

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN GERMAN AND MARTIN LUTHER'S ROLE AS
A LINGUAL PATRIARCH THROUGH HIS ACCELERATION OF THE
STANDARDIZATION PROCESS

By

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this paper is to provide a broad overview of the historical developments of the German language and the challenges the language faced that kept it from being significantly standardized up until Martin Luther published his translation of the Bible into German. In order to fully understand the impact that Luther had on the language, a documentation of historical obstacles the language faced up until the time of Luther must be observed. Luther's main contribution was a translation, which in turn accelerated the process of standardization. In the following pages, I have briefly covered the history of the German language and the hindrances it faced for regularization up until Martin Luther accelerated the process through his translation of the Bible.

The claim that Martin Luther simply created the modern German standard language is oversimplified. The process of unifying numerous dialects and linguistic landscapes into one written language was a task that exceeded the capabilities of

one individual. Certain points in history did allow for a gradual coming together of the language, but overall the German written language developed slowly, and had many interruptions and obstacles over the centuries which prevented any kind of significant standardization. Martin Luther, however, was able to accomplish something that had been prevented throughout history; he was able to create a variety of German universally understood and accepted by the people. In this way, he did not create the German Standard language from nothing, but rather unified what was already present. In this way he was the lingual patriarch, not of all the German dialects, but of the Standard High German language, which, in turn, shaped the Modern German spoken today, more than any other one person in history.

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Introduction

During the course of history the German language has evolved on many different levels. Organic processes, such as the first and second sound shifts, brought about the changes in the dialects spoken by the Germanic tribes living within the boundaries of today's Germany, making them distinct from the other Germanic languages spoken anywhere else. Due to the diversity of the dialects and its people and influences, a standard language was never crafted; that is until Martin Luther, who through his desire to create a version of the Bible understood by the majority of the German-speaking people, wrote his own translation of the Bible. With this achievement, the beginning of the standardization of the German language was set in motion. Martin Luther was therefore the lingual patriarch of the Modern German language by accelerating the standardization process through his translation of the Bible, and the overall spread and acceptance of the language of his translation throughout the German speaking lands.

The German language, as part of the "Indo-European" family, has been evolving for over 1,500 years. Martin Luther's modern German language started developing during the first consonant shift, setting it apart from the other Indo-European languages early on.

Historical Introduction

The modern German language spoken today in Germany, Austria, and areas of Switzerland, has gone through a long evolutionary process. German is classified as part of the "Indo-European" family of languages. There is, however, a prominent

difference between the Germanic branch of the Indo-European languages, and the others. The main difference, and the starting point of the modern German language, came through the first consonant shift.

Four Major Periods of the German Language

Old High German (c. 750-c.1050)

Middle High German (c.1050-c.1350)

Early New High German (c.1350-c.1650)

New High German (c.1650-Present)

First Sound Shift

Grimm's Law

The first sound shift (*Erste Lautverschiebung*) began perhaps as early as 500 BC. This first sound shift set the Germanic languages apart from the rest of the Indo-European languages. This shift had two basic parts: first, a shift of consonant sounds, and second a shift in syllable stress, that affected every word (Sanders 2010: 27). This sound shift is also known as Grimm's Law, named after Jacob Grimm, and it is a set of statements describing the stop consonants and how they changed from Proto-Indo-European to Proto-Germanic. This was established allegedly in the 1st millennium BC. Grimm's law was comprised of three fundamental realizations, which formed a "chain shift".

