

Verticalization and the historical sociolinguistics of language maintenance

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From the present day back as far as we can see into prehistory, migration and colonization have correlated with language shift, where a community abandons its traditional language(s) for another, usually socially dominant one. A new model ties language shift to changes in community structure, laid out in Brown (2022) and built on Warren (1978). Central to the model is that minority-language communities who control their own local institutions and resources tend to maintain their languages; when that control moves to those beyond the community, a process of ‘verticalization’, we see shift to the language(s) of that broader community. The model has been widely tested with immigrant languages in North America and increasingly beyond (Brown 2022, with initial comparative work in Salmons 2022), and it is general enough that it can be applied to almost any setting of contact and shift past or present.

The model has barely been used for deeper historical situations, where evidence is sparser and harder to interpret, though Frey and Salmons (2012) did an initial study of verticalization in Latin-Germanic contact. This presentation explores how verticalization can be generally integrated into historical sociolinguistic research. Warren identifies five “major functions” carried out within communities and/or from beyond them (1978: 9-13): Production–distribution–consumption; socialization; social control; social participation; mutual support. I draw examples from the history of English, especially English-French contact, to probe how these factors correlate with the ultimate maintenance of English. Recent work (e.g., Timofeeva and Ingham 2018) helps us to see how even important institutional roles for French in domains like religion and education did not create the strong and broad vertical patterns which would have led to wholesale shift to French, rather than just powerful language-contact effects on English.

References

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