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How did you become involved in doing research?

From 2010-2011, I spent a high school exchange year in Lower Saxony just outside of Bremen and noticed speakers of High German regularly using Low German colloquialisms. My personal interest in this topic grew in the spring of 2014 when I visited my former host family and saw a poster advertising a concert for De Fofftig Penns, a band that performs electronic hip-hop music in Low German. I expressed an interest in researching the growing interest in the Low German language in this region to my German advisor, Dr. Lorie Vanchena, and my honors thesis was born.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

I don't think I was aware of how many questions I would have to ask myself and be able to answer, how narrow and subsequently in-depth my topic would become. You can find all the answers you started searching for, but in the end, these answers raise many more questions.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

As a German Studies major, my favorite part of this research was incorporating sources in both German and English into my project. Since my topic is current and evolving, a large portion of my research involved reading local news from the region, which I enjoyed. This version of my paper is actually a translation of my thesis, which was written in German.

The German version of this article is available at ugresearch.ku.edu/Anderson

“Wi Snackt Wedder Platt!” Bringing Low German back to Bremen and Lower Saxony through the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*

Sara Sofia Anderson

ABSTRACT

Since 1992, when the Council of Europe created the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, 25 member states, including Germany, have ratified the *Charter*. The *Charter* protects several minority languages in Germany, but only one regional language—Low German—is included. My thesis argues that the *Charter* has had a positive impact on preserving Low German by supporting developments in education, politics, and daily life. I demonstrate this using the federal states of Bremen and Lower Saxony as my two case studies. While these are not the only federal states in the Low German region, the year I spent studying near Bremen in Lower Saxony (2010-2011) woke my interest in the Low German language and its importance in the culture of these particular states. Their schools, for example, have implemented creative solutions to fulfill the stipulations of the *Charter*. As I show, Bremen and Lower Saxony can serve as models for other regions of Europe that want to preserve their native regional and minority languages, an important part of their cultural identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Europe's 60 regional and minority languages attest to the continent's linguistic diversity. This linguistic landscape affects Europeans far and wide: approximately 55 million speakers of these languages live in every country on the continent except Iceland.¹

One of these languages, Low German, which Germanic language scholar Frerk Möller describes as "one of the small languages of Europe,"² is spoken from the North Sea to the Baltic, between the Weser and Elbe Rivers, in the cities and on the plains of Northern Germany. Although data about the exact number of Low German speakers is contested in the linguistic literature, an estimated 2.5 million Germans use Low German today.³

In Germany, Low German is colloquially known as *Platt* or *Plattdeutsch* and formally referred to as *Niederdeutsch*. Low German is often understood as the "language of the low lands," but the name has a different etymological background: "low", which was once known as *plat*, referred to the language being clear and understandable to the average person.⁴ However, the term Low German has to do with the geographic region from which it comes, which is flat and near the sea. The official language of Germany, High German, historically comes from the geographically "higher" South. The names of these two languages are not associated with

the socioeconomic class of those people who speak them.⁵

Low German was the official language of the Hanseatic League, the former commercial power of the North, from the 14th to the 17th centuries. The language became a *lingua franca* with which the people could make themselves understood.⁶ As trade in Europe became more concentrated in the South in the 17th century, economic power was not the only aspect of the Hanseatic League that disappeared: the power of Low German declined, too. High German became the administrative language of the "German"-speaking territories, and by the end of the 17th century, Low German was hardly more than a conversational language generally concentrated in rural areas.⁷ Since this shift, Low German has existed as a regional language, relative to High German.

In 1992, the Council of Europe passed the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*, which aims to preserve these 60 European languages. The *Charter* perceives these languages as cultural assets and protects them.⁸ The Council of Europe recognizes Low German as a regional language in eight of Germany's 16 federal states; each state selects different measures in the *Charter* to protect the language. This paper presents a case study of two of these federal states: Bremen and Lower Saxony, where Low German has substantial cultural significance.



Figure 1: The federal German state of Lower Saxony is denoted in red, while the federal state of Bremen is the beige area located within Lower Saxony.⁹

The Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache (Institute for Low German Language) describes the protection of Low German as the "task of society as a whole."¹⁰ Bremen and Lower Saxony have adopted exactly this approach. The *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* has had a positive impact on the preservation of Low German in Bremen and Lower Saxony, as evidenced by initiatives in

¹ "Minority Languages: Facts & Figures," *Mercator: European Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning*, <http://www.mercator-research.eu/minority-languages/facts-figures>.

² Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert* (Leer: Verlag Schuster, 2008), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵ Jan Wirrer, "Niederdeutsch", 133.

⁶ Carl Undéhn, "Schnack mol wedder platt!" *Språktidningen* (februari 2013), <http://spraktidningen.se/artiklar/2013/02/schnack-mol-wedder-platt>.

⁷ Jan Wirrer, "Niederdeutsch", 132.

⁸ François Grin, Dónall Ó Riagáin und Regina Jensdóttir, *Language Policy Evaluation and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 61.

⁹ Wikipedia contributors, "Niedersachsen," *Wikipedia: Die freie Enzyklopädie*, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Locator_map_Lower-Saxony_in_Germany.svg

¹⁰ "Sprachenschutz in Deutschland: Konferenz in Berlin," *Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache*, 24 November 2014, http://www.ins-bremen.de/fileadmin/ins-bremen/user_upload/presse/ins241114.pdf.

politics, education, and daily life in these two states, which could serve as models for other regions of Europe: they have implemented measures that are successfully preserving their native language.

II. THE POLITICS OF LOW GERMAN

The Council of Europe, the European Union, and how they support language rights

The Council of Europe was founded in 1949, soon after the Second World War. The mission of the member states was—and remains—to support human rights, democracy, and constitutionality in Europe. Although this mission was naturally also included in the founding principles of the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe remains an independent organization, located in Strasbourg, France. Today, there are 47 member states in the Council of Europe and 23 in the EU.¹¹ For countries that do not want to become members of the EU, the Council of Europe offers an opportunity for European as well as global collaboration outside of the EU. For countries that would like to become members of the EU, membership in the Council is often a strategic first step toward achieving this goal, as it offers international recognition of their commitment to human rights, democracy, and constitutionality.¹² The current member states of the EU were all members of the Council of Europe first.

