

Impact of World War I on the Language and Identity of German Australians

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Abstract

*The motives that drove German immigration to Australia in the 1830s were essentially religious, economic, political, and social. Though shifted to another country, German Australians maintained strong ties with their German heritage up until World War I. But the reversal of this situation began with the rising tension between the British and the German Empire on the eve of the First World War. It is evident from a church periodical titled *The Australian Lutheran*, published from 1913 to 1921, that there was a dramatic language shift from German to English in the Australian Lutheran church as severe anti-German attitudes developed among the Australian people during the war. This anti-German attitude affected religious as well as cultural and ethnic identities of the German Australian community. This paper aims at exploring how the First World War impacted the language choice of the German Australian community in Australia and consequently how it crippled their identity.*

Linguistically, Australia is a very resourceful country. There is an Australian national variety of English and other varieties of English, 150 aboriginal languages, 100 of which unfortunately have less than 100 speakers each, several aboriginal Creoles, and 75-100 immigrant tongues in Australia (Clyne, 1987, p. 1). The 1986 census indicates that other than English, eleven different languages were used in Australia. Among these, German was spoken by 111,276 people. The Australian language policy has been accommodating all these diverse languages and seeking ways for developing and facilitating the use of these languages. But this present scenario was largely absent at the time of World War I. Particularly, this sensitive war climate had a deadly effect on the German Australian community as their language, their cultural, and religious identities had faced continuous threats in Australia because Germans declared war against the British in 1914.

Language and identity have a complex relationship, and is a very well researched area in Sociology and Anthropology. Language has several functions beyond communication. Bourdieu argues that “the value ascribed to speech cannot be understood apart from the person who speaks and the persons who speak cannot be understood apart from a large network of relationships”(1977). Besides this social aspect, language controls reality and reaches the supernatural, e.g., the language of prayers; it is a vital tool for expressing identity (as we can see in Woods, 2004). So language bears the social, cultural, economic, religious, and the national identities of those people who speak it. Because of this interrelationship, if one is altered, then the other is automatically affected. Again, the pattern of language maintenance in an immigrant context is different from how it is maintained in a native context. Generally, “Diglossia” is an inevitable situation for the immigrant community as they want to integrate with the target language community socially and extract economic benefits from it. But they also expect the continuity of their mother tongue and culture. As Fishman observes, “Diglossia is a cultural posture whereby one language is reserved for one set of

ethno-culturally approved and essentially self-regulated functions (e.g., outside relations) and another language is reserved for another set (e.g., inside relations) (1991, p. 357). For instance, German Australians were a group of German born people who left Germany for religious, political, and economic reasons, and arrived in Australian colonies to seek a better life. In the 1830s, Old Lutherans faced persecution in Europe that led to their rejection of attempts by the King of Prussia to exercise state control over all churches. All Lutherans who revolted against this decision faced death penalties and traditional Lutheranism was declared illegal. So, these people left their homeland to pursue religious freedom. Beside this religious sect, the bitter economic experience of rural communities during 1844 and 1846 (Leske, 1996, p. 17) and also the rising nationalistic sentiment of the 1850s contributed to their desire to emigrate to a foreign land, thus form the German Australian community in Australia. This community, except the Lutherans, used English for official purposes but German inside the home. Lutherans used German for both “inside” and “outside” functions. When the war broke out, this German community became the subject of suspicion and animosity because of their German parentage and also for their language as Germany was one of the central opponents of the British Empire and its allies. So, driven by war fever, the Australian high ups and the ordinary Australians compelled and influenced the German Australians to shift from German to English. This forced language shift and other pressures were mortal blows to their identity. In the first section of this paper, the complex relationship between language and identity will be illustrated briefly (only to the extent it is required for the present discussion); then the political and ultra-patriotic zeal of the Australians which intensified anti-German attitudes will be highlighted; and in the final section some light will be thrown on the German Australians with particular reference to the Australian Lutheran church and Lutheran schools, and on the rising anti-German attitudes affecting various aspects of the German Australians’ identity during the First World War.

