

Postvernacular Dutch in Wisconsin

Joshua R. Brown and Rachyl Hietpas

1. Introduction

Just because a heritage language community shifts from the heritage language to the language of dominant society does not mean that the heritage language ceases to be a marker of identification for the community. A postvernacular language was once the everyday language of regular communication, but has since taken on performative and emblematic roles in the identification of the heritage language community. Jewish studies scholar Jeffrey Shandler conceptualized postvernacular Yiddish internationally since the Holocaust and importantly demonstrated:

in postvernacular Yiddish the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered—if not more so. (Shandler 2008: 22)

The postvernacular stage is a shift in value of the heritage language from communicative to symbolic. Although the heritage language is no longer used actively for in-group communication, its meaningfulness exists in the postvernacular stage as a marker of authenticity and connection to the past. This article describes postvernacular Dutch in Wisconsin. Several waves of immigration from the Netherlands since the nineteenth century created a Dutch immigrant community in the Fox River Valley centered on the village of Little Chute. This community capitalizes on its strong Dutch heritage with, among other things, a fully operational windmill in the heart of its downtown area (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Dutch-costumed face cut-outs flanked by a wooden shoe and miniature windmill inside the Little Chute windmill.



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Although there are some speakers of Dutch, either as a heritage variety passed down from earlier immigrations or as an attrited variety spoken by native speakers who arrived in the aftermath of World War II, the language still has a prominent—though different—role in the identification of the community as Heritage Dutch.

The article begins with a contextual description of the history and location of the heritage language community followed by a description of our study undertaken there. The data and its analysis are presented in the third section and are divided into the ways in which postvernacular Dutch is used in the community: spoken, visual, discursive, and performative. A conclusion summarizes the findings.

2. Study

While many Protestant Dutch immigrants came to the United States, Wisconsin was the only state with an early influx of Roman Catholic Dutch immigrants. The immigration began as the result of fortuitous advertising through a pamphlet *De Reize naar Noord-Amerika* (The Journey to North America), which sold out after only three months of publication (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012: 44). Father Theodore van den Broek, the author of the pamphlet, arrived in Wisconsin in 1834 and later settled and built a church in La Petite Chute (Little Chute) in 1836. He returned to the Netherlands in 1847, published his pamphlet, and spearheaded the emigration of 205 Roman Catholics from North Brabant (or the immediate vicinity) on three ships in 1848 (Keeris 2012). They settled the Fox River Valley.¹

The long-lasting Dutch identity in Little Chute and surrounding towns owes its strength, in part, to the patterns of settlement in those early years. Ligtenberg (2006: 151) calls the emigration en masse from a single, small area a “unique phenomenon.” Moreover, their settlement locations in the New World were fairly homogenous, i.e., their Wisconsin settlement mimicked the settlement patterns in North Brabant: settlers from the towns of Uden and Zeeland went to Hollandtown and settlers from Boekel went to Little Chute (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012: 50). Thus the new immigrants not only came from a single small area in the Netherlands, they maintained their original locality in the settlement of the Fox River Valley. In time, the settlements grew—estimated to be nine thousand Dutch Catholics by the beginning of the twentieth century—thanks in large part to the canalization of the Fox River and increase in industry in the area, particularly paper mills (Swierenga & Krabbendam 2012: 52, 55).

The settlement patterns were not the only aspect of Dutch immigration to the area that make it unique. A near-constant stream of Dutch Catholic immigration from North Brabant to the same area lasted until after World War II through the 1960s, a phenomenon that van Marle (2012) calls “fresh input” influencing longer language maintenance and Keeris (2012: 35) and others call “chain migration.” The long-lasting Dutch identity in the Fox River Valley owes its existence to both the homogenous nature of immigration and Wisconsin settlement patterns as well as the continued migration in several waves through the twentieth century from the same area in the Netherlands.

