Chapter Seventeen

Hyphens

Between Deitsch and American

Marc Shell

“Mixed languages” are often spoken by people who live in areas of interlinguistic contact where there is a dominant language other than their own.1 For such languages in the United States nowadays the particular terms include “Greeklish,” “Yinglish,” “Spanglish,” and “Franglais.” The present chapter, “Hyphens,” represents such languages by focusing on the German language in America. In the first part of this essay, we consider the role of German language in the United States, with special attention to the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth. In the second part, we focus on two by-products of German in America: German-accented American English, and Germerican. In the third, we consider the political debate in the United States about whether the languages of “hyphenated Americans” in general and German-Americans in particular ought to be tolerated. This anglophone debate about “hyphenated Americans” had a counterpart in a contemporaneous argument about whether the hyphen itself—that orthographic sign of tension between, say, Deitsch and American—was an alien diacritical mark that ought to be eliminated from the English language.

German in America

We express our own free thoughts in our own language, adopted from the tongues of many nations, of our forefathers... Consequently, language in the United States is polyglot—national with our people—not borrowed from one distinct tongue.

—James Herron, American Grammar (1859)

The history of the German language in the United States is an important part of understanding the development of a politics of linguistic unity in that country.2 At the time of the American Revolutionary War, after all, not all that many people in the colonies were English-speakers. (Some scholars say that English-speakers numbered fewer than 40 percent; others point out that the German-speakers in one state numbered more than 50 percent.)3 Many German-Americans believed that German would eventually become an official American language;4 a few people argued that all Americans should learn to speak German;5 several endorsed the view of Benja-
min Rush (a "founding father") that there should be a German-language national college; hundreds hoped to found a New Germany following the model of New France or New England. In any event, by 1900, there were millions of German-speakers in the United States. German-Americans had published tens of thousands of German-language books and pamphlets. The German-American ethnic group was well educated, wealthy, and influential.

What happened to all these people? A complete answer is outside the purview of this essay, but its broad outline might be be summed up as follows: Thanks to fears of a German-American "third column" during the Great War, it became illegal in many parts of the United States even to teach German in American schools. In 1917, President Theodore Roosevelt said that "we must have but...one language. That language must be the language of the Declaration of Independence." The problem was one of "language loyalty." Roosevelt's view was that the United States has to have only one language and that this language must be English. German-American appeals for linguistic tolerance—many eloquent ones were published during the Great War—fell on deaf ears.

By the mid-1930s, most American German-language writers, especially in Chicago and Cleveland, were worried about a precipitous decline in German immigration to the United States. This decline meant a general change in expectations about the linguistic future of the United States. At one time many people had believed that the American language would eventually become polyglot, a sort of linguistic melting pot. In this tradition, Noah Webster had asserted that the United States would "produce, in course of time, a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish are from German, or from one another." This belief in a non-English American language emerging from polyglot ethnic populations in America had remarkable counterparts in the modernist cosmopolitan literatures of the early twentieth century. Thus a specifically American "babel of languages" characterized basically anglophone "ethnic" literature of the period (Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, for example) as well as "modernist" writing. Ezra Pound uses Chinese and writes prose pamphlets in Italian. T. S. Eliot closes "The Waste Land" with a series of multilingual quotations. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* is a babel-like "language of the devil." (And elsewhere there is Paul Celan, say, or Samuel Beckett.)

Many German-American writers and visual artists of the 1920s and 1930s were interested in developing a tradition at once multilingual and cosmopolitan. Their work included theory of translating German texts that contain English words into English, and vice versa; concern with "transfugee" writers; fostering of German-language anthologies of American writers and bilingual journals; and studying the influence of American English on American German. In such a setting, German-Americans often debated whether their bilingualism (or diglossia) was a temporary "way-station" along the road to German-language "extinction" (as one study of German-Americans considers it; others called it "Americanization") or a permanent "end in itself." In the Chicago area in the 1930s, the political and linguistic implications of such questions were considered from several angles: Aron's study "Colloquial American German" (1930) explores some of the relevant ambiguities.
By the early 1940s a once-fruitful "dialectic of dual allegiance" between Germany and America was dying.\textsuperscript{20} German-Americans were exhorting themselves to "talk American"—that is, to speak without even a trace of "a German accent." They encouraged themselves to speak "the American way" (as Beulah Handler put it) and to imitate all "American words and ways."\textsuperscript{21} Soon enough there were few Americans who could speak German.\textsuperscript{22}

