

# Low German Mennonite Drama as a Subversive Activity: Five Plays by Manitoba Women

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The recent popularity of skits, plays, and music performed in Low German attests to a revival of interest in cultural traditions for Mennonites in Manitoba, after a period of decline in the use of this language in decades prior to the 1980s and 90s. The creative energy and enjoyment associated with this drama make it an inviting subject for examination; I attempt here to show some of the aspects of its appeal, and to recognize it as a force within Mennonite culture. Low German Drama (LGD) is well attended both in Winnipeg and in southern Manitoba towns where amateur theatre groups perform unpublished works by playwrights from within these Mennonite communities. Theatre groups vary in their composition, so that the drama may be produced by all-women groups – the Willing Helpers of West Kildonan Church is one example – or one of the mixed companies, such as the ones based in Landmark (a club founded by Wilmer Penner), and Reinland. Some groups may have actors exclusively from the older generation, while the participants in others range in age. The material I have selected varies as well; most of it, however, I discovered in the Mennonite Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. There I was directed, by Conrad Stoese, to a file holding a number of short plays by women, written before the 1980s. I was particularly interested in these short plays because of the opportunity I saw there to focus attention on works that might otherwise be neglected. Women's activities within the church and the community have recently come into view as a little-studied and fascinating area, and my choice of these plays enables me to contribute to research into this subject. Four of the pieces I discuss come from this collection, while the other (*Dee Hoot*) was written by a member of the West Kildonan theatre group.

My essay seeks a complementary place in relation to research that has already been done in other areas of Mennonite culture. Such work includes Low German dictionaries by Herman Rempel and by Jack Thiessen, the latter being the most recently revised; Al Reimer's article on the humorous writing of Arnold Dyck (*JMS*, 1986.2); Wilfred Cuff's *Grammar of Plautdietsch (Mennonite Low German)*, which (as

yet unpublished) was made available to me by the kind permission of the author; and Doreen Klassen's *Singing Mennonite*, a collection and critique of Mennonite "folk" songs and their function in the community. (A song from this collection appears in Mary Pauls's short play.) Parallels can be drawn between the function of the Low German songs in Klassen's book, as she describes this function, and LGD; like the songs, a Low German skit is "not only a vehicle for inter-ethnic differentiation", but it can also "convey Mennonite values by expressing ideals and tensions among Mennonites themselves" (10).

In this paper I explore the ways in which LGD subverts social conventions and does so through its very theatrical form.<sup>1</sup> My study begins with the idea that dramatic form – which comprises all the elements of representation including length, style, and structure – contains and conveys important messages in addition to the content. Conventional theatrical form in the western world usually sets out a progressive beginning-middle-end pattern, urging us to understand the world as being on the forward course as it should be, and to accept current social arrangements as inevitable. Alternative approaches to form communicate other, more elastic models of reality. I argue that these subversive approaches are evident in the five selected plays recently written and produced by Mennonite women playwrights in Manitoba.

As Ric Knowles argues, where the plays "disrupt" they protest "totalizing" narratives such as the fundamentalist or literal reading of the Bible, or the view that Canada is a homogeneous society. Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* (both undated) illustrate LGD's playful and fragmentary form, and the way that theatrical presentation can fly against established codes. The alternating use of different languages such as English and Low German is one kind of disruption, refuting the pressure from mainstream culture to speak English only. *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* may be seen to open up the issue of Canadian acculturation and the loss of ethnic languages amidst the cultural power of English and French. Margaret Tiessen's *The Right Christmas Gifts* and Agnes Wall's *The Hat* bring into focus the erosion of Low German usage in the descendants of the first generations of Mennonites in Canada, suggesting the difficulties of maintaining Low German as a means to resist the forces of middle class English-Canadian conformity. Through the play *Christmas Clothing*, Kay Friesen associates particular values with Low German and with English, in seeming response to pressures from the English-speaking world. These works differ from conventional theatrical drama in that the ideas and values they convey present alternatives to the ideology that accompanies traditional form.

