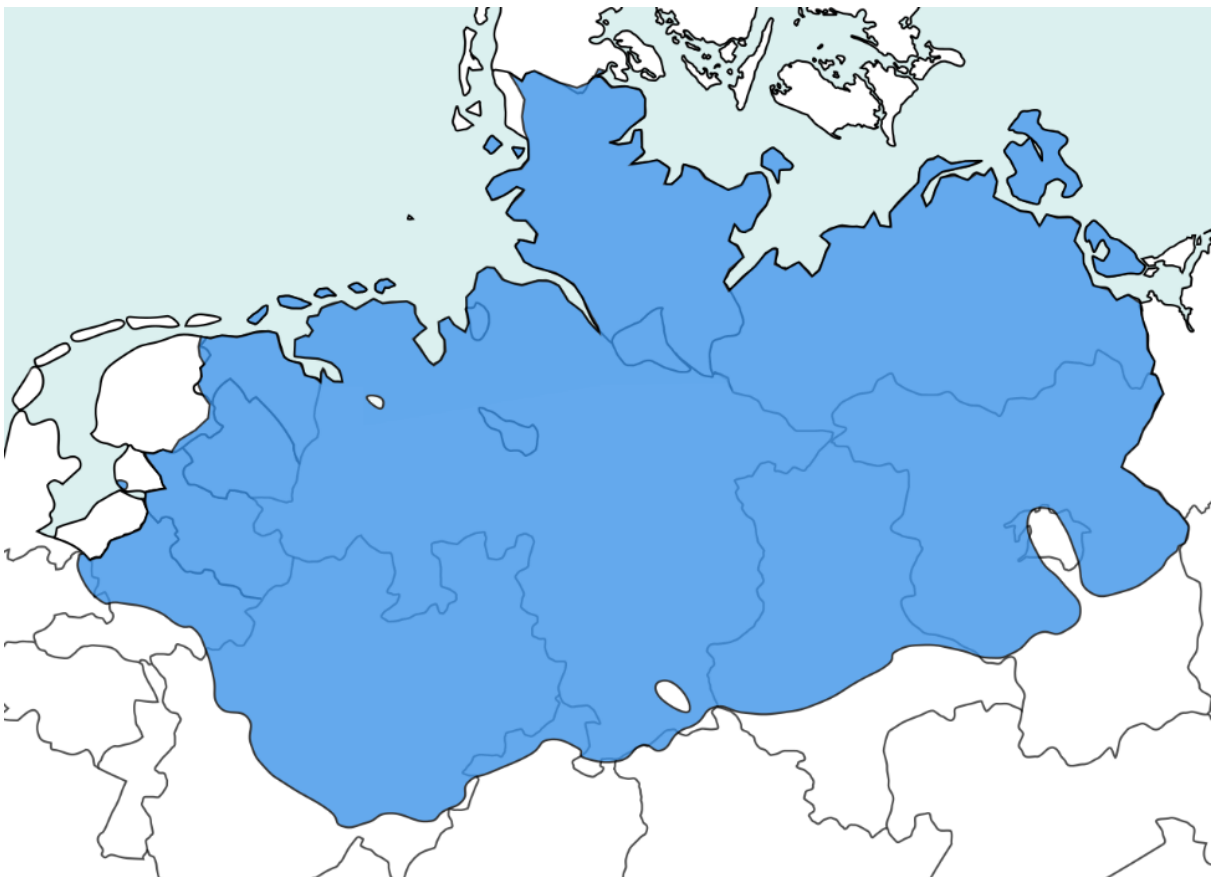


Reviving the German cousin of English

How Digital Media could save the Low German language from extinction

February 23, 2022 – Paul Krummrey

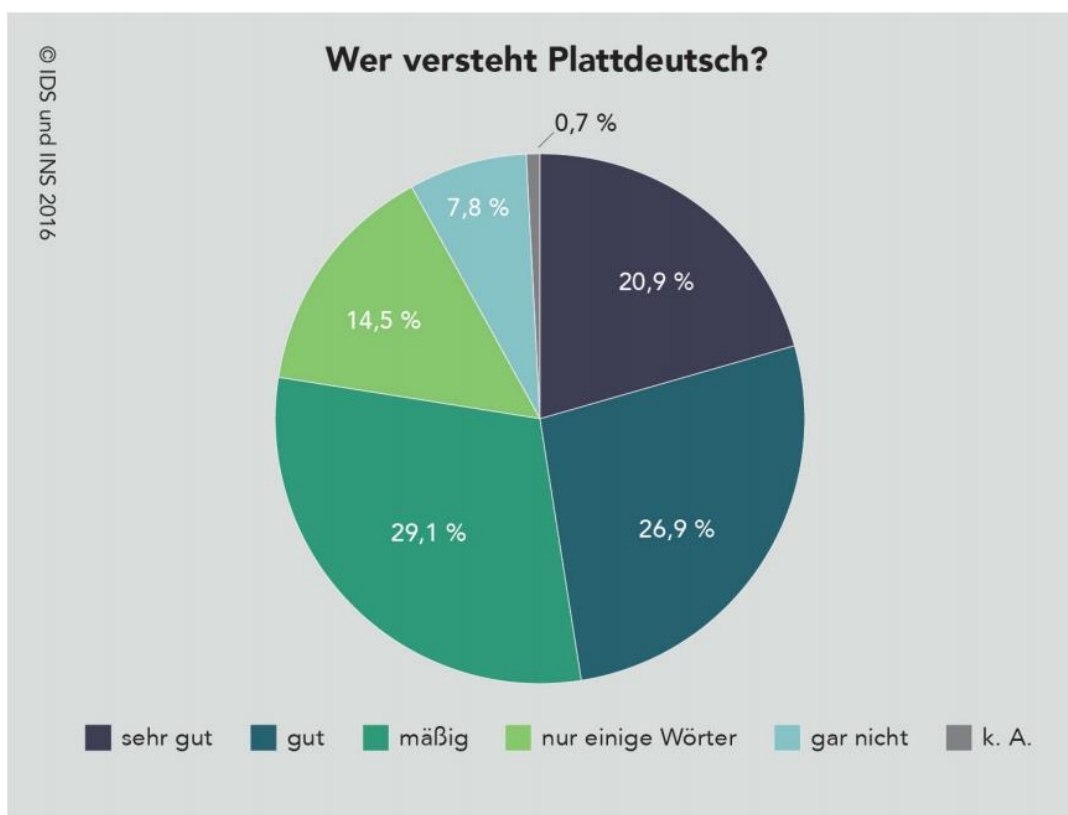
Did you know the English language has a German cousin? Do not worry. Like nobody does. Though indeed, it has: A very old German cousin that is to say. When the Angles and Saxons, the ancestors of the modern English, set sail from what is today Northern Germany 1500 years ago to conquer Britain from the Romans, some of their kin stayed behind on the continent. Over the centuries the two groups and their languages developed quite differently. While the use of English is at an all-time high being spoken by billions around the globe, dominating science and global culture, its Low German cousin is on its way out.



Pic. 1: Where people speak Low German since 1945 (2008)

Today, the second generation of North Germans (me included) is growing up without being the ability to speak the language. While my grandparents could still have a fluid conversation in it, my parents and I are at best able to understand what they are saying. For the last three centuries the High German language used by most Germans in daily life has continuously pushed back its regional Low German relative. First from church, culture, and commerce and in the last century also from most people's everyday life. Past attempts of keeping the language alive using TV, theatre and radio had only limited success. Despite all this, two thirds of North Germans still think their traditional language should be strengthened (Adler and Ehlers, 2016). For this, the protection of Low German by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages and especially the recent rise of digital media has given rise to new hopes (Bundesraat för Nedderdüütsch and Goltz, 2010).

So let's take a closer look at these hopes now and see what is still preventing them from being fulfilled.



