Mennonite Old Colony Schooling for Survival: Village Schools in the Community of Salamanca, Quintana Roo, Mexico

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Mennonites have been living in Mexico for a century. This paper explores how the survival of separatist Old Colony Mennonite communities relates to their schooling and sociolinguistic circumstances. Founded in 2002, Salamanca is one of the first Mennonite settlements in the southern state of Quintana Roo (le Polain de Waroux et al., 2021). The Mennonites of Salamanca belong to the Old Colony branch of the Mennonite faith, with origins in southern Ukraine. They are characterized by their religious conservatism and a strong tendency towards separatism from worldly matters (Krahn & Sawatsky, 1990). Amongst themselves, Old Colony Mennonites speak two Germanic languages: Plautdietsch (Mennonite Low German) for everyday oral communications and High German (Mennonite High German)[2] for activities related to church and schooling.

Research in Salamanca suggests that language use in educational contexts has been crucial in upholding and protecting the conservative way of life of the Old Colony Mennonites. Among other researchers, Hedges (1996) and Sneath (2017, 2019a) stress the

importance of the reciprocal relationship between language use, education, and religious tradition among Old Colony Mennonites in Chihuahua as well as families that later returned to Canada. The case of Salamanca offers insights into school tradition and language use within an orthodox community and their instrumental role in the transmission of the *Ordnunk*,[3] the community's congregational rules of conduct. Linguistic resilience and educational tradition, more than religious learning, have a self-reinforcing effect on these communities.

This study is based on ethnographic fieldwork that included participant observation, conversations, and semi-formal interviews conducted between 2017 and 2021. During two introductory visits to Salamanca in the summer and winter of 2017, I helped establish a medical contact for a Mennonite family with a young child needing care in a Mexican public hospital. My acquaintance with Mexican society, my fluency in German, and my success in speaking a little Plautdietsch aided in establishing warm relations with some families. On further visits to the community, I was invited to stay with one of the families in the summers of 2018 and 2019 and in the winters of 2021 and 2022. I conducted interviews with members of the *Liadeenst* (the religious authority of the colony), teachers, parents, and young adult members of the community. The interviews' semi-formality reflects the difficulty implicit in dialoguing about issues (education, language, and language use) that the interlocutor was not always used to talking about. Consequently, dialogues could end up stranded in a series of one-syllable answers to questions and often demanded further inquiries. Sometimes interviews resulted in equally interesting family conversations. During the same period, additional shorter visits to several Mennonite settlements in Belize and Chihuahua provided comparative insight.

After a short historical overview, a description of Old Colony education follows. It centres on High German Bible–reading, writing, reciting, singing, and arithmetic within a school routine concentrating on collectivity, humility, and obedience. On the basis of my field research in Salamanca, I explore how schooling, language use, and the *Ordnunk* interact to protect and maintain the traditional "separatist" Old Colony way of life. Finally, comparisons between current educational developments among Mennonite communities in Chihuahua and ongoing developments in Salamanca show that Salamanca's sociolinguistic and general status quo is not unchallenged.

Mennonite Migrations: A Short History of Language and Education

A historical overview of Mennonite language, educational practices, and policies provides insight into how education and language became determinant factors in the contemporary perseverance of Old Colony Mennonite communities (Bowen, 2010). From the beginning of their existence in the 16th century, Anabaptists living in the northern Netherlands attended to basic education in reading, writing, religion, and arithmetic for girls and boys. The main goal was to teach children to read the Bible (Boekholt & de Booy, 1987). Because of their fervent belief in adult baptism and separation between state and religious community, in addition to early, violent outbursts of radical Anabaptists, Anabaptists suffered harsh persecutions from Spanish authorities, Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists (Zijlstra, 2000). When many followers of Menno Simons fled from their homes in the southern and northern regions of the Netherlands, they settled in a more tolerant West Prussia in the Vistula delta around Danzig (Peters & Thiessen, 1990, p. 16). These Mennonites, speakers of Frisian, West Low Saxon, and Low Franconian, adopted West Prussian Low German as their everyday language, conserving some morphological and lexical features of their home languages (Siemens, 2012; Nieuweboer, 1999). However, at school and in church, they continued to use the Dutch language based on the Dutch Biestkens Bible (1560). Only in the second half of the 18th century would Dutch Mennonites in Prussia, embedded in a High German public environment, officially adopt the High German Luther Bible and instate High German as the language of instruction (Thiessen, 2003; Siemens, 2012). As in the 16th-century rural Netherlands, education continued to focus on Bible-reading, exercises in writing, and some arithmetic.

