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The German Language in Milwaukee's Grade Schools, 1850-1920: The Case of the Catholic Schools

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This report on German in Milwaukee schools is a part of my dissertation that covers the period between the late 1840's and the early 1920's and investigates the assimilation process of German immigrants in Milwaukee. Language transition is obviously a central feature of that process. Especially for German immigrants, who were divided along economic, political, and religious lines, ethnic identity has basically to be defined in cultural terms, and the vernacular was the most prominent cultural bond and thus of crucial importance for the very existence of the ethnic group. The dissertation focuses on language transfer in the school environment. It discusses the gradual displacement of German as both, indicator and catalyst of the assimilation process.

Milwaukee was chosen because of its urban and strongly German character. There the German immigrants did not live isolated from other groups but their arrival at an early stage in the city's development and their sheer numbers put them into a position of strength; therefore they faced less pressure to assimilate than in other urban centers.

The German language as a subject to be learned and as a medium of instruction had a long tradition in Milwaukee's public and private grade schools when it came to an almost abrupt end during the course of World War I. The first German parochial schools were founded as early as the 1840's, and during the 1850's, several German-American private schools, conceptionalized as bilingual institutions, opened their doors. In the public school system, German language instruction was offered citywide on an optional basis since the late 1860's. By that time, however, at
least in some of the German wards, the language had already been taught for several years.  

Certainly, there were opponents of German language instruction from the beginning, and, especially in times of financial stress, they found support: When everybody was looking for possibilities to cut back the school budget they targeted the German lessons as the main cause for expendable expenses. But generally speaking, up to World War I, German was a rather stable part of the curriculum, accepted not only by a majority of German-Americans but by the larger Anglo-American public.

In view of this wide acceptance, it seems almost self-evident to conclude that the anti-German hysteria in the United States during World War I was the main cause for the exclusion of German from almost every Milwaukee school during 1917 and 1918. And it is true: If there had not been this climate of fear and defensiveness, the development would have been different. The question, however, is: Were there not other factors that were at least as important as if not more decisive than World War I which made the abolition of German within the school system possible and which prevented its renaissance during the post-war years?

This question is the focus of my paper. The relatively easy abolition of German as subject and as language of instruction during the war years, I argue, was also the result of an ongoing crisis of this instruction which had made itself felt already around the turn of the century. The crisis was evident in the public as well as in the private and parochial schools, although it took different forms in these systems. Its causes can not be found in attacks from
the outside, from nativist spokesmen or from competing ethnic groups. They resulted from social and mental changes that had been taking place within the German-American community itself. The language maintenance behavior of German-Americans in Milwaukee long before World War I clearly indicates an advanced state in the assimilation process.

Since there is not enough time to present an analysis of all grade school systems in Milwaukee, I will focus on the German Catholic parochial schools. A parochial rather than the public school system was selected for the following reasons:

(a) I wanted to test the widely held conviction that the German-American churches were the strongholds of German language and culture. I will demonstrate that this assumption has at least to be modified.

(b) Compared with their public counterpart, church schools were ethnically more homogeneous and less centralized during the 19th and early 20th centuries. They were maintained by individual parishes which most often were organized along ethnic lines. Thus, whereas in the public school system German parents had to compete with the interests of other ethnic groups and with those of a central school bureaucracy, in the parochial schools they exercised a more direct and greater influence on the shape and contents of their children's education.7 Changes in these schools, therefore, refer more directly to changing aspirations on the parents' side than this is the case in the public schools.

I will now first briefly characterize Milwaukee's Roman Catholic church and its German parishes and schools. Then focus on the use of German in these schools, describing a process of displacement that
led to the marginalization of this once dominant language. And finally, I discuss the causes of language transition in the schools and its effects on other parts of the parish life.

The sources I have evaluated include published materials like German-American newspapers, parish histories and commemorative volumes, and school board proceedings as well as unpublished documents like parish records, school report cards, and the so-called "announcement books" containing the pastor's notes for his weekly announcements. I searched the basements of Milwaukee churches and did find the proverbial cardboard boxes the owners had forgotten all about.

I

During the second half of the 19th century, Milwaukee developed from a relatively small city of 20,000 people into an urban center with approximately 300,000 inhabitants. This population growth was mainly due to European, particularly German immigration. In 1850, German immigrants constituted more than a third of the city's population, while the Irish, the second largest group, only made up 14 percent. In 1900, 24 percent of Milwaukee's inhabitants were German-born, and if their American-born children are added, almost two thirds of Milwaukee's population were of German descent by that time.

