

Verticalization and Language Shift in the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin

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This study reports on the shift from Dutch to English in the Fox River Valley of Wisconsin centered around the village of Little Chute, an area which received extensive Dutch immigration from 1848 through the 1960s (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012; Brown & Hietpas 2019). I utilize both speaker quotes from recordings in the community from 1966 (Daan & Heikens 1966) and 2018 (unpublished fieldwork recordings) as well as previous research (e.g. Crombez 2025) and historical documents (e.g. census and sacramental records) to argue that language shift in the community largely overlapped with its verticalization: “a change from local control of tightly interconnected institutions to more external or ‘vertical’ control of those increasingly interdependent institutions” (Brown & Salmons 2022: 8, cf. Warren 1978). From fieldwork I conducted in 2018, the last generation of speakers from the community was born in the 1930s and the last wave of immigration occurred in the 1960s. However, Dutch was largely no longer a community language by that time. The test, therefore, becomes how well this period of language shift (1930s-1960s) matches up with the verticalization of various domains of the community.

One important domain is economics (see Bousquette 2022 for an overview and thorough analysis of change in Life-Mode). Early immigrants to the community worked predominantly as farmers (1860 U.S. Census) and the last generation of speakers recorded in 2018 grew up on a farm - a markedly non-verticalized way of earning a living. However, later immigrants, such as those recorded in 1966 (immigration years 1904-1923), were often (paper)mill workers - a more integrated, verticalized profession. Stores in the community were also originally owned by locals, and speakers in 1966 noted you used to be able to speak Dutch in stores in town. However, these were later superseded by regional/national chains such as Red Owl, which opened on Main Street in Little Chute in 1961 (*Post Crescent* 2016).

Another important domain is news. *De Volksstem*, a Dutch-language newspaper, was published out of De Pere (~20 miles north of the Fox River Valley) from 1890-1919 and had “a strong focus on local matters” (Crombez 2025: 436). However, *De Volksstem* was absorbed by *Gazette van Moline* (IL) in 1919, which was absorbed by *Gazette van Detroit* in 1940. This consolidation and move from local to regional to national also coincided with an increase in the amount and prominence of English being used in the papers over time (Crombez 2025). Several speakers in 1966 reported having known of and read *De Volksstem* when it was still published but did not report reading it after consolidation.

One domain that does not match up well with verticalization is school. Speakers in 1966 note that school was *always* an English domain despite most children attending a local parochial school (a bastion of immigrant language in other communities, e.g. Dux 2025) and a public high school (more verticalized) not being feasible until 1966 (Village of Little Chute Centennial Committee 1999). This may reflect early ideologies held by the immigrants on the importance of learning English even before it moved into other domains and when the community was still horizontally oriented.

Consequently, I provide another test of the verticalization approach to language shift, an approach that is still “in its infancy” (Brown & Salmons 2022: 9), on a language and community understudied in immigrant language research. Verticalization of various domains largely matches up with a shift from Dutch to English in the community. Schooling, however, shifted earliest and before verticalization, perhaps reflecting the community’s belief in the need to learn English to interact with the outside world even before the community itself verticalized.

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