

Language shift and heritage maintenance: A case study with a Texas German

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Much research in Germanic heritage linguistics focuses on the factors that lead to heritage language maintenance or shift towards the surrounding majority language (for an introduction, see Johannessen & Salmons 2015 and the volume for case studies). However, the development of shift towards the surrounding majority language may occur via a standardized form of the heritage variety, as shown e.g., in Bousquette (2020) for historical language change among Wisconsin Heritage Germans. In this study, I present current data from sociolinguistic interviews with a young speaker (“Kevin”, 19) who belongs to a family of Texas German (TxG) speakers. His first language was (standard) High German (HG), acquired as a heritage variety from his mother who, in turn, grew up bidialectal but acquired English when entering school. Kevin’s great-grandfather represents yet a former stage in the continuum towards language shift, as a TxG speaker, who acquired English later on in life.

TxG, as many other “German” speaking communities, is characterized by dialect mixing (Boas 2009). This particular dialect emerged in the mid-1800s, and was spoken by German settlers around the Austin area. Today, it is estimated that there are five or six thousand speakers left. The effects of verticalization (Salmons 2005) during the mid-20th century led to a decline of TxG and a beginning shift of its speakers towards the majority language -- English. However, TxG was very susceptible to cross-linguistic influences from other varieties such as Spanish in the San Antonio area, or, in the case of Kevin’s family, standardized HG.

On the micro-level, the trajectory of Kevin’s family reflects studies on historical language shift. It also gives us further insight into the role of heritage beyond the heritage variety itself. Kevin displays features that mark a standardized form of German rather than TxG (front rounded vs. unrounded vowels: *natürlich* [nə’tyɛliç] vs. [nə’tiɛliç], overt dative marking vs. syncretism: *mit meiner Mama* vs. *mit meine Mama*, use of preterite vs. perfect: *es gab* vs. *es hat gegeben*), yet he clearly identifies as a Texas German. His communication with older family members is bidialectal, which, considering the already varied nature of Texas Germans, represents a common linguistic environment. After eight generations of minoritized language use, the use of German and English continues to be stable in Kevin’s life today. Through the institutional support that standard HG receives in the US, his redefined Texas German heritage is more likely to withstand time against the pressure of English.

References:

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