While EU membership means the subsequent loss of some

sovereign rights for a country—a necessary step to ensure that mutual democratic decisions can be reached with other EU countries—membership in the Council of Europe is not governed by a legal contract. Rather, the Council of Europe supports the assembly of member states in order to determine minimum standards in various domains and to assure the fulfillment of these standards. This paper focuses on one aspect of the area of “human rights”—the right to one’s own language.

The Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

The title of the *Charter* distinguishes between regional and minority languages, but what is the difference? Languages of migrant groups and dialects of the official languages of countries do not count as regional or minority languages. In other words, the population of a certain region must recognize the languages as actual languages and not as dialects, and the languages must be native to that region.¹³ As Jan Wirrer, Low German scholar at the University of Bielefeld, explains, minority languages include those that belong to an ethnic or religious minority. Low German is therefore not a minority language, but a regional language.¹⁴ Six minority languages are recognized in Germany, but Low German is the only recognized regional language.

In the 1980s, members of the Council of Europe began to recognize a problem with regional

and minority languages in Europe: they were threatened, oppressed or beginning to disappear. In 1984, a debate began in Strasbourg that continued through the 1980s and into the post-Cold War era, culminating in 1992 with the passage of the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*.

Some scholars remain critical of the *Charter*. For example, M. Nic Craith, professor of European Culture and Heritage at Heriot Watt University in Scotland, criticizes how the *Charter* defines “Europe” and asks whether immigrants are not Europeans. She asserts that the *Charter* ignores the linguistic and cultural multiplicity and the diversity that exists in Europe.¹⁵ According to Craith, the *Charter* also perpetuates the idea that languages are of greater importance than dialects.¹⁶ Grin, Riagáin and Jonsdóttir also mention that the *Charter* does not encompass sign languages.¹⁷ Although these criticisms are relevant, I can refute them. Indeed, the *Charter* was written with the interests of European countries in mind, but other countries can sign the *Charter*: it does not concretely define the sociopolitical space of Europe. Furthermore, the founders of the *Charter* wanted the definition of “language” to remain open to interpretation, so that a dialect group could identify as a language group, for example. Most important is that a unified European body—the Council of Europe—acknowledges the diverse multilingualism of Europe as an important aspect of its heritage.

¹¹ Further information about the Council of Europe and the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* can be found on the Council of Europe website: <http://www.coe.int>.

¹² M. Nic Craith, “Facilitating or Generating Linguistic Diversity: The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages,” in *Minority Languages in Europe*, ed. Gabrielle Hogun-Brun and Stefan Wolff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 56.

¹³ Peter Kraus explains that programs for the instruction of migrant languages do not exist to preserve linguistic diversity; instead, they exist to ensure that the speakers of these migrant languages do not become “semi-lingual,” which can result in social discrimination. According to Kraus, the language programs that exist for first-generation German residents of Turkish heritage are good examples of programs for migrant languages. Kraus, Peter A., *A union of diversity: language, identity and polity-building in Europe*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99-100 and 106-107.

¹⁴ Jan Wirrer, “Zum Status des Niederdeutschen,” *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik* 26 no. 3 (1998): 334.

¹⁵ M. Nic Craith, 59.

¹⁶ M. Nic Craith, 61.

¹⁷ François Grin, Dónall Ó Riagáin and Regina Jonsdóttir, 64.

The *Charter* also recognizes that regional and minority languages are a threatened part of Europe’s cultural heritage. Language is a living aspect of culture, and one goal of this *Charter* is to enable speakers of these languages to use their language in private and public life. Since many international charters and contracts focus on specific groups of people, this *Charter* is quite unusual in that it makes the languages themselves the focal point of the document.¹⁸ As of today, 33 of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe have signed the *Charter*; 25 of these have chosen and ratified specific stipulations from which member states can choose.¹⁹ Germany signed the *Charter* in 1992 but ratified it in 1998. M. Nic Craith describes the ratification process as “intensive,” because it requires participating countries to choose which specific stipulations to ratify.²⁰ The countries choose not only the stipulations they will accept, but since most countries have more than one regional and/or minority language, they must also choose the languages to which each stipulation will apply. Grin, Riagáin and Jensdóttir describe the process with the French term *table d’hôte*, which implies that the countries choose stipulations for every “course.”²¹ Sixty eight stipulations are offered as options in the *Charter*; at least 35 stipulations must be chosen for each language.

Bremen and Lower Saxony chose many of the same stipulations for Low German. These stipulations are taken from the articles addressing *Education, Media, Administrative Authorities and Public Services,*

Cultural Activities and Facilities, and Economic and Social Life. In addition to these sections, Lower Saxony also ratified some stipulations from the article Transfrontier Exchanges.

Low German: Northern Germany’s regional language

In a survey by the *Gesellschaft für angewandte Sozialpsychologie* (Society for Applied Sociology or GETAS) from 1984, more than a third of respondents—35 percent—answered that they could speak Low German *very well* or *well*.²² This survey included the regions of Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Northern Lower Saxony/Bremen, Southern Lower Saxony, and parts of North Rhine-Westphalia: in other words, linguistic regions in the former Federal Republic of Germany (FRG or West Germany). Fifty percent of the respondents from Bremen and Northern Lower Saxony—the largest percentage of self-identified Low German speakers in the former FRG—answered that they could speak Low German *very well* or *well*.²³ See Figure 2. The importance of Low German in Bremen and Lower Saxony could not be denied.

Between 1984 and 2007, however, the number of Low German speakers in Germany declined by more than half. In a 2007 survey by the *Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache* (Institut for Low German Language), only 14 percent of respondents self-identified as able to speak Low German *very well* or *well*. Although Bremen’s 23 percent was above average, Lower Saxony represented the average with 14 percent of

¹⁸ Craith, 57-58.

