THE CURRENT STATUS AND USE OF LOW GERMAN

Initial results of a representative survey
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by
Astrid Adler
Christiane Ehlers
Reinhard Goltz
Andrea Kleene
Albrecht Plewnia
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1. Introduction

The regional language of Low German has been subject to strong influences in recent years. Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, profound changes were observed in the use of language within families, with Low German being displaced by Standard German as the everyday language. It was not until the 1990s that views started to change and the cultural value of the regional language was rediscovered; no longer perceived to be backward and coarse, it was accorded attributes such as closeness and melodiousness. From 2000 onwards, activities were introduced, particularly in kindergartens and schools, but also in children’s and youth theatre projects and in connection with music, which targeted language learning and simultaneously facilitated access to Low German. They, too, were intended to improve the image of Low German.

In terms of its structural characteristics, Low German (like Dutch and Frisian) is a North Sea Germanic language; Low German dialects differ considerably from Central and Upper German dialects. One characteristic of Low German is that the voiceless plosives $p$, $t$ and $k$ did not shift to $pf/f$, $s/ss/zz/tz$ and $ch$ as was partly the case in Central German and completely so in Upper or Standard German by around the 8th century (High German consonant shift). So in Low German, “I eat the apple” is $Ik\ eet\ den\ Appel$ as opposed to Standard German $Ich\ esse\ den\ Apfel$.

Low German is spoken in the following nine German federal states: Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Schleswig-Holstein and (the northern parts of) Brandenburg, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia and Saxony-Anhalt. Within this area, numerous local Low German dialects can be identified. In addition, there are Low German linguistic enclaves in the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Paraguay, Russia, Kazakhstan and in other countries.

By signing the “European Charta for Regional or Minority Languages”, the Federal Republic of Germany recognized Low German as a regional language; the relevant law came into effect in 1999. In this internationally binding agreement, Germany undertook to protect and promote Low German alongside the minority languages of Danish, Frisian, Sorbian and Romani.

While linguists usually speak of “Low German”, in everyday German people commonly use the terms “Platt” and “Plattdeutsch”. “Platt” originally meant ‘clear, distinct, understood by everyone’ and is not derived from “flat countryside” – as many assume. During the 17th century, however, the term underwent a change in meaning, after which it was generally used in a more derogatory sense meaning ‘simple, coarse’.

What attitudes do people living in northern Germany have towards Low German nowadays? How many of them are actively proficient in Low German or at least understand it? Do they conceptualize Low German as a dialect or a language? These and other questions were covered in the project “Sprachlagengefüge in Norddeutschland” (Vertical variation spectra in northern Germany), which was carried out jointly.
by the Institut für Deutsche Sprache (IDS, Institute for the German Language) and the Institut für niederdeutsche Sprache (INS, Institute for Low German).

The main focus of the project was a representative study of the status of Low German. To this end telephone interviews were carried out by the Mannheim-based market research company Forschungsgruppe Wahlen in June 2016. One hundred and sixty interviewers spoke to a total of 1,632 people from the following eight federal states:¹ Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein as well as the northern parts of Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Saxony-Anhalt.² Figure 1 shows how many participants came from which federal state. They represent a random sample of the German-speaking population over the age of 16 living in private households with a landline. The data are representative for this group. The sample was weighted by location (federal state or region), age, sex and level of education.

Alongside social data, the questionnaire included 21 questions, some of which covered the participants’ attitudes towards and opinions on Low German and – in comparison – Standard German. The main focus was on proficiency in and the use of Low German, including those areas of everyday life in which participants come into contact with Low German. A few questions were only aimed at some of the participants for methodological reasons, e.g. only at speakers of Low German; this is indicated in the figures concerned.

This brochure, then, presents a selection of the results from the current survey, mostly in the form of relative frequencies, i.e. percentages. For some questions, the statistical analyses of the answers include correlations. In these cases, the frequency of responses is given in percentages and mean values for specific subgroups of participants (i.e. the participants’ average rating for a question on a scale). Quite often the participants’ responses are quite unanimous. In other cases, there are differences between specific groups of people which often appear to be small at first sight but which are statistically significant and can therefore not be considered to be random. For every question it is possible to divide the participants into subgroups according to specific characteristics and to ascertain whether there is a statistically significant difference in the answers given by the groups relating to that characteristic (e.g. which group of people understands Low German very well and which does not understand it at all). For many of the questions, various individual characteristics were examined for their relevance in this way. The standard characteristics were sex, age, education, location by federal state, the size of their home village/town, active proficiency in Low German and ties to northern Germany as well as a series of further characteristics. In this brochure, only those differences are reported which were statistically significant

¹ Hesse was not included in the survey for practical reasons on account of the small area in which Low German is spoken in the federal state.
² In the southern parts, the area covered by the survey would not correspond totally to the Low German-speaking area. Due to the population density of North Rhine-Westphalia, some regions were not covered as the sample would have had to be very large to ensure that it was representative.
(any exceptions are mentioned explicitly in the text). For example, the participants’ sex only influenced the answers to a few questions and, therefore, it is not included in many of the figures. Detailed data on the sample as a whole as well as the questionnaire itself can be found in the appendix.

