

Language and identity in the East Frisian-American (postvernacular) heritage community

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Language is a crucial factor of identity construction, even in communities where a minority or heritage language is replaced by the majority language (Reershemius 2009). As such, the language may lose its communicative function but serve as a symbolic marker of communal identity and belonging, a phenomenon called “post-vernacular language use”. This paper explores the ongoing linguistic shift from heritage Low German to English in the American-East Frisian community, while considering the effects of post-vernacularity on identity construction.

Implementing an online survey based on Moquin & Wolf’s (2020) study of identity in the American-Icelandic community, this presentation inquires about language use, cultural heritage and identity construction. In addition to the remaining speakers of heritage Low German, the survey targets those members of the community who self-report no linguistic proficiency but identify (to some extent) with their cultural and linguistic heritage. Since the linguistic shift from heritage Low German to English is still ongoing, the survey may shed light on the processes that influence the formation of a post-vernacular community. As of now, many older community members (60-100 years) still speak Low German fluently, while their children and grandchildren rarely know more than single words or phrases, or show only a passive understanding of the language.

So far, 26 participants responded the survey on social media. The respondents’ age ranged from 20-79 years (M=56), with a majority of male participants (n=23). All of the participants are 3rd to 5th+ generation, grew up and currently reside in the USA. Of the nine participants who reported to identify “strongly” with being East Frisian, six reported not knowing (and never have known) Low German. Interestingly, although only 4 respondents report Low German knowledge, most participants (n=14) regard the maintenance of the language in the USA as *moderately*, *very* or *extremely important*. Hence, while identity construction apparently is no longer based on linguistic knowledge, there seems to be a general appreciation of the language. Apart from that East Frisian heritage is preserved strongly in the religious affiliation, as all but two respondents identify as Lutheran/Protestant. Likewise, some ethnic foods and especially the traditional East Frisian tea ceremony seem to have been maintained.

Data collection is still ongoing, with the survey currently being distributed by means of newsletter reports in heritage and genealogical societies, email lists and social media. I aim to collect at least 100 responses, including both speakers who have participated in my dissertation research, as well as other interested individuals. The data generated by this survey may capture the attitudes and identity construction of a changing community, both in terms of its linguistic and cultural make-up. In addition to an in-depth description of the American-East Frisian (postvernacular) community, the results of this study may also enhance our understanding of the processes that influence linguistic and cultural maintenance. Thus, comparisons with heritage Icelandic (Moquin & Wolf), Dutch (Vanhecke & Hietpas) and Pennsylvania Dutch (Fisher) communities, all of which are currently investigated using the same survey, may allow for generalizations across language groups and reveal trends that affect the development of post-vernacular communities.

References

- Moquin, L. & Wolf, K. (2020), Language and Identity: The Case of North American Icelandic, Paper presented at WILA 11, October 8-10, 15-17, 2020, University of North Carolina-Asheville (virtual).
- Reershemius, G. K. (2009). Post-vernacular language use in a Low German linguistic community. *Journal of Germanic Linguistics* 21 (2), 131-147.