In 2018, we interviewed 30 members of the Dutch Catholic community residing in the Fox River Valley. Participants were interviewed in a semi-structured manner and concluding each interview was a picture story-telling activity in Dutch. Participants ranged in age from 50-91 years and ranged in immigration year. Some participants were heritage language speakers descended from van den Broek’s nineteenth century Dutch immigrants, some were the children of immigrants in the early and mid-twentieth century, and some were immigrants and their children in the post-World War II period. Additionally, we engaged in a critical ethnography of the community incorporating participant-observation and archival research.

3. Postvernacular Dutch in Wisconsin

Conceptualized by Shandler (2008), postvernacular language use characterizes the period when the language ceases to function as the everyday interactional language of a community. Its special status in

¹ For a general history of Father van den Broek’s Dutch settlement in Wisconsin see Corry (1907) and sections on van den Broek (pp. 175-183) and Roman Catholics in Fox River Valley (pp. 299-302) in van Hinte (1985).

the heritage language community is markedly different—it can draw attention to various aspects of the heritage language community and draw on authenticity in performative spaces (cf. Bendix 1997). Linguistically, researchers have used a conceptualization of the postvernacular language to describe heritage language communities for Low German in Northern Germany (Reershemius 2009), Occitan in Provence, France (Costa 2015), Danish in Utah (Kühl & Peterson 2018), and German in Wisconsin (Wilkerson & Salmons forthcoming).

After our critical ethnography in the community, we decided to conceptualize postvernacular Dutch as existing in four macro-areas. *Spoken* aspects are the structural (phonological and morpho-syntactic) and lexical ways that Heritage Dutch continues to appear in the English of the Fox River Valley residents. *Visual* aspects of the postvernacular community include language in the linguistic landscape on signs and in writing. *Discursive* aspects of a postvernacular community characterize the attitudes and ideologies about the heritage language. *Performative* aspects are the continued use of the heritage language in cultural traditions that seek to tie language to the rituals and traditions of the heritage language community. These four aspects show how Dutch continues to be used as language for identification for Wisconsin’s Heritage Dutch community.

3.1. *Spoken*

The spoken aspects of postvernacular Dutch in the Fox River Valley manifest themselves in two ways: (1) through regional English showing Dutch borrowings² and (2) through historical recollections of Dutch language use in opposition to and in conjunction with English over time.

The regional speech of the Dutch Catholics in the Fox River Valley is marked by several structural phenomena:

- (1) *dem* *dis* *dat*
 ‘them’ ‘this’ ‘that’

- (2) *She works there yet.*

- (3) *I was by her.*

The stopping of interdental fricatives in example 1 is a stigmatized pronunciation, in concord with Wilkerson & Salmons’s (forthcoming) findings, associated locally with uneducated speech. It was the only feature of Dutch English pronunciation that was commented on by several participants. Similarly, a resident born in 1923, interviewed by an elementary schoolchild as part of a class project in 1983, noted that:

[m]y classmates didn’t speak Holland though... But most of the kids did have a little Dutch accent. One thing I know, is that a lot of the kids did not pronounce ‘th’. Dis – dat – dem – dose were always used. (*Chutes Rutes* 1983: 16)

Examples 2 and 3 occurred in the speech of all overhearers of Heritage Dutch born in the mid-twentieth century, though none of them remarked overtly that they were features of Dutch English. Although examples 1, 2, and 3 could come from Dutch, they are also markers of Wisconsin English as having been influenced by German (Wilkerson & Salmons forthcoming) as well as a number of other immigrant languages and Hiberno-English. It is apparent that similar features from related Germanic language substrates have influenced the English of Wisconsinites.

² We use van Coetsem’s (1988, 2000) term “borrowing” to show the use of structural and lexical elements from the heritage language, Dutch, into the dominant language, English. “Imposition” indicates loans from English, the socially dominant language, to Dutch, the heritage language.