Proto-Indo-European voiceless stops change into voiceless fricatives

Proto-Indo-European voiced stops become voiceless stops

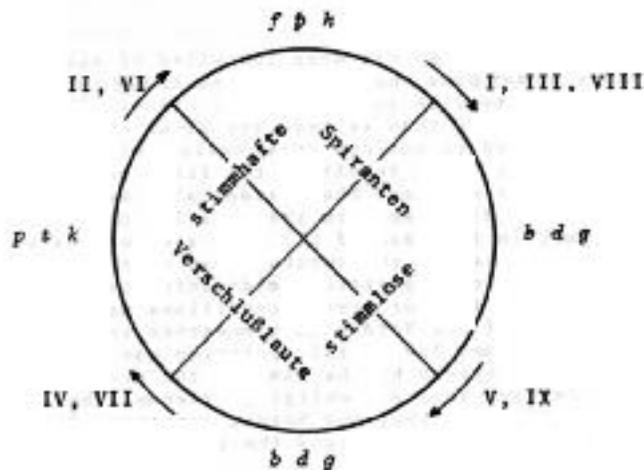
Proto-Indo-European voiced aspirated stops become voiced stops or fricatives (as allophones)

This chain is illustrated below

Correspondence	Examples
<i>p</i> to <i>f</i> , e.g.:	<i>platus</i> (broad) ~ <i>flatur</i> (flat) <i>patēr</i> ~ <i>fadir</i> .
<i>t</i> to <i>þ</i> , e.g.:	<i>treis</i> (read <i>trís</i>) ~ <i>þrír</i> <i>tego</i> ~ <i>þek</i> <i>tu</i> ~ <i>þu</i> .
<i>k</i> to <i>h</i> , e.g.:	<i>kreas</i> (meat) ~ <i>hræ</i> (dead body) <i>cornu</i> ~ <i>horn</i> <i>cutis</i> ~ <i>hud</i> .

(Salmons 2012: 38)

Alternative illustration: “*Kreislauf*” or rotation of consonant shifts:



(Salmons 2012: 46)

This law was formulated by Grimm between 1820-1822, and influenced by the work published in 1818 by the Danish philologist Rasmus Rask, on the regularly occurring consonant differences between Germanic and non-Germanic languages of

the Indo-European family. Grimm expanded on Rask's work, and created his own law in 1822. This law claimed, "Proto-Germanic had been derived from Proto-Indo-European through a sound shift among three kinds of consonants. This sound shift affected virtually every single word that came from Proto-Indo-European into Germanic" (Sanders 2010: 29).

Verner's Law

There were however some inconsistencies in Grimm's Law. Grimm could not explain these differences, as they showed that different "daughters [two or more sounds that developed from a single sound in the next generation of speakers] can have different forms of what must have once been one and same sound in one and the same word" (Salmons 2012: 51). Grimm was never able to solve this inconsistency, but Karl Verner's essay; "Eine Ausnahme der Ersten Lautverschiebung" (an exception to the first sound shift) shed new light on this topic.

In 1875, the Danish philologist Karl Verner created his own law stating that *f, *þ, *s, and *x become voiced as *b, *d, *z, and *g when they immediately follow an unstressed syllable in the word (Sanders 2010: 29). Verner had noticed a pattern while studying Sanskrit forms; he noted, "When the accent in Sanskrit rests on the root syllable, we have the voiceless fricative for the root final in Germanic; on the other hand, when the accent in Sanskrit falls on the ending, the Germanic forms show a voiced stop for the root final" (Salmons 2012: 52). Overall, his law states that when an IE voiceless stop/Germanic voiceless fricative directly follows an unstressed vowel, it becomes voiced in Germanic.

Languages that came out of the shift

The following are several examples of words in Latin and English that came out of the shift and preserved the IE consonants: Latin: piscis> English: fish, Latin: tres> English: three, Latin: genu> English:knee. The first consonant shift separated the Germanic languages from the rest of the Indo-European languages. Some of the languages that developed out of Proto-Germanic (explained below) are: Anglo-Saxon (ancestor of our modern English), Gothic, Old Norse (ancestor of Icelandic and other Scandinavian languages, and Old Franconian (Andreas 2008: 2).