The 2016 survey is an update of two studies on Low German carried out by the INS in 1984 and 2007. In order to be able to compare the results, some of the questions in this survey were based on the previous studies and on the nationwide study on language attitudes carried out by the IDS and the University of Mannheim in 2008. This survey was supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media.

Fig. 1: Area covered by the survey

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2. Understanding and speaking

2.1 Who understands Low German?

Passive knowledge was determined by the question “How well do you understand Low German?”. The possible answers were very well, well, reasonably well, only a few words and not at all. This question asked the participants to self-report on their knowledge. In other words, the results are a subjective impression and not an objective measurement of their knowledge of Low German.

When the first four answers are grouped together, 91.4% of the people in the area covered by the survey can understand at least a few words of Low German (cf. Fig. 2) while 47.8% even understand the language well or very well. On average the participants understand Low German reasonably well or well.

In comparison with the survey in 2007 there are only minor changes: while 20.9% in the current survey claimed that they understand Low German very well, it was five percentage points lower in 2007 (cf. Fig. 3). In contrast, taken together the two categories of well and reasonably well were seven percentage points higher in 2007. The differences to the 1984 survey were much greater: then almost double the number of participants claimed that they are able to understand Low German very well.

In Figure 4 the results are broken down by federal state. The highest figures were reported in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, where 70.1% stated that they understand Low German very well or well. Schleswig-Holstein (58.7%) and Lower Saxony (48.6%) were above the average of 47.8% for the entire area covered by the survey. Brandenburg and Bremen were the federal states in which the most participants (around 30%) admitted to understanding only a few words of Low German or not at all.

Comparing the results for the federal states from the current survey with the one ten years previously reveals that good to very good passive knowledge sank in Schleswig-Holstein (from 67.5% to 58.7%) and Bremen (from 57.3% to 41.9%). It stayed approximately the same in Lower Saxony and Hamburg and clearly rose in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (from 60.6% to 70.1%).

Figure 5 shows how the level of understanding depends on the participants’ age. The proportion of those who do not understand Low German at all does not fall drastically with increasing age. What does change, however, is the degree: while over half of the younger participants stated that they understand Low German only reasonably well or only know a few words of the regional language, over 50% of the older participants classified their passive knowledge as being very good or good.

There is not only a link between passive knowledge and age, but also between understanding and the level of education/the size of their home village/town (cf. Fig. 6): participants who attended lower secondary school understand Low German better than those who completed intermediate or upper secondary school. In addition,
those living in villages/smaller towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants) have a greater passive knowledge of Low German than those living in larger towns/cities with over 20,000 inhabitants. There was no difference between women and men, in contrast.

Individuals who understand Low German better tend to identify it as a language and not as a dialect; they also tend to be in favour of more being done for Low German. In addition, it is more likely that those who have a greater passive knowledge would send their child to a Low German kindergarten, evaluate the regional language more positively and have stronger ties to northern Germany (cf. Fig. 7).

Fig. 2
The data from the survey in 1984 were rounded up/down, which is why no decimal places are given here. In addition, only four choices were given; the categories of reasonably well and only a few words used in 2007 and 2016 are the equivalent of a bit, the single category used in 1984. The same is true for Figure 9.

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7 The data from the survey in 1984 were rounded up/down, which is why no decimal places are given here. In addition, only four choices were given; the categories of reasonably well and only a few words used in 2007 and 2016 are the equivalent of a bit, the single category used in 1984. The same is true for Figure 9.
Figures like this are to be read as follows: the phenomenon concerned is on the y-axis (here, for example, understanding Low German, with the categories not at all to very well from bottom to top). The x-axis shows the averages for the subsamples relating to this phenomenon (here, for example, how well Low German is understood by men and women or by those who attended lower secondary, intermediate
2.2 Who speaks Low German?
In all 15.7% of the participants stated that they can speak Low German (very) well (cf. Fig. 8), which is only a third of those who claimed that they understand Low German (very) well. That means that active proficiency is much lower than passive understanding; furthermore 42.2% of those interviewed said that they can not speak Low German at all.

