

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

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This article reports initial results from an online survey in the East Frisian heritage community in the United States, inquiring about remaining cultural and linguistic practices. Answers from 31 participants indicate a generally positive attitude towards the Low German heritage language, despite low self-reported productive and receptive proficiency. Community members show awareness of the ongoing and inevitable language shift to English but feel unable to stop the trend. This also manifests in terms of identity construction: while autochthonous minority language communities have been shown to employ emblematic language use as a postvernacular identity marker, East Frisian heritage in the U.S. is constructed mostly around church affiliation, food and tea traditions, shared values, and being “German.” Thus, this study opens the door for additional (comparative) studies on the development of postvernacular communities and the (diminished) role of language use in these groups.

Keywords: Heritage language, identity construction, attitudes, language shift, postvernacular immigrant community

## **1. Introduction**

Even in areas where a minority or heritage language has been replaced by the dominant language, sociocultural heritage often remains an important part of identity building (Reershemius 2009). As a result, the heritage language may lose its communicative function but continue to serve as a sign of communal identity and belonging, a situation known as “postvernacular language use.” This research examines the ongoing language shift in the American-East Frisian community from heritage Low German to English, as well as the impact of postvernacular practices on attitudes towards Low German and identity construction.

This study incorporates data from an online survey that focuses on language use, cultural heritage, and identity creation, and is inspired by Moquin and Wolf’s (2020) study of identity in the American-Icelandic community. The poll is aimed at those members of the community who claim little linguistic proficiency but strongly identify with their cultural and linguistic heritage, in addition to the remaining speakers of heritage Low German. The survey may offer insights into the factors that influence the creation of a postvernacular community because the language shift from heritage Low German to English is still ongoing. Currently, many older people in the community (60–100 years old) still speak Low German fluently, although their children and grandchildren rarely know more than a few words or phrases, or only have a rudimentary comprehension of the language. This

generation, on the other hand, frequently exhibits a strong interest in cultural characteristics (e.g., genealogy, traditions, and gastronomy) and builds their identity around in-group variables (e.g., religion, ancestors).

As data collection continues, this survey offers a first glimpse into the attitudes and identity formation of a changing community, both in terms of language and cultural makeup. The findings of this study may improve our understanding of the processes that drive linguistic and cultural maintenance, in addition to providing a first account of the American-East Frisian (postvernacular) community. As a result, future comparisons with heritage Icelandic, Dutch, and Pennsylvania Dutch communities, all of which are being studied using the same survey, may allow for generalizations across language groups and highlight factors that affect the evolution of post-vernacular languages.

## **2. Language, identity and postvernacularity**

The study of immigrant communities and their language maintenance has been of interest to linguists for decades. While Fishman (1965) observed that many immigrant families shift to the majority language within three generations, other studies find that prolonged language maintenance beyond the third generation is not uncommon (e.g., Bousquette & Ehresmann 2010, Köhl 2019, te Velde & Vosburg 2021) and may be predominantly found in rural communities with a strong in-group identity, endogamy and more inward-looking culture (see e.g., Loudon 2006). But despite language maintenance beyond the third generation, it seems that many heritage language communities in the USA are shifting to English and are currently seeing the last generation of active speakers. While such shifts are still ongoing, the development of so-called “postvernacular” communities can be observed (e.g., Brown & Hietpas 2019, Kleih 2022). Postvernacular language use can be seen as a conscious performance of cultural belonging, which members of a particular community who are not fluent in the communal language may express by “performing in the language, engaging in discourse about the language, using or doing translations, attempting to learn the language, surrounding themselves with objects related to the language and using certain borrowed words and phrases of the language in their dominant vernacular” (Reershemius 2009: 132; but see also Shandler 2006). Thus, cultural traditions and emblematic linguistic practices make up important features of a postvernacular community and often influence identity construction of its members. As has previously been shown, identity construction in immigrant communities are often influenced by family heritage but may become more vague in later generations as identification may no longer be bound to specific regional groups but rather national heritage (Litty et al. 2015).

Since language shift toward English is ongoing in many heritage groups, we may be able to capture and describe the processes that lead to the development of a postvernacular speech community. Moquin and Wolf (2020) designed a survey to study the language use, attitudes and cultural practices of the Icelandic heritage community. This study uses the same survey, to collect data answering the following research questions:

1. What is the current state of East Frisian Low German in the USA?
2. What are the attitudes on the language shift from Low German to English in the community?
3. What linguistic or cultural practices remain?

