

Verticalization and Language Shift Among the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

Benjamin E. Frey

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Department of American Studies

Conference: North American Research Network in Historical Sociolinguistics (NARNiHS)

21-23 July 2017 – University of Kentucky

Many citizens of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians suffered under the assimilationist policies of federal boarding schools of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, yet a shift in home language use from Cherokee to English did not begin in earnest until the 1950s. The primary differentiating factor between the 20th century and other historical periods was the increasing degree of social contact that Eastern Band Cherokee citizens had with people from outside their communities, and the extent to which Cherokees became integrated into the larger American society during what Warren (1978) refers to as the Great Change. While previous studies (Salmons 2002, Lucht 2007, Bousquette & Ehresmann 2012 among others) have examined the correlation between social integration and language shift under the model of verticalization (Warren 1978), Eastern Cherokee represents the first case study in an indigenous context.

On the Qualla Boundary, the land base of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, increased social contact with outsiders in multiple domains altered traditional community structures that had supported the widespread use of the Cherokee language. As those structures changed, domains of English use increased, while domains of Cherokee use decreased. Ultimately the number of domains in which people used English instead of Cherokee became so great that parents began raising children to exclusively in English. Secondary historical sources, oral interviews and census data suggest that community-wide shift to English began during the early 20th century – some 80 years after the founding of the local boarding school. This pattern correlates well with a verticalization-based model of language shift.

References

- Bousquette, Joshua & Todd Ehresmann. 2010. West Frisian in Wisconsin: A historical profile of immigrant language use in Randolph Township. *It Beaken*. 72(3). 247-276.
- Lucht, Felecia. 2007. *Linguistic variation in a Wisconsin German community*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison dissertation.
- Salmons, Joseph. 2002. The shift from German to English, World War I, and the German-language press in Wisconsin. In W.G. Rödel & Helmut Schmahl (eds.). *Menschen zwischen zwei Welten: Auswanderung, Ansiedlung, Akkulturation*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. 179-193.
- Warren, Roland L. 1978. *The community in America*. 3rd edn. Chicago: Rand-McNally.