

Two Paths of Early Shift Bilingualism: Language of instruction influences whether the H- or L-variety will be retained longer

Joshua Bousquette

Recent literature on multi-lingual and multi-dialectal heritage language (HL) communities as shown that tripartite divisions of High (H), Low (L), and External (E) varieties tend to be reorganized into an internally- versus externally-oriented bilingualism, as an intermediate step in language shift towards the socially dominant language (cf. Bousquette 2020). Still, the output of this process has not yet been fully accounted for, as the early stages of language shift tend to result in the retention of either the H- or L-variety in opposition to the E-variety (English, in the North American context). This presentation provides a comparative overview of multilingual and bidialectal West Frisian and German heritage language communities in eastern Wisconsin (cf. Bousquette & Ehresmann 2010, Bousquette 2020), suggesting – quite counter-intuitively – that communities with English language instruction in (public) education retain the baseline HL longer than communities with (Standard) German as language of instruction. Within a Verticalization framework (Brown, 2022) these data suggest not only that the language of instruction is a primary indicator of language shift-in-progress (Salmons 2022), but also that the output of the early stages of language shift have an effect on the bilingual dyad of late shift bilingualism, with wide-ranging effects on the grammar of the final generation of speakers.

The primary data concerns a comparison of the West Frisian community in Randolph, WI, with the Seifert Audio Corpus of High German. In the former situation, the pre-immigration multilingualism included Dutch as the H/E-variety, and West Frisian as the L-variety. Upon arrival in the US – with West Frisian immigration peaking around 1910 – the absence of Dutch-language instruction and the increasing difficulty in finding Dutch-proficient pastors over the years caused a rapid shift towards English-Frisian bilingualism, which persisted into the 21st century as a moribund HL. Crucially, this is an example of domain-specific language shift, where formal institutions may shift independently, without immediately or necessarily affecting other domains. For instance, only a handful of adults were self-reported monolinguals in 1910, while nearly 30% of the population in 1930 – overwhelmingly children – were unable to speak English (Bousquette & Natvig 2022). Despite the absence of formal institutional support, cross-generational transmission of HL persisted in social and domestic spheres, and a stable, domain-specific bilingualism facilitated HL acquisition and use – at least for a generation, or more.

In eastern Wisconsin, Standard German was used as a medium of instruction from peak immigration around 1880 up until the 1930s or 1940s (Salmons 2022). Recordings made in the late 1940s confirm a Standard-like pattern related to nominal case marking, which reverted to baseline HL patterns such as dative-accusative case syncretism and non-standard features such as C-agr and non-standard pronunciation following reduced access to Standard German (Bousquette & Putnam 2020, Bousquette 2014). Similar to Randolph, WI, the domain-specific language shift in formal institutions in eastern Wisconsin affected language shift specific to the H-variety, and did not effect overall shift to English monolingualism. However, the shift was much more drastic, as "things progress from a situation in 1910 where significant numbers of people, many US-born, spoke only their community languages and could not speak English to the essentially complete cessation of transmission of those same languages about 30 years later" (Salmons 2022: 76).

The analysis of these two communities follows one of two distinct paths (Fig. 1). The first is that of domain-specific language shift, where shift is early or immediate to arrival and the E-variety is the language of instruction, initiating a domain-specific early shift characterized by a period of stable bilingualism, as in Randolph, WI. The second is a period of sustained bidialectalism in the H- and L-varieties, resulting in a competition between two often mutually-intelligible varieties within the HL community, whereby the institutional support of the H-variety leads to a reduced use of the baseline (HL) L-variety, often under the assumption that the HL is less prestigious, or economically advantageous (cf. Born 1994) – a process similar to internal verticalization (Frey 2013). This pattern is reflected more extremely in Milberger, Kansas and the Catholic community in Haysville, Indiana, where Standard German was the medium of instruction in school; and neighboring communities in Victoria/Herzog and the Protestant community in Haysville, IN, where English was used in school (Nützel 2009, Keel 2015). In the former, Standard German patterns were attested prior to shift to English monolingualism, while a comparatively longer maintenance of the pre-immigration HL variety was attested in the latter two communities. The pattern of loss of the H-variety prior to the loss of the L-variety is attested also in ego-documents of an East Frisian speaker (Rocker 2021); and in ongoing change in a Mennonite Low German community in Western Kansas (Vosburg 2019).

The preliminary results of this comparative overview suggest that the language of formal instruction in HL communities determines the dyad outcome in early shift bilingualism. This pairs with rate of shift to determine the observed moribund grammar. In the broader context of language maintenance/shift in HL communities, this work builds on previous literature that views language shift as a multi-stage process, but adds that there are multiple paths of domain-specific language shift within a Verticalization model.

Figure 1 - Bilingual output as a function of language of instruction in HL communities

E-variety as Language of Instruction		H-variety as Language of Instruction	
Pre-shift Multilingualism	Early Shift Bilingualism	Pre-shift Multilingualism	Early Shift Bilingualism
E-variety	E-variety	E-variety	E-variety
H-variety	–	H-variety	H-variety
L-variety	L-Variety	L-variety	–

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