What was lost, besides the language? Some German-Americans believed an entire culture was lost. They recalled that Herder had said, "Jede Nation spricht, nach dem sie denkt und denkt, nach dem sie spricht" [Every nation speaks according to how it thinks and thinks according to how it speaks]. The sentiment attracted Chicago scholars like Georgiana Simpson in her \textit{Herder's Conception of "das Volk" (1921)}. Many German-Americans anticipated or mourned the loss of their own culture by projecting that loss onto other peoples and their languages. Native American peoples provided an especially important screen. A brilliant German and German-American scholarly tradition focuses on the loss of "Amerindian" languages and adds to it, sometimes wittingly and sometimes not, a concern with German-Americans' loss of their own language.\textsuperscript{23} The German-American Karl Heizen, critic of Karl Marx and editor of several important journals, was much vexed by this problem many decades earlier:

\begin{verbatim}
Sich amerikanisieren
Heist ganz Sich verlieren
Als Deutscher Sich treu geblieben
Heist Ehre und Bildung lieben:
Doch lieber indians[ch]
Als deutsch-amerikanis[ch].\textsuperscript{24}
\end{verbatim}

A similar German-American tradition of opposing or contrasting German language loss with Amerindian cultural loss extends from the ethnologist Franz Boas's \textit{Handbook of American Indian Languages (1911)} and \textit{Race, Language, and Culture (1940)} to Edward Sapir's \textit{Language (1921)}—Sapir was professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Chicago from 1925 to 1931—to Benjamin Whorf's \textit{Language, Thought, and Reality (1956)}. Much German-American anthropology ventriloquistically transforms Americans' general silence about Amerindian genocide into something like a self-reflexive whisper.

The German-Americans for whom the disappearance of German from the American scene was most painful was probably the last (and largest) generation of German-speakers. This generation was born in the 1880s and 1890s in the United States or emigrated from Germany at about that time.\textsuperscript{25} For them, the disappearance of German was often the intellectually motivating fact of their lives. The German/American poet Lisa Kahn wrote "Mirgift" mindful of the triumph of English over German in the New World.

\begin{verbatim}
Eicherne Truhe handschmiedeesern beschlagen
aus unbekanntem Dorf in Westfalen
nach Texas verschifft—wann?—
einst selbstgesponnenes Linen bergend
\end{verbatim}
gussmüttervererbt
auch Schmuck in einem schmalen Seitenfach
jetzt voller veralteter Sammlungen
Briefmarken
Ansichtskarten
Münzen
Kinderfotos herzzugeklappt [?]
hat ein faustgroses Schloss
das schaut aus
wie ein Frauengesicht:
alt
algenutz
zugeschlossen
Der Schlüssel
ging schon lange verloren.27

The key was lost long ago for understanding fully “Mitgift”’s old collections of stamps, picture postcards, coins, and photographs of children. Best, when dealing with this language, to handle with care.

Germerican Graffiti

Da steit me uf der neue Wel
u seit scho englisch: Very well!
—Popular emigrant song in American
English and Allemanic dialect28

In the United States at the turn of the century many German-Americans spoke German-accented English and some spoke Germerican, a lexically and syntactically polyglot mixture of the English and German languages. German-accented English, to which we first turn our attention, played an important role in the literature of the period.

Accent

The New York Commercial Advertiser claimed in 1896 that “if one were asked what was the most familiar poem in the households of America today, it would not surprise some New Englanders if he were to say, [Charles Follens Adams’s] ‘Leedle Yawcob Strauss.’ ”29 Another well-known example of German-accented English-language poetry is Charles G. Leland’s poem “To a Friend Studying German”:

Will'st dou learn de Deutsche Sprache?
Brepae dein soul to shtand
Soosh sendences ash ne'er vas heardt
In any oder land.
Till dou canst make parentheses
Intwisted—ohne zahl—
Dann wirst du erst Deutschvertig seyn,
   For a langushe id eal.30

Other poets included Gus Williams.

