Moin, *Schietwedder*, and Freely Phrased Sentences: The Commodified Use of Low German on Instagram

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Abstract

In the context of a generally heightened awareness of regional or minority languages, new domains of usage, and the increased prestige of Low German, this article focuses on the use of Low German in the captions of commercial Instagram posts. By employing a mixed-methods approach of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, the captions are analysed based on language choice, distribution, and usage. Questions are addressed as to how commercial Instagrammers employ Low German for marketing, what kind of texts, linguistic structures, and lexical items are employed, and in which linguistic context Low German is used. The findings show that commercial Instagrammers primarily embed a small set of commonly known Low German words into High German sentences. In this way, they establish a connection between a shared, distinct Northern German identity, their products, and themselves. With this conscious usage of the regional language Low German, the promoted products and the commercial Instagrammers thus stand out from comparable others in a competitive global market.

Introduction: New Domains for Regional and Minority Languages

The digital space provides multiple ways to facilitate the usage of regional and minority languages (hereafter RML) and to engage in language activism. The internet and social media, however, are also places in which these languages are used in commercial settings. This article employs the novel approach of combining the domains of Low German in commercial contexts with its usage on social media platforms. It sheds light on how the regional language is used in commercial posts on the global social media platform Instagram and aims at answering how and in which linguistic contexts commercial Instagrammers employ Low German in their posts' captions.

The internet and social media platforms are not only parts of our daily lives, but also offer diverse opportunities for (speakers of) RML. The first opportunity is that, depending on technological affordances, a higher variety of agents can engage in the discourse about the language and community (Dołowy-Rybiṅska, 2013; Giolla Mhichíl et al., 2018; Reershemius, 2010, 2017). Not only is the discourse becoming more democratic, diverse, and speaker centric, but also the visibility of the language and its community increases at the same time (Dołowy-Rybiṅska, 2013; Reershemius, 2017). Another opportunity is that in times of increased mobility, users can form spatially independent communities via the internet and interact with each other (Dołowy-Rybiṅska, 2013; Reershemius, 2017). A third opportunity is that the users cannot only communicate in or about the language online, the internet and social media platforms are also a way to share and express belonging to a shared (regional) group identity (Dołowy-Rybiṅska, 2013). Furthermore, the internet and social media platforms increase the accessibility of language learning, since learning materials can be shared online and agents

other than institutions can easily engage in language teaching in various ways (Browne & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2013; Mac Uidhilin, 2013; Reershemius, 2010). The internet and social media platforms have thus the potential both to change our perception of RML and their communities and to facilitate using and learning the languages.

In times of progressively globalised markets and changing economic systems, RML are increasingly employed and commodified in commercial contexts (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019). The process of commodification describes how languages, dialects, or other varieties, also influenced by a changed social status, are used in the economy (Heller, 2010, 2014). As a result, languages gain value in various ways (Heller, 2010). For example, Heller (2010) names the areas of marketing, tourism, and translation as possible fields in which languages and language skills are profitable in different ways.

In the increasingly competitive markets, languages are used for various changing functions, some of the languages being employed as unique markers of authenticity and identity (Heller, 2010, 2014; Heller & Duchêne, 2012). According to Maegaard and Karrebæk (2019),

> [a]uthenticity can be seen as a framework for the creation of meaning and value. It involves an assemblage of meanings, including, e.g., the grounding of a phenomenon in place, time, and tradition, all of which carry high value in a time characterized by mobility and constant change. (p. 55)

The use of RML creates a regional context that associates brands, companies, and products with tradition and advertising, which can distinguish them from other comparable retailers and their products (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019; Cavanaugh & Shakar, 2014; Dlaske, 2015; Moriatry, 2015). Using RML in commercial contexts is even promoted by official language institutions, for example regarding Welsh, Frisian, or Irish (Cunliffe et al., 2010; Kelly-Holmes & Atkinson, 2007). In these cases, RML are not only used to promote the language and language area but are also presented as a relatively cheap, easy, and unique way to advertise products. Aspects such as regionality and authenticity are important factors, especially in connection with the tourism industry and marketing (Heller, 2010, 2014).

Furthermore, RML support the creation of a certain brand identity, as well as the identity of the consumers of the given products (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019; Jürgens, 2016). To create a specific unique image of a product or a brand in connection with regional identity, a small set of words and phrases in the given language are often sufficient (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019; Jürgens, 2016). This rather tokenistic usage in combination with a dominant language makes it possible, on the one hand, to relate to regionality, and, on the other hand, to understand the respective text with limited or no knowledge of the language (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019; Jürgens, 2016; Pietikäinen et al., 2019; Reershemius, 2011a, 2011b). Since the RML are not understood by the general public, it is thus not the purpose of RML to be a means of communication that conveys a high information value but rather to be a conspicuous eye-catcher, combined with a dominant language in many cases.

The investigation of RML is not only relevant in commercial contexts offline, but also in online spaces. In the last decades, the importance of e-commerce in our daily lives has risen. It has

expanded its power in the economy, especially during the pandemic (UNCTAD, 2022). In contrast to offline marketing, online spaces and social media platforms, especially, make it possible to create a high degree of individualisation and interactivity (Kelly-Holmes, 2015). Kelly-Holmes (2015) and Pietikäinen et al. (2019) point out that social media platforms can thus be used by producers of niche products, who employ RML in their marketing to reach a wider global audience. Furthermore, online shopping is seen as an opportunity to attract particularly younger speaker generations (Cunliffe et al., 2010). The investigation of RML in commercial online contexts can therefore provide insights not only into the commodification of languages but also into how younger speakers encounter, use, and perceive languages.

Although the use of Low German has already been investigated in the digital space (for an overview of some previous studies, see the following section), a better and deeper understanding is still needed of how it is used in different domains of daily life. Examining e-commerce in connection with Low German produces further knowledge about the commodification of RML, language usage, and attitudes in online spaces. Since Instagram is an important marketplace that connects, like other social media platforms, marketing with the private lives of its users, it is particularly suitable for the study of RML in online spaces (Kelly-Holmes, 2015). This article aims to answer the question of how commercial Instagrammers employ Low German for marketing purposes in their posts' captions: What kind of texts, linguistic structures, and lexical items are used in the captions? In what kind of linguistic contexts is Low German used? Is it the sole language of the caption or rather used in combination with others?