In the late 18th century, when Mennonites' living conditions and liberties in Prussia became restricted, Catherine the Great granted them freedom of religion and exemption from military service if they would settle in the newly conquered territories of New Russia (Ukraine). Many Mennonite families decided to migrate. The first immigration flow consisted mainly of farmers and landless farmhands of Flemish origin (Siemens, 2012; Epp, 2003; Toews, 1979). These settlers founded Chortitza, close to the Dnipro River, in 1789. Beginning in 1803, another group of Mennonites from Prussia arrived and settled close to the Molotschna River. The initial Chortitza settlement thus became the Old Colony and their inhabitants were known as *Ooltkolonia*, "people from the old colony" (Zacharias, 2009, p. 261).

During the 19th century, improved living conditions for most Russian Mennonites in Tsarist Russia led to conflict. This was based on contrasting views held by the more conservative (or traditionalist) and the more progressive members of the principal settlements. Some of these disputes were about wealth and community authority and many were concerned with educational reforms started by Johann Cornies (Epp, 2003). Quite a few 19th-century Old Colony and other conservative settlers resisted educational innovation (Toews, 1979; Epp, 2003) and insisted that reading the Bible was of sole importance. Any additional knowledge, they claimed, would lead to conceit. Alongside internal conflicts over education goals, the Russian government started interfering with traditional Mennonite education and language choices, making the Russian language first part of the school curriculum, and later the language of instruction (Epp, 2003; Staples, 2003). These experiences taught the most orthodox Mennonites the importance of educational and linguistic autonomy as an integral part of the community's religious living conditions.

With the end of their *Privilegium* with the Russian government in 1871, some Mennonites began to consider emigration to the United States or Canada. A delegation visited the countries in 1873, and in Canada met with officials eager to attract settlers to the prairie west. Delegates negotiated a *Privilegium*, expressed in a letter that among other things promised autonomy of education. Ultimately, a large group of the most conservative clusters of Mennonites in Russia, a majority from the Old Colony, decided to move to Canada in order to live in accordance with their religious principles. However, before the end of the century, Canadian provincial governments began to modify their education and language policies—areas in which they held jurisdiction despite the federal government's 1873 letter. School Attendance Acts in Manitoba (1916) and Saskatchewan (1917) made English-language schooling compulsory, causing much distress. The more conservative Mennonite settlers decided to do what their parents and grandparents had done in the Russian empire, that is, to seek another place where they could live their autonomous community life (Sneath, 2017, p. 98).

Beginning in 1922, many Old Colony families moved to northern Mexico (Chihuahua and Durango) after negotiating a *Privilegium* with the Mexican government under President Álvaro Obregón. In 1958, several conservative Mennonite families decided to leave Chihuahua, fearing Mexican government interventions and ongoing internal educational and other innovations within the Manitoba and Santa Clara colonies in Chihuahua (Roessingh, 2007). They settled in Belize where they preserved, in the colony of Shipyard and later

in Little Belize, the *Ordnunk* as they saw fit—without the use of cars and with tractors on steel wheels (Roessingh & Plasil, 2009). From 1958 onwards, this Old Colony group separated from their Chihuahua coreligionists. Our colony of interest, Salamanca, in the southeast of Mexico, was founded in 2002 by descendants of Mennonites who left the Netherlands (16th century), Prussia (18th century), Russia (19th century), and Canada (20th century) to settle in Mexico, migrate to Belize (to Shipyard and Little Belize) and subsequently return to Mexico (21st century).