In this same humorous tradition, there were German-accented monologues and plays.31 Examples from the period 1926–1931 include Dot's Right,32 Dis Is Mine Autogeografy,33 and Dot New Baby.34 Writers of American "Dutch Dialect" stories and essays include Charles H. ("Carl Pretzel") Harris, Joseph C. ("Rube Hoffenstein") Aby, and George V. ("D. Dinkelspiel") Hobart.

Germerican

Germerican was a lexical and syntactical mixture of GERMan35 and AmERICAN spoken by hundreds of thousands of German-speakers in the United States.36 The term Germerican does not appear in the dictionaries, but it was common parlance by 1926 when Kurt M. Stein published in Chicago his Die Lorelei vom Michigan Michigan-See: 33 Gedichte in Germerican: "Die schonste Lengevitch" (1926).37

In The American Language (1937) Mencken gives a humorous example from a German-language daily newspaper published in the United States in 1935:

"Was machst du denn in Amerika?" fragt der alte Onkel.
 Well, der Kuno was sehr onest. "Ich bin e Stiefelpletzer," sagt er.
 "Bist du verrückt geworden?" rohrt der Onkel. "Was is denn das?"
 "Das," sagt der Kuno, "is a Antivereinigstaatenconstitutionsverbesserungspirituosenwarenhändler."38

Such Germerican-language stories about Händler also appeared in English-language newspapers like the Chicago Tribune and the Evening Post.

Germerican poets published one-line bilingual epigrams of the sort that have long constituted a genre in itself in places of "syncretic" cultural interaction.39 Among them was Stein, who wrote Gemixte Pickles (1927).40 Pickles includes a Germerican version of Hegelian Aufhebung; in Stein's Germerican-language version of Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, Horatio (known as "Raish") says, "Well, business wird schon starteh aufzupickey."41

The mixed language tradition has counterparts in the visual realms. Consider three examples from the often similar Yenglish, or Yiddish-English, tradition.42 In one Yenglish cartoon, Nudnick (Figure 2) means "a silly person" in Yiddish and "little Nick" in English; being "nude" makes little Nick a nudnick. In another cartoon, Menschen (Figure 3) means "real human beings" in Yiddish and "mansion" in English: owning a mansion makes one a mensch. In a third cartoon, Goyeb, or Goih (Figure 4), means "gentile" in Yiddish and in English it is the name of the painter Goya: "Goya is a Goih." The fun here—if fun there is—arises from more or less coincidentally similar sounds of two languages.43 Such coincidence makes "Yinglish" out of Yiddish and English even as "Germerican" arises from German and English.

**Hyphenations**

Sitting atop the hyphen provides a marvelous view, but no direction. Does one face forward or backward? Look ahead or behind? the hyphen is incomplete; there is no where to go. the force of the dash, the inconclusiveness of the parenthesis the finality of the period. The Hyphen only supports. It does not connect. Japanese-American, Mexican-American, Italian-American—lacking the two slight marks that gives the arrow its certainty the hyphen is incomplete; there is nowhere to go. Exiting between two cultures, it is an eternal bridge with barriers and guards at both ends.

Questions of English-language orthography are nowhere more vexed than in the area of hyphenation. The once-influential, would-be regulator of the English language, H. W. Fowler, took an especial interest in the controversy about whether to use hyphens. In such works as *Hyphens* (1921) and the exceptionally influential *The King's English* (1930) Fowler maintains that “there are three degrees of intimacy between words.” The first and loosest degree of intimacy between two words is expressed by their mere juxtaposition as separate words. “Over due” and “German American” would be examples. The next degree of intimacy between two words is expressed, according to Fowler, by their being hyphenated. “Over-due” and “German-American” would be examples. Bret Harte writes in *Lost Galleon* (1872): “Due she was, and over-due—/ Galleon, merchandise, and crew.” Finally, the closest degree of intimacy is suggested by the two words being written continuously as one “solid” word. (“Overdue” and “GermanAmerican” would be examples.) The term “Germerican” would be off the charts.

