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The Denglish Press? Reprinting and Code-Switching in Nineteenth-Century German-American Newspapers

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*Pflegt die Deutsche Sprache, Hegt das Deutsche Wort,
denn der Geist der Väter lebt darin fort.*

The epigraph represents the first two lines of the first stanza of ‘An Meine Kinder’ [‘To My Children’], a song of praise about the German language published by Friedrich Karl Castelhun (later: Frederick Carl) in Milwaukee in 1883.¹ The song calls on future immigrant generations to preserve the language of the fatherland. By describing the positive emotional experiences when reading Lessing, Göthe, and Schiller, the lyrics clearly echo educational aims of preserving a German identity in the United States, rooted in a common literary tradition. Editors of German-American newspapers started to print the song in various venues. They sometimes published the entire text, while not always attributing its author, or they only reused parts of it, as did Theodor Graf in his editorial of the *Hermanner Volksblatt* from 5 March 1909.² The small-town paper had a circulation of approximately 1,260 at that time.³

On the top left (see Fig. 1), the front page starts with an editorial titled ‘Der Werth der deutschen Sprache’ [‘The value of the German Language’] which reported the death of the wealthy Henry Köhler from Davenport, Iowa, and his sneaky testament. According to his will, only the grandchildren who were fluent both in English and German would receive their inheritance. The text continued with material directly quoted from the daily newspaper, *Der Demokrat* (Davenport, Iowa, 1851–1918), which had a circulation of 3,902 in 1910. It is followed by the first stanza of Castelhun’s song.⁴ However, the lyrics had already changed: while in the original version the first line starts with the verbs ‘Pflegt’ [‘preserve’] and ‘Hegt’ [‘nurture’], this version uses the verbs ‘Ehrt’ [‘honour’] and ‘Wahrt’ [‘protect’]. As this shows, when editors reprinted literary texts, they also made changes to its content. The value of the German language was not necessarily in fidelity to the text or — as we will see elsewhere on this page — to linguistic consistency. This short paper will suggest how reprinting, the mutations of

1 Friedrich Castelhun, ‘An Meine Kinder’, in *Gedichte* (Milwaukee, WI: Freidenker Publ. Co., 1883).

2 Theodor Graf, ‘Der Werth der deutschen Sprache’, *Hermanner Volksblatt*, 5 March 1909 [accessed 22 May 2022].

3 Karl J. Arndt and May E. Olson, *German-American Newspapers and Periodicals, 1732–1955; History and Bibliography*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1965), p. 241.

4 Arndt and Olson, p. 136.



Fig. 1 Digitized image of the front page of *Hermanners Volksblatt*, a Republican weekly, published in St. Louis, Missouri on Friday, 5 March 1909.

newspaper texts, and even blending of languages illustrate some of the complex ways that multilingualism functioned in the late-nineteenth century press.

In the nineteenth century, German-language newspapers were the most widely spread non-English newspapers in the US.⁵ By 1880, more than 1,000 such papers were printed in almost every state. Due to the editorial system of reprinting, Castellan, who

5 Carl Wittke, *The German-Language Press in America* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky 1957).

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was not a professional writer, but a physician in St. Louis, became well-known among German-speaking immigrants. His song was widely reprinted from the 1880s up to the beginning of the twentieth century across states in newspapers from South Dakota, Maryland, to Ohio. The author's dream about the survival of his native tongue, however, was shattered by the decline of the German-language press starting in the period of World War I. Newspapers disappeared from the market or transformed into English due to the rising xenophobia towards German immigrants.⁶ In addition, many German-language newspaper publishers depended on revenues from commercial partners such as the beer industry. However, these revenues were ceased due to the prohibition of advertising of alcoholic beverages already in 1918, when the US Congress passed the temporary Wartime Prohibition Act prior to the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment.

The topic of 'German language' requires some explanation. Two centuries ago, it was a vacant abstraction for Germans and German emigrants. When Germany became a unified country in 1871, it was still a deeply divided nation: politically, culturally, economically, and linguistically. The immigrant newspaper had to perform at least a double role: it had to serve as guide to the new society by conveying local and national information, while also serving as a connection to immigrants' cultural roots. These twin missions turned immigrant newspapers into a pervasive 'contact zone', in the words of Mary Louise Pratt, between Germans from different regions and German states.⁷ This diaspora did not regard themselves as Germans but would identify themselves in regional, provincial, or even more local terms, including in relation to other groups in the US. In attempting to become the voice and mirror of German ethnic life, the press also turned into a playground for linguistic plurality and diversity. From a linguistic point of view, thinking about how to name these papers opens a repertoire of questions. While scholarship in the US written mainly in English calls it the German press or the German-language press, scholars in Europe mainly refer to it as 'deutschamerikanische Zeitungen' ['German-American Newspapers'].⁸ Should we rather call it the Dengish press?