Education and language use, as we can observe today in the Salamanca colony, largely resembles Mennonite schooling at the beginning of the 19th century in Chortitza colony. It consists of teaching reading, writing, reciting out of the Luther Bible, and arithmetic based on school materials written in High German (Epp, 1993; Hedges, 1996). The case of Salamanca offers further details about how the Old Colony school system functions for the preservation of Old Colony Mennonite communities.

Salamanca: Old Colony Languages, School Routine, and Language Rituals

The settlement of Salamanca began in 2002 with a group of Mennonites from the Old Colony community of Little Belize in the Corozal District of Belize. It lies 12 km from the nearest urbanized zone of Bacalar. There is only one unpaved access road and no public transportation. Electricity comes from gas-powered generators and use is mostly restricted to essential domestic applications such as lightbulbs, fridges, and sometimes washing machines, plus whatever is needed for agricultural and other mechanical labour. Transport in the community is by horse and buggy. Possession of cell phones, radios, televisions, and other internet-connected devices is prohibited. Thus, distance from worldly influences seems secure. My fieldwork in August 2018 noted that sometimes, on Sundays, incoming vehicles, mostly taxis carrying colony residents and visitors, are stopped and their trunks and interiors are investigated for alcoholic beverages and other prohibited material including cell phones, radios, and drugs. The settlement consists of seventeen *Darpa* (street villages). Each street village contains a modest one-room school building and consists of roughly 20 plots with farmhouses and their adjoining land, situated on both sides of the road. A *Darpsschult*, the elected village overseer, is responsible for the school's maintenance, materials, and teacher's salary, with costs paid for by all inhabitants.

The school curriculum and the content of teaching materials are the responsibility of the *Liadeenst*. The *Liadeenst*, consisting of seven preachers plus a deacon, is the highest authority of the community. It protects the community's life regulations (*Ordnunk*). The decisions of the senior preacher or bishop, the *Eltesta*, are decisive for most community regulations, including the choice of a teacher and school materials (Roessingh & Plasil, 2006). Originally, only male teachers were employed (Roessingh & Plasil, 2006). However, in Salamanca and in Chihuahua, male and female teachers are active in the Old Colony schools. Being a teacher is not a meritorious profession among the Old Colony Mennonites and no special knowledge of High German, grammar, arithmetic, or didactic skills is required. Since their arrival in Mexico in 1922, teachers in the Old Colony Mennonite communities under the supervision of the "ultra-conservative wing" do not receive any professional training (Sawatzky, 1971, p. 308). The lack of teacher training underscores the fact that school is not about learning in the sense of studying or discovering the unknown but, rather, is a place for assimilating, copying, and collectively absorbing the humble discipline necessary to be part of the community.

Languages and Learning

With regard to language acquisition, while children grow up hearing and speaking Plautdietsch, they are first introduced to reading and writing in High German at school. After having completed the *Fibel* (primer),[4] they practice this language through text fragments mainly from, or based on, the Luther Bible and the catechism. Pronunciation starts by copying the teacher and the elder pupils and then constantly repeating the same word and text sequences. High German is usually spoken, sung, and recited in such a way that it is not generally intelligible to most German-speaking persons or even to most Old Colony Mennonites. The collective Salamanca Mennonite pronunciation of High German utterly differs from spoken standard German due to what Sawatzky (1971) calls "the insistence upon use of archaic vowel inflections in the speaking of German" (p. 309, footnote 31). Siemens (2018) states that Plautdietsch has clearly influenced High German morphology and pronunciation and that the syntax has retained archaic forms from the Luther Bible. In her discussion of this phenomenon, Hedges (1996), like Sawatzky (1971) and Burns (2016), refers to the pronunciation of the vowel "a." In this respect, Moelleken (1993) remarks, "Especially regarding the pronunciation of the *a*, the teachers must follow strict rules that have an extremely negative impact on learning the German

language"[5] (p. 170). Siemens (2018) agrees that the difference in pronunciation is mainly based on a distinction in vowel pronunciation, primarily influenced by the Old Colony Plautdietsch. In this text, because of the above features, the term *Huachdietsch* is reserved for the spoken form of biblical High German in Salamanca. The written form may be archaic or differ somewhat from standard German (Siemens 2018), but it does not deviate drastically from contemporary German. The written language, or *Schriftsprache* (Hinskens, 2016, p. 13), is generally readable by every German-speaking person. It is important to observe that Huachdietsch is never used as a conversational language. It is only spoken in a religious context in church and at school where language education is based almost entirely on biblical texts. In contrast, short community notifications of items for sale placed on walls of Salamanca stores often show a mixture of German, Plautdietsch, and Spanish words.