Now, there are often distinct needs for some sort of hyphenation in English-language terminology. Sometimes it is ambiguous whether particular words are nouns or adjectives, for example. In such cases it is often helpful to include a space between words: “over all” (meaning “from one extreme point to another”) thus comes to mean something different from “overall” (“including everything”). Likewise, it is helpful to insert a hyphen between words: the bipartite noun *German-American* suggests that the person so called is an American citizen or “permanent
resident” whereas combinations of adjectives and nouns like German American and American German suggest ambiguity about the matter.

Fowler reluctantly admits to the need for hyphenation in the English language. But like many of his social class in America as well as in England, Fowler believes that hyphens are a regrettable foreign-language “intrusion” into the English language. According to him the hyphen is basically a “German-language” solution to a particular English-language problem of imprecision.48 If only there had been no German immigration! Then, Fowler suggests, there would be no hyphens.

In the United States as well as England, issues of national- or blood-purity thus came to interact with those of linguistic-purity.49 (Fowler was a supporting member of the Society for Pure English, which published his Hyphens.) Dislike of hyphens and dislike of hyphenated Americans went hand in hand. When the hyphen became a common visual sign of the supposed problem that the loyalties of German-Americans were divided dangerously between Germany and the United States, American citizens of German descent themselves adopted the term “hyphenated citizens” partly because they wanted to demonstrate resistance to its uglier connotations. Herman Ridder’s Hyphenations (1915), Edward Steiner’s The Confession of a Hyphenated American (1916), and George Seibel’s Hyphen in American History (1916) are principal examples.50

In the 1930s the rhetoric of divided loyalty hearkened back to the Great War, when German-American culture had been under fire in America from both English-speakers and German-speakers. For example, the German-Texan writer Selma

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Metzenthin-Raunik published a cosmopolitan poetic memoir of the Great War. Her *Deutsche Großmutter*, with its throngs both English and French, raises a still motivating political question about "barbarianism."

Rah, rah— bum, bum— tei, tei!
Amerikas Jugend marschiert vorbei
Darunter viel tausend Deutsche,
Darunter auch du, mein Enkelsohn,—
Ach Gott, ach Gott, welch' Spott und Hohn—
Zu Schlagen die "deutschen Barbaren,"
Mit den Englisch-französischen Scharen.⁵¹

Across a generational divide the German grandmother sings about German-Americans marching off to war in order to fight against "German barbarians." *Barbarian* means a person who does not talk the same way as the dominant group or who knows no one language well: a commonplace charge against German-Americans and Germericans was that they themselves were linguistic barbarians, or stammerers.⁵² So *alma mater*'s lament wonders about the hyphenated relationships in America between words (*German* and *American*), between languages (the German language and the American language), and between national groups (Germans and Americans).

NOTES


5. J. Ehrenfried argues in Colloquial Phrases & Dialogues in German & English (Philadelphia, 1834) that “the prevalence of the German language in many parts of the United States should form a powerful inducement of men in every situation of life to become, at least partially acquainted with it” (quoted by Shirley Brice Heath, “English in Our Language Heritage,” in Charles A. Ferguson, Shirley Brice Heath, and David Hwang, eds., Language in the USA [Cambridge, 1981], p. 11).


11. See Gustavus Ohlinger, Their True Faith and Allegiance (Wister, N.Y., 1917).

12. The situation of German-Americans in Cleveland is a theme of David Ross’s bilingual work, Deutsch-amerikanische Heimatkunde Tagung (Cleveland, 1937). On the German-American press in the 1930s, see Stephen Economides, Der Nationalsozialismus und die deutschsprachige Presse in New York, 1933–1941 (Frankfurt am Main, 1982). The specific bilingual tradition of German-Americans in the Illinois area in the 1880s is treated in Beate Hinrichs, Deutschamerikanische Presse zwischen Tradition und Anpassung: die Illinois Staatszeitung und Chicaguer Arbeiterzeitung, 1879–1890 (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1989). There was a more-than-proportionate drop in the number of German daily newspapers (H. L. Mencken, The American Language: An Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States, 4th ed. [New York, 1937], p. 620 n).