Multilingualism in these newspapers occurred on many levels. Editors published German poems followed directly by their English translations. They printed jokes or anecdotes that were written in various German dialects. News reports increasingly borrowed lexical items from English or consonant or vowel mutations occurred within words.⁹ In addition, even though advertising texts were published in German, the names of German products became more and more Americanized.

In this milieu, the immigrant press offers an interesting case for the study of code-switching. In linguistics, code-switching refers to bilingual communities that alternate between languages in spoken and written communication.¹⁰ Code-switching is just one of the many complex multilingual elements that we can find in these immigrant periodicals. Editors produced German-English code-switching by heavily mixing the two languages at discourse, sentence, and word levels. If we look again at Fig. 1, but this time at the right side of the page, we immediately observe a change in its layout in terms of text sizes. The larger texts are no longer editorials, hard news, or factual texts,

6 Erik Kirschbaum, *Burning Beethoven: The Eradication of German Culture in the United States During World War I*, (New York, NY: Berlioz Publishing, 2015).

7 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

8 Wolfgang Helbich, 'German Research on German Migration to the United States', *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, 54.3 (2009), 383–404.

9 The noun *Kapitän*, for instance, first turned into *Kaptain* before the English item Captain was used.

10 A. J. Toribio and B. E. Bullock, *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Code-Switching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

but advertising texts. While advertising texts have been rather neglected by historians and literary scholars, they are vital resources to study language change and, thus, offer insight into processes of assimilation. Here, the products and companies are English even though they are produced by or belong to German immigrants. We can observe the Germanization of English nouns ('Whiskies' instead of the dominant variant 'Whiskeys') and the formation of compounds ('White Seal Flaschenbier'). On the bottom of the right column, we find small text written completely in English: 'EARLY RISERS The famous little pills'. This is clearly just a reprint to fill the page since the next page does not continue with information about this pill but features an article about the 'Christkindlmarkt' ['Christmas Market']. These advertising texts in addition to this little 'gap filler' are various examples of code-switching that represent the diversity of language on only one page: a page that started with the value of the German language for the future of German-speaking immigrants and their place in American society.

Reprinting and multilingualism have more in common than meets the eye: both depend on a network that connects and creates change. As scholars of periodicals, we are all aware that reprinting was common. However, we have not yet fully understood the multilingual scope of this textual ecosystem. In my PhD project 'Text Mining America's German-Language Newspapers, 1830–1914: Processing Ger(wo)manness', I use computational methods to identify reprinted texts in a corpus of 58 different newspapers and to semi-automatically classify these texts into different genres.¹¹ The corpus of German-American newspapers taken from the *Chronicling America* database by the Library of Congress brings together small and large papers ranging from urban and rural areas published throughout the nineteenth century. The machine-readable text offers the opportunity to study reprinting at scale to trace how language changed ones these texts traveled through time and space.¹² Analysing inter-sentential and intra-sentential alternations and comparing their properties in different genres provides empirical evidence to study assimilation. With this approach, I hope to tell the story of the immigrant press in a way that emphasizes the transregional network character of its readers and writers and simultaneously displays the heterogeneity of newspaper genres and language.

Jana Keck is research fellow in Digital History at the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI). Before joining the GHI in 2020, she was working in 'Oceanic Exchanges: Tracing Global Information Networks in Historical Newspaper Repositories, 1840–1914' (DFG), a research project that boasted a team of scholars from seven countries in Europe and the Americas to study transnational news circulation in nineteenth-century newspapers. Her PhD project 'Text Mining America's German-Language Newspapers, 1830–1940: Processing Ger(wo)manness' uses digitized newspapers and computational methods to examine reprinting practices and genre conventions in German-American newspapers. The project received the first Peter Haber Prize for Digital History at the '53. Deutscher Historikertag' (German Historian's Day).

11 Jana Keck, 'Text Mining America's German-Language Newspapers, 1830–1914: Processing Ger(wo)manness' (2021).

12 For computational research on reprinting, see Ryan Cordell and David Smith, *Viral Texts: Mapping Networks of Reprinting in 19th-Century Newspapers and Magazines* [accessed 22 May 2022] or Oceanic Exchanges Project Team, *Oceanic Exchanges: Tracing Global Information Networks in Historical Newspaper Repositories, 1840–1914* [accessed 22 May 2022].

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