Aims and Scope

Despite the fact that the study of national and religious identities is an enriched research area in Sociology and Anthropology, little attention has been given to related language matters. This paper thus aims at contributing to the research by providing examples from the German Australian immigrant context and also from the context of the Lutheran church in Australia during World War I by exploring the factors behind the language shift in this community. The aim of this paper is also to focus on the complex relationships between language and identity and to show how alteration of one affects the other. The scope of this paper is historical, with specific focus on growing anti-German attitudes of Australians in the wake of WWI, the pressure on the Lutheran church, and the effect of the war climate on German Australian identity.

Research Methodology

This study is based on qualitative analysis of some secondary data collected by retrieving the websites of Lutheran Archives and Queensland State Archives where the history of German Australians has been preserved. The researcher has also explored books and research articles dealing with German Australian history to portray the true picture of German Australians living in Australia during WWI. Excerpts have also been used from a church periodical titled *The*

Australian Lutheran published from 1913 to 1921 to identify language motives of the Lutheran church. In addition, some historical data have been presented to highlight the influence of the war situation in making English instead of German the language of German Australians, and the final conclusion is based on analysis of these data.

The Complex Relationship between Language and Identity

Language and identity are closely connected. Identity is socially constructed and language is one of the major mediums for expressing identity. According to Norton, “Every time language learners speak they are not only exchanging information with their interlocutors; they are also constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (1997, p. 410). Again, he uses the term “identity” to refer to “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space and how people understand their possibilities for future” (p. 410). Besides, language has symbolic power. For example, if a particular language is considered to be prestigious in a country, then the group of people who speak that variety will be privileged. So, automatically, other varieties as well as the people who speak in those varieties will be marginalized because social institutions such as schools, religious institutions, official institutions, and social clubs will encourage the former group and they will be able to extract more benefits from these institutions than the latter groups. Thus, the former group will be socially, culturally, religiously, politically, and economically in a higher position than the latter group. In other words, as identity is socially attributed and negotiated, social institutions such as schools, churches, and clubs will play an influential role in the continuity of that identity because in these institutions people practice their own culture in their own language. For instance, since the very beginning of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, the West Pakistanis who dominated East Pakistan made an effort to impose Urdu on the people of East Pakistan whose mother tongue was Bangla. Though their attempt was aborted, their aim was to deprive Bangalees linguistically, socially, economically, politically, and culturally. Urdu was made the state language, that is to say, the language of education, social interaction, cultural practices, and employment. The intention was to paralyze Bangalees and perpetuate their “Raj” by placing Urdu-speaking people in privileged positions. Their master plan was to erase Bengali identity by suppressing Bangla. It is obvious from this example that only by denying a particular language, perhaps, it is possible to rub out all signs of identity of a particular linguistic group. Again, as mentioned above, in an immigrant context, people maintain two varieties of languages, that is one for “outside relations” and the other for “inside relations” and thus ensure the “intergenerational” continuity of their language, culture as well as their identity. But, sometimes, in an immigrant context, because of political and societal pressures such practice may become problematic. In his book *After the Last Sky*, Edward Said captured the poignancy of displacement when he says: “Identity – who we are, where we come from, what we are – is difficult to maintain in exile ... we are the other, an opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement, an exodus” (1946, p. 16-17).

Said's concept of "otherness" indicates the peripheral and marginalized condition of people dislocated from their own country. Again "exile" of any kind, whether it is by choice or because of pressure from others torment, people move between their old identity and their new one, and become marginalized. German Australians thus had undergone the same fate during WWI.

In the following section, the specific historical and political reasons why German Australians were considered as "enemy aliens" (Fischer, 1989) in Australia though they were born and bred in Australia will be explicated.

Reasons behind Anti-German Attitudes

After they migrated to Australia, German Australians built churches and schools, known as German schools, and largely remained isolated from other settlers because of their language, religion, and distinct culture. Though they kept their traditional values and customs, they did not maintain patriotic and political ties with Germany (Leske, 1996, p. 145). Besides, the pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Church made their position clear on the question of loyalty by saying: "We enjoy all rights and privileges of British subjects and therefore believe to owe complete and undivided patriotism to the government" (Fischer, 1989, p. 23).