14. Noah Webster, *Dissertations on the English Language* (1789), intro Harry R. Warfel (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1951, pp. 22-23. Webster also said that in the Federal Procension there was “a scroll, containing the principles of a [new] Federal language” (see Bailey, *Images of English*, pp. 104–5). In the ensuing years, Webster and his followers came to realize that the English language would predominate—or they now argued outright that it should. Only later did Webster say that “our language is the English and it is desirable that the language of the United States and Great Britain should continue to be the same” (quoted in Richard N. Rollins, *The Long Journey of Noah Webster* [Philadelphia, 1980], p. 127; in Crawford, *Language Loyalties*, p. 35 n).


19. Aron’s work came out of the University of Illinois. As Mencken (*American Language*, p. 621 n) points out, although there had been many studies of the Pennsylvania-Dutch dialectic-version of American-German by 1937, there were very few of other forms of American-German. Otis Kaye’s painting *Handel With Care* (1935) considers others.


24. One can sense a very little of the same thing, in relation to African-Americans, in obviously scurrilous German-American works like Henry J. Wehman’s *Black Jokes*, for “blue
devils" (New York, 1897), which is "chock full of darkey fun" together with "colored philosophy and nigger witticisms." There is also Wehman's Brudder Bones' "4-11-44" Joker, Containing a Jolly Lot of Sable Conundrums, Ethiopian Jokes, Burnt Cork Comicalities and Darkey Dialogue (New York, 1897).

25. "To americanize yourself / Means to lose yourself entirely / To have stayed true to yourself as a German / Means to love honor and heritage: / But better to be Indian / Than to be German-American." From the Pioneer (a journal published 1852–1879), cited in Paul Otto Schinnerer, Karl Heinzen = Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtsblätter, 15 (published by the Deutsch-Amerikanische Gesellschaft of Illinois, Chicago, 1915), pp. 84–145, and in Hawgood, Tragedy; translation adapted. For Karl Heinzen on Marx, see, for example, his Die Helden des deutschen Kommunismus dem Herrn Karl Marx gewidmet (Bern, 1848).

26. Walter D. Kamphoefner, "German American Bilingualism: cui malo? Mother Tongue and Socioeconomic Status among the Second Generation in 1940," International Migration Review 28:4 (Winter 1994), 846–865, writes: "Clearly, second generation Germans were an aging if not a dying group by 1940. . . . Mass immigration had ended with the Panic of 1893, and the two largest cohorts of their children were those born in the 1880s and 1890s."

27. "Trousseau": Oaken chest fitted with hand-wrought iron from an unknown village in Westphalia shipped to Texas—when—at one time holding handspun linen from one's grandmothers and jewelry in a narrow compartment at the side, now full of dated collections: stamps, picture postcards, coins, photos of children in closed, heart-shaped albums. (See Hubert P. Heinen, "Consciousness of Being German: Regional Literature in German Texas," in Theodore Gish and Richard Spuler, ed., Eagle in the New World [College Station, Tex., 1986], p. 156.) At the time she wrote this work, Lisa Kahn had a home in and close ties to Texas. Some of her works are listed on the inside back cover of Lisa Kahn, David am Komputer und andere Gedichte (Providence, 1982).


29. New York Commercial Advertiser, 23 January 1896. The essayist continues: "The quaint humor, the tender pathos, the subtle something that speaks of humanity and loving kindness, combined with an attractive metrical form and an amusing dialect, unite to make it a delight to young and old."


31. Humor is paramount in such works about "Dutch"-American vaudeville jokes and witticisms as The German Joker (1904), Wehman's Budget of Jokes, Replete with English, Irish, and German Wit and Humor (New York, 1893), and Edmund Phillip Kremers German-American Handbook (Chicago and Philadelphia, 1939). The latter was a Chicago-based collection of Germerican "idioms, colloquialisms, familiar quotations, localisms, dialectal and slang expressions, and words not generally found in German-English dictionaries" (front page).


35. The term "Germerican" denotes a combination of the German-English-American languages, but it is no such combination: "Germerican" itself is an anglophone amalgam of
two English words. “Deutsch-American” or “German-Amerikanisch” would be bilingual combinations. Such terms appear frequently on German and German-American paper Notgeld of the period; see Deutsche-Amerika—Woche (1923), discussed and illustrated in Marc Shell, OVERDUE (Chicago, forthcoming, 1998), chap. 5.


