

Home is Still the Social Center:

Domain-specific German language use in southeastern Wisconsin, 1946-1949

This work presents sociolinguistic data on domain-specific German language use in southeastern Wisconsin in the late 1940s, based on field notes taken by Lester W. J. ‘Smoky’ Seifert. These hand-written, unpublished notes provide sociolinguistic data about speakers’ social networks, rooted in local churches, schools, and patterns of socialization, which together supplement the Seifert Audio Corpus, housed at the North American German Dialect Archive, at the Max Kade Institute, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Despite being predominantly agrarian and socially insulated, language shift was nevertheless underway across German-speaking communities, with contemporary speakers reporting of their children and grandchildren “die verstehns aber antworten Englisch.” ‘They understand it [German] but answer in English.’ (Bousquette 2020: 500). Seifert’s own experience and field notes corroborate that situation, noting in multiple communities that the youngest speakers who use German regularly are all over 40 years of age, and the institutional language use of churches and schools have all shifted over time, since the establishment of these German communities in the mid-19th century. Analyzed within the Verticalization framework (Salmons 2005a, 2005b; Brown & Salmons 2022), and supported by Seifert’s observations, it is here argued that language shift is in progress, driven by community-external ties in religious and educational domains, which lead to a shift from German to English. This shift is underway – and ultimately is nearly complete, by the present day – despite low degrees of social mobility, and high rates of endogamous marriages.

Preliminary data from the German community of Ashton, Wisconsin, suggests a common picture across southeastern Wisconsin at this time: Seifert records the community as “95% Catholic” and “Cölsch [sic] predominant”, with the community and social network comprising a three-mile radius around the church, with two schools – 6 lower grades, and 2 upper. Seifert makes no mention of language of instruction, but we might assume English, without contrary evidence; among the entire Seifert Audio Corpus, only speakers born in the 19th century attest to having had German as their language of instruction in school. Seifert notes that there were approximately 112 students in the church’s parochial schools, with 2/3 of students, on average, choosing to return to farming rather than continue on to high school. In church, there had been – at time of recording (1946-1949) no sermons in German for 7 years, though prayers were occasionally recited in German, and German was used largely – but not exclusively – by parishioners over the age of 40. Despite shift-in-progress in educational and religious domains, socialization was predominantly if not exclusively local. There had reportedly been no members of the parish marrying outside the Catholic faith since 1862, and social gatherings were related to weddings, funerals/wakes, and parties and card games. Seifert writes that, “Home is still the social center,” and “Movies have very little patronage”. The sociolinguistic situation parallels Bousquette (2020), suggesting that language shift occurs at different rates across different linguistic domains, with educational and religious domains being comparatively more vulnerable than close social and familial ties, and the domestic sphere. This presentation asserts the value of contemporary demographic, sociolinguistic, qualitative, and meta-linguistic data on language use in addition to primary linguistic data, in order to better understand language shift in the remote past, when direct observation is not possible.

References

- Bousquette, Joshua. 2020. From Bidialectal to Bilingual: Evidence for two-stage language shift in Lester W. J. 'Smoky' Seifert's 1946-1949 Wisconsin German Recordings. *American Speech* 95(4): 485-523.
- Brown, Joshua R. (ed.) 2022. *The Verticalization Model of Language Shift: The Great Change in American Communities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Joshua R. & Joseph C. Salmons. 2022. A verticalization theory of language shift. In Joshua R. Brown (ed.) *The Verticalization Model of Language Shift: The Great Change in American Communities*, 1-24. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salmons, Joseph. 2005a. The Role of Community and Regional Structure in Language Shift. In Lothar Hönnighausen, Marc Frey, James Peacock, and Niklaus Steiner (eds), *Regionalism in the Age of Globalism*, vol. 1 : Concepts of Regionalism, 129–38. Madison: Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures.
- Salmons, Joseph 2005b. Community, Region and Language Shift in German-Speaking Wisconsin. In Lothar Hönnighausen, Anke Ortlepp, James Peacock, Niklaus Steiner, and Carrie Matthews (eds), *Regionalism in the Age of Globalism*, vol. 2 : Forms of Regionalism, 133–44. Madison: Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures.