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Martin Luther: Vater einer allgemeinen Sprache?

Martin Luther: Father of a Standard Language?

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John Wesley Powell Undergraduate Research Conference

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Martin Luther is usually best known for his *95 Theses*, which was written in protest of the selling of indulgences and directed to the Archbishop of Mainz on October 31, 1517. Luther wrote this during his time as a professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. He first wrote the *95 Theses* in Latin, the language used in the church and in academia at the time. It was not until January 1518 that colleagues of Luther translated the *95 Theses* into German and through the recently invented printing press, it was spread rapidly throughout Germany. The *95 Theses* was also quickly criticized and as a consequence Luther was called to trial in front of Cardinal Cajetan in Augsburg in October 1518, but Luther fled back to Wittenberg. On May 18, 1521 Luther appeared for trial in front of the Diet of Worms. Since Luther refused to renounce his works, he was named an outlaw and a heretic and his works were thereafter forbidden. It was now illegal to offer Luther help or food, since he was a criminal and was to be arrested. After the Diet of Worms, on Luther's journey back to Wittenberg, soldiers of the Elector of Saxony, Frederick III, staged a kidnapping of Luther to make it appear as if he were being arrested, but instead he was brought to safety in the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, where he continued to write under the Pseudonym 'Junker Jörg' and also worked to translate the bible from Latin to German.

When Luther's first translation of the New Testament was published in Wittenberg in 1522, there were already fourteen bible translations in Middle High German, printed in Strasbourg, Augsburg and Nuremberg, and four bibles in Low German, printed in Cologne, Lübeck, and Halberstadt.¹ Luther's Early New High German translation was so influential that these other translations were no longer printed after the publishing of Luther's bible.²

¹ Horan, et al, 36

² Horan, et al, 36

Martin Luther's translation of the New Testament was based on the Greek New Testament by Erasmus.³ Luther's Old Testament and the Apocrypha were based on the Hebrew texts.⁴ Professors of Greek and Hebrew, Phillip Melanchthon and Matthaeus Aurogallus, both had an extensive knowledge of the Vulgate and assisted Luther with the translations.⁵ Luther used these versions of the bible because he wanted his translation to be as close as possible to the original, but he wanted a German vernacular translation, so every German-speaking person, educated or not would be able to read the bible and understand it for themselves. To accomplish this, he used Early New High German, which was a written language that was very similar to spoken German, but also mixed it with some Latin. Luther asserts this in his *Sendbrief von Dolmetschen* (1530), "We do not have to ask the literal Latin how we are to speak German, as these donkeys do. Rather we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, by the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. Then they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them."⁶ Early New High German mixed with the Latin of the Church was very important because common people were now able to participate in the church and read the bible without the instruction of clergy members and were able to make their own opinions and assumptions of the bible and the word of God.

Because Luther wanted every German-speaking person to have the opportunity to read and understand the bible, he used grammar and a style very close to normal speech. He was the first to use modal words, such as *sollen* and *wollen* in his translation.⁷ Modal words and similar

³ Horan, et al 37

⁴ Horan, et al 37

⁵ Horan, et al 37

⁶ Luther (translated by Gary Mann for project Wittenberg)

⁷ König, 97

words were seldom used in religious writings, but Luther used them to make his text flow better and to clarify meanings. He also used ‘seasoning words’ like ‘allein,’ ‘doch,’ ‘nur,’ and ‘schon’.⁸ These words bring the bible language and the spoken language close together. Luther clarifies the importance of these words in his work *Rein und Klar Deutsch*: “But it is the nature of our language that in speaking about two things, one which is affirmed, the other denied, we use the word *allein* (only/apart) along with the word *nicht* (not) or *kein* (no).”⁹ The usage of these words like ‘allein’ have an extra meaning for the Lutheran faith and followers. The usage of these types of words can be seen, for example, in Romans 3:28 in Luther’s translation: “So halten wir es nu/ das der mensch gerecht werde/ on des gesetzes werck/ allein durch den glauben.” “ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law”¹⁰ It is said that Luther is the first to add what would be the word ‘apart’ to this part of the bible. This shows that one does not have to participate in the selling of indulgences to go to heaven, as asserted at this time by the Catholic church, but it is alone through their faith in God.¹¹ Therefore he used the word ‘apart’ to convey his meaning.