37. It is worth remarking that the generally anglophone term “handle” is sometimes also spelled “handel.”


41. “Well, business will soon start to pick up” (Stein, Hamlet, Part I, l. 5, p. 79; in Kurt M. Stein, Die Schöne Lengevitch, introd. Richard Atwater [Chicago, 1925]).

42. For the relationship between Yiddish and English in the United States, see Rudolf Glanz, Jews in Relation to the Cultural Milieu of the Germans in America up to the Eighteen Eighties (New York, 1947).


44. University of Chicago Press, A Manual of Style, 12th ed., completely revised (Chicago, 1969), p. 130, advises: “Of ten spelling questions that arise in writing or editing, nine are probably concerned with compound words. Should it be self-seeking or self-seeking? is the word spelled taxpayer, tax-payer, or tax payer?—solid, hyphenated, or open. “Most such questions are readily answered by the dictionary. If the compound is used as noun, the chances are good that it will appear in the columns of the abridged Webster, in one of the three possible spellings. If it is used as an adjective, the chances of finding it are still fair. But there will yet be some noun forms and a great many adjective forms for which no “authoritative” spelling can be found. It is then that general principles must be applied.”

46. Bret Harte, *The Lost Galleon and Other Tales* (San Francisco, Towne & Bacon, 1867).

47. Fowler adds a fourth sort of intimacy between words: uppercasing of letters in the middle of words. One writes “Anglo-SouthAmerican” instead of “Anglo-South-American,” for example, or “OverDue” instead of “OVERDUE” (Fowler, *King’s English*, pp. 286–287).

48. Fowler, *King’s English*, p. 288. Fowler dislikes foreign words and also “foreign methods” within English. Scott wrote “A low door, leading through a moss and ivy-covered wall”; Lowell wrote of “A language ... not yet fet-locked by dictionary and grammar mongers”; and Thackery wrote of “Those who take-human or-womankind for their study.” Concerning these uses of the hyphen, Fowler notes unhappily that the only “quite satisfactory plan” is the Germans’, who would write moss- and ivy covered. In the end, all he can say is that “it is a much commoner fault to over-hyphen [sic] than to under-hyphen [sic].

49. On the general rhetoric of this interaction between race and language, see Marc Shell, *Children of the Earth: Literature, Politics, and Nationhood* (New York, 1993), esp. “Both Sides Against the Middle,” pp. 41–44. For Fowler, “Americanisms” corrupt British-English even as, for Americans, “Anglicisms” corrupt American-English.Writes Fowler: “Though we take these [Americanisms] separately from foreign words ... the distinction is purely pro forma; Americanisms are foreign words, and should be so treated” (Fowler, *King’s English*, p. 33).

50. See also various essays collected in *Hyphenated Diplomacy*. Herman Ridder, *Hyphenations: A Collection of Articles on the World War of 1914 which have appeared from time to time in the New Yorker Staats-Zeitung under “The War Situation from Day to Day”* (New York, 1915), begins with a dedication that already suggests his subject: “To those Americans in whose veins German blood still flows, whose undivided sympathy and loyalty to the ideal of these United States of America is coupled with the immutable remembrances of all that is noblest and highest in the Fatherland, these pages are respectfully dedicated.” In the painting *Handel With Care* the pictorial counterpart to the hyphen is the ambiguously planar border between Dutch and American sectors.


52. “The Greek word barbaros had probably a primary reference to speech, and is compared with Latin balbus stammering” (OED, s.v. “Barbarian”). In 1827 Julius C. Hare and Augustus W. Hare wrote: “A barbarian is a person who does not talk as we talk” (*Guesses at Truth* [c. 1827; London, 1839] p. 325). In 1857, John Ruskin wrote in *A Political Economy of Art* (London, 1857), p. 9: “A wholly barbarous use of the word, barbarous in a double sense, for it is not English, and it is bad Greek.” Both Hare and Ruskin wrote during the heyday of the British Empire.