The German predominance had its impact on the Roman Catholic church, the city's largest religious body. According to estimates, approximately a third of the German immigrants were Catholics. While, as a rule, the American Catholic hierarchy was controlled by the
Irish, Milwaukee's archbishops, up to 1930, were born in one of the German-speaking countries. Only in St. Louis and Cincinnati did German Catholics reach a comparable strength. For that reason, these three cities are referred to as the German Catholic triangle of the West.¹⁰

A consequence of the ethnic diversity within the American Catholic church was the development of so-called "national" parishes. Rather than appealing to all Catholics in a particular neighborhood, a national parish was open only to Catholics of the same national origin or - more often - the same language. Usually, these parishes were founded on the immigrants' own initiative. Jay P. Dolan has characterized them as "the institutionalized attempt of an immigrant group to preserve the religious life of the old country."¹¹ Whether national parishes were desirable or a threat to unity was a much disputed question within American Catholicism. Not so in Milwaukee, where national parishes were whole-heartedly supported by the German-American hierarchy. By 1918, the city had a total of 46 Catholic parishes. Twelve of them served the Irish and other English-speaking communicants, ten were Polish, and nine served various smaller immigrant groups, mostly from eastern and southern Europe. Catholics of German descent had organized 15 of them.¹²

Almost all parishes maintained schools. According to canonical law, Catholic parents were obliged to send their children to parochial schools. Public schools were rejected because of their secular character. Although many Catholics did not obey to this rule, the church schools thrived. Between 1870 and 1910, more than a third of Milwaukee's students attended parochial or private schools, and in 1910, al-
most 80 per cent of them attended Catholic institutions. While the expansion of the Catholic school system was to a high degree the effect of Polish immigration, the German Catholic schools gained in size, too. Enrollment increased more than fourfold in four decades, from 1510 in 1870 to nearly 7000 in 1910.  

Like Polish Catholics, German Catholics founded parochial schools not only for religious reasons but also for retaining their language and culture. Religious and ethnic needs were inseparably linked in the slogan "language saves faith." German-American clergymen and parishioners were convinced that the coming generations had to grow up with the language and culture of their German home country if they were not to become alienated from the Catholic church. Despite this conviction, the school became the first public space in parochial life where the English language gained ground.

II

Milwaukee's first German Catholic parochial schools, founded in the 1840's and 1850's, were exclusively German-speaking. By 1870, at the latest, the German Catholic schools were forced to offer also some English language instruction. Gradually, German was displaced, both, as medium of instruction and as subject. Developments at two church schools may illustrate the process.

Before 1890, at Holy Trinity School all morning instruction was given in German while English was limited to one hour in the afternoon. In the early 1890's, there still was a German morning session comprising religion, biblical history, German reading,
writing, and grammar; the English afternoon session included not only English reading and writing but history, geography, and arithmetic as well. Within a few years, instruction in German was cut back further, leaving only one hour of German reading by the turn of the century. At St. Francis' School English had displaced German in a similar way. Although 95 per cent of its students were of German descent, by 1900, all teaching took place in English except for a limited number of German lessons and for religious instruction. Within one decade, the relation between the two languages had been reversed: By 1900, English had become the dominant, German the marginal language.

One effect of this process was a lowering of the standards in German language instruction. During the 1890's, Archbishop Katzer prepared a syllabus for the archdiocese's English and bilingual schools. At St. Francis, it was adopted immediately. According to parish records, this syllabus "helped the children gain a thorough mastery of the English language and gave them at the same time a practical working knowledge of the German language."

German lessons and German catechism instruction did, of course, continue after the turn of the century. But their character changed. What once had been instruction in the vernacular, turned into foreign language instruction. As early as 1892, German-American clergymen found it necessary to prepare a bilingual German-English edition of Deharbe's German catechism for use in their schools. Similarly, during the first decade of the 20th century the standard German Lesebuch was being replaced by a new series of "German-English Readers". "For many years," the editors of the 1912 edition pointed out, "there have
been complaints that the German textbooks ... are too difficult and incomprehensible for American children. In former years, they still served their purpose, but this is no longer the case. At most, the children learn to read German; but since they scarcely hear a German word anymore either at home or in the street they do not understand what they read." It was, therefore, necessary, the editors concluded, to attach an English translation to the German texts.\(^{20}\)

Only a few years after the introduction of the new readers, during World War I, most parishes gave up the remnants of German language instruction. Even without the war, it is unlikely that German would have had a future, even in Milwaukee's Catholic grade school system. A revealing statement to this effect was made in February 1919 by the pastor of St. Elizabeth's when he announced: "In our parish, German will be taught as long as it is not forbidden by law to do so. If some parents do not want their children to learn German they have to give notice to the teachers. Nobody will be forced to participate." But then he added about the subject closest to his heart: "Katechismus wird in d. Eng. Sprache gelehrt - weil die Kinder das besser verstehen" ("Catechism is taught in English - because the children understand that language better").\(^{21}\)

III

The transition from German to English in Milwaukee's German Catholic parochial schools took place in three stages: 1. the transition to bilingual education, 2. the gradual displacement of the German language, and 3. its final abandonment.
In Milwaukee, the first step toward bilingual schooling took place in the late 1860's. As in other cities, it was brought about by pressure from the parents. German Catholics wanted to retain the language and culture of their home country, but at the same time they recognized that knowledge of English was a prerequisite for their children's social and economic mobility in the new world. Since the public schools had just started to offer an optional German lesson daily in addition to their otherwise English-speaking curriculum, many Catholics were attracted to these schools despite the repeated warnings from the clergy. By introducing English language instruction, thus, the German Catholic parochial schools tried to keep up with their public competitors.22