Since this survey was also distributed to speakers of Dutch (Hietpas & Vanhecke 2021; see also this volume) and Pennsylvania Dutch (Fisher 2021; see also this volume), the results from the four (and potentially more) studies may inform a broader cross-linguistic understanding of processes influencing language shift and the development of postvernacular speech communities.

### **3. East Frisians in the United States**

East Frisians originate from the Northwestern corner of modern-day Germany, bordering the North Sea and the Netherlands. Similar to many other European groups, the East Frisians began to migrate to the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to escape political unrest and general economic hardships, and the first East Frisian settlement was established in 1847 in German Valley, Stephenson County, Illinois. This “mother settlement” grew in size by attracting new immigrants from the homeland, and soon “daughter settlements” were established across Illinois, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska. These settlements functioned like “strawberry vines,” originating from one larger mother settlement and being connected amongst each other (Rocker 2021; see Reschly 2000 for a detailed introduction to the theory). Although most settlers had been members of Lutheran or Reformed congregations before migrating (Frizzel 1992: 166, fn. 15), they joined a wide variety of denominations, including Lutheran, Reformed, Christian Reformed, German Baptist, and German Presbyterian congregations (Lindaman 2004: 92, n. 5). Importantly, these church congregations maintained High German as the language for religious purposes, while the East Frisians continued to speak Low German in the community and used English in education. One important factor in language maintenance was the *Ostfriesische Nachrichten (ON)*, a newspaper established in 1882 in Breda, Iowa, with the intention of connecting the scattered East Frisian settlements. The paper provided news from the old motherland and published letters from correspondents reporting on events in the settlements. Even though personal connections between individuals in the geographically dispersed settlements probably existed prior to the establishment of the newspaper, the *ON* and its successor, the *Ostfriesen Zeitung*, affected the development of an East Frisian-American identity (Rocker 2021) and laid the foundation for supra-regional festivities and clubs.



Figure 1: On the left, map of modern-day Germany, East Frisian region highlighted. On the right, map of the USA, Midwestern states with considerable East Frisian migration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century highlighted. Created with Google Maps.

Although the East Frisian settlements were well-established by the turn of the century, sociocultural changes and verticalization processes (Salmons 2005, Warren 1963) led to a two-stage language shift. Since most settlements had implemented English as the main language of school education, the American-born generation was no longer (highly) proficient in High German. Despite Sunday schools and catechism classes being taught in High German, the younger adults began to advocate for more English services after the end of World War I (Saathoff 1930: 73). In the 1920s and 30s, most churches slowly reduced the number of High German services each month, before all congregations finally shifted to English-only services by the end of the 1940s. Low German was often maintained as the community language at the time, leading to a generation of heritage speakers who learned Low German at home and English after entering elementary school. However, this last generation of active speakers (born between 1925 and 1950) actively decided to cease the transfer of their heritage language, often for fear of negatively impacting their children’s educational and economic chances in life. Today, hubs of active speakers can be found in Iowa and Illinois,<sup>1</sup> and there seems to be some interest in East Frisian culture, history and genealogy among younger community members, as evidenced by the existence of multiple East Frisian societies, as well as regular newsletters and events. Schnucker (1917: 811) estimated that more than 80,000 East Frisians lived in the USA in 1917, so the number of their descendants is potentially many times higher; whether or not they still identify with their heritage is the main focus of the survey presented in this article.

#### 4. A survey on language use, identity and attitudes

The survey used for data collection is based on Wolf and Moquin’s (2020) study of Icelandic-Americans’ language and identity. Their survey, which they generously shared as a data-collection tool, was extended slightly to capture the maintenance of the two heritage languages originally used in the East Frisian community: High

<sup>1</sup> I interviewed 25 Low German speakers in Grundy County, Iowa, in 2018 and 2019, and 53 Low German speakers in Illinois in 2021. My estimate is that there may be up to 300 speakers scattered across the USA, and probably a similar number of “receptive bilinguals” who understand Low German but do not speak it.

and Low German. Thus, it entailed a total of 47 questions with both multiple choice and open-ended questions inquiring about participants' language use, attitudes, identity and cultural traditions. It was distributed via social media and email list servers of East Frisian heritage groups. Data collection is still ongoing at the time of publication. Participants were given the option to complete the survey online or to print the survey, fill it out with pen and paper and mail a physical copy, an option which was used especially by older participants.