Important for the spread of Early New High German as, used in Martin Luther’s bible, was the printing press, which was founded in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg in Mainz. The printing press then spread to Italy in 1464, to Basel in 1465, to Strasbourg in 1458, and to Nuremberg in 1470.¹² At the beginning of the sixteenth century, there were already 80 printing presses in Germany.¹³ The printing press first made its way to Wittenberg, where Luther’s bible

⁸ König, 97

⁹ Luther *Rein und Klar Deutsch* (translated by Gary Mann for project Wittenberg)

¹⁰ Romans 3:28 NIV

¹¹ MacCulloch, 115

¹² König, 90

¹³ Stedje, 121

translation would be printed, in 1509¹⁴, but this late arrival only gave the printing press time to develop before his bible would be printed. It must be established that Luther's ideas and his bible translation would not have been so widely accepted and loved if it had not been for this newly founded printing press. According to research, "the Reformation and the press influenced and molded each other mutually during the first half of the sixteenth century."¹⁵ The research of printing found that in the twenty biggest publishers at this time printed only Catholic literature.¹⁶ Because they only printed Catholic Literature, the other publishers must have printed a very large quantity of Luther's writings because they accounted for 11.5% of everything that was printed at this time.¹⁷ Smaller printing presses would have to print a great deal of Luther's works and Luther would have had to write a large quantity of works. Looking at a map of the spread of Protestantism in Europe in 1618, one can see how influential Luther's writings and teachings were, especially in big cities that were well known for printing. Augsburg, Nuremberg, Wittenberg, Frankfurt am Main, and Strasbourg, all well known printing centers, were all Lutheran. Despite being a publishing center, Basel was not Lutheran because Zwinglianism was the most dominant in Basel, consistent with most other regions in Switzerland. The assumption should be made that when these cities use Luther's bible translation then they speak and write with the Luther's German. These printing centers were also very important trade cities where Luther's bible was traded, especially Wittenberg. Due to their status as trade cities, they needed a standardized language to aid in trade, since there were a large quantity of different dialects spoken at this time. This would especially be the case in regions where strong regional dialects were used, such as many regions in Bavaria and Alsace, making the use of Early New High

¹⁴ König, 90

¹⁵ Zweck, 93

¹⁶ Zweck, 93

¹⁷ Zweck, 93

German more important and advantageous. On the other hand, the Counter Reformation was against many “Lutheran words and forms” and did not support the use of them, nor use them in any of the writings involved with the Counter Reformation.¹⁸ Many places rejected “Lutheran words and phrases.” Therefore Early New High German spread more slowly to regions where the Catholic religion was particularly active and their traditional dialects remained intact longer.

One of the most important cities for language change in Germany at this time was Nuremburg. In the sixteenth century, Nuremburg was a cultural center and was very well known for art and printing and publishing art.¹⁹ In the fourteenth century, Nuremburg had developed itself as an important news center and therefore Martin Luther had called Nuremburg “die Auge und Ohr Deutschlands,” the eye and ear of Germany. And because of Nuremburg’s large population, Nuremburg could also be considered a culture and science center of Germany. With over 40,000 citizens in the 16th century, Nuremburg was one of the most populous cities in Germany at the time, similar in size to Cologne and Augsburg. With the dense population and its strong political, cultural, and economic significance, it is not surprising that Nuremburg had a strong influence on the history of the German language.²⁰ Due to the adoption of Luther’s bible translation, Nuremburg officially became Lutheran. This led to the teaching of Luther’s bible translation in schools and subsequently the language of Early New High German of his translation.²¹ Soon after the adoption of Lutheranism as the official religion of Nuremburg, Luther’s German started to become more widely used and became the dominant dialect in Nuremburg. The old traditional dialect of North Bavarian was now a symbol of the old Catholic

¹⁸ Stedje, 122

¹⁹ Müller, 57

²⁰ Müller, 57

²¹ Müller, 58

church²² and was therefore not widely used, allowing for a shift towards a standardized supraregional language. Nuremburg was also a center for the publishing of texts for the military and weapons, which were found to be written in Early New High German.²³ They were written in Early New High German in Nuremburg because of Luther's influential bible translation. These books were distributed throughout Germany and were read by many due to the various wars, such as the German Peasants' War and the Thirty Years' War. The military officials would have read these texts, used the language in them with the lower ranking groups of working class soldiers, and Early New High German would have been spread through Germany in this manner.

Another important city for the study of the spread of Early New High German is Strasbourg. France is traditionally known for its relationship to the Catholic church. Therefore, it is very interesting that Strasbourg was officially Lutheran. Strasbourg has a very interesting history of religion. Strasbourg, in the French Alsace region, belonged to The Holy Roman Empire of Germany from 962 to 1648.²⁴ Following the Thirty Years' War and the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, Alsace was given to King Louis XIV from France.²⁵ It was not until this point that Alsace had any influence from France,²⁶ but Louis XIV was not very interested in forcing the Alsatians to speak French because a large quantity of them were Lutheran and spoke German, which was the language spoke in the churches.²⁷ Strasbourg was a large printing center, which played a very important role in the Reformation and the spread of Lutheranism. In a study it was found that currently, in the 21st century, a large quantity of Alsatians feel a stronger

²² Müller, 56

²³ Just, 419

²⁴ Vatja, 110

²⁵ Vatja, 110

²⁶ Vatja, 111

²⁷ Vatja, 112

cultural connection to Germany than to France and one of the main reasons for this is the predominance of the Lutheran faith. This fact exemplifies the immense impact that Lutheranism had on that region.

Luther's bible translation influenced not only the German-speaking countries and regions, but also was the example and master text for bible translation in many other European countries, like the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Iceland.²⁸ After Luther's complete bible was published in 1534, other bibles in Germanic dialects were published: one in Low German in 1534 by Ludwig Dietz in Lübeck, in Dutch in 1558, in Danish in 1550 in Copenhagen, and one in Swedish in 1541 in Uppsala.²⁹ These translations were studied and it was found from 395 words studied across these translations that 222 were found to be cognates.³⁰ It was also found that the translators of these bibles imitated idioms that Luther used in his translation.³¹ Some of the imitated words include: 'hielten,' 'geholfen,' 'helffen,' 'linwand,' and 'Heubtman,' for example. Cognates and imitated idioms such as these allow for conclusions to be drawn about how influential Luther's bible translation was on other Germanic languages outside of the German realm. Luther's translation was so influential that others simply did not want to alter the words in them and these words were subsequently adopted into these different languages.

Martin Luther was the most influential person to the modernization of the German language; he helped to modernize and standardize the German language. Luther advocated for a German language that everyone could understand, not just the clergy and noblemen. Luther believed that the bible should be accessible to every person, educated or not. Luther's advocacy of the German language being used to bring the common people closer to knowledge and