Several participants highlighted lexical borrowings from Dutch into their English, mostly including terms of intimacy and cultural items without a direct English equivalent. The terms of intimacy are familial terms, often used to describe a member of the family who spoke Dutch in the recollections of the participant:

- (4) *oma* *opa* *tante*
 ‘grandma’ ‘grandpa’ ‘aunt’

Cultural items that lack direct English equivalents occur often both in the recollections from the participants, but also in the visual landscape (discussed later). Food terms are perhaps the most frequent, many of which are dialectal terms from Brabants Dutch—which Shetter (1957) notes is common in the Fox River Valley:

- (5) *stamppot, potassi, woetelstamp* *pankuka, kuk* *brij*
 ‘potato and vegetable mash’ ‘pancake’ ‘sliced fried meat and grain loaf’

One resident interviewed by a schoolchild in 1983, noted the prevalence of food terms in spite of her lower proficiency in Dutch at home:

Brye and Patosie were Dutch foods we used to eat. I think they made Brye out of pork fat... The think [sic] I remember best about my childhood is Christmas. We used to spend our time with mom and dad and talked Dutch. Just so the other kids didn’t know what was going on we picked up a few words but that was all. (*Chutes Rutes* 1983: 37)

Several participants in our study who are members of the same family also noted the use of *muf* and *muffig* ‘stale, musty’ in their English:

Narrator 4: He had boxing gloves in the closet and that was *muffig*. Oh it was *muffig*. I’ve never smelled so much *muf*. We didn’t know what it was. We opened the closet door and it was *muffig*.

Attrited Heritage Dutch speakers and overhearers use occasional Dutch lexical borrowings in their English, while later immigrants and their children used longer chunks of discourse in Dutch.³ These were limited to saying goodnight, idioms, and songs. Van Marle (2012: 228) notes that most Dutch Catholic immigrants had low language loyalty, namely because the language is not used exclusively in the religious domain (Latin was used for Mass) and they tended to settle areas with other Catholics. However, informants in our study noted that some of the earlier Dutch priests would conduct confession in Dutch. Dutch was also not a language used in school, as noted in earlier immigrant letters, e.g., Versteegen (1852):

Here too she [daughter Adriana] went to school a couple of years and learned so well that she could talk and read English as if she had been American born.

Religious loyalty outweighed language loyalty and Dutch was not supported as a language of education. However, as noted earlier, the Fox River Valley is unique in that the Dutch immigration to this area resulted in several generational waves from the same region in the Netherlands. A resident born in 1899 and interviewed for the same class project mentioned above claimed:

³ Attrited speakers are those native speakers of Dutch, who have (for whatever reason) a decreased proficiency of the language across their lifespan. Overhearers are those who grew up hearing Dutch, but may have control of the language at a productive level.

[w]hen I started school we couldn't speak English. My grandpa had taught us all to speak Dutch. The only way we could manage was to speak Holland so that then when we went to school we could communicate. Now I can take a dictionary and make out the words, but I need a dictionary to be sure. (*Chutes Rutes* 1982: 5).

In our study, we found only a few residents who could speak Heritage Dutch. They all came from the same family and grew up on a farm on the outskirts of Little Chute in the town of Freedom. They attributed their distance from Little Chute as the reason that they maintained Dutch since their family's arrival to the area in the 1850s. Several participants noted that although there was a steady stream of immigration from the same area of the Netherlands, the generations did not necessarily interact with each other. The Heritage Dutch speakers descended from the original settlers do not converse in Dutch with the newer post-World War II Dutch natives and their children in Dutch, even though they are aware of each other, their shared Dutch heritage, and attend the same church.

3.2. *Visual*

The most striking aspect in an area of heavy Dutch immigration in the Valley are the visual cues—only some of which feature language. Dutch exists in the linguistic landscape in the Fox River Valley in a variety of ways. Most prominent are the businesses and street signs with Dutch surnames (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Dutch surnames on businesses are frequently encountered in Little Chute and neighboring areas.