A comparison of the surveys from 2007 and 2016 reveals very small differences: the results for very well and well remained more or less the same; only the category of reasonably well dropped by nearly seven percentage points in the current survey; at the same time the number of those who said that they speak only a few words or no Low German at all is slightly higher (cf. Fig. 9). If the current data are compared with those from 1984, there is a clear decline: 32 years before, the percentage of those who could speak Low German (very) well was twice as high.

Breaking down the results by region reveals that in the northern federal states like Schleswig-Holstein (24.5%) and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (20.7%) considerably more people speak Low German (very) well than in the parts of North Rhine-West-
phalia covered by the survey (11.8%) or in Saxony-Anhalt (11.8%) or – clearly trailing behind – in Brandenburg (2.8%) (cf. Fig. 10).

Whether an individual has mastered Low German depends very strongly on their age: while only 0.8% of the under 20s indicated that they can speak Low German (very) well, in the group of 40 to 49 year olds it increased to 11.7% and amongst the over 80-year olds to over half of those interviewed (cf. Fig. 11).

Proficiency in Low German is also related to the level of education: the higher the educational qualifications, the lower the participants’ proficiency in Low German. Those who attended lower secondary school speak Low German better than those who completed intermediate or upper secondary school (cf. Fig. 12). The difference between men and women is marginal, with men speaking Low German slightly better. Participants in the survey from villages/smaller towns speak Low German better than those from larger towns/cities.

Low German and non-Low German speakers also differ in relation to their attitudes: Low German speakers are more likely to consider Low German to be a language and are in favour of more being done to support it. In addition, they would be more likely to send their child to a Low German kindergarten, evaluate the regional language more positively and have stronger ties to northern Germany (cf. Fig. 13).

![Who speaks Low German?](image)

Fig. 8
Fig. 9

Fig. 10
Fig. 11

Fig. 12
2.3 Where or how is Low German learnt?

Low German is predominantly passed on within families (cf. Fig. 14): 44.0% of the participants said that they had learned Low German from their parents and 41.0% mentioned their grandparents. Around 8% of the participants learnt Low German in their day-to-day life, e.g. when shopping, and just as many learnt it from friends and acquaintances. School, too, plays a role for acquiring Low German, with 5.5% learning Low German at school, albeit with certain regional differences. For example, in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania an above-average number of people said that they had learned Low German at school (13.2%). In the two Hanseatic cities of Bremen (14.0%) and Hamburg (11.2%), just about as many mentioned the media, which includes radio, television, newspapers and also books, in this question.

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10 Several responses could be given to this question. The percentages given here relate to the interviewees; that means that the sum of all responses adds up to more than 100%.
This only includes people who are proficient in Low German (n=944), albeit to varying degrees.

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11 This only includes people who are proficient in Low German (n=944), albeit to varying degrees.
3. Low German in day-to-day-life

3.1 Where do people come into contact with Low German?

The media were mentioned most frequently in connection with day-to-day contacts with Low German, namely by 45.2% of those interviewed in the survey (cf. Fig. 15). Again, there are considerable regional differences: the media were listed most often by participants from Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (72.3%), with Bremen (63.1%) and Schleswig-Holstein (58.8%) also assigning the media above-average importance for everyday contacts with Low German. A total of 42.3% also hear Low German in the family and circle of friends. Around a third of all participants stated that they come into contact with Low German in their free time, for example in clubs and societies.

The neighbourhood is an important location for 22.3% to come into contact with Low German, the more so the smaller the village/town is: in villages/small towns with under 2,000 inhabitants, 36.6% hear Low German in the neighbourhood while in larger towns/cities with over 50,000 inhabitants, this drops to less than 17%. Public offices and educational institutions provide the fewest opportunities for northern Germans to come into contact with Low German.

![Fig. 15](image-url)
3.2 When is Low German spoken?
Slightly more than one quarter of all participants (26.6%) said that they use Low German predominantly with members of the family and friends (cf. Fig. 16). Around 16% use it during free-time activities (e.g. in connection with sport, music and culture) and just under 14% when communicating with neighbours. Mirroring the responses given in connection with where people come into contact with Low German, it is not used very often in public offices, public transport and in schools, universities or adult education centres. All of the categories had higher responses on average in Schleswig-Holstein: here just under 40% speak the regional language within their family and circle of friends, a quarter in the neighbourhood and a similar proportion (25%) while shopping.