Proto-Germanic

The history of the Germanic group of languages begins with what we now call the Proto-Germanic language (also termed Common or Primitive Germanic, Primitive Teutonic and simply Germanic). Proto-Germanic is the linguistic ancestor or the parent-language of the Germanic group of languages. It is guessed to have split from related Indo-European languages/dialects sometime between the 15th and 10th c. B.C. (Studopedia 2014:1). The time period of the Proto-Germanic era was between the first and second sound shift.

From Proto-Germanic came three rather distinct families of Germanic languages.

North Germanic: Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Faroese, and Icelandic

East Germanic: (extinct) Gothic, Langobardic, and various others

West Germanic: Old High German, Middle High German (Yiddish and Modern High German), Old Low German (Dutch, Afrikaans, Low German), and Anglo-Frisian (Frisian and English).

The closest language to Proto-Germanic, for which extensive written records are still available today, was the Gothic language, which came out of the East Germanic family. The Gothic language is one of the few and the oldest extensive written records of Germanic before the 8th century. Of all of the pre-medieval Germanic languages, only Gothic actually became a written literary language (Sanders 2010: 65). During to the *Völkerwanderung* (migration of the people) (375-568 AD), all of the East Germanic tribes and people left their homelands and eventually assimilated with the people of their destinations. As a result, their language was lost. For this reason, the East Germanic languages made no contribution to the German language or to its standardization. The Gothic Bishop Wulfila created a Gothic alphabet based on the Greek alphabet. Although this had no direct impact on the standardization of German or on Luther's later translation of the Bible, it is interesting that the Bible was a source used multiple times to help in the development and standardization of the language (Andrean 2008: 9).

Divisions that Created Language Separation

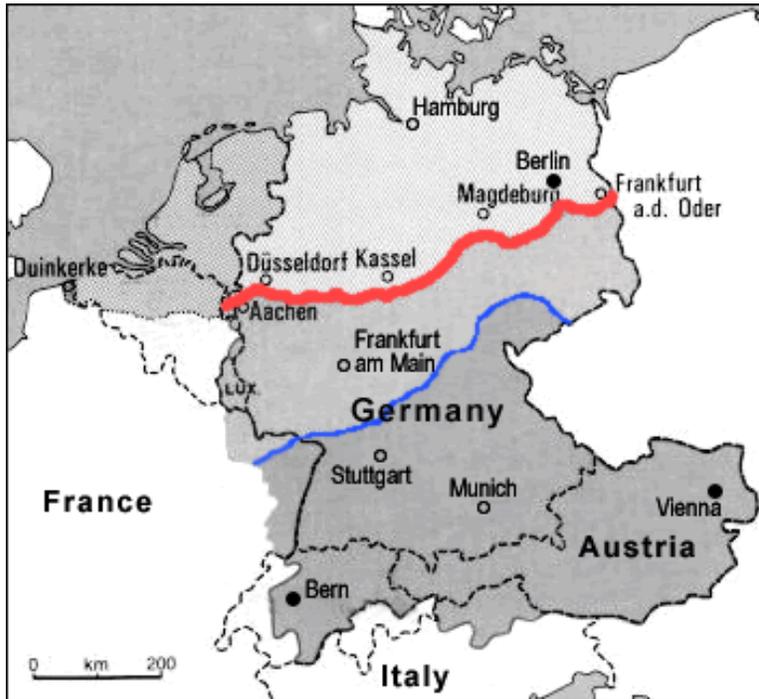
The death of Louis the Pious in 840 A.D. gave way to the Treaty of Verdun in 843, which divided the empire into three distinct parts, each occupied by an heir. Lothar held the land from the North Sea to Italy between the Rhine River in the east and the Scheldt River in the west, his brother Charles held the lands to the west, and Louis obtained the east. This division helped define the now modern countries of Germany and France (Andrean 2008: 12). In Louis's kingdom, the German dialects

continued evolving and eventually led to the ones we have today, but the Treaty of Verdun in Charles's lands led to the adaptation of the French language.