¹⁹ A complete list can be accessed on the Council of Europe website: “European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, CETS No. 148: Signatures and Ratifications,” <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ChercheSig.asp?NT=148&CM=8&DF=&CL=ENG>.

²⁰ Craith, 57.

²¹ François Grin, Dónall Ó Riagáin and Regina Jensdóttir, 64.

²² Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert*, 14-15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

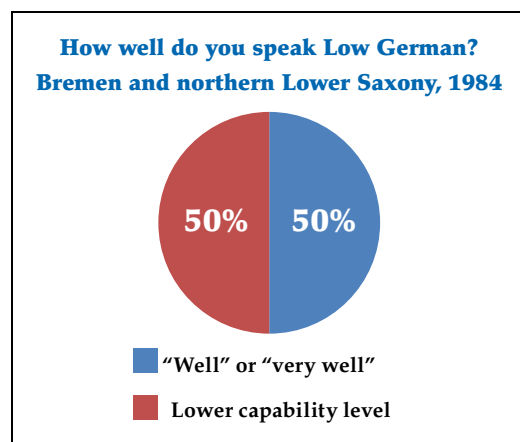


Figure 2. Source: Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert* (Leer: Verlag Schuster, 2008), 16.

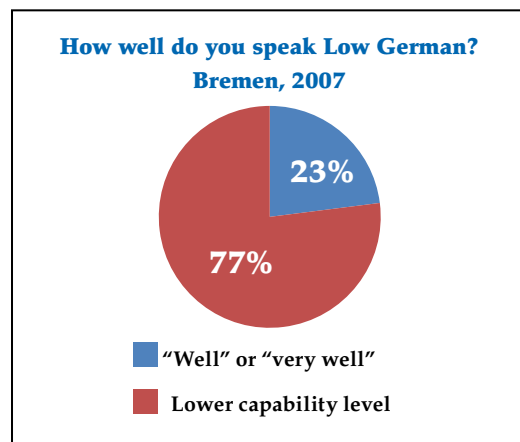


Figure 3. Source: Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert* (Leer: Verlag Schuster, 2008), 32.

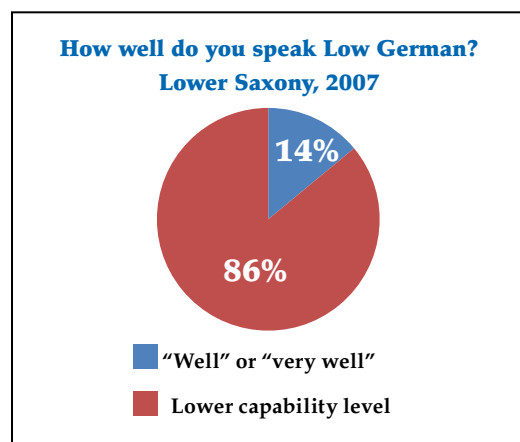


Figure 4. Source: Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert* (Leer: Verlag Schuster, 2008), 32.

respondents self-identifying in this way.²⁴ See Figures 3 and 4. Given the data, it is no surprise that protecting the Low German language has become a political topic.

It must be noted that the regions in the 2007 survey probably contributed to the different results. The 1984 survey included Northern Lower Saxony and Bremen as a single region. The southern part of Lower Saxony, a separate entity in the 1984 survey, had a substantially smaller number of people that self-identified as Low German speakers (26 percent could speak Low German *very well* or *well*).²⁵ In the 2007 survey, however, Bremen and Lower Saxony were separate regions, and Lower Saxony encompassed both the northern and southern parts of the federal state.

Furthermore, it must also be noted that the 1984 survey included only the western part of the entire Low-German-speaking region, which extends into the former East Germany. In contrast, the 2007 survey included the Low-German-speaking regions of the former East Germany as well, which includes Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and parts of Saxony and Brandenburg. German reunification and the subsequent addition of new regions to the 2007 survey could also explain in part the different results.

The wording of answers was another important variable in the two surveys. The 2007 survey offered *somewhat* and *only a few words* as answers to the questions “Do you speak Low German?”, while a *little* was an option in the 1984 survey. Although this is a small change, it

points to interesting information about the linguistic landscape of the respondents. In 1984, 21 percent of survey participants responded that they spoke a *little* Low German.²⁶ In comparison, in 2007 23 percent of Germans answered that they could *somewhat* speak Low German. Another 25 percent identified as being able to say only some words: in other words, they could *not* speak the language proficiently.²⁷ This last number suddenly becomes noteworthy when one considers that these participants probably would have answered that they could not speak Low German in the first survey. The problem is clearly not that Low German is disappearing from the regional culture. Rather, the problem is that the number of Germans who can competently speak Low German is sinking, which the Council of Europe recognized when it adopted the *Charter* in 1992.

These data encompass only the *speakers* of Low German. Naturally, there are also Germans who understand Low German, even if they do not speak it with any degree of proficiency. In the 2007 survey, 58 percent of people in Bremen and 47 percent in Lower Saxony self-identified as having a *very good* or *good* understanding of Low German.²⁸ However, it is important for a living language to remain spoken: understanding regional languages is useless if the goal is for these languages to survive in today’s global society. When the number of speakers is distributed according to age, it becomes clear that younger Germans speak and understand

less Low German than older generations. Throughout Germany, only five percent of the 2007 survey participants 35 years and younger could speak Low German *very well* or *well*; only 26 percent of participants in this age group understood the language *very well* or *well*.²⁹

The differences in the results of this age group and the 50+ age group are astonishing: in 2007, 21 percent of participants in the older group could speak Low German *well* or *very well*, while 58 percent could understand the language *well* or *very well*.³⁰ These data distinctly illustrate why Low German is recognized as a threatened regional language.

One task of the *Charter* is to enable the population of a given region to continue using the language in private and public life with both oral and written competencies. Attaining this goal requires state funding, which in turn requires commitment from politicians.