Significantly, each of these five Low German plays is presented through unconventional, fragmentary methods, symbolically breaking up linear metanarratives of social control. First, the entertainment evenings in which these plays are presented to Manitoba Mennonites use a revue format, offering a number of different “acts” on the same program. One such evening’s entertainment at New Hope school in April 2005, for example, consisted of a tribute to Loretta Lynn, an Elvis impersonator, and a Low German play (Ens, Interview). But LGD’s fragmented qualities lie perhaps more significantly in its very form and content. The plays, for example, are often very short. Kay Friesen’s *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls’s *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* are one and four pages long respectively, and last no longer in production than a few minutes each. The short skits represent a moment or episode rather than an entire story.

These plays also reflect Barbara A. Babcock’s work on the clowning spirit in theatre. Babcock shows how “logical argument” can be “eschewed in a paradoxical...discourse of fragments and aphorisms, dialogue and pastiche” (103). The clown in other times and cultures, according to Babcock, does not gain knowledge or go through a change but remains childlike (109). In a seeming unawareness of social demands, the clown figure displays feelings and actions of the kind that are usually held in check (112), and acts out rebellious impulses, such as the desire not to conform to rational principles of communication.

The figures in *Forgetful Jake* and *Trudeau Lands in Steinbach* can be seen to match Babcock’s description of the clown. In a disruption of the beginning-middle-end pattern, *Forgetful Jake* starts with what resembles the middle of a scene: the curtain opens on Jake “in a completely bewildered state”. His comical, childlike nature can be seen immediately as stage directions indicate that he “scratches his head in concentration, gets up, paces [the] floor, sits down, [and] scratches [his] head etc, showing complete confusion”. The reason for Jake’s condition is finally made clear when his first visitor, having seen Jake’s light on, stops in to see if there is something wrong. Henry Braun questions Jake about why he is up so late, and Jake admits to sitting up for the past two hours trying to remember something. Henry’s suggestions of what it might be fail to jog Jake’s memory until Henry gives up, saying he is going home to bed. “Dout es it!” [“That’s it!”] Jake exclaims. “I was going to go to sleep. I had decided today to go to bed early”. Here is the inverted logic that clowning employs.

A series of misunderstandings results from Jake’s muddled logic when the second visitor arrives, and these small spurts of hilarity are characteristic of a style that, again, disrupts the continuity embodied in traditional drama. It may even be seen to disrupt the linearity and progression that Mennonite religious faith relies on. Through

the dialogue the audience understands that the stranger, Peter Hildebrandt, is looking for Jake, but because he pronounces Jake's last name incorrectly (not the Low German way), Jake does not recognize the name when he hears it, and so denies that Hildebrandt has found the right person. Next, Hildebrandt attempts to verify the address, but when he expresses the number as "one-one-three Water Street", Jake again declares that his visitor is incorrect, replying, "No, this is one hundred-thirteen Water Street." The visitor's apology for disturbing Jake so late at night is met with the convoluted response, "No, that's okay. I had to get up to answer the door [anyway]".

The ending comes more as a continuation of the "plot" (or the confused situation) than as a conclusion. Jake's initial problem is solved with Henry Braun's visit, and he proceeds to change into pajamas in the next room, carrying his clothes back out when he returns. Upon the arrival of the second visitor, he puts on all these clothes before he answers the door, including his "shoes, coat and hat". When Hildebrandt leaves after the miscommunication with Jake, the scene is concluded as Jake gets into bed fully clothed, looks at the audience and, perplexed, says, "Well, it's as if I've forgotten something again." This kind of short, laughter-inducing scenario defies rational order. But it may also present an unofficial side of Mennonite life, suggesting that the truth put forward through official doctrine is not the only one, and that there are other ways to apprehend the world than through the linear model of the Bible.