This article is structured as follows. First, I provide background information about Low German and about previous research on its use in online, as well as in commercial contexts. Background on codeswitching is also provided. Then I present the data and methods used. In the analysis that follows, I focus on and interpret the different ways Low German is used in the Instagram captions. Finally, I summarize and discuss the findings.

Background

Low German

Low German is an endangered regional language (Eberhard et al., 2022). In Germany, approximately 2.6 million speakers are estimated to have varying competence in Low German (Reershemius, 2017). It has relatively few speakers in comparison with the dominant language High German,[1] which has 80.6 million speakers in Germany (Eberhard et al., 2022). Often, the more fluent and active Low German speakers are part of the older generations (Adler et al., 2016; Arendt, 2021). In the Middle Ages, Low German was used throughout the Baltic Sea region from South to North as the language of the Hanseatic League, which affected the entire region not only economically and culturally but also linguistically (Arendt, 2021; Bentlin, 2019; Wiggers, 2017; Wirrer, 2000). Despite its prestigious past as a lingua franca, the number of Low German speakers has diminished for several reasons, including the mobility and modernisation of society, as well as the stigmatisation of Low German speakers in the past (Reershemius, 2011a; Wiggers, 2012, 2017). After World War II, the increasingly hostile policy toward Low German at schools was another impacting factor for the decrease in the

number of speakers (Kremer, 1997; Wiggers, 2017). Since the use of Low German was restricted at schools, the language usage at home also changed to protect children from penalties and stigmatisation (Kremer, 1997; Reershemius, 2011a; Wiggers, 2017). Today, Low German has achieved a higher reputation, in part due to various regional and supra-regional initiatives and recognition as a regional language under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Arendt et al., 2017). In contrast to its earlier use in everyday communication, Low German is presently mainly spoken in the domestic domain and in the cultural sector (Adler et al., 2016; Arendt et al., 2017; Reershemius, 2011b). Often, it serves as an identity marker, especially when enregistered forms, such as specific Low German words or phrases, are used in texts and conversations that are otherwise entirely High German (Jürgens, 2016; Reershemius, 2011a). Nowadays, other domains for the usage of Low German have emerged, such as in online spaces and commercial settings.

A few studies have already investigated the use of Low German in computer-mediated communication. For example, Weber and Schürmann (2018) investigated how users of a closed WhatsApp group wrote in Low German. They found that although users might vary in their writing, group-specific standard-like forms can develop in dynamic processes because the users influence each other's writing. Wiggers (2017) analysed the use of Low German on Wikipedia and on Twitter. The Wikipedia articles were monolingual in Low German and often rather short, thus creating the impression that Low German might not be suitable for discussing more complex topics, while on Twitter, Low German was scarcely used. The users codeswitched between High German and a small variety of Low German greetings and well-known words (Wiggers, 2017). Reershemius (2010, 2017) studied language use in various forums, and found that different language policies were at work in the forums and that, apart from communicating entirely in High German or Low German, users frequently codeswitched between these languages. Similar to Twitter, the codeswitching often involved the use of single well-known Low German words and phrases. Moreover, the topics and contexts dealt with were often the collection and discussion of Low German terms and names, the exchange of traditions, and, in some cases, information about events and culture (Reershemius, 2010, 2017).

The investigation of RML and regional varieties in commercial contexts is a very recent topic. The languages are not necessarily employed in connection with traditional products but are often either used in marketing or as text printed on products. Blackwood (2020) describes the use of Corsican on beverage labels, while Johnstone (2009) points to the use of Pittsburghese, for example, printed on T-shirts or mugs. Low German is used in a similar way on souvenirs and decorative items, including the greeting *Moin* 'Hello' on postcards, as shown by Jürgens (2016). In general, due to its recently risen prestige, Low German is increasingly employed in tourism and advertising (Jürgens, 2016; Möller, 2010; Reershemius, 2011b). Research about such usage of Low German in offline spaces shows that it follows previously identified trends and functions: Especially single Low German words, names, greetings, and sayings are popular for indexing regional identity (Jürgens, 2016; Reershemius, 2009, 2011a, 2011b; Wiggers, 2015). Thus, in contrast to the earlier disadvantage of speaking a regional or minority language, the improved prestige of RML makes it possible to employ these languages as a relatively cheap way to create unique marketing opportunities, products, and brands (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019; Reershemius, 2011a, 2011b).

Codeswitching

To describe how Low German is used in combination with other languages, this study draws on the concept of codeswitching. There are various definitions of codeswitching. A commonly cited definition is the use of "at least two languages" (Myers-Scotton, 1992, p. 19) or "two or more linguistic varieties" (Gardner-Chloros, 2009, p. 4) in one and the same communicative act. Other definitions of codeswitching are narrower, such as that of Auer (1999), who defines it as intentional and communicatively meaningful switches that contextualise conversations. The present study follows Gardner-Chloros' definition, treating the use of different linguistic varieties as codeswitches. A few fundamental concepts from codeswitching research are relevant to this article. The first concerns the languages involved in codeswitching. The *matrix* language is the dominant language of the codeswitch, "set[ting] the morphosyntactic frame of sentences showing [codeswitching]" (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 3). The other language(s) involved in the codeswitch is called the *embedded* language, since units of various sizes in that language are embedded into a sentence in the matrix language (Myers-Scotton, 1993). Another relevant concept is the structure of the codeswitch: *intrasentential* codeswitches describe variation occurring within sentences, while *intersentential* codeswitches vary on the sentence level .

Codeswitches can serve a variety of functions. In naturally occurring language use, according to Gumperz (1982), they often serve the functions of quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, and personalisation vs. objectivisation. Codeswitching can also be a means to indicate group membership and identity (Gumperz, 1982) as well as to express humour (cf., e.g., Woolard, 1995). In his overview of codeswitching research in computer-mediated communication, Androutsopoulos (2013) shows that the functions of (spoken) offline codeswitching can also be seen online. Through codeswitching, users can, for example, specify their audience, "perform culturally-specific genres," express their opinion, and "mark what is being said as jocular or serious, and . . . mitigate potential face-threatening acts" (Androutsopoulos, 2013, p. 681). The aspect of group membership and identity is particularly important in the present study.

In connection with codeswitching, the concept of *flagging* is also relevant for this study. Through either visual or verbal means, flagging "draws attention to a feature of the written or spoken text that is important or requires more processing from the reader/hearer" (Nurmi & Skaffari, 2021, p. 501). Codeswitching can be flagged, for example, by quotation marks, italics, or metalinguistic commentary (Nurmi & Skaffari, 2021).

Data and Methods

The data for this study come from Instagram, a social media platform that is particularly based on visual content. In their posts, users can share up to 10 images, gifs, and videos combined with a caption (max. 2200 characters), hashtags (max. 30 hashtags), and a geotag, or a location. In addition, content can be posted as so-called stories, which is content that is available only for 24 hours, and as reels, short videos of a maximum of 60 seconds, consisting of (pre-produced) video and sound material as well as effects, filters, and written texts (Instagram, n.d.). For data collection for the present study, different hashtags were used to compile a group

of Instagrammers who employ Low German for advertising. Hashtags serve as topic markers and make tagged content searchable on social media platforms (McMonagle et al., 2019; Zappavinga, 2011; Zappavinga & Martin, 2018). Apart from these functions, by tagging their posts with specific hashtags, Instagrammers make deliberate choices, especially in the context of RML, since hashtags are a user-based classification (McMonagle et al., 2019; Zappavinga & Martin, 2018). With the help of hashtags, a specific group of Instagrammers was identified who employ Low German for commercial purposes. The hashtags used for the corpus creation refer to Low German either in Low German (#plattdütsch, #plattdüütsch, #plattdütsk, #plattdüütsk, #nedderdütsch, #nedderdüütsch, #nedderdütsk, #nedderdüütsk) or in High German (#plattdeutsch, #niederdeutsch). These hashtags were chosen because they are relatively neutral search terms and, in the case of the Low German hashtags, represent different regional spellings.

The preconditions for posts to be included in the data were that the Instagrammers (companies, shops, private persons) promoted a brand, products, services, or any other kind of goods in their feed and that a post's caption included at least one Low German word. The data were collected in 2021, and they comprise posts published from March 1 to October 31, 2021. In total, 1157 posts by 86 Instagrammers[2] were collected (see Table 1). The total collected data consist of the posts' visuals, captions, and hashtags; in this article, only the captions are discussed. Captions are particularly interesting, since they show which functions Low German fulfills in written online communication, i.e., whether the language is used to provide information or if it is used for other purposes. The captions contain 54,304 words, with a mean length of 47 words. Emojis and comments on the posts are not included in the data.

Category	∑
Instagrammers	86
Posts	1157
Captions	1157
Visual elements	1753
- Images	1673
- Videos	80
Words in the corpus	54,304
Hashtags in the corpus	22,007

Table 1. The total corpus

The Instagrammers are not large firms or chains, but rather, for example, small companies that sell products with Low German words printed on them, private individuals who sew children's clothes or craft decoration products, and restaurants and hotels. In the corpus, Low German is less connected to the promotion of (regional) food or traditional handcrafted products and more to souvenirs and items displaying regional identity, e.g., through text on products such as t-shirts. The Instagrammers sometimes address their linguistic backgrounds: A few grew up speaking Low German, some are new speakers, and others admit to having rather limited or almost no knowledge of Low German. In most cases, neither the posts nor the so-called bios (profile descriptions) provide any further information about the Instagrammers' connection to Low German or language skills.

To address the research questions, the coding and categorising of the captions considered various aspects linked to language choice, distribution, and usage (see Figure 1). First, the captions were coded based on the linguistic setting in which Low German was used, i.e., whether the captions were mono-, bi-, or multilingual, and the language(s) used. Since there are often no clear-cut differences between (related) languages, and they are not always easily distinguishable, decisions regarding the categorisation of the captions were thus made on a case-by-case basis.

The bilingual and multilingual captions were analysed manually based on the positioning of the Low German part(s) in the captions, for example, whether they were placed at the beginning or at the end. Furthermore, following the extent of Low German in the captions, the bilingual and multilingual captions were further divided into those a) that include single (or several) separately used Low German words, and b) captions that contain larger syntactical units in Low German, such as phrases or sentences. The captions of the first group were then manually analysed regarding the parts of speech of the Low German items (both frequency and content) in order to describe preferences regarding forms and structures.
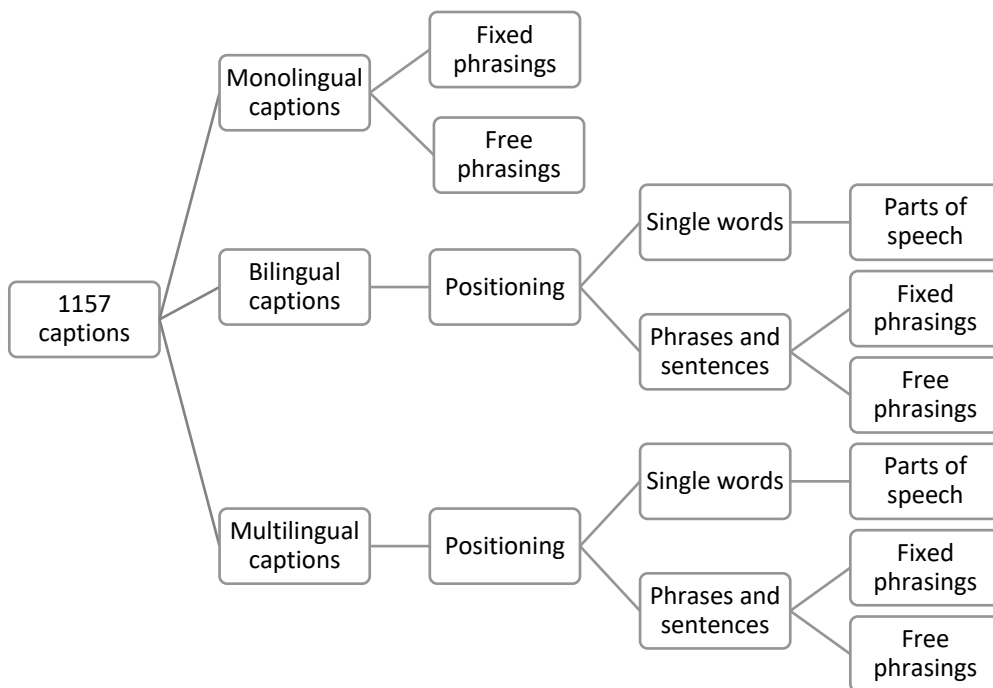

