive as the remaining non-nominative case to mark possession (see also Guion 1996: 457).

The analysis of the seven interviews reveals a wealth of interesting information. For example, none of the seven informants employed the genitive or dative cases in possessive constructions as previously noted by Eikel (1967) in his study of New Braunfels German (see examples (1) and (2) above). Instead, all of the seven informants employed the accusative in possessive constructions as in the following sentences.

(9) Ich    hole den        sein Ball.  
      I:NOM get the:ACC his ball:NOM  
      ‘I get his ball.’ (Speaker 2)

(10) Und denn hab ich        den        sein Stelle            gekriegt.  
      and then have I:NOM the:ACC his job:NOM/ACC got  
      ‘And then I got his job.’ (Speaker 29)

Besides illustrating the use of accusative case in possessive constructions the examples are interesting because they demonstrate an additional development in the case system of TxG as spoken in New Braunfels. That is, it appears as if the accusative case marking is becoming unstable vis-à-vis the nominative. For example, in (9), following the accusative marking on the definite article *den* ‘the’, one would also expect an accusative case ending on the possessive pronoun to yield *seinen* ‘his’. Instead, we find *sein* ‘his’ with no overt case marking, so that it must be categorized as nominative.<sup>4</sup>

The preponderance of accusative case marking in possessive constructions shows that over the past forty years the case system of New Braunfels German has been reduced from a four case system to a two case system, a development similar to that pointed out by Wilson (1960), Gilbert (1965), and Jordan (1977) for the varieties of TxG spoken outside of the New Braunfels area. As such, the 2002 data represent the end of a development towards a two case system that was already noted by Eikel (1967) among his middle-aged and younger informants in New Braunfels.

## 2.1. Code-mixing Constructions

Besides the continuation of the trend towards a two case system noted by Eikel (1967), the 2002 recordings also include a number of previously under-described possessive constructions. One such type repeatedly occurring in the data includes Noun Phrases where possession is marked in terms of what looks at first glance like a genitive-type German *-s* case ending as in the following example.

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<sup>4</sup> Similarly, in (10), we would expect the possessive *sein* ‘his’ to occur with a suffixed *-e*, indicating that *Stelle* ‘job’ is marked for feminine gender. At this early stage in the analysis of current TxG data it is not clear whether the missing suffix is to be attributed to a breakdown in the case system, or to the fact that a number of informants use variable gender assignments for nouns.

- (11) An meiner Mutters Side kamen die Leute aus Magdeburg.  
*at my mother-s side came the people:NOM from Magdeburg*  
'On my mother's side of the family people came from Magdeburg.' (Sp. 2)

However, the problem with *-s* suffixed to *Mutter* 'mother' in (11) is that it does not adhere to any German case-marking pattern that would apply in such a position. At first, one may think of an explanation for the presence of the *-s* in terms of the Standard German construction *auf der Seite meiner Mutter* 'on my mother's side'. However, even in varieties that have preserved a full-fledged four case system, the *-s* used to mark the genitive does not occur in such a position. Since there does not seem to be an obvious case marking paradigm readily available to explain the *-s* marking on *Mutter* in (11), I tentatively propose that its presence is due to code-mixing with English. That is, it appears as if the English possessive construction *on my mother's side* has been borrowed into TxG and re-lexified with German words. The fact that the informant employs the English word *side* instead of its German counterpart *Seite* 'side' fits nicely with such an explanation.<sup>5</sup> As the data presented here report only on a preliminary analysis of possessive constructions employed by seven TxG speakers in the New Braunfels area, further interviews need to be carried out and analyzed in order to determine the full distribution of re-lexified English possessive constructions.

## **2.2. Prepositional Possessive Constructions headed by *von* 'of'**

Another previously under-described grammatical construction expressing possession in TxG contains a prepositional phrase headed by *von* 'of'. The distribution of this construction forty years ago is somewhat unclear since it is only mentioned once in Eikel's (1949) description of the case system of New Braunfels German: "The genitive is commonly replaced by a prepositional phrase, usually *von* plus the accusative." (1949: 280) In contrast to this early description, the prepositional possessive construction headed by *von* is curiously absent from Eikel's (1967) account of New Braunfels German. An analysis of the 2002 data shows that the prepositional possessive construction headed by *von*, as in the following example, is widely used among the informants in the New Braunfels area.<sup>6</sup>

- (12) Und die warn eins von die ersten Settlers.  
*and they:NOM were one of the first settlers:NOM/ACC*  
'And they were some of the first settlers.' (Speaker 30)

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<sup>5</sup> Other examples include *Der Daddy war Freunde mit ...* 'Daddy was friends with ...' (Speaker 30), *Mit meines Nachbarn Jungs mit den hab' ich Deutsch gesprochen* 'With my neighbor's boy I spoke German' (Speaker 2).

