

How do heritage speakers maintain identity after the language is gone? Food and drink customs among Scandinavians in Utah

[Note: this proposal for a presentation is intended as part of a panel, along with two other presentations, on heritage languages and their relationship to food and drink]

As research in linguistics has established, a shared language, along with other relevant semiotic systems, is one of the most important means of both creating and maintaining a group identity (see, e.g., Romaine 1994, among others). When it comes to heritage languages, intervening social factors, having to do with the majority language within the territory, can erode the number of domains in which heritage speakers have the opportunity to use their heritage language. The result of this domain loss is a diminishing functionality of one of the key means of creating and maintaining an identity (see, e.g., Fishman 2001). As English takes over in various domains, US heritage language speakers are left with alternative means of expressing membership within their affiliated ethnic group. In this study, I explore how membership within the group is maintained, in part, by adhering to food and drink customs considered specific to the ethnic group in question (Gabaccia 2000).

In the case of Utah, where nearly 30,000 Scandinavians entered into the newly (European) settled territory during a 60-year period starting in 1850, the native languages were destined, like in other US immigrant communities, to undergo the well-attested three-generation language shift (Henrichsen and Bailey 2010). However, research conducted in majority-Scandinavian locations, such as Sanpete County, Utah, demonstrate that, although very few lexical items from Scandinavian languages remain in contemporary language use (see Kühl and Peterson 2018), a localized version of a shared Scandinavian identity is evident in local discourse and also in the linguistic landscape. A unique aspect of this particular demonstration of Scandinavian identity is its combination with cultural aspects of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the dominant religion in Utah. Interestingly, in some ways elements of the Scandinavian and LDS identity are at odds, for example when it comes to drinking coffee (Peterson 2018).

This presentation makes use of data collected over a seven-year period in Sanpete County, Utah, beginning in 2012. During this seven-year period, there is evidence of increased enregisterment and commodification of Scandinavian-language elements, especially relating to food and drink, within the community. At the same time, there is evidence of food and drink rituals that have been passed on through intergenerational transmission as integral components of a shared, local Scandinavian identity. This presentation explores the relationship of these different manifestations of local Scandinavian identity, both enregistered and inherited, showing that they are not necessarily in conflict.

The data for the presentation comes from three main sources: 1) audio-recorded interview data with Sanpete County residents, collected by the author of this presentation from 2012 to 2019 2) photograph documentation of the local landscape in Sanpete County, Utah, also from 2012 to 2019 3) data from published sources such as cookbooks, dating from the 1950s to the 2000s.

References:

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Romaine, Suzanne. 1994. *Language in Society. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [2nd revised edition 2000]