Figure 1. Coding and categorising of the caption data

To analyse the syntactic complexity of the Low German units in the captions, the captions in the second group containing Low German phrases and sentences were further classified manually. This classification includes *fixed* phrasings (Example 1) if the Instagrammers posted commonplace sayings, greetings, and other fixed forms, and *free* phrasings (Example 2) if they used their own freely formed wordings. (The Low German parts in the examples are underlined by the author.) The division between fixed and free phrasings was also applied to the monolingual captions.

(1) _Geiht nich, gifft nich! Einen Weg gibt es immer und wenn es nicht passt, wird es passend gemacht. [emoji] Ein schönes Wochenende euch!_

'Anything is possible! There's always a way and if it doesn't fit, it will be made to fit. [emoji] Have a nice weekend!'

(2) _De Eerdbeer-Tied hett begünnen. [emoji] Wer liebt sie auch? Wir finden sie absolut unwiderstehlich._

'The strawberry season has begun. [emoji] Who else loves them? We think they are absolutely irresistible.'

Concepts of codeswitching and flagging were employed in the manual coding process of the bilingual and multilingual data in the corpus. Codeswitching concepts were used to understand the use and combination of different languages in the captions, particularly as regards their functions. The analysis included determining the embedded and matrix languages in the captions, as well as distinguishing between intrasentential and intersentential codeswitches. The concept of flagging served to further examine the use and function of the different languages. This involved identifying instances in the data where written text was italicised, capitalised, enclosed in quotations, or flagged through other means. Through this approach, it was possible to analyse how Instagrammers presented their use of different languages as either a conscious or incidental choice, distinguishing between marked and unmarked language choices.

The different parts of the analysis described above make it possible to draw conclusions about the function of Low German in the Instagram captions.

Analysis

Commercial Instagrammers Use Low German in Predominantly High German Captions

The corpus comprises 1157 Instagram posts that include Low German to varying degrees; this study focuses on the use of Low German in captions. Most of the captions in the corpus are bilingual in Low German and High German (95%), a small number of captions are monolingual in Low German (3%), and some are multilingual, including additional languages besides Low German and High German (2%) (Table 2). The other languages in the multilingual captions are English, Italian, and/or Croatian. Rather than using Low German as the only language in the captions, codeswitching involving one or more other languages is the rule.

Captions	∑ captions	% captions
Monolingual in LG	30	3%
Multilingual	1127	97%
Bilingual LG HG	1101	95%
Multilingual, including LG, HG, and additional language(s)	26	2%
Total	1157	100%

Table 2. Distribution of languages (_Note_: In this and the following tables, LG = Low German, HG = High German)

There might be several reasons for the small number of monolingual captions in Low German. First, monolingual captions can limit accessibility for the audience. In general, the age groups using Instagram commonly exhibit less competence in Low German than the older generations, who are rarely users of Instagram or the internet (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020). Furthermore, since the Instagrammers advertise their products or themselves in their captions, reaching a wide audience is crucial for attracting potential customers. Second, the absence of a common written standard and the fact that many speakers are not used to writing Low German may pose further obstacles to the Instagrammers (Reershemius, 2010; Wiggers, 2017). Third, as Wiggers (2017) observed regarding the use of Low German on Twitter, Instagrammers might perceive the usage of a regional language such as Low German to be a contradiction on the global platform Instagram. Fourth, for the Instagrammers and their audience, monolingual captions could be specifically linked to contexts such as language teaching or activism.

Regarding bilingual captions in Low German and High German, the captions are further divided into those including Low German phrases and sentences (Example 3) and captions that include one or more separately used Low German single word (Example 4). Most of the bilingual captions are of the latter kind (72% of all captions, Table 3).

(3) *Mit diesem hübschen Notizblock macht es ja fast schon Spaß, auch die unangenehmen und nervigen Aufgaben abzuarbeiten. [emojis]* <u>*Wat mutt, dat mutt, ne?*</u> *Ihr findet den Block im Etsy-Shop. [emoji]*

'With this pretty notepad, it's almost fun to work through the unpleasant and annoying tasks. [emojis] <u>What has to be done, has to be done, right</u>? You can find the notepad in the Etsy shop. [emoji]'

(4) <u>*Büdel*</u> *packen und ab nach Norderney! [emoji] Da darf das Inseltagebuch auf keinen Fall fehlen! [emoji] Schaut gerne mal in meinen [sic] Etsy-Shop vorbei! Vielleicht ist das Inseltagebuch ja was für euch oder ihr kennt jemanden, dem ihr eine Freude machen wollt [emoji]*

'Pack your <u>bags</u> and off to Norderney! [emoji] The island diary should not be missing! [emoji] Check out my Etsy shop! Maybe the island diary is something for you or you know someone you want to make happy [emoji]'

Extent of syntactic complexity of unit		∑	% bilingual LG HG	% all captions
Phrase or sentence in LG		263	24%	23%
Word in LG		838	76%	72%
	single LG word in caption	666	60%	58%
	several separate words	172	16%	15%
Total		1101	100%	95%

Table 3. Bilingual captions in Low German and High German (*Note*: The remaining 5% of all captions are monolingual in Low German or multilingual, including languages in addition to Low German and High German.)

In most cases, the Instagrammers used only one single Low German word (666 captions, 58% of all captions). Captions containing more than one Low German word were considerably less common; the Instagrammers posted 172 of this kind (15% of all captions). Syntactically more complex Low German phrases and sentences occur in 263 captions (23% of all captions). The data shows that the Instagrammers clearly prefer to use Low German as single words in their captions rather than as complex phrases and sentences or in monolingual captions.