Fig. 16\(^{12}\)

\(^{12}\) This question was used to elicit how frequently Low German is used in various contexts: “Do you speak Low German very often, often, sometimes, seldom or never in this specific context (e.g. at work, in your free time)?”. The values used in this figure represent the sum of the first four categories.
3.3 Which media and cultural events are made use of?

The media play an essential role in the visibility of Low German. Radio programmes are particularly important for transporting the regional language: a majority of those interviewed listen to the radio in Low German, although only 5.7% do so (very) often, with larger numbers only listening to the radio sometimes (14.0%) or even seldom (25.5%) (cf. Fig. 17). Here, too, certain regional differences could be observed: in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, a total of 65.8% listen to Low German radio programmes, with Schleswig-Holstein at 60.5% and Bremen at 60.2% not far behind. Overall, fewer films or TV programmes are watched and fewer newspaper articles are read in Low German, probably also because not so many are available. Despite that, the proportion of those who read Low German newspaper articles (very) often (5.3%) is very similar to those who listen (very) often to Low German in the radio (5.7%)

Cultural events in Low German are attended rather seldom, although a quarter of those interviewed occasionally goes to a play in Low German. Here, too, there are regional differences. Most theatre goers are from Schleswig-Holstein, with 43.5% occasionally seeing plays in Low German while in Hamburg (home of the Ohnsorg Theatre, where plays are performed exclusively in Low German) it is only 31.8%.

Fig. 17
4. Attitudes towards Low German

4.1 What is associated with Low German?
The participants in the survey were also asked what the first thing was that occurred to them in connection with the word ‘Low German’. Over a quarter mentioned “family/personal matters”; this includes the word family but also specific individual members of the family (e.g. my granddad) and personal memories (such as holiday) (cf. Fig. 18). The next category (21.7%) covered various concepts of a personal or everyday nature, such as home country, birthplace, the past, tradition, which are subsumed under “home country/tradition/culture” in Figure 18.

When asked to evaluate the language, answers such as the following were conflated: direct/simple/old/worth preserving/beautiful/warm or twee/terrible/difficult to understand (the evaluations could be positive or negative). “Specific groups of speakers” (this category includes concepts such as older people, farmers and fishermen) were mentioned by around 20% of the interviewees. Another fifth mentioned northern Germany or specific regions in northern Germany (e.g. East Frisia) or towns (e.g. Hamburg). Maritime associations were also quite common, with the Baltic Sea or North Sea, the islands, the dykes and the coast being associated quite frequently with Low German (9.9%). Around 7% mentioned various “linguistic concepts”; this covers terms such as regional language, dialect, language or Low German. Finally some of those participating also thought of Low German theatre, and particularly the Ohnsorg Theatre, in connection with Low German.

Looking at the replies by location reveals that in North Rhine-Westphalia more participants than on average associated Low German with “family/personal matters” (38.2%) while in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (33.2%) and Schleswig-Holstein (31.1%) “home country/tradition/culture” was a frequent association and Brandenburgers mostly mentioned northern Germany or specific regions in northern Germany (38.9%) or the “coast/sea” (25.0%).
4.2 Where is the “best” Low German spoken?

From a linguistic perspective, there is no hierarchy of Low German dialects. Despite that, many participants had a clear idea of where they think the “best” Low German would be spoken. The areas named most frequently, mentioned by 23.3% of the participants, were Lower Saxony or regions in Lower Saxony (cf. Fig. 19), with East Frisia being mentioned most frequently. Schleswig-Holstein was named by over 10% of the participants. When larger areas were mentioned, the most common response was northern Germany (given by 8.9% of those interviewed), although references to larger areas of the country (by a total of 16.1%) clearly reveal some participants’ uncertainty when attempting to locate where Low German is spoken; only this can explain why “southern Germany” was also given as an answer.

Responses with clear references to maritime areas, such as on the North Sea/Baltic Sea, on the coast/on the islands also came up quite frequently (9.8%). Around 3% of the participants came up with rural areas or where I live. The proportion of participants who did not give an answer here is relatively high at 27.5%. This could be explained by the fact that the number of people who do not speak Low German very well or at all is relatively high, resulting in their having rather vague ideas in relation to where the “best” Low German is spoken.
Where is the “best” Low German spoken?

Just like the previous question, this one is meant to elicit an idea of the regions which are prototypically associated with Low German. The results are very similar to the question asking where the “best” Low German is spoken. Once again Lower Saxony (25.6%) and Schleswig-Holstein (10.6%) in particular clearly stand out from the other federal states (cf. Fig. 20). Again, East Frisia (12.3%) and North Frisia (3.3%) were included in the responses. While the greater Hamburg area was frequently associated with the “most” Low German, Bremen was listed comparatively infrequently.