Visual cultural artifacts (windmills, wooden shoes, tulips) are used primarily for tourism and marketing to express the local identity (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Visual cultural artifacts of Dutch identity in Little Chute.



The Dutch language is used visually in limited ways. On signage and visual artifacts, Dutch only exists on older tombstones in the local cemetery and on a sign advertising the annual *schut* (discussed later). The language does not have a public presence visually, in fact street signs identifying the community as Dutch are in English (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Wooden Shoe Circle shows the prevalence of Dutch identity in the area.



The linguistic landscape, however, can pervade into public spheres less externally visual. Hoffman & Kytö (2017), for example, have noted the connection between identity and cookbooks, as a way of interpreting the linguistic landscape. Indeed, a local cookbook *Little Chute Locals* (2006) contains Dutch in a variety of ways. Some recipe titles are in Dutch and translated into English, e.g., *Karnmelksche Pap* ‘Buttermilk soup’, *hutspot* ‘boiled dinner’, and *spruitjes* ‘brussel sprouts’. Occasionally, the desire to provide authenticity for Dutch foods in the cookbook triggers not only the language but an accompanying anecdote. The aforementioned *potassi* occurs as *patashi* and *pothassi* with one author noting “this recipe came from my mother-in-law...I’m not even sure of the spelling of it!” (*Little Chute Locals* 2006: 47). In a recipe for *brye* the author connects it to her immigrant past: “my mother made this often...her parents... were all born in Holland (*Little Chute Locals* 2006: 29).

Some recipes in the cookbook are simply given Dutch titles without translation like *stamppot*—obviously a cultural item which carried heavy identificational weight among the Brabanters in the Valley. A few recipes with English titles are even translated into Dutch, e.g., Dutch apple fritters as *Hollandse Appelflappen*. In the absence of direct appeal to the Dutch language, the adjective ‘Dutch’ is invoked, again to provide authenticity to the recipe and the connection to the Valley’s immigrant past, e.g., Dutch doughnut, Dutch apple dumplings, and Dutch rye bread.

Another visual representation of the Dutch language is contained in *Little Chute’s* centennial book—a collection of history and memory, meant for tourists and nostalgia among residents. An advertisement from the *Little Chute Education Association* provides their motto in English and Dutch (Van Eperen 1999: 250). The visual manifestations of Dutch in the Fox River Valley are limited to cookbooks, tombstones, and history books and the appeal to the past through language in each of these outlets is prominent.

3.3. *Discursive*

All interview participants expressed positive feelings towards the Dutch language, and many wished they had learned or used it more. A descendent of nineteenth century immigrants who was born in 1949 recounted the nostalgia for wanting to speak his ancestral language, but that his family had switched to English in the 1950s for their children:

Interviewer: So you didn't grow up speaking Dutch at all?

Narrator 24: Not at all. No. I wanted to. Cause sometime in mid-grade school, my dad's sister... was teaching my first cousins how to count in Dutch... I wanted my dad to teach me the same stuff... But he wouldn't do it.

Historically, Dutch in the Fox River Valley meant the importance of maintaining dense networks—at least between nineteenth century immigrants and early twentieth century immigrants. New arrivals from the Netherlands in the 1920s and 1930s sought out connections with descendants of nineteenth century immigrants. Many of these recollections were recorded in Little Chute's centennial book. One writer claimed “many of the Dutch people who immigrated to this area traded at Lamers Hardware, because Dago [Martin Lamers] could speak the Dutch language with them” (Van Eperen 1999: 39). Additionally, “[s]ome of the ‘old timers’ that came into the store only wanted Chris [Wildenberg at Quality Food market] to wait on them because he was able to speak the Dutch language with them” (van Eperen 1999: 47).