Captions Including Low German Single Words: Known Words and Ready to Use Forms Are Common

The further analysis initially concentrates on the largest group of captions that contain one or more separately occurring Low German words (Examples 5-8). When the Instagrammers use only single words or proper names in Low German, they employ in most cases intrasentential codeswitching. In Example (5), the Low German noun *Krabbelderen* 'insects' is embedded into a High German sentence, and in Example (6), the proper name of the product, *Deern*, a widely known noun meaning 'girl,' is the only Low German part of the caption.

> (5) *Mit einem Insektenhotel kann man ganz einfach einen tollen Beitrag für die Natur leisten und vielen <u>Krabbelderen</u> (Insekten) einen geschützten Platz bieten. Habt ihr bei euch auch ein Insektenhotel aufgestellt?*
>
> 'With an insect hotel you can easily make a great contribution to nature and offer many <u>insects</u> (insects) a protected place. Have you also set up an insect hotel at your place?'

> (6) *Die <u>Deern</u> Mini, unser neustes Kraftpaket ist da [emoji] Eine mittelgroße Handtasche für Damen, extrem robust, leicht und haltbar. Das kleine Raumwunder ist ein echtes Designerstück, mit Augenmerk auf Veredelung im Detail. Die große Zahl der Original 360° Segeltuchtaschen ist auch hier der Hingucker, während sich die vielen Feinheiten erst auf den zweiten Blick offenbaren: Die Außentasche für Wertsachen und Papiere ist verschließbar und dank Reißverschluss mit Straps modisch und schick [emoji]*
>
> 'The <u>Deern</u> Mini, our latest power pack is here [emoji] A medium-sized handbag for women, extremely strong, light and durable. The small miracle of space is a real designer piece, with a focus on refinement in detail. The large number of original 360° canvas bags is also an eye-catcher here, while the many subtleties only become apparent at second glance: The outer pocket for valuables and papers can be closed and thanks to the zipper with straps is fashionable and chic [emoji]'

To better understand the use of Low German in this group, the Low German parts of speech are first analysed. The 838 captions in this category contain 334 different types in Low German and 1360 tokens (Table 4 below). Regarding types, common nouns (166 types) are the most frequent parts of speech, followed by proper names (80 types) and adjectives (32 types). However, concerning usage, proper names (429 tokens) form the most frequent category, greetings (304 tokens) the second, and common nouns (274 tokens) the third. The Instagrammers thus prefer the comparably easy-to-use proper names, greetings, and nouns rather than using and conjugating Low German verbs or inflecting adjectives.

		Type	Token
Common nouns		166	274
Proper names		80	429
	of which Moin as a product name	*1*	*102*
Adjectives		32	50
Verbs		29	70
Pronouns		9	62
Adverbs		6	12
Greetings		6	304
	of which Moin	*1*	*298*
Articles		4	55
Particles		1	2
Total		334	1360

Table 4. Captions including one or more separately occurring Low German words

The most common parts of speech categories share the property that they often include Low German words that are rather well known to a High German-speaking audience (Examples 6 & 7).

(7) *Gnadderbüddel! Aber heute nicht, denn es ist Wochenende! [emoji] Macht euch ein schönes Wochenende und genießt den Herbst! [emoji]*

'Grumbler! But not today, because it's the weekend! [emoji] Have a nice weekend and enjoy autumn! [emoji]'

Table 5 below presents examples of the most common parts of speech. The frequently used nouns can be divided into three categories: (1) nouns related to the promoted products, (2) general vocabulary, which is connected to the target audience of the given product in some cases, and (3) aspects that are commonly linked to Northern Germany. Most nouns are comprehensible for a general audience in Germany, as they are either widely known, as their meaning can be derived from the context, or because the Instagrammers give a translation. Neither the Instagrammers nor their audience need to be highly competent in Low German to use or understand the nouns, since they are embedded in otherwise High German captions.

Similarly, the proper names comprise different categories. They are either (1) the greeting *Moin*, (2) general words and phrases (Example 6), or (3) more general aspects that are publicly connected to Northern Germany. The greeting *Moin* is not only frequently used as a proper name, but it is also a salient feature in its original way of usage as a greeting. Other greetings and closings are only used once in most cases. Since the Instagrammers employ especially *Moin* as a proper name for a high variety of products and as a greeting, it can be argued that the Instagrammers perceive *Moin* as highly indexical of a Northern German identity and use it in an emblematic way (see Reershemius, 2009). In general, it is nowadays also part of the Northern German vernacular and does not necessarily index a Low German background (Jürgens, 2016). It could thus also be seen as an index of a broader Northern German group identity.

Nouns	1) *Büdels* 'tote bags', *Büxen* 'trousers'
	2) *Deerns* 'girls', *Kinners* 'children'
	3) *Schietwedder* 'bad weather', *Klönschnack* 'a chat', *Kluntje* 'rock candy', *Teetied* 'specific kind of tea ceremony'
Proper names	1) *Moin* 'Hello'
	2) *Designstuuv*, compound[3] of *design* and *stuuv* 'living room'
	3) *waterkantdeern* 'girl of the coast'
Greetings	*Moin* 'Hello', *Munterhollen* 'Stay healthy'
Adjectives	*lütt* 'small', *sutsche* 'slow', *groot* 'big', *eenfach* 'easy', *natürelk* 'natural', *moi* 'beautiful'
Verbs	*schnacken* 'to speak', *sien/wesen/ween* 'to be', *klönen* 'to talk', *gahn* 'to go', *kieken* 'to see'

Table 5. Examples of the most common Low German parts of speech in the captions

Regarding the less frequent categories of adjectives and verbs, a small group of rather basic and well-known words is common in the captions (see Table 5 for the most frequent). The verbs given as infinitives in Table 5 are either used in the present tense or the infinitive in the captions. The use of Low German verbs and adjectives might be an obstacle for the Instagrammers and their audience due to their inflectional morphology. However, the usage of commonly known and ready-to-use Low German forms does not require a general command of the language or its inflections, and it is thus easier to embed them in the captions.