Second Sound Shift/High German Sound Shift

Between the years 500-800AD a second sound shift occurred in the Germanic language. This shift began in the southern, mountainous area of Germany and was therefore called the High German Consonant Shift. It progressed northward up to the flatlands of North Germany and gradually dissipated. The Low German regions were therefore unaffected by the second sound shift. South of the Benrath Line is the Speyer Line (which runs through Speyer) and separates Middle German from High German (Schrijver 2011: 1). Today we have Low German dialects that do not show any evidence of this second sound shift. These isoglosses/borders in the second sound shift created a great hindrance for the standardization and leveling of the language. The differences and division in the German dialects from these changes made standardization impossible at this time, as the examples below the graph illustrate.

(Benrath Line illustrated in red, Speyer Line illustrated in blue)



(<http://t2.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcRDliwJqH8phcJWOU5dKGU4CUpjYRr67nVj6U6WtBh53JYNDqQCeuwPbQ>)

Example of the shift: Germanic [p], [t], [k] become High German [pf]; [z]; [ch].
Examples: English: penny, German: *Pfennig*, English: street, German: *Straße*, English: make, German: *machen* (Andreas 2008: 2). In the case of street and *Straße* the [t] and [s] did not shift for phonetic reasons, as this would have either obliterated a sound needed to create the word as in case of *Straße*, or it would have been unpronounceable as in the case of *sprechen* (which would have changed to *spfprechen* if the change had not been blocked by the rules of phonetics.) The shift affected mainly the sound of words, and not the spelling since many of the Germanic dialects had yet to be written (Sanders 2010: 93).

Further examples of the shift (taken from Salmons 2012: 116)

Old Saxon	Franconian	rest of OHG	Related English form
pad	pad	pfad(phad, etc)	path
appel	appel	apful	apple
kamp	kamp	kampf	camp(semantic differences)
helpan	helpan/helpfan	helpfan/helfan	help
werpan	werpan/werpfan	werpfan/werfan	warp
opan	of(f)an	of(f)an	open
up	ūf	ūf	up
Old Saxon	central OHG	far southern	Related English form
kind	kind	chind	child
stark	stark	starch	stark
makon	mahhon	mahhon	make
ik	ih	ih	I

Charlemagne

The period in which Charlemagne (742/747/748 until 814) ruled was one of cultural revival as literacy, the arts, the study of law and scripture were all encouraged. During this time, two epic poems were created in German literature; the “Heiland”-a poetic version of the life of Christ and Otfrid’s “Gospel Book”. Charlemagne used German to push Christianization so the Lord’s Prayer, confession of the faith, and the confession of sins had to be translated into German (Sanders 2010: 99). Charlemagne promoted the Rhenish-Franconian dialect throughout the land; however, his particular family of rulers lost their throne to the Saxons, and for this reason his version of German never became the German that was used as a model of standardization. The power centers instead continually shifted eastward

and southward. The German that was therefore established by Charlemagne never had a chance to become a standard language. The empire was instead divided into independent *Herzogtümer* (duchies) and each duke promoted his own particular dialect. These political realities made it impossible for one single dialect to become the standard in this time period.

Old High German (c.750 to c.1050)

Old High German was comprised of varying dialects; some were mutually intelligible and others were not. Old High German was therefore not a single language but rather a collection of diverse dialects. The distinction between dialects and languages should be noted: a dialect refers to speakers of different varieties of a language who can understand one another (mutually intelligible), whereas speakers of different languages cannot understand one another. The main dialects of Old High German were Alemannic, East Franconian, Rhenish-Franconian, and Bavarian (Salmons 2012: 101). After the second sound shift, Old Saxon varied significantly from the other dialects and was no longer mutually understandable, and was only understandable to the learned people in the other dialect areas.

An example of this shift can be seen in the “Lord’s Prayer.” The “Lord’s Prayer” in 5 dialects below shows how Alemannic, Bavarian, East Franconian, and Rhenish-Franconian were all affected by the second sound shift. Old Saxon was not affected by this shift and its variance from the other four is obvious.

In the examples below, the second sound shift is noticeable in the [b]> [p] shift in the Bavarian dialect, and it is evident that [th] had not yet shifted to [d].

- 1) Alemannic, 8th century: *Fater unseer, thu pist in himile*
- 2) Bavarian, 8th century: *Fater unser, du pist in himilum*
- 3) East Franconian, 825: *Fater, unser, thu thar bist in himile*
- 4) Rhenish Franconian, 9th century: *Vater unser, thu in himilom bist*
- 5) Old Saxon, 9th century: *Fadar usa firiho barno, thu bist an them hohon himila rikea* (text examples taken from Sanders 2010: 99)

Middle High German

The Middle High German period can be divided into three sub-periods: Early MHG (1050-1170), Classical MHG (1170-1250) and Late MHG (1250-1350). The “Classic” or “High Medieval” period was in some ways a renaissance of literary activity in Germany. This was a period of chivalry and many myths, legends, and stories of the past were woven into epic poems. This was also the period that allowed non-clerics to achieve equal importance as the clergy in the production of writing (Andrean 2008: 14). A literary language of sorts was created in this period and used more widely than any specific dialect. Court poets did not use local dialects and wrote instead in a language that could be used and translated in all German-speaking regions. This was the language of the aristocracy during the Golden age of the Hohenstaufen dynasty (Andrean 2008: 14). Epic stories such as the *Nibelungenlied* were created during this era.

The traveling poets and troubadours of this time helped to unconsciously shave off some of the differences in the dialects (Waterman 1966: 84), and although there was a unification of the German language, it is inaccurate to claim that this era

approached anything of what we today would consider a standard language. The traveling knights did however create somewhat of a homogenous language through their widespread travel. Knights were often honored guests at large entertainment and social events. These events allowed poets to read their work which was generally in three languages; French, German and Latin. The Germans therefore tried to make their speech as mutually understandable as possible, limiting obvious use of dialects. Eventually, however, societal changes caused people to move toward the main cities, and the need for knights was lost. Due to these changes, any convergence that had been brought about through the knights and troubadours was lost as their culture died out.

Principle differences between OHG and MHG

The main differences between OHG and MHG were 1) the spread of mutation (umlaut) and 2) the weakening of the vowels of unstressed syllables, especially when in word-final position (Waterman 1966: 85).

By the eleventh century, the umlaut had spread to include all of the following vowels and diphthongs: *â, o, ô, u, û, ou, uo*. However, the spread of the umlaut did not take place “at the same pace nor at the same time throughout the High German speech area” (Waterman 1966: 85).

	OHG	MHG	
-â > æ	<i>swârî</i>	<i>swære</i>	“Schmerz”
-o > ö	<i>mohti</i>	<i>möhte</i>	“möchte”
-ô > æ	<i>scôni</i>	<i>schœne</i>	“schön”
-u > ü	<i>sunî</i>	<i>süne</i>	“Söhne”
-û > ü	<i>Hûsir</i>	<i>hiuser(iu= ü)</i>	“Häuser”
-ou > öu	<i>loubir</i>	<i>löuber</i>	“Läuber”
-uo > üe	<i>fuoren</i>	<i>füeren</i>	“führen”

The second difference distinguishing MHG from OHG is the weakening of unstressed vowels. In the following examples the change is apparent in the final syllable of the MHG words (Waterman 1966: 86).

	OHG	MHG
Singular		
Nominative and Accusative	<i>sunt(i)a</i>	<i>sünde</i>
Genitive	<i>sunt(i)a</i>	<i>sünde</i>
Dative	<i>sunt(i)u</i>	<i>sünde</i>
Plural		
Nominative and Accusative	<i>sunt(i)â</i>	<i>sünde</i>
Genitive	<i>sunt(e)ôno</i>	<i>sünden</i>
Dative	<i>sunt(e)ôm</i>	<i>sünden</i>

Early New High German (1350-1600)

The Middle Ages had seen a beginning of a linguistic unification, but the start of the 16th century was dominated by Latin. In the fourth century the Latin Vulgate had provided a Bible based on Saint Jerome’s translation from Greek into Latin. However, after 1200 years, this version was only understood by the clergy. The Roman Catholic Church had also forbidden the translation of the Latin Bible, and it

was instead to be translated, understood, and conveyed by the church only (Sanders 2010: 117). Restrictions, such as these, only impeded any kind of lingual unification.

The Printing Press

The invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1445 was really a turning point in the development of the German language. Although the concept of printing with moveable characters was earlier developed in China, Gutenberg independently developed the printing press for Europe. With this development, Gutenberg produced the 42-line Latin Bible in the German language in 1455. With the invention of the printing press, society realized that a clear standard language was necessary for the distribution of books and for communication among people from different regions (Andrean 2008: 20). Mass communication became possible via the printed page. However, the number of books printed in Latin still far exceeded those printed in German. It was not until 1681 (over 200 years after the invention of the printing press) that German publications exceeded the number of publications in Latin.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483-1546) believed the authority on religious matters did not lie within the church, and that the Bible should instead be available to all German people in a language they could understand. Although this was a noble endeavor, the progression of the language had still not reached a level of

standardization. Luther endeavored to create a translation that would bridge all the different dialects (Sanders 2010: 118).

***Ostmitteldeutsch* (East Franconian)**

The dialect of German that was chosen for such publications was one of the local chancery. Printing was developed in southern Germany, and *das Gemeine Deutsch* (the common German) (descendent from the Hapsburg imperial chancery) became the standard written language of Upper Germany (Waterman 1966: 128).

All of the pre-Luther German Bibles (14 in total) were printed in this dialect.

However the printers took their own liberties in deciding dialects in which to print.

They commonly printed in their own dialect and from this arose the

Druckersprachen (printers' languages) (Waterman 1966: 128).

The core of Martin Luther's German came from East Franconian (*Ostmitteldeutsch*). The New High German has the most similarities to that of the dialect found in Wettiner. This dialect was based on the language of a population that consisted of people who had come from central, high, and low dialect areas. This attention to the written language of what is today east central Germany, in particular Wittenberg, was due to the fact that this was a place where Low and High German met. Luther stated his thought on his translation in his *Tischreden*.

“Ich habe keine gewisse, sonderliche eigene Sprache im Deutschen, sondern brauche der gemeinen deutschen Sprache, dass mich Oberländer und Niederländer verstehen mögen. Ich rede nach der sächsischen Canzelei, welcher nachfolgen alle Fürsten und Könige in Deutschland. Alle Reichstädte,

Fürstenhöfe schreiben nach der sächsischen und unseres Fürsten Canzelei, darumb ists auch die gemeinste deutsche Sprache. Kaiser Maximilian und Kurfürst Friedrich, Herzog zu Sachsen, etc., haben im römischen Reich die deutschen Sprachen also in eine gewisse Sprache gezogen."

"I haven't any certain, special language of my own but I use the common German language so that both North and South Germans can understand me. I speak according to the Saxon Chancery, which all the princes and kings in Germany follow; all Imperial Towns, princely courts write according to the Saxon Chancery of our prince, therefore that is the most common German language. Emperor Maximilian and Elector Frederic, Duke of Saxony have thus drawn together the German language into one" (Russ 2012: 13).