The politics of implementing the *Charter*

The small number of Low German speakers does not correspond with general public opinion regarding the importance of funding Low German language programs. In 2007, 76 percent of the population in Bremen—three out of four people—and 81 percent of the population in Lower Saxony responded that they believed Low German language programs should be better funded. Only 17 percent in Bremen and 15 percent in Lower Saxony responded that they did not think that Low German should be better funded. Only four and three percent

²⁴ Möller, 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65, 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 65, 67.

respectively did not have an opinion, and only two and one percent respectively had no answer or did not know.³¹ An overwhelming majority of the population in these federal states believed in fostering and promoting the Low German language.

Was the language not already being funded at the time of the 2007 survey? In Germany, the *Charter* came into effect in 1999. In 2007, the Council of Europe wrote its third progress report on the *Charter* in Germany. In response to this report, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers recommended measures that Germany should take to ensure the continued preservation of its regional and minority languages. Among the recommendations: increase the number of class hours for Low German and create concrete guidelines for Low German instruction in northern German schools.³²

Only after a fourth report from the Council of Europe in 2011, which addressed the critical need for increased funding for Low German instruction in the schools, did the discussion about increased funding become a priority.³³ In the Lower Saxon *Landtag*, or state parliament, in Hannover, the capital of Lower Saxony, discussions still take place today among politicians regarding continued funding for Low German.³⁴ Although there are naturally differences in opinion, Frauke Heiligenstadt, Minister of

Educational and Cultural Affairs in Lower Saxony, stated in October 2014 in an interview with *Die Welt* that the representatives had rarely been so united on an issue.³⁵ Low German is even sometimes used among the representatives in the Lower Saxon *Landtag*: when former representative Claus-Peter Poppe left the parliament for the mayor's office in October 2014, he gave his farewell speech in Low German.

The *Bundesrat für Niederdeutsch*, or Federal Council for Low German, calls for the implementation of the *Charter*. Since 2002, the Federal Council represents the interests of the entire Low-German-speaking population in northern Germany. Representatives of Low German speakers from the eight federal states where Low German is spoken determine the "lines for modern language politics."³⁶ During the legislative period that ended June 2015, the Federal Council's 18 members designated education politics as the focal point of their work, probably in reaction to the negative report from the Council of Europe (2011), which addressed education.³⁷ Christiane Ehlers, chief executive of the Federal Council for Low German and a research fellow at the Institute for Low German Language, believes the importance of this work lies in its human rights focus.³⁸ Other regions of Germany and Europe that want to focus on the

preservation of their regional and minority languages could introduce similar councils charged with focusing on how such issues can be better navigated in their respective political systems.

The native language of most Germans is High German, the official language of the country. Camille C. O'Reilly, social anthropologist at Richmond, the American International University in London, argues that these Germans take the connection between language and culture as a given. People who identify with another language, e.g. a regional or minority language, often have to defend the connection between this language and their culture.³⁹ Just because High German is the official language of Germany does not mean that this is the only language that can define the culture. Sükrü Senkal, a politician with Turkish heritage in Bremen, stated it best: "I know through my own experience how important one's language of origin is for one's identity."⁴⁰ Because the Low German language is an integral part of Bremen's culture, Senkal actively advocates for the further protection and preservation of Low German.

The Council of Europe's call for better integration of Low German in the northern German school system in 2011 reinvigorated the issue in the Bremen *Landtag*. In 2012, the *Landtag* established the

³¹ Möller, 54.

³² "Recommendation RecChL(2008)3 of the Committee of Ministers on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by Germany" (Council of Europe, 1032nd meeting of the Ministers' Deputies, Strasbourg, 2008).

³³ "Empfehlung RecChL(2011)2 des Ministerkomitees über die Anwendung der Europäischen Charta der Regional- oder Minderheitensprachen durch Deutschland" (Europarat, 1114. Sitzung der Stellvertreter der Minister, Straßburg, 2011)

³⁴ Despite the fact that Lower Saxony did not ratify the stipulations relating to education at the elementary and secondary level, Low German is slowly becoming a part of the curriculum in this federal state. For further information on this topic, refer to the section *Low German in the education system*.

³⁵ "Plattdeutsche Debatte im niedersächsischen Landtag," *Die Welt*, 22 Oct 2014, <http://www.welt.de/regionales/niedersachsen/article133552534/Plattdeutsche-Debatte-im-niedersaechsischen-Landtag.html>.

³⁶ "Bundesraat för Nedderdüütsch mit frischem Wind," *Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache*, 2 Juli 2014. http://www.ins-bremen.de/fileadmin/ins-bremen/user_upload/presse/ins020714.pdf.

³⁷ Education politics are discussed in the section *Low German in the education system*.

³⁸ "Bundesraat för Nedderdüütsch mit frischem Wind."

³⁹ Camille C. O'Reilly, "When a Language is 'Just Symbolic': Reconsidering the Significance of Language to the Politics of Identity" in *Minority Languages in Europe*, ed. Gabrielle Hogun-Brun and Stefan Wolff, 20.

⁴⁰ Frauke Fischer, "Bremer wollen das Plattdeutsche retten," *Weser Kurier*, 23 April 2012, http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/vermishtes2_artikel,-Bremer-wollen-das-Plattdeutsche-retten-_arid,120991.html.

Low German Advisory Board (*Beirat Platt*), charging it with making a more concerted effort to place Low German in the center of society again by concerning itself in particular with the implementation of the *Charter* in Bremen.⁴¹ Politicians and experts from Low German associations and institutions are among the members of this advisory board. The group aims to establish Low German in the schools and to make the language visible in the regional culture again.

III. LOW GERMAN IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Different stipulations in Bremen and Lower Saxony

Bremen and Lower Saxony approach Low German differently in their respective education systems. Bremen ratified the stipulations of the *Charter* that focus on the preservation of Low German in elementary and secondary schools, but Lower Saxony did not.⁴² Schools in Lower Saxony are therefore not required to make Low German a part of the elementary and secondary curriculum.⁴³

However, my research shows that Lower Saxony has nevertheless made important advancements regarding the preservation of Low German in its education system. Roland Henke confirms this conclusion in the following statement:

However, it is also possible to live and implement the spirit of the *Charter* without having formally drawn a legal regulation... It is, however, often

overlooked that Low German... is nevertheless supported in the affected school types, and Lower Saxony does not need to fear a comparison with other states. Lower Saxony feels obligated to fulfill this requirement, even without having officially subscribed to the measures.⁴⁴

In other words, Lower Saxony offers an insightful contrast to Bremen.