Low German and High German are related to each other and share similarities; thus, it is in general relatively easy to embed Low German into High German sentences. In almost all cases in the captions, the Low German words are not morphologically integrated into High German. Only with a small number of adjectives is a High German inflection combined with a Low German adjective (*lüttes*: *lütt* 'small' (LG) -*es* (HG)). This is in part because the ending is the same in High German and Low German, for example, *grootartige* 'gorgeous' (*grootartig* (LG) -*e* (HG and LG)). In these cases, it is not clear whether the Instagrammers were able to inflect in Low German or whether they followed the High German system. Low German nouns in particular are often indexed as separate elements from the subsequent captions through different means of flagging, as discussed later, rather than being integrated into the High German system. Thus, Low German parts of speech are predominantly rather delimited and highlighted as distinct.

The use of Low German in multilingual captions including languages in addition to Low German and High German follows the aforementioned structures in the majority of cases. In most instances, the Instagrammers employ Low German in intrasentential codeswitches; Low German proper names and single words are embedded into High German sentences. In addition, the greeting *Moin* is relatively common. In example (8) below, the Instagrammer posts an English statement at the beginning of the caption, after which *Moin* is used as a proper name and the sole Low German element of the caption. What makes this kind of caption special is the use of English in combination with Low German (this occurs in 25 captions). Since English is often perceived as indexing progress, a future orientation, and success (Piller, 2001),

the use of English in the captions can be seen as a way to associate the Instagrammers and their products with an international and modern community. At the same time, the Instagrammers employ Low German to relate to a shared North German background, bridging the gap between the more internationally focused setting of Instagram and the regional roots of Low German. Since English is rather the norm than the exception in advertisings and commercial contexts, Low German stands out and is an exotic eye-catcher.

(8) So individual, so colorful [emoji] *Unsere MOIN Teile können so unterschiedlich sein... es ist für jeden Geschmack etwas dabei [emoji] Und das ist das Tolle daran... so wird es nie langweilig! Aber seht selbst....[emoji] Welches MOIN ist Euer Favorit? [emojis]*

So individual, so colorful [emoji] Our MOIN pieces can be so different... there's something for every taste [emoji] And that's the great thing about it... it never gets boring! But see for yourself.... [emoji] Which MOIN is your favourite?

Low German Phrases and Sentences: Instagrammers Employ Low German in a More Versatile Way

The uses of Low German described above differ to some extent from bilingual captions that include syntactically more complex phrases and sentences in Low German. The latter comprise 23% of all captions (263 captions). In the analysis of the linguistic properties of Low German phrases and sentences, I distinguish between *fixed* and *free* phrasings as well as their *combinations*, captions in which both fixed and free phrasings are used. Fixed phrasings are captions in which the Low German part is a commonly used fixed wording, such as sayings, greetings, or quotes. Free phrasings, in contrast, contain captions in which the Instagrammers use their own wordings in Low German.

Kinds of Low German usage	∑ captions	% captions
Free phrasings	162	62%
Fixed phrasings	88	33%
Combinations	13	5%
Total	263	100%

Table 6. Linguistic properties of captions that include complex Low German phrases and sentences

As Table 6 indicates, the majority of captions include free phrasings (62% of phrasings) (see Examples 9 & 10). They comprise entire sentences in Low German, as well as intrasentential codeswitching when Low German phrases are embedded in High German sentences. Based on their use of more varied vocabulary, tenses, and structures, it can be assumed that these Instagrammers have a more advanced Low German competence than Instagrammers who only used single well-known words. This aspect suggests that the Instagrammers express a higher degree of authenticity and Northern Germanness in connection with their branding. Nevertheless, High German remains the matrix language of the captions in most cases.

(9) *Wi hebbt an Oostern för ju open. [emoji] Dat gifft mooi warme Brötchen un lecker Koken! Die genauen Filial-Öffnungszeiten für Ostern findet ihr auf unserer Internetseite "[website]" unter dem Punkt "Standorte".*

'We are open for you at Easter. [emoji] There are nice warm rolls and delicious cakes! The exact branch opening times for Easter can be found on our website "[website]" under "Locations".'

(10) *Wo lött sik dat an'n besten öwer meckern? Richtig! öwer't Wäder! Noch mihr plattdüütschen Schnack finnst du up [name]s Internetsiet (Link in Bio)! (Worüber lässt es sich am besten meckern? Richtig! Über's Wetter! Noch mehr plattdeutsche Sprüche findest du auf [name]s Internetseite - Link in Bio!)*

'What's the best thing to complain about? Right! About the weather! You can find even more Low German sayings on [name]'s website – link in bio!)'

In addition to the free phrasings, the Instagrammers posted fixed phrasings in 88 captions (33%) (see Example 11), with Low German sayings being especially popular (16%). Thus, in contrast to the captions that include only Low German words, the Instagrammers primarily use their own wordings in Low German phrases and sentences.

(11) *Hol di fuchtig! Diesen Abschiedsgruß kann heute jeder gebrauchen, den es heißt „Bleib gesund" Halt die Ohren steif" und weil ich als Kind immer dachte die Leudde sagen fruchtig, gibts es ein tolles Obstdecor dazu [emojis] mehr leckere Wandteller gibt bei [website]*

Stay healthy! Everyone could need this greeting nowadays, since it says "stay healthy" Keep a stiff upper lip" and because I always thought people said fruity as a child, there is a great fruit decoration [emojis] more delicious wall plates are available at [website]

Functions of Low German in the Captions: Eye-catchers with a Symbolic Value

Although distinct in their structure and the amount of Low German used, the captions of the different categories share patterns and functions as regards their Low German usage. The positioning of the Low German parts in the captions varies; however, the Instagrammers generally tend to position the Low German parts, especially the syntactically more complex phrases and sentences (Examples 9-11) and the greeting *Moin* (Example 12), at the beginning of the captions, and then proceed in High German. As shown in Example (7), single Low German words are also used as openers of captions. The Low German noun *Gnadderbüddel* 'grumbler' is not embedded in a High German sentence but precedes it and is separated from it by an exclamation mark. Through this positioning, the Instagrammers draw attention to their posts and their promoted products using Low German as an eye-catching element that sets the captions apart from others at first glance.