Spread and Acceptance

This was the German that Martin Luther used for his translation of the Bible, and it spread like wildfire to most of the Protestant areas of the German-speaking areas of Europe. By the beginning of the 17th century, Luther's German had risen above Low German as a written language, and became the main written language in German speaking Switzerland (Die Bedeutung Luthers für die Deutsche Sprachgeschichte 2008). This German was one that was easily understood, absorbed, and accepted. However, Roman Catholic (southeastern) areas were not as quick to accept this variety of German, especially from a labeled heretic like Martin Luther, but eventually it was accepted. Luther's German did go through many

significant changes in the 17th century, but Luther had done what no other man, or group had done in the history of the German language; he had brought into focus the language of one main area, that of modern day east central Germany, and he had “laid the foundations for the acceptance of one variety of written German as a standard” (Russ 2012: 14). The spread of printing made thousands of copies of the Luther Bible available. As such, his teachings and translation reached a wider audience than any German publication ever had. The German language became a language that demanded respect and attention. Sanders states, “From virtually the moment of its creation, the Luther Bible and its language were propelled into prominence by the force multipliers of technology, politics, culture, and demography: a perfect German Storm” (Sanders 2010: 118).

Translation Tactics

Luther’s translation of the Bible was a long and tedious process. When questioned about his translation and techniques he made it clear that he had been very careful to keep to the original passages. For example, in John 6 Christ says: “Him has God the Father *versiegelt* (sealed).” Luther stated that it would have been better German to say “Him has God the Father *gezeichnet* (signified)” or even “He it is whom God the Father *meinet* (means)” (Luther 1530). The missionary zeal that Luther had only helped in his precision and passion to create something universally understood. Luther mainly used the German of the chancelleries in his home district, but he also borrowed idioms, folk sayings, and vocabulary from the languages of the marketplaces, farms, and homes of the common people (Sanders 2010: 137). He used all of these sources to create a homogenized version, one that

was immediately accessible and understandable to the people. However, this dialect was unpolished and not universally understood. Luther therefore used spelling, grammar, and word order based on the writings of the local Imperial government office which was used to communicate with other chanceries. It was in the Imperial *Kanzleideutsch* that Luther found a standard of writing that was already surpassing both Latin and Low German. “Luther rejected his age’s Latinate style of convoluted syntax and learned vocabulary and created for the first time in German a dignified written style based on oral traditions rather than scholarly debate” (Sanders 2010: 138).

Modern German

By the end of the seventeenth century, the High German of the Luther Bible had become the written language of the land. This High German was the direct precursor to the Standard High German spoken and written in German today (Sanders 2010: 138). Luther had achieved what no other person or people had in the history of the German language. He had laid the foundation for the standard German that we have today. Luther created a language that was understood by the common people, and yet respected by the educated. With this accomplishment, he instituted a lasting and powerful language.

Concluding Remarks and Areas for Further Research

Throughout the course of history, the German language faced many different obstacles to normalization. The sound shifts (mainly the second sound shift),

varying landscapes, and socio-political developments all impeded the unification and eventual standardization of the German language. However, the language was very slowly coming together and, by Luther's time, had made some progress since the Proto-Germanic time

Luther acted as a final catalyst that accelerated the unification of the German language. Luther's objective, however, was not standardization, but rather to create a language understood by a vast majority. The outcome of his translation of the Bible was a language that lent itself well to standardization by future linguists. Although Luther should receive full credit for his contribution to the language, it should be noted that Luther was in the right place at the right time, and the success, therefore, of his achievements cannot be solely attributed to him alone. He lived in an area where East Franconian (*Ostmitteldeutsch*) was being created and his work was, from his perspective, translation and not truly intended to be that of standardization, although that was the end product. In the centuries that followed, a number of grammarians brought about further improvements to the language that made today's German even better than the German of Luther's time. To fully understand the additional changes the German language went through, further research of the grammarians in the Baroque and the Enlightenment periods should be explored.

Luther's main contribution was the acceleration of the standardization of the German language, and through this he became the lingual Patriarch of the modern German language. His Bible was an immensely important work that had widespread influence and touched the lives of a vast number of people. Without Luther, the

German language would have eventually reached a level of standardization, but with historical trends in mind, it is hard to fathom that without Luther the language would be anywhere close to where it is today

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