Elementary school programs

For the first time in 2014, many elementary schools in Bremen offered Low German on their lesson plans, and not solely as an elective. To anchor this initiative further, supplemental activities such as Low German reading competitions are encouraged. At the *Grundschule Arsten*, for example, the entire school learns the same sentence in Low German every week, which does not just enhance the pupils' Low German lessons, it also helps create a community within the school. In Bremen, the Institute for Low German Language helps search for qualified teaching staff and supports the advanced training of these teachers.⁴⁵

The Lower Saxon State Education Authority (*Landesschulbehörde*) in Osnabrück, encourages schools to sign up to be a Starter-School or a Project-School; schools have various options, given that Low German is not a required subject. At three schools in the Municipality of Schwanewede, Low German is offered as an elective. The

Grundschule Neuenkirchen has offered Low German as an elective since 1995; the school began the initiative after passage of the *Charter* but before Germany ratified the document.⁴⁶ Other schools in Lower Saxony utilize other methods aimed at preserving the regional language: Andrea Cordes, the consultant for regional and minority languages in Lower Saxony, is an elementary school music teacher. Not only does she teach songs in Low German in class, but the students learn numbers in Low German, for example, so that they learn practical applications for the language.⁴⁷

In March 2014, the Lower Saxon Ministry for Educational and Cultural Affairs recognized four elementary schools as "Low German Schools"; these schools actively engage with their students' acquisition of Low German and can be used as examples for other schools looking to achieve similar results. When a school is awarded this honor, it receives a certificate and a plaque using the typical pronunciation and spelling of their regional variety of Low German. Such recognition is important for encouraging continued participation in Low German initiatives, especially as Lower Saxon schools are not required to offer Low German. Such recognition and support from the Ministry of Educational and Cultural Affairs can help preserve similar programs in the future.

⁴¹ "Neu in Bremen: Beirat Platt," *Bundesrat für Nedderdüütsch/Bundesrat für Niederdeutsch*, Oktober 2012, http://www.bundesrat-nd.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=134%3Aneu-in-bremen-beirat-platt&catid=62%3Abremen&Itemid=76&lang=de.

⁴² Both Bremen and Lower Saxony ratified the stipulation for Low German in preschools. However, since the initiatives in elementary and secondary schools provide a better overview of the influence of the *Charter* in the school system, I chose to focus mainly on these areas of the school system.

⁴³ Frerk Möller, "Niederdeutsch: das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld," in *Niederdeutsche Sprache und Literatur der Gegenwart*, hrsg. von Dieter Stellmacher (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2004), 291.

⁴⁴ All translations my own unless otherwise noted. Roland Henke, "Niederdeutsch (und Saterfriesisch) in der Schule" in *10 Jahre Europäische Sprachencharta in Niedersachsen*, hrsg. von Jörg Peters und Gabriele Diekmann-Dröge (Oldenburg: Isensee Verlag, 2010), 70.

⁴⁵ For further information about the Institute, refer to the section *Culture and daily life*. Frauke Fischer, "Plattdeutsch als Profil," *Weser Kurier*, 27 Juli 2014, http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/politik2_artikel,-Plattdeutsch-als-Profil-_arid,908136.html.

⁴⁶ Jutta Kuper, E-mail Message to Author, 27 August 2014.

⁴⁷ Jochen Brünner, "Wie man Plattdeutsch besser verankert," *Weser Kurier*, 22 April 2013, http://www.weser-kurier.de/region/delmenhorst_artikel,-Wie-man-Plattdeutsch-besser-verankert-_arid,552753.html.

Low German after elementary school

At the Lower Saxon *Realschule Edeweicht*, pupils can learn Low German as a foreign language; indeed, Low German fulfills the foreign language elective. The Lower Saxon Ministry for Educational and Cultural Affairs has named another *Realschule* in Leer a “Low German School.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately, there are fewer Low German initiatives in the secondary schools at this time than in the elementary schools. The secondary school programs, however, are projected to grow as elementary school programs develop. Roland Henke emphasizes: “The goal must therefore be to win more elementary schools for the preservation of regional and minority languages. The fruits of early multilingualism could then be harvested at the secondary level.”⁴⁹

In Lower Saxony, the universities in Göttingen and Oldenburg offer Low German courses of study within their German departments. The University of Bremen focuses not only on its Low German curriculum, but also on its students’ professional competency: they can now complete internships at Bremen schools for university credit.⁵⁰ Additionally, many community colleges and adult education centers throughout the Low German linguistic region offer Low German courses that provide greater access to the language in communities.⁵¹

A look at the future

According to the recommendation by the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers (2014), Low German should eventually have the same status in the curriculum as all other subjects in Bremen schools.⁵² Although this is an honorable goal, such large steps require time. Above all, school districts need time to hire educated teachers and to secure teaching materials. The schools in Bremen—and in Lower Saxony—have already made significant steps toward preserving the Low German language.

Low German in elementary school classes could inspire young students to continue learning languages. This is especially important in today’s globalized society, where communicating with other regions of the world has become an integral component of many people’s professional and personal lives. In the spirit of the *Charter*, it would be important for such classes to offer students a solid foundational knowledge of the language so that they can remain lifelong learners of Low German and its accompanying culture.

IV. CULTURE AND DAILY LIFE The Institute for Low German Language (*Das Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache*)

To speak a language is a part of the human experience: it is through languages that people experience their own cultures.⁵³ The Institute for Low German Language in

Bremen plays a leading role in the maintenance of this regional language by working not only with schools in the Low-German-speaking region, but also with authors, musicians and media outlets, so that Low German can remain accessible to people in this region.⁵⁴ Without the Institute’s outreach, the Low German language would not have become so well established in the five areas of culture and daily life that I discuss in this section.