Despite their loyalty to the Australian government, with the declaration of the war, this community became the object of suspicion and hatred, and underwent untold harassments. Again, the ultra-patriotic zeal of Australians during the Great War caused much suffering for German Australians. Because of Germany's involvement in WWI against the British Empire, Australians with German parentage became the most visible enemies for Australians. As Australia was besotted with war fever, common Australians were keen for ways to get involved in the war. Fischer explains, "attacking [Germans] made the distant war seem real and immediate; Australians could feel that they were fighting war at home" (1989).

The sinking of the German light cruiser SMS Emden by the Australian light cruiser HMAS Sydney in the Cocos Island was one of Australia's first actions in the war and excited the nation. The event created hysteria about possible German naval attack, thus establishing immediately cultural and national divisions within the community. Besides, after the release of the Bryce Report in 1915 on alleged atrocities, the sinking of the liner Lusitania by a German U-boat and the growing casualty lists from Gallipoli contributed to a hardening attitude against Germans. The real victims were the German Australians at the home front. As a reaction to those losses, Australians widened the process of internment. Moreover, anti-German sentiments were inflamed through nationalistic propaganda. These propaganda, newsreels, and posters were used to demonize the German Australian community.

This war hysteria was further intensified by Prime Minister "Billy" Hughes who told the Australians that "No German can be trusted" and made vitriolic attacks against them in the press. These patriotic presses poisoned the minds of Australians by giving them the impression that all Germans in Australia were agents of the Kaiser government. The best example of such xenophobia was the weekly *The Mail* published in Adelaide. This kind of "senseless xenophobia" fostered by unscrupulous propagandists made life terrible for most Lutherans and all Germans in Australia.

Because of these above mentioned reasons, German Australians were treated with violent fanaticism in their home country despite the fact that some of their family members had joined Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) and had embraced death for Australia.

Effect of the Anti-German Attitude on German Australians' Identity

When German Australians settled in Australia, they were treated with high esteem as they made significant contributions to Australian economy and other aspects of Australian life. These people valued their language, culture, and Lutheran identity highly. But, with the beginning of the WWI, that past belief was shattered. German Australians' identity, including their religious, political, economic identities, was at stake as the war-frenzied Australians took harsh steps to erase possible signs of "German-ness" from the Australian soil and wanted to do their bit against the German Australians. In his book *Internment at Trial Bay during World War One*, Gerhard Fischer pointed out the destructive motive of the Australians:

The Australian government sought to destroy the German community as an autonomous, socio-cultural entity within Australian society ... through many different avenues, the closing of German clubs, and Lutheran schools, the internment of the leaders, so as to deprive German Australians of their spokesmen, their representatives in the mainstream public sphere of the Australian society. Together with the destruction of what might be called the socio-cultural infrastructure of the community, this would have the effect – it was thought – of intimidating and keeping in check the rest of the community: it would lead to its disintegration and eventual disappearance (2005, p. 30).

From Fischer's comment, it is evident that World War I brought about catastrophic changes in the lives of German Australians. Other steps that affected their identity were also taken. Lutheran schools and churches were closed. Besides, during the First World War, 6890 people were interned (Fischer, 1989). In 1915, German and Austrians who were too old to join the army were put into German concentration camps across the continent. Others were carefully watched by police and neighbors. Under this constant surveillance, some lost their jobs and their businesses were destroyed. For example, Karl Fink, the owner of the Fink's Hotel, the largest hotel in Perth, fled to Sweden and it was confiscated by public trustees. Moreover, German music was banned and German literature was severely impacted. The government banned the import of all printed matter from Germany and prohibited the publication of papers and magazines in German language in Australia. Again, severe anti-German attitude was also expressed through changing of food and place names into British ones. For example, no one in Brisbane or Britain could buy local dairy products stamped "Bismark," and the name "Bismark" was changed into "Maclagan" to honor the British General in Gallipoli. Besides, place names like Blumberg became Birdwood, German Creek became Empire Bay, and Germanton became Holbrook.