School Routine

Children between 6 and 12 years of age attend school for two 3-month periods each year.[6] There are four school levels. The children begin as *Fibler*, followed by the *Katechistler*, *Testamentler*, and *Bibler* levels. This arrangement corresponds with a 19th-century Russian system described by Epp (2003, p. 96). The names indicate the core books used to practice reading and writing. Religion is omnipresent. Girls and boys enter the schoolroom through separate entrance doors and are seated on elongated school benches placed to the right and left of a central corridor. The oldest children have their place at the front of the classroom closest to the teacher's worktable and the youngest ones are seated on the back benches closer to the entrance. Usually, the teacher sits at a desk containing neat boxes of plasticized cards arranged according to the learning levels, which include texts to copy and arithmetic problems to solve. Students learn the alphabet by rote. Indeed, all learning adopts this essential didactic element. The children learn to carefully and collectively copy the letters of the alphabet in their printed and longhand forms. The *Fibel* contains children's prayers, edifying religious instructions, maxims, and moralities. The elder children work with plasticized cards containing arithmetic problems and texts from the New Testament, catechism, or Old Testament.[7] The Bible texts are written in Gothic print or script letters and *Bibler* pupils are instructed to copy them in Gothic longhand on one page of their notebook and in Latin longhand on the opposite page. Reading comprehension is not part of the curriculum. Arithmetic problems are mainly

addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, at different levels of difficulty.

School subjects such as history, geography, biology, or physics are non-existent in the Old Colony classroom. These subject areas would entail "worldly" knowledge that is considered an unwelcome distraction in the Old Colony tradition. The same criterion applies to learning Spanish, which is not a part of the school curriculum. Most children spend 5 years in school copying (in more or less neat writing) pious songs, catechism, and Bible fragments. They learn basic calculating, while memorizing multiplication tables and the alphabet (vowels separately). Most importantly, they sing devout Mennonite hymns collectively from the *Leedabuak* (songbook) in the slow style of singing practiced in church.

Schooling, Languages, and Communication

Whether, or how much, the children learn about word classes and cases is dependent on the teacher's interest and self-acquired proficiency. In the Old Colony schools I visited in Salamanca, there were no dictionaries or any books other than Bibles, songbooks, copied bundles with song texts, and catechisms. New school material is the responsibility of the bishop, the head of the *Liadeenst*. In Chihuahua, a former Old Colony teacher, who managed to learn to speak standard German as an adult, narrated how she was admonished by the bishop of the Old Colony community where she was teaching when he heard the way she was speaking. She had to teach the children the Huachdietsch pronunciation, or what she called "the Old Colony Bible High German" (fieldwork, 2021).

Though the level of literacy does not seem of much concern to the *Liadeenst,* it is observed that basic literacy is attained and certainly serves a social purpose. In the shops, as I remarked before, there are written notifications on desks or walls. These may concern meetings, a shop's payment policy, or other information, and are mostly printed in Latin letters using a mix of High German, Spanish, and Plautdietsch. Further literacy depends entirely on the student's interest—which varies considerably—and addresses the community's needs (Hedges, 1996). The shops also sell the bi-monthly *Mennonitische Post* and the *Deutsch-Mexikanische Rundschau*—both German-language publications. Within nearly every family, a few persons read these publications and share what they consider interesting, while others simply glance at the images and headlines.