Babcock also draws attention to the festive nature of the activities that work successfully as playful criticism. The play, *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, like *Forgetful Jake*, contains what Babcock lists as the necessary elements of festivity: "(1) conscious excess, (2) celebrative affirmation, and (3) juxtaposition" (108). Perhaps because in *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* there is more at stake in the action (Prime Minister Trudeau must land his plane before he runs out of fuel), and there is a greater complexity in terms of language and interaction, this play has an especially festive feel. There is constant interplay between three languages (English, French, and Low German). English words and "anglicized" Low German are randomly inserted, while the Mennonite air traffic authorities absurdly insist that it is necessary to speak Low German in order to land in Steinbach. The first misunderstanding between cultures begins when the "Controller", responding to the request for clearance to land, asks the appropriate technical question regarding the pilot's coordinates in airspace. Despite the care that the "Controller" takes to be understood, inserting the English word "position" into his Low German sentence, the answer comes back through the translator/navigator: "He says he is the Prime Minister of Canada" (1). This kind of paratactical dialogue that places two disparate

meanings of a word beside each other in the popular comedic “play on words” continues in an increasingly nonsensical vein to the end.

Both “conscious excess” and “celebrative affirmation” are also clearly expressed in these two plays. The behaviour of the main characters, the irrationality of their dialogue and the exaggeration of types all enact an element of excess. Stage directions seem to indicate that Jake is laughable in his confused demeanor, and instructions for *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* reveal a similarly comic figure in the air traffic controller: the “Controller comes in with a pitch fork and lays it beside the desk. He is fat, [and] dressed in old farmer coveralls or overalls. He is wearing a farmer shirt (a big checkered one) and an old hat...”. Whether it is this stereotypical ‘country bumpkin’ represented by the farmer/air traffic controller, a ‘scatterbrain’ like Jake, or any of the other often foolish characters that appear in the comedies, the extreme (and extremely funny) behaviour depicted speaks of an excess beyond the norm in everyday life. Laughter is the other element of excess here. Festivity means, for both actor and audience, leaving behind one’s usual modes of judgment to indulge in the pleasure of flouting rules of conduct, and taking part in the dismantling of rational structures.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s discussion of carnival and the critical work that goes on through comedic channels may also help to shed light on LGD. As far as LGD’s subversive or “perversive” activity goes (Knowles 154), the significance of laughter must be noted as a potential tool for undermining governing rules. In traditional Mennonite culture, laughter belongs with the everyday world of common experience and not with the serious business of the congregation or *Gemeinde*. Religious codes that regulated behaviour traditionally could even involve the use of such serious measures as the ban or shunning (Friesen 31), cutting off errant members from social interaction with the rest of the community. Just as church officials in the early modern period of Bakhtin’s study were the focus of carnivalesque parody, in part because of their abuse of power to further their own interests, the potential for hypocrisy in the Mennonite disciplinary system is a fitting focus in the theatrical medium. As Bakhtin notes “Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people...It is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity” (11). Although LGD may not be strictly designated as “carnival” on all points, this description is accurate in some important respects when applied to Low German theatre. Authority figures are not exempt from the effects of laughter, and so laughter is a destabilizing force. Those who govern can be mocked, by association, through the foolish figures in the plays such as “Jake” in *Forgetful Jake* and the air traffic controller in *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*.

Bakhtin also draws attention to the “official” and “unofficial” versions of reality represented by religious celebrations and the accompanying carnival activities. He argues that the figures represented in the carnival exploits correspond to those in Christian religious rituals, posing an alternative way of seeing the world. In Mennonite culture, “official” truth was distinguished historically by its presentation through High German only, while Low German was designated for lower (unofficial) aspects of life. Perhaps it is even possible to read the comic figures featured in *Forgetful Jake* and *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* as versions of the authoritative speakers who led the worship service and oversaw many of the decisions of the community. The “Controller’s” character especially lends itself to this reading, with his authority that ranks above the highest human office (when he has power over the Prime Minister), his involvement with rules, and his governance of the skies. As an authority figure, he upsets the rules by which a leader maintains power in rational systems.

Importantly, even though LGD may carry out a kind of subversive activity within Mennonite communities, taking aim at Mennonites themselves rather than representing people outside the community, the criticism expressed through LGD is relevant in relation to social structures that define that “outside” world as well. While the religious strictures that bear on Mennonite life allow for a comparison of LGD with Bakhtin’s carnival, LGD also subverts the metanarratives specific to the ‘majority’ culture outside Mennonite communities. In *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, for example, the Prime Minister’s power is undermined by the air traffic controller’s nonsensical dialogue, and with it the directive to speak only English (or French). LGD, with its focus on “being in the moment” and on playful interaction rather than plot or outcome, in addition to the fragmentary form it takes, defies those metanarratives or “grand narratives” (Lyotard 38) that are tied up with unifying forces. The LGD, then, may be seen to expose both the strictures within the Mennonite belief systems, and the ideology behind the wider, surrounding English-speaking culture.

