

# **The influence of linguistic insecurity and community dynamics on continued use of Low German in East Frisia**

Ellen Jones Schoedler  
*The University of Texas at Austin, USA*  
[ej.schoedler@gmail.com](mailto:ej.schoedler@gmail.com)

Linguistic insecurity, first coined by Labov (1966), is defined as “a mismatch between speakers’ ideal of a standard language and their actual linguistic competence” (Abtahian & Quinn, 2017: 140). Abtahian & Quinn (2017) then further define this insecurity as either an expression of an individual’s belief about the social value of a language or variety as “good” or “bad”, or their insecurity about their language skills in general (ibid). For speakers of a regional or minority language, attitudes towards less fluent speakers within their own speaker community can directly influence language maintenance. As discussed in Bradley (2002), “[i]f the speech of the younger people is regarded by the elders as inadequate because of puristic attitudes, the younger people may be discouraged from continuing to speak” (Bradley, 2002: 7).

Low German has been historically viewed as a *Mundart* or *Dialekt* spoken only by members of the working class and among rural communities (Biehl, 1999; Reershemius, 2004). However, bureaucratic efforts at the local, regional, and even European level have led to Low German being officially considered a regional language in the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages (ECRML), w created in the late 90’s to protect and support regional and minority languages in Europe. While official recognition as part of the ECRML has also generated increased public support for the maintenance of Low German, language use continues to decline (Adler, 2021).

This paper examines linguistic insecurity as reported by speakers of Low German in East Frisia, Lower Saxony, Germany, through the analysis of survey questions and open-ended interviews focused on reported language attitudes within the speaker community via speaker gender and age. These questions were included in a larger, in-depth survey distributed to Low German speakers between May and August 2023. The survey itself examines reported language use, speaker identity, and language revitalization in East Frisia. Low German is viewed positively by most speakers included in this study, therefore the linguistic insecurity expressed by speakers corresponds to their own perception of their skills in the language. While both female and male speakers in the two older age groups primarily reported not feeling nervous when speaking Low German, female speakers in the two younger age groups specifically had much higher rates of reporting this negative feeling. Anecdotal evidence indicates that female speakers may report feeling nervous because of an insecurity about their personal language skills, or because they are often overtly corrected by other Low German speakers, shown in open-ended interview responses and qualitative data from the survey.

## References

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