<sup>6</sup> Only one of the seven informants occasionally employed dative case marking in the prepositional phrase headed by *von* as in *die erste Hälfte vom Tach* 'the first half of the day' (Speaker 25).

In (12), *von* governs the phrase *die ersten Settlers* ‘the first settlers’ which is marked for case in the plural form. However, in sentences such as (12), we are confronted with case syncretism which makes it difficult to clearly distinguish accusative from nominative case. That is, the problem with the case marking in (12) is that it is not exactly clear whether the *-n* suffix on *erste* ‘first’ represents nominative plural or accusative plural case marking. Clearly distinguishing between different cases in the same sentence gets even more complicated when we consider examples such as the following.

- (13) So dann musst ich mit drei von meine kleine Schwestern ...  
*so then had I:NOM with three of my little-Ø sisters*  
‘So then I had to with three of my little sisters ...’ (Speaker 29)

Following Eikel’s (1949) description, we would expect the noun phrase following *von* in (13) to be marked with accusative case. However, instead of finding accusative case marking on *kleine* ‘small’ resulting in *von meine kleinen Schwestern* ‘of my little sisters’, there exists no case marking that would allow us to classify this phrase as being marked with any specific case. The absence of such case marking is not an isolated phenomenon, but is found regularly in the speech of five of the seven New Braunfels informants. It demonstrates that the previously described distribution of accusative case assignment following *von* has become unstable. Examples such as in (14) give further support for this observation.

- (14) Die zwei Brieder warn Neffe von mein Ururgrossvadder.  
*the two brothers:NOM were nephews of my greatgreatgrandfather:NOM*  
‘The two brothers were nephews of my great great grandfather.’ (Speaker 25)

According to Eikel (1949: 280), we would expect to find the noun phrase following *von* in (14) to be marked with accusative case, resulting in *von meinen Ururgrossvadder* ‘of my great great grandfather’. However, the absence of the *-en* accusative marker indicates that the noun phrase *mein Ururgrossvadder* ‘my great great grandfather’ is marked with the zero morpheme for nominative case. The differences between Eikel’s (1949) description of the possessive construction with *von* governing the accusative case and the different types of case assignments we find in this construction in the 2002 data clearly show that the earlier dichotomy of nominative vs. non-nominative case (i.e., accusative case) has been significantly weakened over the past five decades.

### 2.3. Periphrastic Constructions

The last type of possessive construction to be discussed here is what Eikel (1967: 89) characterizes as a periphrastic construction (cf. (7) above). This previously attested type occurs frequently in the 2002 data. An example is given in (15).

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- (15) Meine Mutter        ihre Schwestern        kamen da    rieber ...  
*my    mother:NOM her sisters:NOM/ACC came over there ...*  
'My mother's sisters came from over there ...' (Speaker 28)

It is not entirely clear under what circumstances speakers prefer periphrastic possessive constructions of the type in (15) over other types of possessive constructions such as prepositional possessives headed by *von* as in (12) or possessive accusatives as in (10) above. While the distribution of the periphrastic possessive construction vis-à-vis the other types of possessive constructions requires further study, the 2002 data reveal an even more interesting construction that has not previously been described as such for TxG. Consider the following example.

- (16) Der erste        was hier rieberkam von    meine Mutter  
*the first:NOM what here over-came from my    mother:ACC*
- ihre Mutter        ihre Side        war Stefan Klein ...  
*her mother:ACC her side:ACC was Stefan Klein:NOM*

'The first one to come over here on the side of my mother's mother was Stefan Klein...' (Speaker 30)

In (16) we find a possessive construction that appears to be a combination of a prepositional possessive headed by *von* governing the accusative (see Section 2.2) and a periphrastic construction of the type in (15). This mixture is not only unique in that it incorporates two previously existing strategies for marking possession. It is also special in that the PP headed by *von* is followed by more than three NPs instead of only two.

At this point in the investigation we do not have enough data to determine the exact factors contributing to the formation of such mixed possessive constructions. However, one trend clearly emerging from our preliminary analysis shows that the number of chained NPs in periphrastic possessive constructions is not limited to two as previously described by Eikel (1967: 89). Another interesting development regarding periphrastic possessives that include more than two chained Noun Phrases is that accusative case marking in the prepositional phrase is not consistent as the following example demonstrates.

