

Sleight-of-hand effects in language contact: German and English in eastern Wisconsin

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In language change, we often see features of a language apparently disappear only to emerge later. The same occurs as populations shift from speaking one language to another, with an apparently delayed emergence of what are often called ‘substrate features.’ We find this in eastern Wisconsin, where several German-like patterns are now establishing themselves in local dialects of English a century after German receded as a widespread L1 in the region.

Wisconsin English today shows distinct German-like patterns. In sounds and sound patterns, these speakers show devoicing or fortition of final obstruents (Purnell et al. 2005), so that final /z/ is often realized as [s], e.g. *beer*[s]. They variably manifest ‘stopping’ of interdental fricatives, so that *them, there, those* are produced as *dem, der, dose*. In the lexicon, we find interference in patterns like that of mass versus count nouns. For plural *scissors*, it is common to talk about *a scissors, a clipper(s), a tweezer(s)*, etc. Some function words have developed striking new uses, like *by* taking on the German-like meaning of *chez*. In pragmatics, traces of German ‘modal particles’ appear to thrive in new uses of English lexemes like *once*, cf. *come here once* (parallel to German *mal*).

Some of these features seem to be absent in the early English of the area but are present and spreading among younger speakers today. For instance, English speakers born in the late 19th century, when German was still widely spoken in the region, show an exaggerated degree of glottal pulsing on final stops and fricatives compared to other varieties of American English, while young people in the region today may be reaching neutralization of the contrast between *hiss* and *his*.

Recent work (Salmons & Purnell 2010) associates this with the notion of ‘colonial lag’ (Trudgill 2010), the multi-generational ‘settling out’ of new dialect formation and van Coetsem’s notion of ‘imposition’ (2000). We explore the history of such structures and investigate how a linguistic minority (and a demographic minority, in terms of the region) had such influence on the majority language. We show, in particular, that these immigrants did not begin to acquire English quickly, nor apparently did they acquire it completely, with a very slow transition.

Ultimately, English speakers have acquired German-sourced features to a greater extent than previously recognized and along a surprisingly complex path.

References

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