In summary, because of the severe hatred shown towards the German Australians, the State and Commonwealth government took the above mentioned extreme steps. The First World War made the Australians hyperactive enough to want to destroy German Australian property and to torment them so badly that some German Australian families replaced their German

names with English ones. This anglicized naming is the extreme example of how they lost their German identity. The German Australians' identity crisis during the World War I can be compared with the abject socio-economic condition and identity crisis of Bihari communities in Bangladesh after the Liberation war of 1971. Like the German Australians, around one million Urdu-speaking Muslims from the Indian provinces of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, now known as "Stranded Pakistani" or Bihari, migrated to East Pakistan immediately after the partition of British India in 1947 to escape communal bloodshed and to preserve their religious practices, that is, their Islamic way of life. But, unlike the German Australians, Biharis worked against the interest of the majority of Bangalees and collaborated with the West Pakistani regime in the freedom struggle of the Bangalees in 1971 as they were non-Bangalees and also because they enjoyed all the privileges of a Pakistani citizen. So when Bangalees achieved victory, this Bihari community became the object of hatred and also lost their Pakistani identity. They have now turned into "artificial minority" in Bangladesh as they are considered "a distinct group of people who are not part of Bangladesh, but yet living there as unwanted refugees"(Farzana, 2008, p. 1). For four decades, these people have been living a life of extreme poverty and do not have access to proper shelter, education, medical facilities, and employment. So, these people can identify themselves neither as Bangladeshis nor as Pakistanis. Similarly, even the naturalized German Australians could claim themselves neither as Australians nor as Germans. Moreover, history shows us that German Australians left their Fatherland to seek religious freedom as they refused to conform to the authority of their own state over the church and thus faced persecution. Though these churches were under the shadow of German identity in Australia, they were loyal to the British crown. But during WWI, they were accused of fostering "Germanism" and thus faced persecution. So it was an irony of fate that in Germany they were persecuted for being Lutheran and in Australia for being German. This is how their religious identity was threatened. Besides, to rub out the signs of German-ness, the Australian government took some covert policies to stop Lutheran education through German language in Lutheran schools which made the shift from German to English possible. Finally, the closure of Lutheran schools was catastrophic for the ethnic identity of the German Australian community as "religion and language can be important national identity markers and are essential components of ethno-national identity, along with presumed historical continuity and culture"(Safran, 2002, p. 154). By imposing a ban on German music and the importation of German literature and magazines, their cultural identity was threatened. Thus, German Australians became marginalized and were turned into suppressed "exodus" in Australia during the First World War.

Language Shift of the German Australians

In the previous section, I attempted to focus on the war-time political climate of Australia and the effect of the anti-German attitude on their identity. It is evident from the above discussion that the war-hysterical Australians made the lives of German Australians impossible in every possible way. They wanted the disappearance of "German-ness" from Australian soil by breaking down the socio-cultural infrastructure of the German community and by imposing English on them as the one and only language instead of German. As the German language was the bearer of their German identity so the anti-German sentiment was a mortal blow to that language. In that sensitive war period any

attempts to cling to German were considered as anti-Australian. Again, to escape harassments and sufferings, German Australians used German behind closed doors. Moreover, because of the government policy, they were compelled to switch their language from German to English. In the next section, I will throw some light on the language shift factors of German Australians by giving examples of the language choice of the Lutheran schools and Lutheran churches.