When larger areas were given, northern Germany, once again, was rather popular. For 17.0%, rural regions were areas where Low German is spoken the most, followed by 14.5% who mentioned the coast and the sea. Hence the traditional language-related milieu concepts were stated most frequently under this heading.
4.4 How is Low German evaluated? How is Standard German evaluated?
To ascertain participants’ attitudes towards Low German and Standard German, they were given a series of characteristics with which to evaluate the languages. The dimensions of value, sound and structure were represented by two characteristics each.

A majority of the participants find Low German very beautiful or beautiful (59.9%), somewhat fewer (43.9%) find it (very) appealing (cf. Fig. 21). The sound properties of Low German differ in their evaluation: on the one hand it is judged to be partly soft, partly harsh and on the other hand as rather flowing (58.6% chose (very) flowing). In connection with the dimension of structure, Low German was evaluated by most of the participants as being (very) logical and partly systematic, partly unsystematic. It seemed to be rather difficult for the participants to evaluate its structural properties: the number who did not give a response was considerably higher than for the other properties (14.3% for logical and 21.3% for systematic).

Standard German is clearly considered to be beautiful and very beautiful (75.3% when taken together) and, although somewhat less clearly so, as (very) appealing (50.8%; the proportion of the partly appealing/partly abhorrent replies is relatively high at 42.6%, however; cf. Fig. 22). Those interviewed consider Standard German to be harsh (25.6%, with 47.4% choosing partly harsh/partly soft), yet not abrupt but rather flowing (68.6%). The evaluations relating to its structure were clearly positive: a majority of the participants consider Standard German to be (very) logical and (very) systematic (77.8% and 69.2% respectively). It appeared to be slightly easier to evaluate Standard German; only seldom was no response given, with the properties of
systematic and appealing having a somewhat higher non-response rate (systematic: 7.7%, appealing: 5.0%).

The evaluations of the properties of Low German and Standard German are compared directly with the help of the mean values (the y-axis has very strongly at the top and not at all at the bottom), showing that the participants evaluated Standard German more positively overall than Low German; only in connection with the sound and the property of being soft is it the other way round, with Standard German being evaluated as harsher than Low German (cf. Fig. 23). Particularly strong differences are to be found in connection with the structural properties of being logical and systematic: Standard German is considered to be clearly more logical and systematic than Low German.

Low German is not evaluated similarly by all participants: the responses varied particularly in relation to those who are not very proficient in Low German and those who are more proficient (cf. Fig. 24). Overall, those who are more proficient in Low German evaluated it more highly than those who can hardly speak Low German or not at all: people who can speak Low German reasonably well, well and very well find Low German much more beautiful and appealing than those who speak only a few words or not at all. The same is true for the dimensions of sound and structure, albeit with not so much of a difference: Low German is evaluated as being softer, more flowing, more logical and more systematic by those who are proficient in it than by those who do not speak it at all.

![How is Low German evaluated?](image)

Fig. 21
How is Standard German evaluated?

- **Value**
  - Beautiful: 1.7% not at all, 0.1% not so strongly, 4.4% partly the one/partly the other, 55.6% strongly, 19.7% very strongly
  - Appealing: 5.0% not at all, 0.1% not so strongly, 14.1% partly the one/partly the other, 45.2% strongly, 5.6% very strongly

- **Sound**
  - Soft: 3.8% not at all, 1.8% not so strongly, 42.6% partly the one/partly the other, 47.4% strongly, 0.8% very strongly
  - Flowing: 2.2% not at all, 0.1% not so strongly, 17.0% partly the one/partly the other, 68.6% strongly, 8.0% very strongly

- **Logical**
  - Logical: 3.1% not at all, 0.5% not so strongly, 16.0% partly the one/partly the other, 65.4% strongly, 12.4% very strongly

- **Systematic**
  - Systematic: 7.7% not at all, 2.0% not so strongly, 29.9% partly the one/partly the other, 58.4% strongly, 10.3% very strongly

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**Fig. 22**

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Evaluations of Low German and Standard German: a comparison

- **Value**
  - Beautiful: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly
  - Appealing: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly
  - Soft: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly
  - Flowing: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly
  - Logical: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly
  - Systematic: evaluations of Low German, strongly, evaluations of Standard German, very strongly

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**Fig. 23**
A majority of northern Germans assume that Low German is a dialect (59.2%); only 39.0% consider Low German to be a language (cf. Fig. 25).