All of the later immigrants (post-WWII) that we interviewed continue to use the language regularly to communicate with family back in the Netherlands. Some participants who came to the U.S. as children or who are the children of Dutch immigrants recounted that their parents were adamant about speaking and using English both out in public and in the household so people would not think they were talking about them and/or to be more American. Their parents often continued to use Dutch at home:

Narrator 1: [I] used to think, ‘Oh my God. Mom, we're living in America. Why don't you talk English?’ But I am blessed that she did [speak Dutch] because now I can go there [to the Netherlands], and all my cousins and all my aunts and uncles—I can have a conversation with them.

Narrator 30, another post-World War II immigrant as a child, first attended school in the US. She recalled that her teacher, noting the loss of Heritage Dutch in the community by the 1960s, encouraged her parents to keep speaking Dutch at home:

Narrator 30: And the nice thing was that when I went to kindergarten, my parents asked the kindergarten teacher what language they should speak in the home, and she said Dutch.

In all, Dutch identity is viewed positively in the area, but the ability to speak Dutch no longer is required for that identity.

3.4. *Performative*

The residents in the Fox River Valley—sharing ethnic and religious identities, being both Dutch and Roman Catholic—meant that they held onto cultural traditions, though they have waned in recent years. Ligtenberg (2006: 156) concludes that although they have lost their Dutch identities, they have gained “strong awareness of their Dutch heritage.” Pride for being Dutch was echoed in our participants' statements and those published elsewhere. A resident born in 1926, stated in 1982 that

[m]y culture is important...because I was born and raised in Little Chute and that's a Holland town. The first Little Chute priest came right down and founded the Little Chute Church and everybody in Little Chute was Holland. That was our background. We are all Holland people. (*Chutes Rutes* 1982: 16)

One of the ways of creating a new ethnicity and continuing the awareness of a heritage language community is through fests (Bungert 2016), though the original function is often lost through time. Cederström (2012: 30), in his folkloristic work on Scandinavian-Americans, notes that they often found a space for their heritage identification in the church. In the Fox River Valley, the church, although never conducted in Dutch, was and continues (in a limited sense) to be a site of Dutchness and creation of a new ethnicity through fests. Festivals are a strong maintainer of regional identity, as in New Glarus, Wisconsin (Hoelscher 1998). A Kermis ‘after Mass’ Festival has been celebrated, stopped, and resurrected at several times during Little Chute’s history (Figure 5). The Kermis included street sweeping, food, drink, parades, and Klompen (wooden shoe) dances. The most recent resurrection of the Kermis ended in 2014 due to lack of interest in organizing the event—the community’s strongest push now is towards a summer cheese festival.

Figure 5: The resurrected Kermis Dutch Festival in the 1980s is now no longer celebrated.



Nearby Hollandtown's St. Francis Parish has an annual Schut, celebrated since 1849, as part of religious ritual. During the Schut, congregants gather in an open field, a carved bird is shot at and who ever hits it first is awarded a medal (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Schut Acre in Hollandtown.



4. Conclusion

Subsequent waves of immigration after the initial settling of the Fox Valley area by Dutch immigrants have kept a lasting presence of Dutch locally. This has been especially supported by religion as both the initial and subsequent waves were Roman Catholic. Consequently, a Dutch cultural identity persists in the area without the continued use of the language, or “talking Holland” as many of the Heritage Dutch community members call it. The postvernacular Dutch that is present in the area is relegated to a few Dutch borrowings in English and Dutch language used for tourism or nostalgia. The majority of Dutch identity in the Fox River Valley is displayed visually as cultural artifacts (surnames, windmills, and wooden shoes). Even with these cultural artifacts there is a strong difference between immigrant groups—nearly all of the post-World War II participants had homes displaying delftware and images of the Netherlands while they served us windmill cookies. The descendants of the nineteenth century Dutch immigrants had homes with Green Bay Packer signs and served us Midwestern bars.

At present there is no substantial continued Dutch immigration and, in spite of positive attitudes toward the language and culture, there is no current local attempt to institute Dutch language courses. Postvernacular Dutch in the Fox River Valley is limited in a linguistic sense, but thrives visually in a semiotic sense.

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