The usage of Low German words, phrases, and sentences as eye-catchers is not only apparent from their positioning but also through various means of flagging. The already mentioned exclamation mark in Example (7) is one way to set Low German content apart from High German words. In other captions, Low German proper names embedded in High German

sentences are also given in quotation marks or entirely in capital letters (Example 8), clearly distinguishing them from the rest of the sentences. Additionally, quotation marks or brackets are common when the Instagrammers introduce Low German vocabulary or provide High German translations (Example 12). In addition to the visual flagging, in some cases, the Instagrammers use metalinguistic commentary as verbal flagging such as "as we say here," claiming ownership of Low German. The findings show that various means of flagging are employed to differentiate the Low German parts from High German content.

(12) *Moin mitnanner! Hab ihr schon mal einen #Igel gesehen? Meistens sieht man sie ja leider ziemlich platt auf der Straße. Aber manchmal hat man Glück und ein quicklebendiges Exemplar ist im eigenen #Garten unterwegs. "Stiekelschwien" heißt übrigens #Stachelschwein und eine ziemlich treffende Beschreibung des kleinen Kerls. Ein anderer #Name ist "Tuunegel", wobei "Tuun" der Garten ist. Kennt ihr noch andere Namen? Wie heißt er bei euch?*

'Hey fellows! Have you ever seen a #hedgehog? Unfortunately, most of the time you see them pretty flat on the street. But sometimes you're lucky and a lively specimen is on the road in your own #garden. By the way, "porcupine" means #porcupine and a pretty apt description of the little guy. Another #name is "hedgehog", where "garden" is the garden. Do you know any other names? What do you call it?'

In general, words, phrases, and sentences in Low German tend not to convey the key information of the captions, but rather they draw the audience's attention to the captions, the promoted product, or the Instagrammers. In these uses, Low German has a symbolic rather than a communicative value. Codeswitching can index group membership and identity, and this is also the case in the present corpus. The ready-to-use single Low German words, greetings, and proper names fulfill the function of expressing a shared Low German background and membership in a Northern German community. Active knowledge of the Low German words in the captions is neither necessary nor important. Similarly, even when the use of Low German is more versatile and extensive, it is often not necessary to understand the language in captions that include a Low German phrase or sentence. As exhibited in Example (10), the Instagrammers provide the most important information or facts they want to distribute in High German, while the Low German part is more general. In this example, the freely phrased first Low German sentence states that their shop is open during the Easter weekend. In contrast to the captions including Low German words, Low German is the matrix language of the second sentence in this caption, since the High German noun *Brötchen* 'roll' is embedded into a Low German sentence. The reason for choosing *Brötchen* instead of a Low German word such as *Rundstück* 'roll' might be to ensure that the audience understands the caption or that it reflects the language use and codeswitching in everyday life. In combination with the placement of the Low German parts, their low information value further underscores their function as eye-catchers and indicators of regional identity.

Some Instagrammers teach Low German to a limited extent, providing translations of Low German words, phrases, and sentences in their captions. They often either present single Low German words (Example 5) or different regional varieties (Example 12), even though the meaning of the Low German content might already be clear from the context of the caption.

Apart from presenting different regional varieties and translations of single words, the Instagrammers also provide translations of Low German phrases and sentences in some captions. One Instagrammer translates a Low German closing phrase, connecting it to the presented product, by sharing how she misunderstood the phrase as a child (Example 11). In a small number of captions (42, 4% of all captions, 16% of captions with phrases or sentences), one or more Low German sentences are followed by their High German translation. In Example (10), the Instagrammer shares a commonplace about the weather and promotes her homepage. Although teaching Low German is not the focus of most captions, the provided High German translations make it possible for a broader audience to understand the captions' content, which is important for the commercial success of the Instagrammers. In addition to increasing the accessibility of the captions, the translations also emphasise the distinctiveness of Low German and that there is room for misunderstandings.

Monolingual Captions in Low German Stand Out

Captions written entirely in Low German differ from other captions not only in their number, but because they also fulfill different functions. Only a small number of captions are monolingual in Low German (30 captions, 3% of all captions). Like the Low German phrases and sentences in the preceding section, the monolingual captions were categorised based on whether they include fixed phrasings or free phrasings. Following the tendency of bilingual captions that include Low German phrases and sentences, the majority of captions consist of free phrasings (73% of monolingual captions). See Table 7.

Kinds of Low German usage	∑ captions	% monolingual LG	% all captions
Free phrasings	22	73%	1.9%
Fixed phrasing	5	17%	0.4%
Combination	3	10%	0.3%
Total	30	100%	2.6%

Table 7. Linguistic properties of monolingual captions in Low German

The monolingual captions contain even fewer fixed phrasings than the bilingual captions with Low German phrases and sentences. Rather, they tend to provide information and discuss Low German vocabulary in mostly freely phrased sentences. In Example (13), a bank branch informs the audience that their employees also speak Low German with customers. Example (14) is one of the monolingual Low German captions that discuss Low German vocabulary; in this case, the Instagrammer gives a list of various regional words for a TV set.

(13) *"Plattdüütsk bi de Arbeit" Uns Kollegen (v.l.) [name 1], [name 2], [name 3], [name 4] un [name 5] van de [bank branch] maken mit und proten platt mit jo! [emojis]*

' "Low German at work" Our colleagues (from left) [name 1], [name 2], [name 3], [name 4] and [name 5] of the [bank branch] join in and speak Low German with you! [emojis]'

(14) *Wat löppt bi di grad in't Kiekschapp, orrer in [emoji] denn Fiernse(i)her/*
Feernseher [emoji] de Kiekkommod [emoji] denn Kiekkasten [emoji] de
Flimmerkist [emoji] ... TV-Programm orrer Stream?

'What's on your TV right now, or on [emoji] TV/TV [emoji] TV [emoji] TV [
emoji] TV [emoji] ... TV program or stream?'

