

This library in Bremen is keeping “Platt” alive

By Daphne Kooy

Walk into any shop or café in Bremen and you'll hear 'Moin!', it is the standard Northern German way of greeting someone. Other than that, you probably won't hear much "Plattdeutsch" in the city anymore. Except at one place, a library where you can read, hear and learn about the language as much as you want. It is run by 27-year-old Nele Otten, who hopes to connect to young people and motivate them to keep speaking "Platt".

Walking through Schnoor, Bremen's oldest district, feels like walking through a fairytale. Your head keeps turning from left to right as the old buildings and signs are trying to grab your attention. Every house is leaning in another direction. Some buildings are tucked away in small alleys and while you try to find your way back you get lost in another small alley. At the end of the biggest street, there is one building that you can't miss. The big text on the facade looks like German on first glance, but most German speakers wouldn't be able to read it. That is because it is written in "Plattdeutsch", or Low German as it is called in English.



Four years ago, Nele Otten did a three-month internship at the library and stuck around after that. By Daphne Kooy

The precursor of Low German as we know it now, is Middle Low German. It was spoken in Northern Germany and Eastern parts of the Netherlands. Thorsten Börnsen, the managing director of the Länderzentrum für Niederdeutsch, explains that it therefore also became the language of The Hanse. 'It was the mother language of the merchants living here', he says. They spread Middle Low German across the borders, using it for contracts, laws and trade agreements. 'You will find it wherever they opened offices.'

Back to the building in Schnoor, where the typical smell of books fills your nose as you step inside. Even in here you could get lost, with multiple stairs and hallways all leading to other sections filled with more books. Nele laughs as she hears this observation and explains that the library is located in four different houses that have been attached to each other. Here, the Institut für Niederdeutsche Sprache has been collecting all sorts of media in Low German for over 50 years. Most of the collection consists of books, but there are also CD's, videotapes, theatre scripts, and so on. There are over 46.000 pieces of media in the library, the largest collection in the world.

'I RECOGNISED PHRASES FROM MY CHILDHOOD'



Nele first got interested in Low German during her studies. ‘I was studying Dutch and Russian language in Oldenburg’, she says. ‘When I followed a course in Low German, I recognised phrases from my childhood and realised that I already knew a lot of things.’ Nele’s grandpa used to talk Low German to her, but she had never realised that it was a different language. She sees a lot of people who experience the same thing. They remember phrases or words from when they were young, which connects them to the language and makes them curious about it.

While we stroll through the library, Nele grabs some interesting things from the shelves. The oldest book they have is from 1851, but there are also translations of famous works, like Harry Potter and Winnie-the-Pooh. Nele laughs as she shows me the “Plattdeutsches Schimpfwörterbuch”, which is a book full of Low German insults.

‘THE CLICHÉ THAT LOW GERMAN IS JUST FOR OLDER PEOPLE IS NOT TRUE AT ALL’

What Nele loves most about her job? ‘So many people come in and ask so many different questions’, she smiles. ‘Some people ask about poems or songs they once heard. It is interesting to research that and see if I can find it in the library.’

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‘Wi snackt Platt’, means ‘We speak Low German’.
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Low German is still a language that is actively spoken. ‘We don’t have exact numbers, but we’re talking about 2 million people that can definitely speak it, and I guess more than 5 million who can understand it’, Nele says. Nonetheless, the language has been struggling. For a long time, it was discouraged to speak Low German and that impact is still visible. Older generations stopped passing it on to their children and it is not standard practice for it to be taught in schools. Both Nele and Börnsen are struggling with a lack of funding and support from German politics.

Still, Nele has a positive attitude. ‘It’s always the cliché that Low German is just for older people, but that is not true at all. We’ve got a lot of young people that speak it.’ The language is spoken in eight states, which is a big area. Nele also sees that most of the people that speak it live in smaller villages, not in big cities like Bremen and Hamburg. That is why she now uses social media to reach more people. ‘It is the easiest way to connect to people that speak it a little and are interested in it. We just need to find them, and then we can save the language from disappearing.’

Scan the QR code to read more about the struggles that Low German faces and what is being done to protect the language:

