

“Rotkohl...but I think this is German” – postvernacular identity in two North Frisian immigrant communities in the US

Robert Kleih

Europa-Universität Flensburg

In sociolinguistics, the importance of language (Tabouret-Keller 1997, Heller 2005) and culture (Haarmann 1996, Götz 2011) as factors determining identity has been sufficiently discussed, as have the difficulties associated with characterizing a clear definition of 'identity' (Jörrisen 2010, Zirfas 2010). It is precisely within heritage language communities that complex identification processes occur for both the individual and/or an entire group and are subject to lifelong change processes (Brown & Bousquette 2018). Following Rothman's (2009) definition of what qualifies as a heritage language, three heritage languages can be found among North Frisians living in the US and their descendants: North Frisian, Low German and High German. The particular group in this dataset emigrated from the island of Föhr in the 1950s and 1960s and brought both North Frisian and Low German as heritage languages with them to the US, and High German entered the North Frisian community as a heritage language in the following generations. The linguistic and cultural situation of immigrants *before* leaving their home country is often not considered (Martin 2007). However, a description of the complex multilingual (and multi-ethnic) background of North Frisian immigrants is necessary.

In this paper, I describe the factors that play a much more decisive role for the descendants of Föhr-Frisian immigrants (2nd to 4th generation) regarding strong identification with North Frisia (and the small island of Föhr) than for the broader German cultural area. The Frisian language is not an exclusive factor for Frisian identity in the US, as language shift is visible from the second/third generation. A clear distinction what consists of “Frisian” or “German” culture is already difficult in the Frisian homeland (Kleih 2019), so it is perhaps unsurprising to see this blurring continued in the US. Rather, what we find is a kind of mixing of general North German culture and customs, described by consultants, such as in the title example, where a consultant lists *Rotkohl* (“red cabbage”) as being indicative of their Frisian identity, only to then question whether or not this is actual “German”. This intricate mixture, however, contributes to the “exclusively Frisian” identity image common among the Föhr-Frisian descendants in the US today.

Using data from two North Frisian immigrant communities (New York City, NY and Petaluma, CA), I describe how the processes of language, culture and identity maintenance / loss have been preserved and which factors have contributed to it. Data comes from my dissertation research, consisting of a questionnaire survey completed by 48 Föhr-Frisian descendants. The questionnaire covers topics such as personal history, language use and identity (both individual and community). Additional narrative interviews were conducted with nine Föhr-Frisian descendants and eleven with “Rückwanderern” (Föhr-Frisians who re-migrated to Föhr from the US). Both Föhr-Frisian immigrant communities identify to a large extent with the island of Föhr (in some cases until the fourth generation), keep in touch with relatives on the island, and have mostly visited their 'home island' Föhr at least once. Despite the difficulties mentioned above with regard to the Frisian culture and language among the Föhr-Frisian descendants, the positive attitude towards the Frisian culture and language (and a rather negative attitude towards the German language and cultural area) serves to a large extent for strong identification with the ancestors' area of origin.

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