Literature and theater

From 1990 to 2000, an average of 150 new Low German books were published every year in Germany.⁵⁵ There is also an initiative throughout the Low-German-speaking region to make literary translations in Low German accessible in bookstores and libraries. Classics such as *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell have already been translated into Low German.⁵⁶ The importance of such translations will be evident as the initiatives in the schools continue to expand.

Through collaborative efforts in 1992 between the Lower Saxon city of Soltau, the *Freudenthal-Gesellschaft*⁵⁷ and the University of Göttingen, the *Bibliothek Regionalliteratur der Lüneburger Heide* (Regional Literature Library of the Lüneburger Heide) was founded in Soltau. It makes approximately 1500 books and magazines accessible, many of which are in Low German.⁵⁸ The library at the Institute for Low

⁴⁸ Susanne Schrammar, “Sechs Schulen ausgezeichnet - Kultusministerin Heiligenstadt verleiht erstmals die Titel ‘Plattdeutsche Schule’ und ‘Saterfriesische Schule,’” *Niedersächsisches Kultusministerium*, 6 März 2014, http://www.mk.niedersachsen.de/portal/live.php?navigation_id=1820&article_id=122583&_psmand=8.

⁴⁹ Roland Henke, “Niederdeutsch (und Saterfriesisch) in der Schule”, 73.

⁵⁰ Frauke Fischer, “Plattdeutsch als Profil,” *Weser Kurier*, 27 Juli 2014, http://www.weser-kurier.de/bremen/politik2_artikel,-Plattdeutsch-als-Profil-_arid,908136.html.

⁵¹ Freerk Möller, “Niederdeutsch: das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld,” 297.

⁵² “Recommendation CM/RecChL(2014)5 of the Committee of Ministers on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by Germany,” Council of Europe, 1200th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies, Strasbourg, 2014.

⁵³ Camille C. O’Reilly, 17.

⁵⁴ “Was macht das Institut?” *Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache*, <http://www.ins-bremen.de/de/das-ins/aufgaben.html>.

⁵⁵ Freerk Möller, “Niederdeutsch: das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld,” 318.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁵⁷ Further information about the Freudenthal-Gesellschaft: <http://www.freudenthal-gesellschaft.de>.

⁵⁸ Freerk Möller, “Niederdeutsch: das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld,” 308.

German Language in Bremen is also open to the public.

According to Frerk Möller, “theater in Low German is an integral factor of this linguistic landscape.”⁵⁹

There are three professional Low German theater associations in Germany, one of which is for Bremen and Lower Saxony (the other two are in Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). But professional actors are not the only people who use Low German on stage: throughout northern Germany, there are an estimated 4,240 theater groups that perform pieces in Low German.⁶⁰ One example comes from the East Frisian region of Lower Saxony: in 1992, *Das niederdeutsche Theater für Kinder und Jugendliche* (Low German Theater for Children and Youth) was founded by various East Frisian organizations in the region. This theater group creates an interest for Low German among the younger generation, because the theater pieces themselves are directed toward a young audience and can easily be performed by younger actors.⁶¹ Theater programs for children and youth are vital for the preservation of a regional language.

Tourism and marketing: Low German as economic commodity

While a *Germanistik* student at the University of Hamburg, Kristina Meissner wrote her Master’s thesis about the Low German language. In an interview with the Swedish *Språktidningen* (“Language

Magazine”), Meissner emphasized that it is a natural reaction in today’s globalized society to demonstrate a greater interest in local or regional issues.⁶² Eunike Piwoni, a sociologist at the University of Bamberg, points to Germany’s 20th century history—most notably the Holocaust—as an influential factor shaping German national pride. Due to the tragic events of the Second World War, many Germans must confront how they will overcome the past, according to Piwoni, and this process can lead to feelings of shame.⁶³ In this case, regional and minority languages could play an important role in Germany, since they are bound to specific regions and groups of people instead of to the country and its problematic past.

Meissner also believes that the increased interest in Low German could be seen as a reaction to the infiltration of the English language in German and European media sources, particularly in advertisements.⁶⁴ In 2011, *Der Spiegel* reported that most German consumers do not understand what German businesses try to convey in their English advertisements.⁶⁵ The Low German language could counterbalance this problem: the language offers many consumers in northern Germany something “foreign” that is also *heimatlich*, or connected to home. In the 2007 survey by the Institute for Low German Language, 91 percent of Germans from Low-German-

speaking regions agreed that Low German is *heimatlich* to them.⁶⁶ Jutta Kuper, a Low German teacher in the Municipality of Schwanewede in Lower Saxony, confirmed: “Low German is always connected with cultural topics...very *heimat*-related.”⁶⁷ Marketing the “*heimat*-related” regional or minority language could be an effective strategy in other parts of Europe. Ireland offers a good example of this approach: Campbell, Bennett and Stephens demonstrate in their study of the Irish language that regional traits can be effectively used to gain a wide clientele.⁶⁸

British linguist Gertrud Reershemius supports this observation. In the 1980s, tourism became an important part of the economy of Eastern Friesland, a region in Lower Saxony that has historically retained its own dialect of Low German. At that time, the growing tourism industry needed an identity to market the region as a tourist destination and chose to form that identity by capitalizing upon the East Frisian dialect. This language, which had previously been stigmatized, suddenly became an important part of the regional culture. Today, this language helps the region represent itself as bilingual.⁶⁹

Reershemius analyzed 12 issues of the *Ostfriesland Magazin* between July 2008 and June 2009 to gain an overview of the use of Low German in public texts. Primarily in High German, the *Magazin* reports on

⁵⁹ Frerk Möller, “Niederdeutsch: das sozio-kulturelle Umfeld,” 309.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 309.

⁶¹ Ibid., 315.

⁶² Carl Undéhn, “Schnack mol wedder platt!” *Språktidningen*, Februar 2013, <http://spraktidningen.se/artiklar/2013/02/schnack-mol-wedder-platt>.

⁶³ Eunike Piwoni, “Latent but Not Less Significant: The Holocaust as an Argumentative Resource in German National Identity Discourse,” *German Politics and Society* 31, no. 3 (22 Sept 2013).