- (17) Mein Vater        hat den        ihr Bruder        sein Mädchen  
*my    father:NOM has the:ACC her brother:NOM his    girl:NOM/ACC*
- sein Freundin        gekannt ...  
*his-Ø girlfriend:NOM/ACC known*

'My father knew the girlfriend of her brother's girl ...' (Speaker 29)

Following Eikel's (1967) description of case marking in periphrastic possessive constructions, we would expect to find all three NPs in (17) to be marked with accusative case. Instead, the first NP *ihr Bruder* 'her brother' is marked with nominative. Due to case syncretism, the case marking on the second NP *sein Mädchen* 'his girl' is not clearly identifiable and could either be nominative or accusative. Finally, the third NP *sein Freundin* 'his girlfriend' is not marked for any case at all (the expected accusative ending would yield *seine Freundin*). Inconsistencies in case marking as found in examples (13), (14), and (17) suggest that the current two case system consisting of nominative and non-nominative is exhibiting further signs of case reduction. In other words, it appears as if TxG may well be on its way of losing its only remaining non-nominative case, leading ultimately to a one case system.

### 3. Case Loss: External or Internal Factors?

Over the past four decades several studies have appeared which attempt to determine the factors leading to case reduction and loss in German-American dialects (see, e.g., Gilbert 1965, Huffines 1989, Keel 1994, Loudon 1994, Salmons 1994, Van Ness 1996, among others). These studies have to a large degree focused on finding out whether case loss can be primarily attributed to external factors (language contact with English) or internal factors (developments parallel to those found in other German dialects). For example, whereas Eikel (1949) proposes that case reduction in New Braunfels German is ultimately due to the influence of English syntactical patterns, Gilbert's (1965: 290) data suggest that it "is unlikely that English played anything more than a very minor role in causing the change."

As this paper presents only a preliminary analysis of the current distribution of cases in TxG as spoken in New Braunfels, it is clearly too early to come to a definite answer regarding the influence of external and internal factors on case reduction and loss. To this end, much larger data pools as well as further studies are needed to determine the influence of external and internal factors on the developments in TxG morphology and syntax reported on in this paper. An in-depth analysis of the influence of these factors is very likely to involve a multiple causation scenario similar to that proposed by Van Ness (1996) for Pennsylvania German:

Internal tendencies have been the cause. However, the changing sociolinguistic environment predicated on increased contact with English was ultimately the catalyst that propelled the reduction in case markings forward in time and space. (Van Ness 1996: 14)

### 4. Conclusions and Outlook

To summarize, the variety of Texas German spoken in New Braunfels has undergone a number of remarkable changes over the past four decades. Focusing on the development of possessive constructions, the preliminary analysis of the 2002 data suggests that the New Braunfels German case system has undergone a reduction from four cases to two cases. As such, the current data represent the finishing point of a development towards a two case system that was already noted by Eikel

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(1967) among his middle-aged and younger informants in New Braunfels. This means that New Braunfels German has finally arrived at a two case system similar to those recorded previously for other varieties of TxG by Wilson (1960), Gilbert (1965), and Jordan (1977).

Besides case loss, the 2002 New Braunfels data reveal a range of previously under-described grammatical constructions used to encode possession, which at earlier stages in the development of the dialect were encoded by the now lost genitive and dative cases. The first type of construction - what I have labeled here code-mixing constructions - involves an English possessive construction that has been re-lexified with German words. Prepositional possessive constructions headed by *von* 'of' represent the second type of emerging possessive construction. This construction is interesting because there are a number of examples in which there exists no more distinction between nominative and non-nominative case assignments. A similar breakdown of case distinctions is found in longer periphrastic possessive constructions, the third type of previously under-described construction. Our preliminary analysis of the 2002 data suggests that TxG may well be on its way to lose its only remaining non-nominative case, leading ultimately to a one case system. Based on this trend, I tentatively propose that the loss of the remaining non-nominative case goes hand in hand with the emergence of novel grammatical constructions.

Obviously, we are only at the beginning of a much-needed research program documenting and analyzing the current state of TxG. With respect to case reduction and loss, future research is required to investigate the full distribution of cases outside of possessive constructions in New Braunfels German as well as in other TxG speech communities. Comparative studies of other German-American dialects as well as the study of the developments in the case systems of Central European German dialects will help to determine the influence of external and internal factors on developments in TxG. This line of research is likely to shed light on the question of whether there is a coherent Texas German dialect, or, whether there still exist a number of regionally distinct varieties. These results will also be helpful in studying TxG within an overall model of language death. The goals of the present paper have been more modest: to report on recent developments in the TxG case system in the context of possessive constructions, and to illustrate the distribution of a number of previously under-described grammatical constructions now used instead of genitives or datives to encode possession.

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