The displacement of German during the following decades is often interpreted as a result of the "Bennett School Law" of 1889 and of the Americanization debate within the Catholic church. Clearly, both affairs had an influence on the political climate, but their role has been overestimated.23 During the controversy of the 1880's and 90's when Irish- and German-American clergymen fought over the issue of national dioceses the archdiocese of Milwaukee definitely took an ethnically conservative stand. Wisconsin's Bennett Law of 1889 placed parochial and other private schools under the control of the state and prescribed English as the sole language of instruction for the elementary subjects. Therefore it was vehemently attacked by the churches. The law, however, was on the books less than a single year, and, unlike its counterpart in Illinois, it was never enforced.24

Once again it was competition with the public school system that played a decisive role. Together
with the succession of generations, the public-parochial rivalry in effect sped up the displacement of German in the church schools. At St. Michael's, e.g., the parishioners took great pride in the fact that Milwaukee's Board of School Commissioners recognized the diplomas of their church school, because this recognition put the graduates of St. Michael's on an equal footing with those of the public schools, and as a result, they were admitted to the city's high schools without entrance examination. Obviously, St. Michael's needed that recognition to keep enrollments up. But it had to pay the price. With the exception of religious instruction, it had adjusted its curriculum to that of the public schools. Since the timetable could not be overloaded, German language instruction had been cut back, and at the end, it did not take up more time in the parochial school than it did in the public school system.25

This was what the parents wanted. They were ready to see the German lessons reduced; they were not willing to accept an education for their children that did not meet the standards of the public school system.

At the beginning of the 20th century, German language instruction was not felt to be a real need any longer by Milwaukee's German-American Catholics. Immigration from Germany was declining. The majority of parishioners was born in the United States. Many of them did subscribe to German newspapers or were members of German-speaking societies, but they did so for traditional reasons. They were not monolingual any longer and, therefore did not depend on their children's knowledge of German to communicate with them. On the contrary, numerous complaints of clergymen, educators, and journalists suggest, that English
rather than German was the language spoken in most homes most of the time. This caused difficulties for the schools. Since German was no longer the vernacular, it had to be taught as a foreign language. But even the new teaching methods could not restore what had been vanishing for some time: the sense of a genuine need and vital necessity for German language instruction.

Church services, also, had to be adapted to the loss of German. English children's services were started in the late 1890's. Around the same time, some of the parishes' youth organizations decided to make English the official language of their meetings. At the eve of World War I, probably most parochial events for children and young people took place in English.

With the adults the transition to English proceeded at a slower pace. It was not until the late 1920's that the process found its completion. This should not disguise, however, that English had made its inroads already in the 1910's when all parishes started reading at least one English mass a week. Even before World War I made it opportune to dissociate oneself from German traces these English services, the parish records clearly indicate, were crowded beyond seating capacity.

Thus, one may conclude, within Milwaukee's German-American Catholic community the German language was on decline long before and independently of World War I. I believe, I can demonstrate in my dissertation that this was true for Milwaukee's other Germans as well.
Notes

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4 See the Annual Report of the Milwaukee Board of School Commissioners for the years 1885/86 (p. 20), 1889/90 (pp. 40-41, 66-67), 1890/91 (pp. 83-86), 1896/97 (pp. 36-37, 81) as well as the Proceedings of the Board for the years 1897/98 (pp. 47-56, 423-24), and 1907/08 (pp. 289-94, 325-26); see also Steven L. Schlossman, "Is There an American Tradition of Bilingual Education? German in the Public Elementary Schools, 1840-1919," *American Journal of Education* 91 (February 1983), pp.170-72.


8 Research was done in the following institutions and archives: Milwaukee County Historical Society; Milwaukee Public Library; Legislative Reference Library of Milwaukee; Milwaukee Area Research Center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison; Marquette University Memorial Library; Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Milwaukee; Salzmann Library at St. Francis Seminary; Archives of the School Sisters of Notre Dame; Archives of the School Sisters of St. Francis at St. Joseph's Convent (both Milwaukee); Archives of St. Anthony's, St. Boniface's, St. Elizabeth's, St. Francis', St. Leo's, and Old St. Mary's Church, all Milwaukee.


12 See Barry, Catholic Church, pp. 44 ff.; Dolan, American Catholic Experience, pp. 294-320; for Milwaukee's parishes see The Official Catholic Directory for the year 1918, pp. 92-93, and 104.


19 P. Jos. Deharbe, S.J., Katholischer Katechismus. Für die Vereinigten Staaten von Nord=Amerika mit Autorisa-

20 *Deutsch=englische Lesebücher für katholische Schulen. German-English Readers for Catholic Schools. Sechstes Lesebuch* (New York - Cincinnati - Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1912), pp. 5-6 (translated from the German); see also Burns, *Growth*, pp. 300-301.


27 See, for instance, Antonin Willmer, 1870-1895. *Einrinnerungsblätter aus der Geschichte der St. Fran-


29 See "1904-1907. English Announcements," MS. (St. Francis Church); Bruce, Holy Trinity, p. 53; "Verkündigungsbuch," pp. 240-41 and 252.


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