Regionally, there are quite a few differences. The claim that Low German is a dialect was made most frequently in Saxony-Anhalt (80.7%) and Brandenburg (80.5%) (cf. Fig. 26). In contrast, over half of those from Hamburg (52.0%) and Schleswig-Holstein (50.7%) considered Low German to be a language.

Proficiency in Low German influences its categorization as a language or dialect particularly strongly: participants who are not very good at Low German are more likely to identify it as a dialect (cf. Fig. 27). Differences in terms of age and educational qualifications are minimal; the proportion of participants for whom Low German is a dialect is somewhat greater for those who live in larger towns/cities (over 20,000 inhabitants).

Differences in attitude are certainly stronger: Low German is identified as a dialect particularly frequently by participants who find that Low German should not receive more support, who would not send their child to a Low German kindergarten, who tend to evaluate Low German more negatively and who have weaker ties with northern Germany (cf. Fig. 28). This means that those who tend to categorize Low German as a dialect.

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13 In contrast to the diagrams so far, which illustrated the differences between subsamples, here the percentage of a particular category is given rather than the mean values. For this question, for example, on whether Low German is a language or a dialect, the percentage is given of those who think that Low German is a dialect.
language find that Low German deserves more support, would send their children to a Low German kindergarten, evaluate Low German more positively and have stronger ties to northern Germany.
Fig. 28
5. Support for Low German

5.1 Should more be done for Low German?
Over two thirds of northern Germans find that more should be done for Low German; only 24.0% are not of that opinion and 9.2% did not give a response (cf. Fig. 29).

Most of its advocates live in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (84.5%), Bremen (83.9%) and Schleswig-Holstein (76.2%) (cf. Fig. 30). In contrast, those who thought that Low German does not deserve more support were most frequently found in North Rhine-Westphalia (30.3%) and Lower Saxony (28.5%).

Women are more likely to be in favour of more support than men, likewise older people, those who attended lower secondary school and those living in a village/town with under 20,000 inhabitants (cf. Fig. 31). Proficiency plays a major role here too: those who speak Low German better are more likely to believe that it should be supported more than participants who speak it badly or not at all. The proportion of those in favour of more support is also generally higher amongst those who identified Low German as a language, who would send their child to a Low German kindergarten, who tend to evaluate Low German positively and who have stronger ties to northern Germany (cf. Fig. 32).

If more should be done for Low German, who should be responsible for taking that on? Here the participants agree that it should start at school (cf. Fig. 33). Over one quarter of those interviewed said that support for Low German should already be much stronger in kindergartens. Cultural institutions like clubs or associations or theatres, for example, should also adopt a more proactive approach according to 20.3% of the interviewees. Politicians, federal government, the federal states and the municipalities should attend to it too (summarized under “politics” in Fig. 33). Around 5% of the participants listed other institutions such as the media and the church, but also Low German speakers in general, including older people and the family as an institution.
This figure illustrates the percentage of participants per subsample who were in favour of more support for Low German; the same is true for Figure 32.
5.2 Low German kindergartens?

Half of those interviewed would send their child to a Low German kindergarten in the vicinity while 42.5% would not do so and 7.4% did not answer (cf. Fig. 34). Particularly those living in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein would send their child to a Low German kindergarten (over 50% in each case) (cf. Fig. 35). The decision also relates to the participants’ age, education, the size of their home village/town and their Low German proficiency (cf. Fig. 36), i.e. they tend to be aged 30 and above, those who attended lower secondary school, those from smaller villages/towns and those who can speak Low German.

The proportion of people who would send their child to a Low German kindergarten is clearly higher amongst those who stated that Low German is a language and who have stronger ties to northern Germany (cf. Fig. 37). The correlation is even stronger for those who expressed the opinion that Low German deserves more support and those who evaluated Low German positively. The proportion of people in these categories who would send their child to a Low German kindergarten is much higher than amongst those who find that Low German does not need more support and who tend to evaluate Low German negatively.

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15 Several responses were possible for this question; it was only posed to those who had agreed that Low German should receive more support.
Fig. 34

Low German kindergartens?

- I would send my child to one
- I would not send my child to one
- n.s.

Fig. 35

Low German kindergartens: by federal state

I would send my child to one | I would not send my child to one | n.s.
Low German kindergartens: by sex, age, education, location, proficiency in Low German

Fig. 36

Low German kindergartens: by attitudes

Fig. 37
6. Conclusion

The results of the representative survey presented here reveal that Low German is certainly present in the minds of northern Germans and predominantly has positive connotations. This reflects general social developments as a result of which regional attributes are more highly appreciated and a desire for closeness and familiarity has been identified.