The use of Low German is an element of form that adds to the plays’ resistance to majority culture. Against English Canada’s call (official and unofficial) for “English-only” communication and culture, and as a means of recuperation from the outlawed use of German in their schools in the early decades of the twentieth century, LGD is a way for Mennonites to assert the value of one of their native languages, especially as this language is one that threatens to disappear from lack of use. A number of the plays contain self-reflexive references to Low German, treating the subject in varying ways. *Trudeau*, for instance, is full of humour based on language, and this humour is self-mocking

at the same time as it voices concerns about the general, contentious subject of acculturation in Canada. In the wonderful but problematic blending of three languages, this play brings into the foreground the power dynamics associated with language and culture. In particular, the incorporation of French calls up the debate over the issue of French language retention and use in Canada; this debate is marked by parliamentary action such as the Official Languages Act in 1969 ("Official", 1), which legislated bilingualism in Canada, but the debate continues to the present day. In *Trudeau*, the French-speaker gets to make the first clever play on words when he chooses to interpret the question regarding his "position" as a chance to indicate his status rather than his location in air space; after this interaction the Prime Minister gets the worst of ensuing puns and jokes. This structure could even be interpreted in a way that sees this initial bit of fun on the part of the French Prime Minister as a challenge to a battle of wordplay, to which the "Controller" responds eagerly and triumphantly. (It could certainly be played that way.) Besides the Canadian-Mennonites' certain awareness of the French language situation in Canada, Steinbach is located close to a number of rural French communities, and so it is not surprising that the dynamics between French and Low German are of special interest to Mennonite playwrights. The subtext in this play involves the tendency for English to dominate other languages, but when the French- and Low German-speakers insert English words into their speech in their attempts to communicate, they relay the possibility that English could be a neutral ground as well, and a means of communicating for speakers of minority languages. The "Controller" extols the merits of bi- and trilingualism, suggesting that the Prime Minister can learn Low German, and saying through the navigator that, "It is always good to have a second language" (2); when informed that Trudeau is already bilingual, the "Controller" responds with, "Hie weit wie all 3 oder 4 Sprache" ["Here we all speak three or four languages"] (3). Compulsory English causing the obliteration of other tongues is being resisted, but the play can be interpreted as promoting the idea of a common language in conjunction with the continuation of diverse languages.

In addition to acting as a vehicle for humour, the mixture of Low German and English in LGD is a sign of the gradual integration of English and the values of secular society into Mennonite life, as well as the Mennonite resistance to these influences. Because the stage directions are always written in English, it is clear that LGD is always meant for a cast schooled in the language of the 'host' culture. The English words indicate Low German's position within the culture of the majority. In this predominantly English environment, the increasing number of words "borrowed" from English is evidence of the way

English can take over, but perhaps, too, of the integration of the two languages into a blend that preserves the native tongue.

The idea of integration comes through humour in the plays, such as the pun made on the word “position” in *Trudeau*. In this piece, part of the humour comes from the blurring of the lines between languages, as both the non-English-speakers begin to insert English words and phrases for the apparent purpose of making themselves clearer to the other minority language-speaker. Under pressure, “Je demande permission de descendre” (1) later becomes “Je demande permission to land” (3). In response to the Prime Minister’s first protests about language, the “Controller” conveys in Low German that he will ask his superior whether an “exception” (in English) might be made (2), so that Trudeau can land without knowing the local language, even though, as he has explained through the navigator, “...Low German is important to the Steinbach people” (2). Perhaps his choice of an English word communicates the idea of compromise along with the sense of what he says. If English can be a neutral ground, and a site of shared understanding, then its ‘majority’ status is actually helpful to speakers of other languages.

