

Historical sociolinguistics and language shift: On verticalization

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This talk presents new support for a ‘verticalization’ view of language shift, where shift is driven by specific changes in community structure (Warren 1978). Until the late 19th century, strong ‘horizontal’ ties existed among economic, media, education, and religious organizations in Western communities. Over time, these have given way to ‘vertical’ ties which bring in English, as groups become more dependent on extra-community institutions. For example, in government, more powerful state boards of education bring English into schools; in the social sphere, many religious organizations centralize and merge, prompting shift to English; and in the media, small newspapers, including minority-language papers, merge or go under (Salmons 2005a, 2005b, Frey 2013).

I provide historical sociolinguistic comparative context on the learning of and shift to English in 19th / early 20th century North American immigrant groups. While Germans sometimes remained monolingual for two or more generations (Wilkerson & Salmons 2008, 2012, Frey 2013), other immigrant groups show a range of patterns, with Norwegians apparently learning English quickly but remaining bilingual, while Dutch and Danish immigrants seem to have shifted to English early. Other communities across the United States, like Hasidim or Old Order Amish, continue to transmit their languages today.

These case studies all support a verticalization account, and allow us to identify further correlates, e.g. community size, where larger communities can more easily create and maintain horizontal structures. For Germans, shifting to English involved dismantling an extensive German-language infrastructure; in other cases, less support correlates with faster shift. Successful language maintenance in some communities today reflects the development of robust horizontal structures and resistance to verticalization.

References

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