In Salamanca, there are very few people who speak standard European German. The differences between written High German and spoken Huachdietsch (as explained above) are an important aspect

of the Old Colony sociolinguistic condition. The Mennonite Old Colony pronunciation turns Huachdietsch into an exclusive language. It is a ritual language and nobody is encouraged or expected to understand it or use it for communicating. In school and church, the slow singing, or *Lange Wiese*, in Huachdietsch is embraced as a ritual. While the *Eltesta* preaches in Huachdietsch, he later offers commentary or explanation in Plautdietsch. Women and children are not encouraged to learn Spanish and hardly spend time outside the community. Therefore, most women do not speak or understand Spanish, and Plautdietsch is their sole resource for oral communication. In Salamanca, not even all male adults speak proficient Spanish. Some men, by virtue of having more contact with the Spanish-speaking environment, are known to assist families with medical or administrative visits and the accompanying documentation. These practices accentuate the community's seclusion. Communication is seemingly restricted to the Low German–speaking Mennonite transnational or "island" speech network (see Sneath, 2019b; Cañás Bottos, 2013; Rosenberg, 2005) may influence identification on a national level.

This island Old Colony Mennonite network of similar communities living according to similar rules also facilitates easy adjustment. Family movement between Old Colony Mennonite communities happens frequently. Every year that I visited Salamanca, I tried to ascertain what changes had taken place in the now 17 *Darpa*, *campos*, or street villages that constitute the colony. It was surprising how every year there had been some movement either away from or towards Canada (very few), Belize, the Mexican state of Campeche or to neighbouring communities in Quintana Roo (more frequently). Causes for moving among Old Colony communities are diverse: it can be marriage or remarriage, better land prospects or, for the landless, earning more working as a farmhand in Canada. People also move out of community policy preferences (for example, acceptance or rejection of personal vehicle ownership). Peoples sometimes move back when parents need care, or parents move in with children (fieldwork notes, 2018, 2019, 2021, 2022). On top of that, due to a lack of land, the Salamanca colony started a new settlement in Peru in the province of Ucayali, where in 2022 over 10 Salamanca families had established themselves. At least two of my interlocutors mentioned having lived in at least four different Old Colony communities during their childhood. In these cases, attending new schools in those different places (in Mexico and Belize) occurred without any difficulty due to Old Colony Mennonite schooling uniformity. Such adaptations seem to occur seamlessly within the Old Colony school network. Conversely, in Salamanca, there are also

adolescents who have had some schooling in Canada. According to another interlocutor, some of these youngsters would show off their knowledge of English and, consequently, did not seem to adapt well in the community (fieldwork, July 2019, November 2021).

Old Colony School Benefits for the Community

What do Salamanca children learn in this school environment? Kaufmann observes that Old Colony schooling does not aim to further develop training in knowledge and science. Instead, it wants to prepare students for an exemplary community life (Kaufmann, 1997, pp. 64–65). According to Hedges, the main objective of the education system is the teaching of "literacy-based appropriate use of communicative practices" (Hedges, 1996, p. 151). As Hedges explains, the "appropriate" practices are all about maintaining the existing structure of hierarchy and authority. Crocker (2016) defines Mennonite Old Colony literacy as "the tool through which the children learn the *Katechismus* (catechism and the 18 articles of faith) and hymns (*Gesangbuch*)" (p. 176). Moreover, Sneath (2019a), in the title of her dissertation, and Hedges (1996), in a chapter subtitle (p. 114), both call attention to the common Plautdietsch saying "Je jelieeda, je vekjieede," which comes down to "the more school, the more fool."

Upon leaving the Russian empire, the Old Colony Mennonites carried with them the conviction that autonomy of education and language was something to defend (Sawatsky, 1971). Though not always clear on the exact details, Mennonites in Salamanca are aware that Mennonites who stayed in Russia (later the Soviet Union) suffered a great deal (fieldwork, July 2018) in the ensuing decades of revolution, war, and displacement. When questioned about their Russian past, Salamanca Mennonites stated pride as the cause of the harsh downfall of the Mennonite settlements in southern Russia after their departure. According to their narrative, the prosperity achieved in Tsarist Russia made the Mennonites forget their religious principles. Arrogance (*Huachmoot*), manifested in individual ambition, came at a high cost. Therefore, collective humility, as an important commitment for Old Colony Mennonites, is manifested in the material and intellectual living conditions they have chosen in Salamanca.