The difficulties of compromise and language retention are complex in the play. The “Controller” seems to make a sincere effort to help Trudeau, and his “coming halfway”, if that is what his mixed English and Low German may be called, is notable when he asks for “clearance” in English, in the midst of a Low German sentence (2). The “Controller” defends the language of his culture by insisting that Low German is necessary for landing in Steinbach, but a short time later, he tries again to solve the matter, saying, “Oba ech hab ein ‘solution’” [“But I have a solution”] (2). His stance shows his unwillingness, however, to compromise on the issue of language when his “solution” turns out to be that Trudeau should quickly learn Low German. Elsewhere he is impervious to urgent requests by Trudeau for permission to land; he goes through a lengthy process of phoning the appropriate community members to ask for clearance, and at the point when he hears, “Mayday! Mayday!”, he responds, “May, noh dot es doch November” (4). Attempts at communication mixed with consistent misunderstanding are the basis for the humour in this sketch and show, as well, the challenges of reconciling a number of different nationalities within the cultural landscape of Canada. The resistance to English-language use is perhaps misdirected at another minority language, and may express an element of competition between second languages.

The crash of the airplane is represented comically, of course, rather than as a serious consequence of the “Controller’s” attitude towards language. The serious side of the event is not to be ignored entirely, however; since content is part of form as well, then what

happens has implications beyond those of mere comic effect. If the “Controller” represents a hegemonic authority over language use that mirrors English-only forces, then his treatment of the French people and the ensuing destruction of the plane signify the serious danger of disappearance that faces languages other than English. The symbolic death of the only French-speakers in the piece enacts the end of their minority language at the hands of those who insist on one particular language as a mode of communication. The device is symbolic of the chaos that can ensue when cultures collide, but it also highlights the power dynamics involved in language debates. Here the point is clear that whoever occupies the more advantageous position, whichever languages are involved, has the power to shut out others and to withhold a place in the community or society from non-conformists until they bend to the language of the majority around them (which in this case, being in the Mennonite community of Steinbach, is Low German). These dynamics are represented by the French-driven airplane suspended above the community, unable to touch down. The “Controller’s” actions show an attitude of bull-headedness, and the resultant crash is due to the abuse of power by a speaker of the language of the majority which in this case is Low German.

The denouement shows how it is possible to destroy other languages from this position of dominance. Interestingly, the Low German-speaker brings about the annihilation of the French contingent, which is an important statement about the closed nature that small communities such as Steinbach can have. It is also about the destructive potential of narrow vision. The “Controller’s” final mood is the reverse of remorse: “Vann he doht es, dann es he events doht. Dann mot wie am events begrove. Un daut wau wie ean Plautdietsch donne” [“If he’s dead, then he’s really dead. Then we must bury him. And that we will do in Low German”]. (4) These are his last lines. That the Prime Minister has been on his way to speak at the Steinbach “Cradit Union” is a point that adds both humour and complication to the dynamics; either those in the community have invited him or he is himself making a gesture to communicate with them. The meeting of cultures and points of view fails because of language. Importantly, however, the disparate languages *together* have made the comedy work, which is a different message, and more subtle than the obvious outcome of the play.

The loss of Low German in the younger generations compromises the ability of LGD to embody resistance to English-speaking society, and shows a lack of investment by the younger people in this kind of resistance. The decrease in Low German use reflects the situation of Mennonites in their move from isolated rural communities to urban centers as succeeding generations had to seek out more varied means of employment (Kauffman and Driedger 35). Once they entered

school the children of Russian-Mennonite immigrants became fluent in English and able to function comfortably in urban environments, in contrast to their elders. The eventual change from High German to English in worship services was cause for great upheaval in the Mennonite church; indeed, according to a detailed study by Gerald C. Ediger of the transition in Mennonite communities in Manitoba, the issue threatened to divide the Mennonite Brethren denomination, and resulted in much painful conflict among families and between generations. Ediger explains the complexities involved in making a move to English when bureaucratic form (from Mennonite bodies) had to be observed and personalities clashed. The impetus behind the transition was of course a response to modernization and greater contact with English-speaking society so that English was put forward as necessary. The change took place over years of steady and passionate debate, as Ediger's book relates, with bilingualism finally being accepted by the majority. The fear that the language would be lost as an identifying aspect of culture and identity was evident as far back as the 1930s. Within the Mennonite Brethren Conference the debate involved the (painfully-made) separation of value and language, and the necessity of accepting the fact that the truth contained in the Bible was not tied to the German language. While one form of authoritative discourse has been completely replaced by another (High German to English), Low German remains an alternative to the standardization or single stream of meaning that comes with the widespread acceptance of one language.