²⁸ Zecher, 37

²⁹ Francis, 75

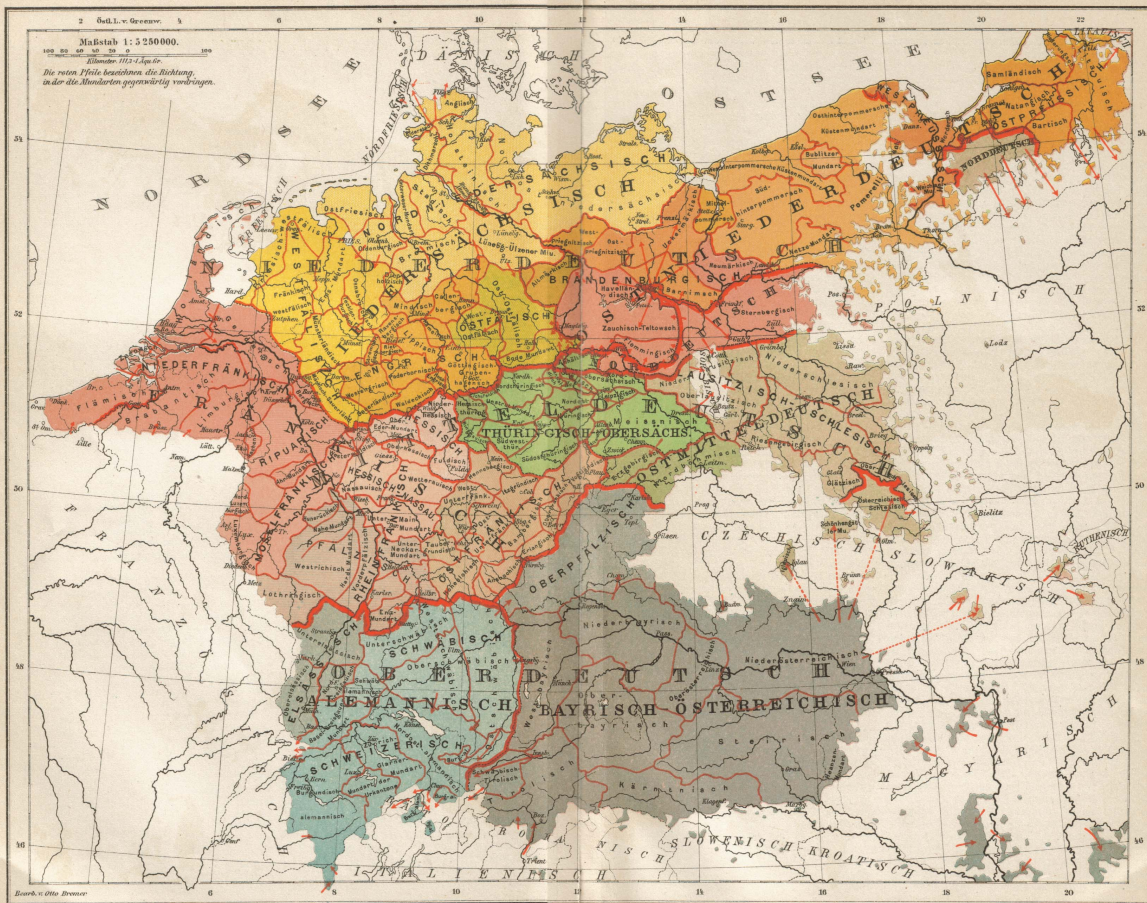
³⁰ Francis, 80

³¹ Francis, 92

religion can also be seen in more aspects than the church. He believed that German should also be used in the university setting, in order to allow for the education of the common people. This can especially be seen in his work at the University of Wittenberg.³² Martin Luther has been one of the most influential thinkers for Germany. Through his bible translation, with the help of the printing press, Luther was able to aid in the standardization of the German language and influence the translation of bible into other languages.