Pic. 2: Who can understand Low German? Very good – good - a little bit – just some words – not at all (2016)

The biggest obstacle to them is the prevailing attitude towards Low German. While most see it as more personal, open, and welcoming than High German, its decline in the last century has led to indifference (Buchholz, 2020). Though around 50% can understand Low German well or very well, most people today do not use it in everyday life (Adler and Ehlers, 2016). As such most would consider knowledge of it as a luxury and not as an everyday tool of communication. Therefore, many do not teach it to their children or were not taught by their grandparents. Although they value skills in Low German and would like to see it strengthened. I am no exception to this rule. On the one hand, I feel sympathy towards the language and think it is important to protect and strengthen it. On the other hand, I do not contribute to that cause in any notable way and leave it up to others to do something.

This overall sentiment has given rise to an interesting phenomenon: Low German is neither allowed to live nor to die. Efforts are being made to preserve it by both private and official actors like an object in a museum. But not quite enough is being done to keep it alive in the long run (Arendt, 2010).

Can digital media change this?

Currently, there is only limited content available in Low German on the internet. State run Northern German Broadcasting (NDR) and Radio Bremen offer a variety of media ranging from talk shows to news broadcast online. However, like most German media produced by public broadcasters, these programs are targeted at an older audience and thus not very attractive to the younger generations. Recently though, NDR tried to change this by creating their own [podcasts in Low German](#) and experimenting with other media formats (Bundesrat für Nedderdütsch and Goltz, 2010). In addition, several [language learning apps](#) similar to the well-known Duolingo are being developed or are already available right now. [Wikipedia](#) too has a very motivated team of Low German authors. But most importantly, some bands and musicians started creating their own new songs in Low German again. These are available online on platforms like Spotify. [Just have a look!](#)

Being used to the wonders the internet is offering in English, this may not seem like much. But sometimes it does not take much to make a change. Around the globe smaller communities with more limited resources were able to help their languages (and cultures) prosper and prevail using similar forms of digital indigenous media. The indigenous people of Taiwan are a great example for this (Ginsburg, 2016). At least it can be seen as good start. In the future, more exclusively Low German content online could help reactivate the passive language skills most have, improve the active skills of some and make others want to learn the language (Arendt, 2010).

But for that to happen some things would have to change.



Pic. 3: Low German class in Böklund, Germany – “We speak Low German!” (2021)

First, people would have to be able to create and consume digital media in Low German. To enable them to do so Low German lessons in school would be a great opportunity. At my school these were voluntary and not many students participated but recently more and more schools in Northern Germany started offering these courses in Low German (Arendt, 2010). Second, the state

governments should shift their efforts away from preserving the language as it was 100 years ago. Supporting Low German artists, initiatives and so on taking the language into the 21st century by utilising the opportunities of digital media may prove far more effective (Arendt, 2010). Finally, it is most important to end the current state of apathy regarding Low German by raising awareness for its cultural richness and the importance to act now to keep it alive. Then there may be a future for the half-forgotten cousin of English again.

References

- Adler, A. and Ehlers, C. (2016) *Status und Gebrauch des Niederdeutschen 2016: Erste Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Erhebung*, Mannheim, Institut für Deutsche Sprache.
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- Ginsburg, F. (2016) 'Indigenous Media From U-Matic to Youtube: Media Sovereignty in the Digital Age', *Sociologia & Antropologia*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 581–599.

Pictures

- **Picture 1:** Eenfache Koort vun dat Spraakrebeet vun dat Plattdüütsche by Wikipedia-user Slomox (2008), https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nds_Spraakrebeet_na1945.svg (Accessed 23 February 2022)
- **Picture 2:** Wer versteht Plattdeutsch by Adler, A. and Ehlers C. (2016)
- **Picture 3:** Plattdeutsch-Unterricht by Auenwaldschule Grundschule Böklund (2021), http://www.auenwaldschule.de/mediathek/dokumentation/DOCschulprofil/DOCschulprofil_niederdeutsch.php (Accessed 25 February 2022)

Notes

- Without the citations and notes the blog post would fit in to the given limit of 1000 words.
- Also, I used links instead of media players and other widgets for the referenced digital media in Low German as Microsoft Word does not easily allow for them.