The playwrights sometimes present a complication of the generational aspect of Low German use when they convey a cautionary message to their audiences about being too close-minded towards English, in addition to their desire to keep up linguistic traditions. It is interesting to note, as Edna Froese points out, that the Low and High German languages have been presented as both a positive, binding force and one that alienates and cuts off the Mennonite community from its surrounding neighbours.

In Margaret Tiessen's play *The Right Christmas Gifts*, for instance, one of the three characters establishes that proper behaviour includes speaking Low German, but the message is mixed. Mrs. Greta Friesen is a character who epitomizes a bossy, self-righteous member of the community who "learns her lesson" about Christian charity and love – a lesson about tolerance that also involves her acceptance of English as a means of conversing. Like *Trudeau*, this play sets up the ambivalent situation in which the retention of native languages is associated with narrow-mindedness, but the idea is presented through plays clearly designed for the pleasure of hearing (and preserving) Low German. The generational element is represented in *The Right*

*Christmas Gifts* through the different uses of language by older and younger Mennonites; in the otherwise consistently Low German work, the representatives of the younger set speak in English throughout the piece. The equivocal nature of the message seems to convey a desire, among younger Mennonites especially, to communicate with others in the larger, English-speaking society, while maintaining the importance of inherited cultural traditions like the Low German language.

*The Right Christmas Gifts* presents language use in a number of ways. The generational difference in attitude toward language is one aspect of the process of acculturation, as depicted in the play. The children in this play understand Low German perfectly well, as Walter shows when he repeatedly joins the conversation between his father, Jasch, and aunt, Greta Friesen. The father and son have come to help Mrs. Friesen deliver her Christmas presents, and when they discover the pettiness that has motivated her in her choice of gifts, they protest in different ways. Walter's first comment is innocent and conversational. When Mrs. Friesen speaks critically about a simple dish that a young wife in the community had made for her husband's supper, he breaks in with, "She made that at home sometimes. It was good. We all liked it" (2). Next he marvels at Mrs. Friesen's gift of an inadequate cake she has decided to give to a poor family. Her reason for doing so is that "poor folk can't be choosy". "But burnt cake?" he asks (3). At Walter's third English interjection, a direct question, Mrs. Friesen admonishes him about language use, saying in Low German, "Ask in German if you want an answer. In this house we speak Low-German..." (3). Interestingly, and possibly for added humour, the phrase she uses in the original script is not "Low" German, but the English (and High German) "real" German; this phrase emphasizes authenticity as a quality associated with the native language. Walter's English comments also express a view that is arguably more objective than Greta Friesen's; his view seems to come from "outside" the situation, perhaps because of his exposure to ideas beyond the small insulated community that Mrs. Friesen has presumably grown up in. Here English is almost presented as an antidote to hypocrisy; however, the play's performance in Low German undermines the idea that English is preferable, in spite of the fact that all of Mrs. Friesen's boisterous proclamations are deflated.

If Low German has no official status traditionally, then to use it to create artistic works is to produce an *excess* of allowable discourses. This excess is a part of the idea behind the title of Doug Reimer's thesis on Mennonite writing, *Surplus at the Border*. Reimer takes up the model for a "minor literature", originally put forward by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as a starting point from which to assess Mennonite narrative art. Recognizing the aptness of this model for the

study of Mennonite literature, Reimer pays particular attention to the ways that Mennonite literature can break with long-held conventions of English literature to foster a unique kind of writing (Reimer 41). Rather than seeing English as a powerful, infiltrating force that furthers the disintegration of Mennonite culture and the loss of Low German, Reimer's view provides a basis for seeing English as an instrument taken up by Mennonite writers and used in unconventional ways. With his study in mind, LGD may be constructively viewed through the model of a minor literature to show how the drama appropriates English for its own purposes, and so bends and plays with the conventions of English narrative art.

