Immigrant monolingualism and verticalization in 1910: A comparative view

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I present the first broad comparative analysis of 1910 US Census data on immigrant monolingualism from a set of Upper Midwestern communities, along with information on community structure. Results to date support the 'verticalization' model of language shift (Brown forthcoming, and other work), where learning of English and then shift to English correlate with loss of local control of community institutions and less tight interconnections among institutions. In a wide range of institutions — governmental, educational, religious, media — control shifts to extra-community hands and connections to broader societal institutions (state, regional, national) grow stronger. These basic community structures, work on verticalization argues, play a far larger role than community-specific factors in the learning English and shift to English. I present data from a set of communities in support of that view.

T. Labov (1998) first used the 1910 United States Census to track the learning of English by immigrants in a case study of Philadelphia. That census asked, in Column 17, whether each person over the age of 10 could speak English and, if they could not, instructed the census taker to list the language spoken. While it gives no indication of the numbers of bilinguals, this provides a starting point for understanding community language use in the early 20th century. Wilkerson and Salmons (2008) used the same approach to show that up to a quarter of Wisconsinites in some communities remained monolingual in German decades after immigration, with many second and some third generation people reporting not speaking English. (Frey 2013 reports yet higher rates of Wisconsin German monolingualism in some communities.) Wilkerson & Salmons (2012) expanded to examine households, where the presence of German monolinguals, such as a parent, suggests that English speakers in the household were bilingual. Today, much further work has appeared or is appearing — for Wisconsin and Minnesota, see Bousquette & Ehresmann on West Frisian, Johnson on Finnish, Natvig on Norwegian, and Vanhecke & Salmons on Dutch.

This paper compares these communities in 1910, with additional information in preparation on other Midwestern communities (Swedish, Polish, Italian), with sample data in Table 1. People in some communities clearly report acquiring English earlier than others, e.g. Norwegians earlier than Germans, though shift to English in both communities happened on the same timeline. Still, many basic questions about these monolinguals have not yet been explored:

- (How) does time of immigration correlate with monolingualism?
- Do larger communities have more monolinguals?
- Were monolinguals economically integrated into the community or restricted to farm labor or other work requiring limited contact with a broader community?

While there are some differences on such points, slower verticalization appears so far to correlate better with reported monolingualism than time of immigration or community size and shift correlates with verticalization. Indeed, language shift has proceeded along very similar timelines across these communities, with the result that all these communities mentioned here now still have heritage speakers, but almost entirely elderly ones.

Table 1. Ability to speak English, 1910 Census, Wilkerson & Salmons 2008, Frey 2013, Natvig forthcoming, Johnson 2018

	# monolingual		US-born monolingual	
German				
Hustisford, WI	310	24%	108	35%
New Holstein, WI	272	28%	134	49%
Norwegian				
Ulen, MN	17	5%		
Finnish				
Oulu, WI	169	27%	5	.8%
West Frisian				
Randolph, WI	102	9%		

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