

“We were really, really praying for it that we would get Trump” – Politicalness as an indicator of sociocultural shift among recent Mennonite immigrants

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One of the pillars of Mennonite (and other Anabaptist) faith is the belief in two kingdoms – of God and of man. This implies a separation of church and state and encourages Mennonites to (supposedly) not further engage in worldly matters like politics. However, there is and has been great diversity of political involvement among Mennonites in the US. This paper analyzes data from an immigrant Mennonite community in Kansas, that have undergone drastic changes with regard to language use and other cultural practices. I argue that political activism and the paradigmatic shift from a strict separation to one entity under Christ (Driedger & Kraybill 1992:122) are connected to language shift towards English, as a part of larger changes in the community structure towards verticalization (Salmons 2009:134-135).

The community consists of multilingual Mennonites in Kansas whose members emigrated from Mexico and Canada mainly in the 1990s (although migration began in the 1970s and continues until today). Despite this relatively short period of time, this community shows strong signs of language shift towards the majority language English, and of cultural shift towards their surroundings. Based on the analysis of interviews with 22 women from this community, interconnected processes of verticalization, i.e. a shift from horizontal to vertical ties happened on several levels: First, changes in schooling from parochial, community-internal schools to public schools demoted the use of their heritage language Plautdietsch, and promoted English. Second, many Mennonites switched from conservative Old Colony churches to new church congregations in Kansas, that are part of the Mennonite Church USA. With these changes comes a switch to English in service and church activities. And third, the paradigmatic shift in the two-kingdom theology from a strict separation to one entity under Christ, as it has been described for US Mennonites since the 1960s, led to political activism. These cultural changes stand in contrast to the Mennonites' former lives in Mexico and Canada, where a traditional Mennonite lifestyle in form of more prominent use of Plautdietsch, parochial schooling, and separation from the surrounding society, including worldly affairs like politics, continues until today (Loewen 2008).

The results provide evidence in favor of a wholistic view to driving factors in language shift. I argue that all of the developments in this community reflect verticalization at the larger scheme and explain a fundamentally different definition of membership in this “new American” Mennonite group.

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