School is not only part of community life; it is organized to vindicate community life. In the Salamanca schools, humility is taught. Children do not receive progress reports (Crocker, 2016, p. 176). Learning is not about knowledge. Reading and writing are not about understanding or discussing school materials. The level of literacy

attained is never assessed. Most performances, such as reciting the alphabet and the multiplication tables, singing, and answering questions about catechism items are accomplished as a collective exercise. No student should stand out individually and teachers seem to abstain from stimulating individual excellence. The Salamanca schools teach collectivity before individual expressions. The children, apart from learning to copy and recite Bible texts, are collectively imbued with edifying texts about correct behaviour in the eyes of God. They learn to copy and not ask questions; they learn to be silent, obedient, and not interpret or discuss. The Salamanca schools quietly instill the community rules and protocols, the *Ordnunk*, that regulate Mennonite adult life (Roessingh & Plasil, 2006). In the schoolroom, girls and boys are treated equally but each group is seated apart exactly the way the community is seated in the church. They learn the sitting and singing rituals of the church along with wedding (*Velafniss*) and funeral (*Bejrafniss*) ceremonies. The community's collectivity is visibly emphasized in uniform clothing for small children, youngsters, and adults. Warkentin (2013) observes the same need for collectivity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia when affirming that the colony members regard the whole community's needs as transcending individual aspirations (p. 129). The way the two-language system among Old Colony Mennonites is implemented serves the purpose of protecting the community's ways of religious living. Specifically relating written language at school to the sacred Bible texts and other religious practices (such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals) keeps it away from the everyday Plautdietsch. The children learn to read and write a language they do not learn to speak. And they speak a language they do not learn to read and write. This peculiar diglossia suggests, at the very least, that the system limits communication outside the community's borders. This is further accentuated because Plautdietsch, while serving as the language of communication among Mennonites, is relatively unknown to non-Mennonite Mexicans. Communication outside the community is restricted to (commercial, administrative) functionality in the hands of the rather few Spanish-speaking persons.

A member of the *Liadeenst* I had various conversations with mentioned that the ban on other languages within the school system, apart from being the tradition, also helped "to protect the children" (fieldwork, November 2021). During the founding of the colony in 2002–2003, he told me, the Mennonites had to engage in close interaction with local Mexican labourers. They had to rent machinery and the Mennonite young boys were good at using it, so, as a sign of goodwill and to earn some money, some boys started helping out

Mexicans with their machines. They learned Spanish quickly and well enough to make friends. But in the process, they also acquired bad habits, the worst being alcohol and drug abuse. This caused conflicts in the community and the *Eltesta* prohibited this interaction between their youngsters and the non-Mennonite Mexicans (fieldwork, November 2021). When asked about these occurrences during an interview, the *Eltesta* stressed that, according to him, language was not the problem, but behaviour, the culture that, unfortunately, was connected with speaking the language. This argument is often heard when questions are asked about the possibility of learning Spanish. The language is not a problem, but the Mexican culture is. When referring to Mexican culture, my interlocutors mostly talked about bad drugs and drinking habits and corruption (fieldwork 2018–2022), but there is also a gap in the sociolinguistic domain. The Salamanca Old Colony inhabitants tend to be less talkative or social than the non-Mennonite Mexicans who visit them or work with them.

Comparisons, Changes, Challenges

When comparing life in Salamanca with Old Colony life in the colonies the grandparents of the Salamanca inhabitants came from (Manitoba colony in Chihuahua, Mexico, and Blue Creek, Shipyard, and Little Belize in Belize), one can wonder how long the isolationist protection strategies will hold. At least since the 1950s, Chihuahua has been a visiting space for other conservative and more-worldly Anabaptists of Canadian or American origin. They came as school teachers, preachers, medical practitioners, or perhaps to seek religious relief (Quiring, 2004; Janzen, 2018). Contacts with family in Canada and the US are more frequent nowadays. In almost all Mennonite settlements in Chihuahua (Kleine Gemeinde, Sommerfeld, and also several Old Colony communities), members have cars, cell phones, and computers. In the Manitoba, Swift Current, and Ojo de la Yegua colonies there are at least four Mennonite trilingual primary-to-college institutions and a few German-Spanish primary-to-college schools (called *Komitee-Schule*). The remaining traditionalist Old Colony communities in Chihuahua are having trouble finding teachers for their village schools. On the one hand, popularity of Bibles in the Plautdietsch language seems to be growing and, in some places, even the Sunday worship service is conducted in Plautdietsch. On the other hand, among young Mennonites and in non–Old Colony schools, there is a notable interest in learning German as it is spoken in Germany. There are teachers from Germany and young

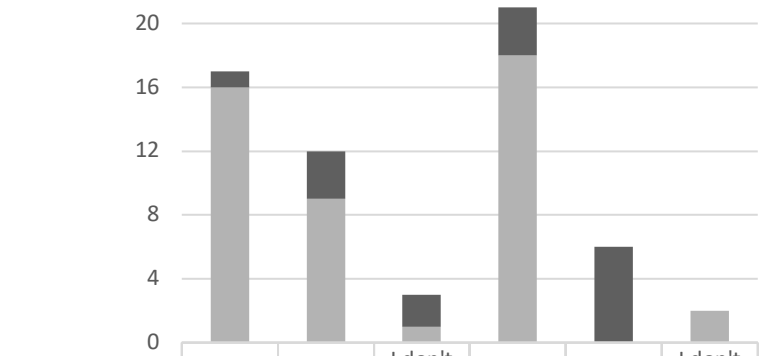
Mennonites express their desire to visit Germany. Spanish seems to be an integrated part of the language skills of many because a growing number of Mennonites are working in offices or other workplaces rather than on the land. (fieldwork, September 2021).

In Belize, Blue Creek (Orange Walk District) harbours a progressive evangelical Mennonite community (the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church), with its head office in Linda Vista, as well as a Kleine Gemeinde community in Edenthal. In Linda Vista, at school and in church, the Luther Bible has been replaced by the King James Bible and High German has been replaced by English. In Edenthal, schooling is also in English except for Christmas, when children learn songs in German from the *Liedbuak*. Plautdietsch remains the home language, although it is rapidly losing ground to English. Shipyard (Orange Walk District) is mainly Old Colony Mennonite with traditional Old Colony schools. At the beginning of this century, with a lot of trouble, a group of young families formed their own community following excommunication by the Old Colony community for their conflicting ideas about Bible-reading and learning (Plasil, 2015). Their schools follow an English language curriculum. Little Belize (Corozal District), the community most families in Salamanca originally came from, is a secluded Old Colony Mennonite community like Salamanca. Some English and Spanish are spoken, but the main languages are High German/Huachdietsch for school and church and Plautdietsch for everyday communication (fieldwork, July/August, 2019).

Interest in Plautdietsch is growing in Salamanca. In 2017, very few families possessed a Bible and/or a catechism in Plautdietsch. In 2021, I was told that several more families and all of the colony's ministers now had a Bible in Plautdietsch. The person sharing this information presumed the *Eltesta* did not approve of this. Yet, one year later when I interviewed the *Eltesta*, he showed me his Plautdietsch Bible and other texts in Plautdietsch. An opinion poll conducted in Salamanca in 2021 asked adolescents and adults between 15 and 75 years (totalling 29 males and 32 females) the question: "What do you think? Should one, in addition to High German, learn to read and write in Plautdietsch at school?" All males under the age of 45 expressed a positive interest in education in their own Plautdietsch language, except two who stated they didn't know what to answer (fieldwork, 2021). Among the women, the younger ones were more inclined to answer this question positively, but the differences between women under and over age 45 were not as striking as among the men.

Figure 1.

Salamanca 2021 poll: "Should one, in addition to High German, learn to read and write in Plautdietsch at school?"