A comparison of the data from the last survey in 2007 reveals that the number of Low German speakers has stabilized, along with those who understand the language. The anticipated continued decline over the last few decades appears to have been stopped, for the time being at least. Looking more closely at the age distribution of those who speak and understand Low German, however, it is clear that it is the older generations who can do so (very) well. When younger generations can speak and/or understand Low German, then – by their own admission – they rarely do so well, but rather reasonably well to only a few words.

With regard to the evaluation of Low German, the media have a central role to play. In addition, for many people they provide contacts with the regional language in day-to-day life. Here there is room for expansion in which the presence and acceptance of Low German could be reinforced.

Promising approaches have already been developed in the education sector, above all, over the last few years: an early introduction to the regional language in kindergarten and school has already been established in many regions. Speakers of Low German must also be involved, along with their clubs, societies and associations. Politics has a role to play here too so that the necessary structures can be established, creating the foundations for positive developments to continue. The same is true for culture: above all in connection with music, theatre and film there is certainly a need for more provision in Low German.

The existential threat to the regional language has not been stopped by any means. Considerable efforts still have to be made, in conjunction with continued and comprehensive support. And as the data reveal, this is what a majority of northern Germans are in favour of.
7. List of abbreviations

Federal states
SH   Schleswig-Holstein
HH   Hamburg
MW   Mecklenburg-West Pomerania
LS   Lower Saxony
HB   Bremen
NW   North Rhine-Westphalia
SA   Saxony-Anhalt
BB   Brandenburg

Other abbreviations
Fig.  Figure
n.s.  not specified / don’t know
### 8. Appendix

**Composition of the sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Federal states</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schleswig-Holstein (SH)</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamburg (HH)</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (MW)</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Saxony (LS)</td>
<td>614</td>
<td>37.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bremen (HB)</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Rhine-Westphalia (NW)</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saxony-Anhalt (SA)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandenburg (BB)</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>under 20 years of age</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 20 to 29</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 30 to 39</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 40 to 49</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 50 to 59</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 60 to 69</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>14.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aged 70 to 79</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over 80 years of age</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>779</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>283</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>803</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>545</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lower secondary school certificate (approx. aged 14)</td>
<td>525</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intermediate school certificate (approx. aged 16)</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>35.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>upper secondary school certificate (approx. aged 18/19)</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Location (size) (median split)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>villages/smaller towns (up to 20,000 inhabitants)</td>
<td>749</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>larger towns/cities (over 20,000 inhabitants)</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>46.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Language or dialect?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dialect Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low German as a dialect</td>
<td>966</td>
<td>59.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low German as a language</td>
<td>636</td>
<td>39.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Should more be done for Low German?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support Level</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>doesn’t deserve more support</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>24.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deserves more support</td>
<td>1,090</td>
<td>66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Low German kindergartens?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kindergarten Status</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>no to kindergarten</td>
<td>694</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes to kindergarten</td>
<td>818</td>
<td>50.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Evaluation of Low German (median split)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more negative evaluations</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>29.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more positive evaluations</td>
<td>999</td>
<td>61.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the evaluations of the attributes in the dimension of “quality” were combined (beautiful/ugly and appealing/abhorrent; cf. Figure 21: “How is Low German evaluated?”).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ties to northern Germany (median split)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ties to N. Germany weaker (so so, not so strong, not at all)</td>
<td>547</td>
<td>33.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ties to N. Germany stronger (very strong, strong)</td>
<td>1,047</td>
<td>64.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n.s.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active proficiency in Low German (median split)</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lower proficiency in Low German (only a few words, not at all)</td>
<td>1,103</td>
<td>67.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>higher proficiency in Low German (very good, good, moderate)</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Questionnaire**

1) How strong is your general interest in matters that have to do with language? (very strong, strong, so so, not so strong, not at all)

2) In Germany, different languages and dialects are spoken: What about Low German?  
a) Is Low German rather a dialect or rather a language in your opinion?  
b) Is Low German rather a language or rather a dialect in your opinion?  
(Sample divided into two with half answering question a and half answering question b)

3) Do you speak one or more German dialects? / Alongside Low German do you speak one or more other German dialects?  
If “yes”, which dialect(s) do you speak?

