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Title: Language shift without language loss – The last speakers of Iowan Low German

Abstract:
Many studies have explored heritage speakers' language use finding e.g. loss of case marking (Boas 2009) change in the gender system (Lohndal & Westergaard 2016) differences in aspect usage (Laleko 2010) or syntactic restructuring (Hopp & Putnam 2015). This study investigates an interesting case of grammatical maintenance despite language shift in the last generation of Low German heritage speakers in Iowa. Data extracted from 10 sociolinguistic interviews indicates that although speakers have almost completely shifted to English and self-reported declines in proficiency (e.g. rate of speech lexical retrieval) they seem to have maintained intact grammars. The East Frisian community in Iowa was established in the 1850s and initially used Low German in the spoken domain and High German in the formal domain before beginning to shift to English in the early 20th century. The participants who were born between 1928 and 1949 grew up exclusively speaking Low German and typically learned English in elementary school. Throughout their lifetimes most speakers shifted to English in most domains (church education work family) and none of them have passed on the language to their (now middle-aged) children. Participants often report losing their speaking abilities and encountering difficulties in the retrieval of lexical items:

Speaker 1  I'm not uh ... I'm not too good in talking it anymore.
Interviewer  oh I'm sure you are—
Speaker 1  I- I forget things.
Interviewer  @I forget things too.@
Speaker 1  and then ... then I go blank and—

Although participants commonly complain about their decline in proficiency all of them were able to hold a conversation and tell Meyer's (1969) Frog Story. While the insertion of English loanwords and code-switches can be found (1) there is little variation in verb second (V2)-placement in main clauses and the V-final structure in subordinate clauses even for clauses containing modal verbs and separable prefix verbs (2).

(1) wenn uns familie nach Grundy Center henmovt bünt (Speaker 5 female 83)
‘when our family moved to Grundy Center’
(2) dat ji dat nich seh’n können dat ji dat overbaut hebben (Speaker 2 male 78)
‘that you cannot see it that you restored it’
(3) de höhner foden that muss doon worden (Speaker 5)
‘feeding the chicken that had to be done’
(4) wenn ik wegflegen sull denn wullt ik lever wegflegen in bed (Speaker 5)
‘if I should fly away I would rather fly away in my bed’

Although the usage of grammatically complex structures admittedly manifests a high degree of interspeaker variability placement of finite verbs appears to be robust and even passive voice
(3) and subjunctive mood (4) is attested among the most proficient speakers. This indicates that speakers with complex grammars simply shifted to the majority language without showing major language loss. It seems that Iowan Low German to put it in Dorian’s (1978) famous words is dying “with its morphological boots” on. This understudied community informs our understanding of heritage languages by providing a case of processes of language maintenance despite language shift in all domains.