The monolingual captions can be seen as excluding an audience that does not understand Low
German well. The captions focus on learners or native speakers, signalling a smaller in-group,
similar to offline use of the language with family and friends. However, depending on their
length and content, monolingual Low German captions might still be comprehensible. If
(shorter) captions include well-known words, phrases, or sayings, a general audience of
speakers of related languages like High German or Dutch might nevertheless understand them.
Overall, the small number of monolingual Low German captions not only stands out from the
other captions because of their monolingualism and the use of Low German as the medium of
communication, but also because of the focus on teaching and discussing vocabulary in many
captions.

Conclusion: Instagrammers Use a Limited Low German Repertoire for Specific Purposes

The questions investigated in this study concerned how commercial Instagrammers employ
Low German for marketing; what kind of texts, linguistic structures, and lexical items are
employed; and in what linguistic contexts Low German is used. The main finding is that the
Instagrammers mostly post captions that are bilingual in Low German and High German. A
small set of single Low German words is typically used, and the greeting *Moin* is crucial for
establishing a relationship between the Instagrammers, their products, and a Northern German
identity. The Low German parts of the captions serve as eye-catchers that highlight a distinct
symbolic in-group and community, as well as indexing authenticity. For these Instagrammers,
Low German is a unique and valuable resource in a competitive global market.

Similar to other RML used in advertising, the Instagrammers employ Low German for various
reasons. In these times of globalised markets, companies, brands, and smaller producers need
to find ways to set their products and brand identities apart from other comparable ones. RML
and aspects linked to them offer ways to connect values such as tradition, regional identities,
and especially authenticity to brands and products. This is true not only for offline domains
but, as this study shows, also for online domains.

Low German serves as a marker of shared regional identity and authenticity on Instagram,
similar to the ways Low German is employed in commercial contexts and tourism offline
(Jürgens, 2016; Reershemius, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). It is seen as an index of 'real' authentic
Northern Germanness. With the help of Low German, the Instagrammers create proximity
between themselves and their audience, including them in the same in-group. The
Instagrammers use Low German strategically to emphasise a close and distinct community, in
contrast to the general public. The performance of identity with the help of Low German does
not only apply to the Instagrammers but also to their audience; by following the Instagrammers,
consuming their content, and buying and using their products, the audience can express a

regional identity, as well (Jürgens, 2016; Pietikäinen et al., 2019). Since (lack of) knowledge of Low German can indicate inclusion or exclusion, the Instagrammers need to tailor their language use to audiences with diverse backgrounds to create a potential for identification. Furthermore, apart from indexing the regional identity and authenticity of the Instagrammers, Low German can also symbolise the authenticity of products and, due to its associations, honesty. Low German is often perceived as a direct and sometimes even rough language (Adler et al., 2016; Arendt, 2010). These associations are especially useful in connection with claims about the Instagrammers' products, which often highlight fair trade or organic origins, even though the products are not necessarily produced in the region or traditionally linked to it.

As observed in similar offline contexts, the single Low German words used in many captions of the corpus are sufficient for the purposes mentioned above: serving as eye-catchers, indexing authenticity, and associating the captions with a Northern German community (Jürgens, 2016; Pietikäinen et al., 2019; Reershemius, 2009, 2011b). To avoid comprehension difficulties, the majority of captions include Low German-High German codeswitching, and only a small number are monolingual in Low German. The frequent use of the greeting *Moin,* as well as proper names, has already been noted by Reershemius (2009, 2011a) and Jürgens (2016); in the corpus of the present study, as well, the Instagrammers employ them as short and easily applicable ways to use Low German forms. The greetings, proper names, and relatively well-known Low German words do not require (a high degree of) Low German competence on the part of the Instagrammers or their audiences. They are comprehensible to the wider High German-speaking public, unlike the monolingual Low German captions, which might pose obstacles for the audience. In most cases, the Low German part does not convey high information value but is used in symbolic enregistered forms that, like in offline spaces, serve the purpose of indexing regional identity (Jürgens, 2016; Reershemius, 2009, 2011a, 2011b). This finding, in combination with their positioning at the beginning of captions, further underscores their function as symbolic eye-catchers.

An aspect that plays a rather marginal role for the Instagrammers in the present corpus is language promotion and activism. In most cases, fairly common and widely known Low German words, phrases, and sentences are used and even sometimes translated. However, a small number of Instagrammers also teach Low German vocabulary, provide information about the language, and promote it in addition to advertising their products. These Instagrammers serve as a kind of mediator through these captions, having the authority of the in-group. Although comments on the Instagram posts are not part of the corpus, it can be observed that even single Low German words and short phrases and sentences can prompt the audience to comment using Low German to some extent. Since people tend to follow the language choice of their interlocutors, the commercial Instagrammers can motivate their audience to increase their use of Low German online by including the language in their posts (Gioalla Mhichil et al., 2018). Additionally, employing Low German in commercial posts might increase the Instagrammers' motivation to improve or use Low German, similar to, for example, the use of Irish in offline commercial contexts (Brennan & O'Rourke, 2019). From an optimistic point of view, the commercial use of Low German on Instagram could thus also be seen as a small-scale form of language promotion, even though the speakers themselves often perceive the internet and social media platforms as less important for the maintenance of the language (Adler et al., 2016).

The overarching aim of using Low German for the Instagrammers in this study is to associate themselves, their posts, and products with a Low German background and thus express being part of a shared regional identity. To realize this aim, neither the Instagrammers nor their audience have to speak Low German well. Although Low German serves as the language of the in-group, it is rarely used more extensively or in more varied and individually formulated texts. The indexed 'true' Northern Germanness of the Instagrammers and their products enables them to be differentiated from other (comparable) products. As observed by Pietikäinen et al. (2016) regarding RML in general, the earlier stigmatisation and minoritisation of Low German is now a competitive advantage over the use of High German only. Low German is clearly being commodified.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. I refer to the language as High German to make the distinction clear between Low German and High German.

2. One Instagrammer was excluded due to the fact that their output mostly consisted of a small set of pictures with the same captions.

3. Compounds like this are internally multilingual, but they were considered as Low German in the context of this study. They were not excluded from the corpus.

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