4) What do you associate with Low German? What’s the first thing that occurs to you?  
(multiple responses allowed)

5) What do you associate with Standard German? What’s the first thing that occurs to you?  
(multiple responses allowed)

6) How well do you understand Low German?  
(very well, well, reasonably well, only a few words, not at all)
7) Do you come into contact with Low German …
   a) in your family and circle of friends?
   b) in your neighbourhood?
   c) on public transport such as trains, buses or trams?
   d) at work?
   e) at school or other educational institutions?
   f) in your free time, for example, in connection with sport, music and culture?
   g) when shopping?
   h) in public offices or authorities?
   i) at church or church organizations?
   j) in the media, i.e. radio, television, newspapers and the internet?
   (in each case: yes, no, don’t have anything to do with …)

   If “yes”, in each case: And how often do you come into contact with Low German in that context?
   (very often, often, sometimes, seldom)

8) How good are you yourself at speaking Low German?
   (very good, good, reasonable, only a few words, not at all)

9) And where or from whom did you learn Low German?
   (multiple responses allowed)

10) How often do you speak Low German where or with whom …
   a) in your family and circle of friends?
   b) in your neighbourhood?
   c) on public transport such as trains, buses or trams?
   d) at work?
   e) at school or other educational institutions?
   f) in your free time, for example, in connection with sport, music and culture?
   g) when shopping?
   h) in public offices or authorities?
   i) at church or church organizations?
   (in each case very often, often, sometimes, seldom, never)

11) Where or in which region is the “best” Low German spoken in your opinion?
   (multiple responses allowed)

12) a) What do you think about the presence of Low German in the media, culture
    and education: In comparison with ten years ago, is it present today …
    much more, more, less, much less or that has not changed a lot?
   b) There is a wide range of cultural events in Low German such as theatre,
concerts, news on the radio or Low German lessons in school. What do you think about the presence of Low German in the media, culture and education: In comparison with ten years ago, is it present today … 
much more, more, less, much less or that has not changed a lot? 
(Sample divided into two with half answering question a and half answering question b)

13) How often …
   a) do you listen to programmes on the radio in Low German?
   b) do you watch TV programmes in Low German?
   c) do you read newspaper articles in Low German?
   d) do you use Low German internet pages?
   e) do you go to performances at the theatre in Low German?
   f) do you go to concerts in Low German?
   g) do you go to readings or poetry slams in Low German? 
(in each case very often, often, sometimes, seldom, never)

14) Regardless of whether you’ve got children yourself or not: if there was a Low German kindergarten in the vicinity, would you send your child to that kindergarten or would you not do so?

15) Where or in which region is Low German spoken most frequently in your opinion? 
(multiple responses allowed)

16) Which characteristics would you associate with Low German? In your opinion is Low German …
   a) very beautiful, beautiful, partly the one/partly the other, ugly or very ugly?
   b) very harsh, harsh, partly the one/partly the other, soft or very soft?
   c) very logical, logical, partly the one/partly the other, illogical or very illogical?
   d) very flowing, flowing, partly the one/partly the other, abrupt or very abrupt?
   e) very appealing, appealing, partly the one/partly the other, abhorrent or very abhorrent?
   f) very systematic, systematic, partly the one/partly the other, unsystematic or very unsystematic?

17) And how strong are your ties to …
   a) the town or place where you live?
   b) the region where you live?
   c) the federal state where you live?
   d) Germany? 
(in each case very strong, strong, so so, not so strong or no ties at all)
18) a) And now for a very general question: Should more be done for Low German in your opinion?
b) And which group of people or institutions in particular should take care of that?
   (multiple responses allowed)

19) Where or in which region is the “best” Standard German spoken in your opinion?
   (multiple responses allowed)

20) Which characteristics would you associate with Standard German? In your opinion is Standard German …
   a) very beautiful, beautiful, partly the one/partly the other, ugly or very ugly?
   b) very harsh, harsh, partly the one/partly the other, soft or very soft?
   c) very logical, logical, partly the one/partly the other, illogical or very illogical?
   d) very flowing, flowing, partly the one/partly the other, abrupt or very abrupt?
   e) very appealing, appealing, partly the one/partly the other, abhorrent or very abhorrent?
   f) very systematic, systematic, partly the one/partly the other, unsystematic or very unsystematic?

21) When you are speaking to somebody in Standard German, how strongly can they tell what region you come from based on your own pronunciation do you think?
   (very strongly, strongly, so so, not so strongly or not at all)

As well as:
Questions relating to the participants’ age, sex, location, the size of their home village/town, marital status, educational background, mother tongue, knowledge of foreign languages, occupation, religion, nationality and economic status.
Who understands Low German today and who can speak it? Who makes use of media and cultural events in Low German? What images do people in northern Germany associate with Low German and what is their view of their regional language?

These and further questions are answered in this brochure with the help of representative data collected in a telephone survey of a total of 1,632 people from eight federal states (Bremen, Hamburg, Lower Saxony, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania and Schleswig-Holstein as well as Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia and Saxony-Anhalt).