	Women			Men		
age ≥ 45 years	1	3	2	3	6	0
age < 45 years	16	9	1	18	0	2

The influence of a Mennonite missionary colony newly settled in 2019 in Los Cuates (about 40 km away from Salamanca) presents an important test case for the Salamanca *Ordnunk* and maybe their language policy. In the new colony, a group of Mennonites with a similar traditional background to the Salamanca community performs weekly Bible readings and discussions in Plautdietsch and invites men and women alike to participate. This is something that has never been attempted in Salamanca. In 2021, I learned that some young family men in Salamanca had caused heated discussions about material and religious aspects of the Salamanca way of life: they expressed the need to form Bible study groups and also argued for the personal use of cars and cell phones. This was not approved by the *Broodaschoft*, the community body of baptized men where the *Liadeenst* has a dominant voice. Some families had already moved to the missionary community of Los Cuates. Schooling in Los Cuates is also different from Salamanca. For instance, they have their own materials from Mennonite schools in Canada and Chihuahua and the children learn to read, write, and speak standard German and English. On my second visit in December 2022, two of the older children, rehearsing for their Christmas recital, also read a text in Plautdietsch (fieldwork, December 2021, 2022).

One of the *Liadeenst* members I interviewed (fieldwork, November 2021) stated that in meetings of the *Broodaschoft*, controversies about the use of cars and cell phones or sometimes about religious matters undeniably exist (and are increasing). However, the majority agree with the more traditional views of the *Eltesta*: no change, we keep things as they are. My interlocutor said he believes in the religious sincerity or purity of the isolated Old Colony community so he also accepts the necessity of keeping things as they are. In his words, he considers it the conservationist role of the bishop to safeguard the *Ordnunk*. As Cañás Bottos (2009) puts it: "In the eyes of the Old Colony Mennonites 'religion' is a 'total social fact' . . . subsumed to the authority of the *Leardeenst*" (p. 114). The Salamanca Mennonites do not reject other people or other cultures, but they see themselves as apart from the world, sanctified, in their obedience to their faith (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Conclusion

We return to the initial question of this paper: how does the survival of the Salamanca Old Colony Mennonites relate to their sociolinguistic situation? Clearly, the Old Colony community of Salamanca's educational methods, language use, and school organization serve the purpose of introducing the Mennonite children to the traditional community's religious way of life and the dominance of the *Ordnunk*. It is part of a strategy to preserve "Old Colony life as it is" and to maintain isolation. In spite of indicating that "language never is a problem," the *Liadeenst* members show an interest in keeping the school system and its language use as they are. Nevertheless, during the period of observation (2017–2022), an increasing range of challenges were observed that may be affecting the community's traditions. These include the presence of evangelical Mennonite communities and growing pressure for some modernization. In 2021, as I previously indicated, more families in Salamanca possessed a Bible in Plautdietsch. This could indicate a change in language preference in the religious domain as reflected in the outcome of my Plautdietsch survey. The developments are recent and further fieldwork is needed to follow up on these and other possible lifestyle variations.

The Old Colony Mennonite education policy observed in Salamanca indicates that upholding the autonomous school and language system is not only a heritage act. The educational system stands as a buttress to preserve the continuity of their religion-based community. Language use in Salamanca maintains a social

distance from the surrounding world and, through its educational workings, it also accomplishes a certain renunciation of worldly information, avoids individual competitiveness, and stresses collectivity. These are all in line with the continuance of the community. However, given the visible persuasive modern (worldly) technologies and the developments in other similar communities in Mexico and Belize, it must be acknowledged that this status quo is not unchallenged.

Notes

[1] Thank you to the community of Salamanca, from whom I continue to learn. Thank you to my reviewers for your helpful support. Any errors or inconsistencies in this text are my responsibility.

[2] I discuss the distinction between High German and "Mennonite High German" below.

[3] All references in Plautdietsch are spelled according to Zacharias's (2009) monolingual Plautdietsch dictionary unless otherwise stated.

[4] The *Buchstabier- und Lesebuch*.

[5] Translation by author.

[6] Before 2021 there were three bi-monthly periods. This was changed due to fluctuating harvest times, when boys, from around 9 years of age, are called in to help (fieldwork, 2021).

[7] The *Fibel* and the instruction (text) cards are ordered from Librería Alemán in Cuauhtémoc. Only the *Fibel* becomes the property of each pupil.

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