³² Schultz, 58

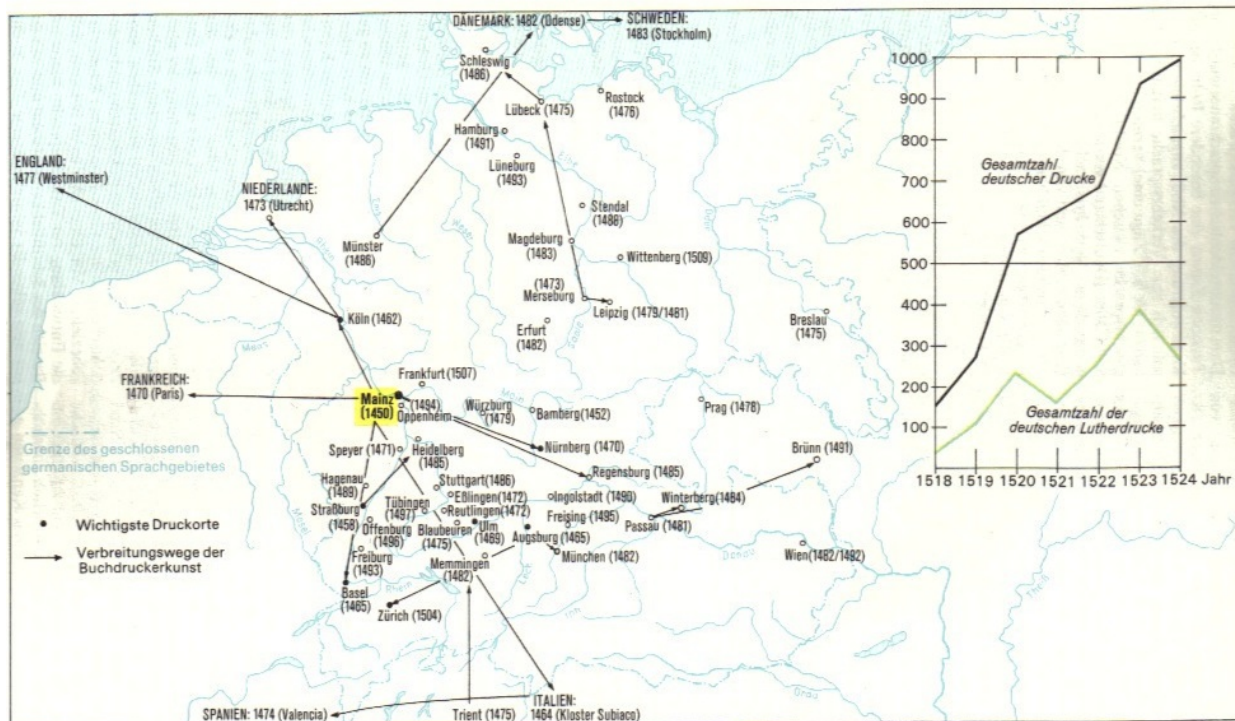
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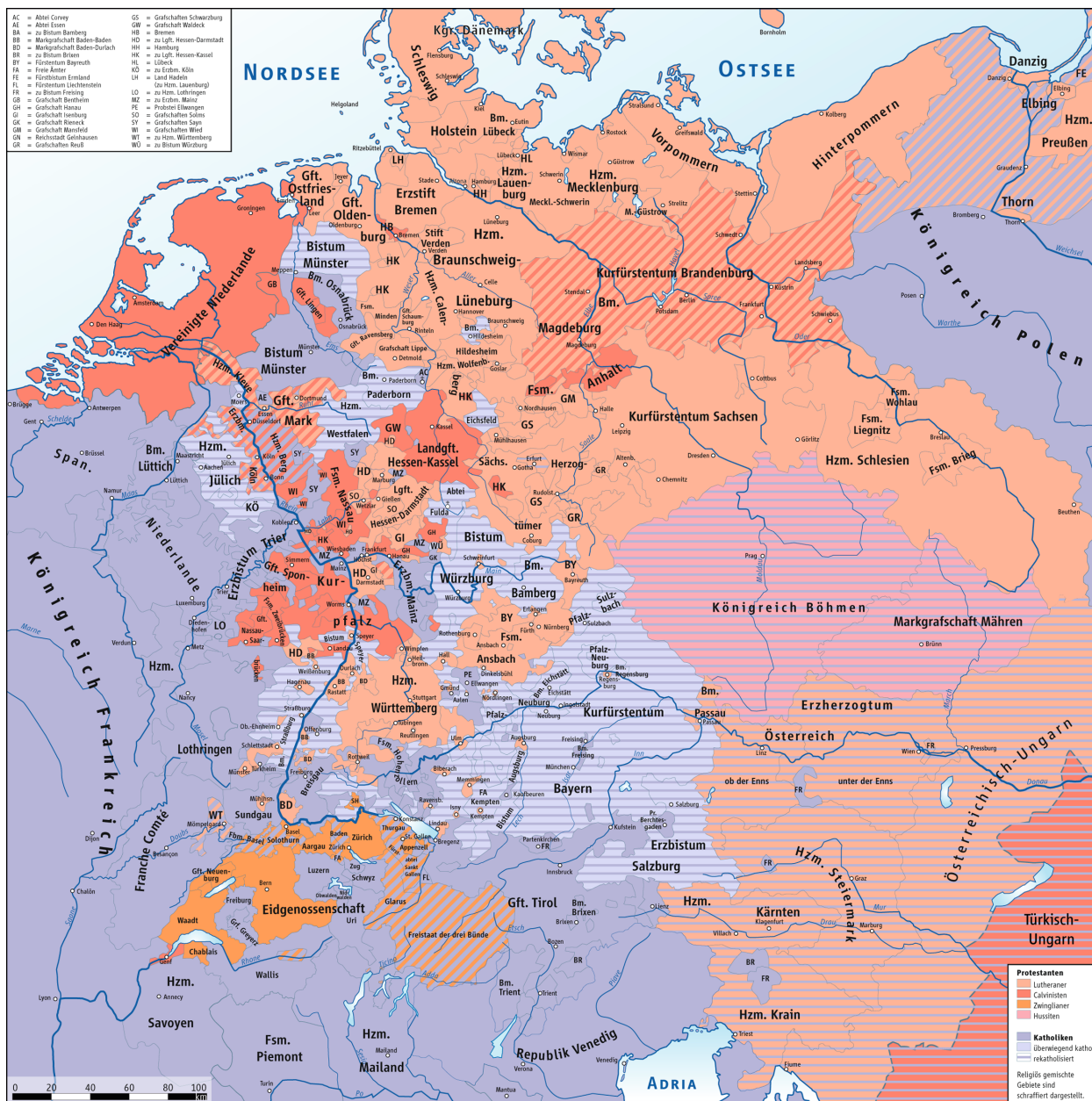
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100 200 300 400 500
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Die roten Pfeile bezeichnen die Richtung,
in der die Mundarten gegenseitig verdrängen.

Brosch. v. Otto Bremer
Brockhaus' Konversations-Lexikon, IV. Aufl.

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