Lutheran schools and churches played a significant role in the education of the children of German Australian background. These schools and churches were solely conducted in German. Lutherans believed that education without religion is no education at all; and it was their belief that the Lutheran faith could only be expressed properly in German. The church paper “The Australian Lutheran” states that German “contains a wealth of theological lore, devotional writings, and hymns, not to be found in any other tongue” (1913, p. 2, cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 103). So, Lutheran schools and churches were “crucial fortresses of the intergenerational continuity of the German language” (Clyne, 1968, 1970, 1988, 1994, 1997 as cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 103). These schools had the triple aim of imparting religious education, language maintenance, and general education (Schule der Deutschen Sprache e. v., 1991, p. 12, cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 100). These schools were monolingual up to the 1850s, but from 1870s they started teaching English as a second language by considering the practical use of it as they lived in an English country. But priority was given to German. By 1916, there were 60 bilingual German English schools run by Lutheran churches, including 49 in South Australia, 10 in Victoria, and 1 in New South Wales (Hatoss, 2012, p. 101). Before the war set in, the Lutheran churches in Australia decided to carry out their work mostly in English in response to the need of the Anglicized younger generation and the rapid language shift of the broader German background community. The church recognized that transition from German to English was inevitable and English was increasingly becoming the language of the young people “despite all efforts, entreaties, and admonitions” (*The Australian Lutheran*, 1913, p. 2 cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 102). Again, the church’s decision to shift from German to English was seen necessary, “not only on account of the Anglicized children of the Church, but also because intermarriage had become common phenomenon and the English speaking partners showed a desire to affiliate with the Lutheran Church” (*The Australian Lutheran*, 1913, p. 3 as cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 102). So, during this time there was no external pressure on the Lutheran church to accept English as the church language; rather, they accepted it to appeal to a wider audience, though they felt the threat of losing German. But the First World War accelerated this language shift by exercising pressure on these churches and Lutheran schools. During the War, these schools and churches became objects of suspicion for their retention of German. Though, time and again, the pastors of these churches made their position clear by saying that they used German only for their religious teaching and language was their secondary consideration, there were doubts about their loyalty to the British and to Australia. It was thought “the pastors never lose an opportunity of sowing seeds of disloyalty to the British Crown among Australian Germans ... The German pastors are the emissaries of sedition and rebellion. The reason for the retention of the German schools in South Australia is because German influence can be exercised over children by these German pastors” (Wilson, 1916, as cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 107). Again, these schools were attacked for fostering “Germanism,”

which was believed to isolate German Australians from mainstream Australians. Due to these reasons, these schools were under serious pressure and gradually shifted increasingly towards English as the language of instruction. Pressure was exerted by the Commonwealth and the State governments to conform to Australian monolingual education. These covert policies led to the gradual decrease of German in schools. A South Australian school timetable from approximately 1896 shows a breakdown of two-fifths of the day in German, three-fifths in English, while other syllabi from 1910 to 1914 show lessons in German only before the morning recess, while the rest of the day was conducted in English (Volk, 1962, p. 5 as cited in Hatoss, 2012, p. 101). During the war, because of anti-German sentiment, the State Parliament decided in 1916 that English must be the only medium of instruction in schools, and in 1917, forty-one Lutheran schools were closed by an act of parliament in South Australia (Hatoss, 2012, p. 107). The use of German came under threat not only in these schools and churches, but also in community life. Though the pastors and other Australians of German parentage distanced themselves from their German identity, they were interned due to the Australians' fanaticism. German Australians found that speaking German or even having German names accrued unrestrained vehemence. In short, Australian State and Federal government took some strict measures to erase all natural rights of German Australians, including political, economic, employment, cultural, and religious. To escape this situation, some German families were found to anglicize their names and they shifted to English from German even in the private sphere.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the perilous effect of World War One on German identity of the German Australian community. In the war-frenzied climate, out of jealousy and racial antagonism towards German Australians, Australians attempted to efface "Germanism" by shedding their heritage and by suppressing and oppressing their linguistic, cultural, and religious practices. The Australian State government and the Commonwealth government took extreme steps to close all those avenues of their lives which gave them recognition as a separate socio-cultural-religious-linguistic entity within Australian society and ensured their safety and security as "identity relates to desire – the desire for recognition; quest for visibility; the sense of being acknowledged; a deep desire for association – what Edward Said would call 'affiliation' and the desire for protection, safety and security" (West, 1992) and thus paved the way for the "eventual disappearance" of the German heritage from Australian soil.

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