⁶⁴ Carl Undéhn, “Schnack mol wedder platt!,” <http://spraktidningen.se/artiklar/2013/02/schnack-mol-wedder-platt>.

⁶⁵ “Denglische Werbung: Worst Case ist keine Wurstkiste.” *Der Spiegel*, 4 May 2011, <http://www.spiegel.de/karriere/berufsleben/denglische-werbung-worst-case-ist-keine-wurstkiste-a-760476.html>.

⁶⁶ Frerk Möller, *Plattdeutsch im 21. Jahrhundert*, 24.

⁶⁷ Jutta Kuper, E-mail Message to Author, 1 March 2015.

⁶⁸ Karen Campbell, Billy Bennett and Simon Stephens, “Utilising a Minority Language to Develop Brand Identity: An Evaluation of Current Practice Using the Irish Language,” *Irish Marketing Review* 20, no. 1 (1999): 68.

⁶⁹ Gertrud Reershemius, “A New Role for Low German? Language Insertion as a bilingual practice in the process of language shift,” *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15, vol. 3 (2011): 384 & 392.

the Eastern Frisian region. Since the Magazin is intended for both inhabitants of the region as well as for tourists, the challenge is to use the language in such a way that readers who only speak High German can still understand the purpose of the Low German.⁷⁰

First, Low German is inserted into the text only in certain contexts, e.g. in columns, aphorisms and humorous texts that do not focus on current events.⁷¹ In this sense, Low German never competes with English, since Low German often draws on nostalgia and local topics, whereas English is used to focus on current regional and national topics and on the future.⁷²

In most cases, Low German is used as a marketing method: names of some business and products are either completely in Low German, or they consist of a mixture of High German and Low German. An example of this is *Dörpmuseum* meaning “village museum,” where *Dörp* is the Low German component meaning “village,” and *Museum* is the High German component meaning “museum.”⁷³ Reershemius believes this is an intelligent strategy since Low German seems authentic and elicits the consumer’s nostalgic feelings that are tied to the language.⁷⁴

Reershemius’s research shows that regional and minority languages can be strategically used to assure a particular society of its values. The reader—or the consumer—feels as though he/she is part of a special community when a regional or

minority language is added to a text. However, these language communities must also be defined in public space. In Eastern Friesland, Low German is integrated into public spaces by means of street signs, advertisements, building names, etc., in order to preserve the regional language identity in a physical way.⁷⁵ As these examples in Eastern Friesland show, the *Charter* fosters the use of Low German in private and public spaces.

Low German in the Bundesliga

In Bremen, Low German experienced its soccer debut in the German *Bundesliga*, the federal soccer organization, in recent years: since 2013, the Werder-Bremen team’s fan shop has advertised in Low German. During the 2014/15 season, fans could buy scarves with Low German inscriptions for the first time. The team’s slogan “Lebenslang Grün-Weiß,” or “Lifelong Green-White,” was translated into the Low German “Op Ewig Gröön-Witt” for new fan articles. This strategy may have been influenced by that used by Spanish soccer team FC Barcelona, whose slogan “Més que un club” is in Catalan, not Spanish.⁷⁶ Such measures bring the regional or minority language into the public arena and contribute to a greater awareness and appreciation of these languages and their cultures.⁷⁷

Music

De Fofftig Penns, founded in 2003, is an electro hip hop band from

Bremen. With hit songs such as “Löppt,” “Dialektro,” and “Platt,” the band raps about Low German and the culture of northern Germany. The band received the Heinrich Schmidt Barrien Prize in 2010, which honors the famous Low German author. The prize was created in 2000, after the ratification of the *Charter*, to encourage people and institutions to work toward preserving the Low German language. The band often creates new messages in Low German for their fans using the smartphone app Snapchat and is active on the social media platform Instagram.⁷⁸

In 2013, the band was chosen to represent the federal state of Bremen in the *Bundesvision Song Contest*. This was a new recognition of the Low German language, which could previously be heard at the *Liet International* competition; musicians who perform songs in a regional or minority language can participate in this contest. *Liet International* was a Frisian initiative that first took place in 2002. Since 2006, the competition has taken place annually, each year at a different location in Europe. The Council of Europe began to oversee the competition in 2008, after agreeing that the competition embodies the message of the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. De Fofftig Penns participated in this competition in 2009, after which a new competition was formed solely for songs in Low German: called *Plattsounds*, it takes place every year in the Lower Saxon city of Oldenburg.⁷⁹

⁷⁰ Gertrud Reershemius, 390.

⁷¹ Ibid., 388-389, 392.

⁷² Ibid., 391.

⁷³ Ibid., 390-391.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 390, 392.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 386.

⁷⁶ Further information: <http://www.fcbarcelona.com/club/board-members/detail/card/more-than-a-club>.

⁷⁷ “Plattdeutsch in der Bundesliga,” *Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache*, 23 Juli 2014. <http://www.ins-bremen.de/de/aktuelles/presse/news/detail/artikel/plattdeutsch-in-der-bundesliga//backpid/103.html?cHash=0ce181da0d476e4ec4cfce548e684053>.

⁷⁸ The band’s username on both Snapchat and Instagram is defofftigpenns.

⁷⁹ “Press Release: Liet International, Oldenburg, Germany, 12 December 2014,” *Liet International*, 24 Nov 2014, <https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/minlang/Source/PressReleases/LietInternational2014pressrelease.pdf>. For more information, refer to www.liet-international.com.

⁸⁰ Further information about Ina Müller: <http://www.inamueller.de/#seite-op-platt>.

⁸¹ “Spannende Geschichten von Plattdeutschen aus der ganzen Welt,” *NDR Fernsehen*, <http://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/start158.html>.

Another musician is Ina Müller, who comes from a Low-German-speaking family near Cuxhaven in Lower Saxony. She is the moderator for *Inas Nacht*, or “Ina’s Night,” a beloved television program that often features songs in Low German.⁸⁰

Digital media: television and radio

Between 1982 and 2006, *Norddeutscher Rundfunk* (NDR, Northern German Broadcasting), televised the series *Talk op Platt* (Talk in Low German). The series was then renamed *Die Welt Op Platt* (The World in Low German). With this new name and the new globally oriented topics presented in the show, NDR illustrated not only that Low German could be international, but showed that the language still carries important meaning for Germans from the Low-German-speaking region who live abroad.⁸¹ This initiative has contributed to a more comprehensive appreciation of the Low German language. NDR’s Low German competition, *Vertell doch mal*, is also popular throughout Northern Germany.⁸² This contest collects Low German short stories about a given topic and publishes the best 25 in a book—an effective method of encouraging members of the audience to utilize their own language skills.

A noteworthy initiative by NDR was its translation of the cult television series *Neues aus Büttenwarder* (Something New from

Büttenwarder) from High German into Low German. The “new” Low German series premiered in 2013, 16 years after the original series first began to air, marking the first time a series was translated into Low German. The original actors recorded the dubbed version, which consisted of a “lightly stylized ‘literary’ Low German.”⁸³

NDR 1 Niedersachsen broadcasts a variety of radio programs in Low German that are also accessible as podcasts. Among these are a daily program, *Hör mal ‘n beten to* (Listen a little bit), and a weekly program, *Düt und dat op platt* (This and that in Low German).⁸⁴ In contrast, Radio Bremen uses a modern method to provide access to Low German: since 2009, the station offers an online Low German course. The lessons consist of listening and grammar exercises and vocabulary pertaining to the themes of each lesson (the theme of the first lesson is “Die Kneipe,” or “The Pub”).⁸⁵ In 2012, Radio Bremen expanded on this program by creating a free smartphone app, *Op Platt*, which offers short lessons and current news headlines in Low German.⁸⁶ These services are an effective variation on language education and encourage interest in Low German among younger listeners.

In November 2014, a conference took place in Berlin that focused on the languages in Germany affected by the *Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*. Among other

topics, the conference attendees discussed the issue of creating a stronger presence for Low German in the German media: despite the progress already made, the Council of Europe desires a greater presence.⁸⁷ Naturally, the position of Low German in the German media could be improved upon, but as I have demonstrated above, Bremen and Lower Saxony have already made great strides.

V. CONCLUSION

“One generation is all that is necessary for a language to disappear from daily life.”⁸⁸ With this statement, Stefan Mähl, a linguist at the Swedish University of Uppsala, describes the importance of protecting not just Low German, but other regional and minority languages as well. There are 59 other languages in Europe that are either repressed or threatened. The speakers of these languages need their governments to take concrete measures that ensure the continued use of these languages. This case study about Low German in Bremen and Lower Saxony shows measures taken in one region that can already claim success.

One critique of such language protection is that many of these languages are “only symbolic.” This statement implies that Low German has no real communicative function in society and thus raises many questions. Are some languages more important than other languages?

⁸² Christoph Ahlers, “Platt im NDR” in *10 Jahre Europäische Sprachencharta in Niedersachsen*, hrsg. von Jörg Peters und Gabriele Diekmann-Dröge (Oldenburg: Isensee Verlag, 2010), 140.

⁸³ Paul Barz, “Hochdeutsch nur im Notfall: Die Kult-TV-Serie ‚Neues aus Büttenwarder‘ wird platt gemacht,” *Die Welt*, 16 Mai 2014, <http://www.welt.de/110282>.

⁸⁴ For the complete list of Low German offerings by NDR throughout northern Germany, see http://www.ndr.de/kultur/norddeutsche_sprache/plattdeutsch/Plattdeutsch-in-Radio-und-Fernsehen,platt710.html.

For the Low German offerings in Lower Saxony specifically, see <http://www.ndr.de/ndr1niedersachsen/sendungen/Plattdeutsche-Angebote-auf-NDR-1-Niedersachsen,ndrnds230.html>.

⁸⁵ “Plattdeutschkurs: Moin moin, un willkamen bi de Plattsnackers,” *Radio Bremen*, 6 Mai 2009, <http://www.radiobremen.de/wissen/dossiers/plattdeutsch/plattdeutschkurs/intro100.html>.

⁸⁶ “Wi snackt Platt! Plattdeutsch-App fürs Handy,” *Radio Bremen*, 14 September 2012, <http://www.radiobremen.de/wissen/dossiers/plattdeutsch/platt2198.html>.

⁸⁷ “Recommendation CM/RecChL(2014)5 of the Committee of Ministers on the application of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages by Germany,” Council of Europe, 1200th meeting of the Ministers’ Deputies, Strasbourg, 2014.

⁸⁸ Carl Undéhn, “Schnack mol wedder platt!” *Språktidningen* (februari 2013), <http://språktidningen.se/artiklar/2013/02/schnack-mol-wedder-platt>.

Are only some languages worth protecting? According to O'Reilly, this statement suggests that regional and minority languages are "somehow secondary or of lesser significance," which can lead to a lack of appreciation for these languages.⁸⁹

Low German belongs to and shapes the identity of this region. Although High German is the official language of Germany, Low German is present in the lives of the people of Bremen and Lower

Saxony, as I demonstrate in this paper. This statement applies not only to the older generations, but also increasingly to the younger generation, a group of people who now have greater access to the language because of the *Charter*.

The preservation of regional and minority languages is a defining step to ensure the continued linguistic diversity of a place, and thus its cultural heritage. The efforts of Bremen and Lower Saxony in politics, in the education system and in daily

life have given the inhabitants of this region the opportunity to continue speaking the language. Bremen and Lower Saxony can serve as a model for other regions of Europe that want to protect their regional and minority languages. If Bremen and Lower Saxony continue their efforts to maintain Low German, younger generations will also eventually view the language as worth protecting.

⁸⁹ Camille C. O'Reilly, "When a Language is 'Just Symbolic': Reconsidering the Significance of Language to the Politics of Identity" in *Minority Languages in Europe*, ed. Gabrielle Hogun-Brun and Stefan Wolff, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 18 & 30.

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