

The Relevance of Social and Cultural Histories in Understanding Heritage Language Shift

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A key task for historical sociolinguists is not to simply map the sociohistorical situation onto language use. It is imperative for both social and historical validity to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of the social context, in which the language varieties under investigation were used (Bergs 2005:8-21; Raumolin-Brunberg 1996:18). This point has been especially prominent in European studies within historical sociolinguistics (Horner & Rutten 2016). When looking at the negotiation of identities, especially when those identities are contested as in immigrant and language contact situations, extralinguistic factors that influence and result as part of that negotiation are necessary to capture fully the ecology of the language contact situation.

This presentation presents data from a seven-year critical ethnography in the Kishacoquillas “Big” Valley in Central Pennsylvania’s Appalachian region. Big Valley is home to one of the most diverse and certainly the most compactly diverse Anabaptist (Amish and Mennonite) settlements in the world (Kauffman 1991). Originating with just a handful of Old Order Amish families from the same religious affiliation, today’s settlement is home to as many as twelve distinct Anabaptist groups ranging from the ultraconservative Nebraska Old Order Amish to the most progressive Mennonite affiliations. Unlike many studies in historical sociolinguistics, which focus on investigating language from older written texts, this study focuses on investigating identity in language and relies largely on oral histories from the Valley’s oldest residents, who were raised in Amish-Mennonite churches as children in the early- and mid-twentieth century. As a result, issues of change, beyond language behavior, and problems of memory need to be reconciled in constructing a comprehensive social history of the language shift that occurred in the middle of the twentieth century among the then Amish-Mennonite congregations. Although written historical data carries with it many problems including authorship, data amount, availability etc., studies, which rely on memory have their own unique problems, even though the “shifters” were directly interviewed about the changes throughout their lifetimes.

Due in part to these problems of data collection, the social history of the language shift situation needs to be assessed to fully understand the processes underway at the time. This presentation aligns its findings with the theory of verticalization, modeled on the work of sociologist Roland Warren (1978) and applied to heritage language shift situations by Salmons (2005a,b), Lucht et al. (2011), Wilkerson & Salmons (2012), and Frey (2013). In this model, vertical structures index relationships that are at differing hierarchical levels, rather than previously forged local, horizontal relationships. In looking at the social and cultural changes underway in Big Valley in the early- and mid-twentieth century, vertical relationships became more pronounced and pervasive.

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