Whereas English-speaking culture uses literature and its conventions to define itself, language that defies those conventions erases the metaphorical lines around this cultural 'territory'. This trait is evident in the blending of English and Low German in LGD, which, in addition to the stylistic tendencies of this dramatic form, works as a method of "deterritorial-izing" the Standard English that surrounds Mennonite communities. That is, by asserting a different way of using English, such as its use for "token" words in a mainly Low German work, the territory normally inscribed by English language conventions is no longer delimited. The English words that pepper the dialogue in many of these plays serve to convey elements of the process of becoming a part of Canadian society, a process that involves a sometimes painful negotiation of language and cultural values. The treatment of English in LGD is a mode of deterritorialization – of English-speaking culture – characteristic of a minor literature. In *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach*, English is used for objects that, though easily named with Low German terminology, may have been introduced on the Canadian prairies, or for objects possibly shared with non-Low German-speakers in the area, such as the "Water tower" in this play (4). At times German grammar is combined with English diction for humorous results, as when the "Controller" puts the English verb "to crash" into the past tense according to German rules, resulting in the hilarious phrase, "Oh, he is ye-crashed". At other times pronunciation is anglicized. An example of this occurs when the "Controller" commands the navigator to "Zwitch to Emergency Channel 11" (3). This incorporation of English into Low German discourse by the playwrights, on their own terms, blurs the boundaries of "territory" as Deleuze and Guattari present the idea, and so these techniques work against imposed structures of meaning.

Other plays insert English words to emphasize the difference in values between the Mennonite and English communities, redefining Mennonite territory against English influences and pressures. In Kay Friesen's *Veenachts Klida [Christmas Clothing]*, for example, a group of girls discuss the items of clothing they would like to have. The more

worldly and stylish items seem to require specialized English terminology. The girls insert the English words that describe their desires, words that perhaps do not fit in with traditional Mennonite styles of clothing, such as: “satin”, “poka dot blous” (sic), “jumper”, “snow pants”, “blue jeans”, “orlon sweata”, “rayon crepe”, “push up sleeves”, “twin sweater set”, “flared circle rook” (skirt), and “reversible plaid skirt” (2). The styles and terms are dated, but the idea behind the skit remains of interest in this study of language and its function. The girls use “Ladies wear” (sic) to indicate the department at the store where they will find their imagined choices. The English term seems to lend the place an exotic air, likely to associate an element of worldliness with the desire to purchase clothing there. The often-gratuitous English terminology for certain fabrics and items of clothing, perhaps unusual or expensive, suggests that the playwright wants to associate luxury with secular society. The girls’ decision, by the end, that they should not be so concerned with their clothes at Christmas, is a facet of LGD’s resistance to the values of the outside world that enter the Mennonite community. These values are clearly evident in the girls’ desire to acquire and wear the clothing that those outside the community wear. The play inscribes Mennonite territory as opposed to “English” or secular territory, even if in another sense resistance is compromised by the adoption of these English words into their Low German dialogue.

Other plays illustrate the way English and Mennonite territories overlap or clash. Agnes Wall’s play *The Hat* depicts the misunderstandings that can occur due to the limitations of those not schooled in both the territorial codes of the city and in the language of the majority. “Daughter Dorothy” represents the younger generation, and she is shown to be competent and knowledgeable in these respects. Fluent in both English and Low German, Dorothy helps sort things out for her mother “Auntje Sachries”. The aspects of the world that are confusing to the older woman must be discussed using Low German, and verified by Dorothy in English to be sure the daughter is getting the correct version of the story. Except for these “verifications”, the play is consistently in Low German. The play opens as Auntje Sachries enters, visibly upset as she explains to her daughter that she has been “faustjenome” (1). In disbelief, Dorothy repeats the term, this time in English, asking, “*Arrested* meenst du?” [Do you mean *arrested*?] (1, italics mine). Her mother explains that while trying on a hat, she had begun chatting with a friend and forgotten she was wearing it. When she tried to leave the store, still with the hat on her head, she had been apprehended by the store management. Dorothy checks again with the English word to be sure she understands: “Säd hee *shoplifting*?” [“Did he say *shoplifting*?”] (1, italics mine). It is necessary to use the English again when Auntje tries to remember the term the police officer used

to accuse her; she cannot finish the word, and gives up after “een Kle.... enn Klept....”. Dorothy immediately guesses what she means; “Säd hee Kleptomaniac?” (2). Interestingly, although Dorothy knows how to comfort her mother and translate what has happened to her, it is the father/husband who actually addresses the situation for his wife in the public realm. Not only does he go to the store to talk to the manager, but, as it turns out, the two men are already acquainted. This reveals the networks that men are able to establish in the public world, and the way that they negotiate territory between each other as males.

In the scene between the two men, the Mennonites’ own territorial codes are in evidence. Doft Schmett, the store manager, quickly understands that there was a mistake, and goes out of his way in the manner of a good businessperson to smooth over Auntje Sachries’ injuries (and any sustained by her husband). In a juxtaposition of the roles of knowledgeable figures, now it is the younger generation that has misunderstood the codes; Schmett explains that he was absent the previous day when the incident occurred and that “Howie”, a new and over-zealous manager had temporarily taken his place (4). The two older men are able to clear up the misunderstanding through the codes of the public world and the codes between men. Isaak Sachries and the daughter both function comfortably in the world, Dorothy because of her exposure to the structures of this social world through her education, and Isaak Sachries due, presumably, to some experience of the public world and to his gender. The weight of authority (and the confidence that comes with it) lies predominantly with the male sex here, perhaps highlighting an important lingering aspect of the patriarchal tradition of the *Brethren*. The play shows that the uninitiated, to any system, are liable to misinterpret events, and that there are multiple, overlapping territories within society. Underlying this message, and against the exclusion implicit in “territory”, is the communally understood language of Low German, a code to the group that watches and participates in the play.

Another way that LGD refuses to comply with English prose conventions is discernible in the “flaws” or inconsistencies apparent in the texts of LGD. Some of the plays were written before standardized dictionaries of Low German were published, and none of the spelling systems match the others (making translation that much more challenging). In addition to the variations in spelling used by different playwrights, there are also inconsistencies within some of the texts themselves. In *Veenachts Klida*, for example, there are a number of words that are spelled differently each time they occur. As well, concerns with the spelling of English or anglicized words by these educated playwrights (Friesen is a teacher) seem to be put aside, with the obvious focus being on the more immediate aspects of the

performance. In the theatrical production, no one would know or care how “Poka dot bloose” or “blous” is spelled, or notice whether the orlon item is a “svetta” or a “sweata”. Even the indefinite article is given as “een” and “enn” in the same sentence (2). This evidence suggests a strong preoccupation with the sense of the language and with the experience of the theatre rather than the appearance and correctness of the text. In paying little respect to the consistency and logic that are the guiding principles of metanarratives, LGD again subverts these controlling structures.

Through the analysis of its form, then, it is possible to see ways in which LGD succeeds in subverting the structures of meaning as they are “imposed” by traditional standards. Laughter represents the potential for disruption of grand narratives, as do the pastiche and paratactical elements of LGD as hypothesized by Babcock. The short, comical form and the irrational or “inversional” nature of the humour in this theatre may be compared to ritual clowning, which, for Babcock, enacts valuable work as criticism. The combination of languages and the use of Low German in the drama act as a form of resistance to dominant structures outside the Mennonite community. The language “refuses” to accept a place with little or no value in the traditional hierarchy of languages within the community as well, and asserts its importance through LGD. As “neither this nor that” (neither English nor High German, nor a politically-backed language like French), but including elements of all these, LGD resists classification by language as well as genre. The form that LGD takes involves excess, and so goes beyond the boundaries of established form. Where postmodernism is “skeptical towards metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv), LGD, like other postmodern products, acts out this skepticism through the elements of form.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper is an adaptation of a chapter from my Master’s thesis entitled *Mennonites at Play: Postmodern Aspects of Low German Drama*.

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