At this point, as data collection is still ongoing, some preliminary trends can be reported. So far, 31 participants (16 female, 15 male) have finished the survey. The age range of these participants is between 20 and 84 years (median age=61 years), and most of them report to have grown up in Illinois, Iowa and Minnesota. Moreover, there seems to be a clear tendency regarding participants' immigrant generation: only one participant identified as first generation, one as second generation, five as third generation, 11 as fourth generation and 13 as fifth (or more) generation. This is in line with the group's historical development, which saw large numbers of immigrants coming to the USA in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and much smaller numbers of immigrants after the turn of the century.

## **5. The development of a postvernacular speech community**

When asked to self-identify in terms of ethnic belonging, the replies showed a mixed picture (see Figure 2). Three participants identified as "German," five as "East Frisian," and eight as "American." Interestingly, nine participants identified with the hyphenated "German-American" option, and five chose "East Frisian-American." One person stated "Scandinavian-German-American." To put this differently, eight participants identify as "American" only, 10 participants identify as "East Frisian" or "East Frisian-American" and 12 identify as "German" or "German-American." This is in line with Litty et al. (2015), who found that descendants of immigrants tend to adopt a more broadly defined identity instead of identifying with their ancestors' regional heritage. Therefore, it is unsurprising that a large number of participants identify with being German instead of being East Frisian. But clearly, ancestry plays a role in identity-construction for most participants.

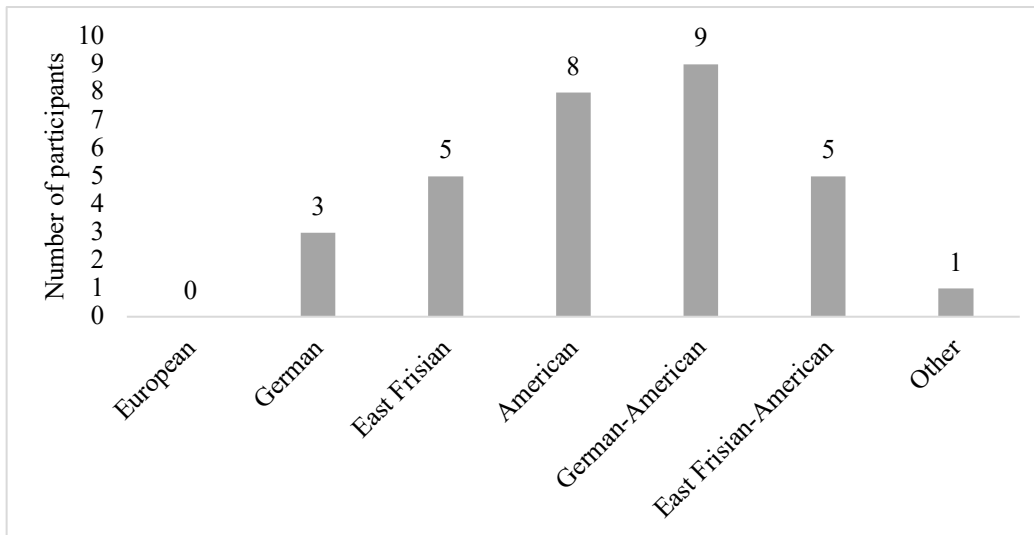


Figure 2: Responses to the question “Which of these terms do you identify with the most?”

In order to find out how prominent the use of Low German still is throughout the community, one question inquired whether participants knew anyone who speaks or spoke the language. In this case, multiple answers were possible. It is noteworthy that only one person did not know any Low German speakers. Moreover, there seems to be a clear generational trend in the results. A large majority (29 of 31) participants stated that their grandparents speak/spoke Low German, and 22 participants’ aunts or uncles speak/spoke the language as well. About half of the participants also stated that their parents or cousins also know/knew the language. About a third of the participants know individuals outside of their family who speak Low German, such as friends, community members or neighbors, indicating at least some visibility of the language in the community. However, Low German is rather infrequent in the participants’ immediate family today, as very few participants report that siblings or spouses speak it. Importantly, there is no transmission to children at all, showing the ongoing and inevitable language shift to English in the community.

This same pattern also holds for the participants themselves. When asked whether they speak High German or Low German, 20 participants answered they spoke neither, five participants speak Low German, three participants speak High German and three participants speak both. It can be assumed that the Low German speakers learned the language as heritage speakers during childhood, while High German was probably acquired either in school or in university as a second language as it has not been a community language since the churches shifted to English in the 1940s. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some individuals in the community started learning High German (but not Low German) in order to do genealogical research and to connect with family members in Germany.

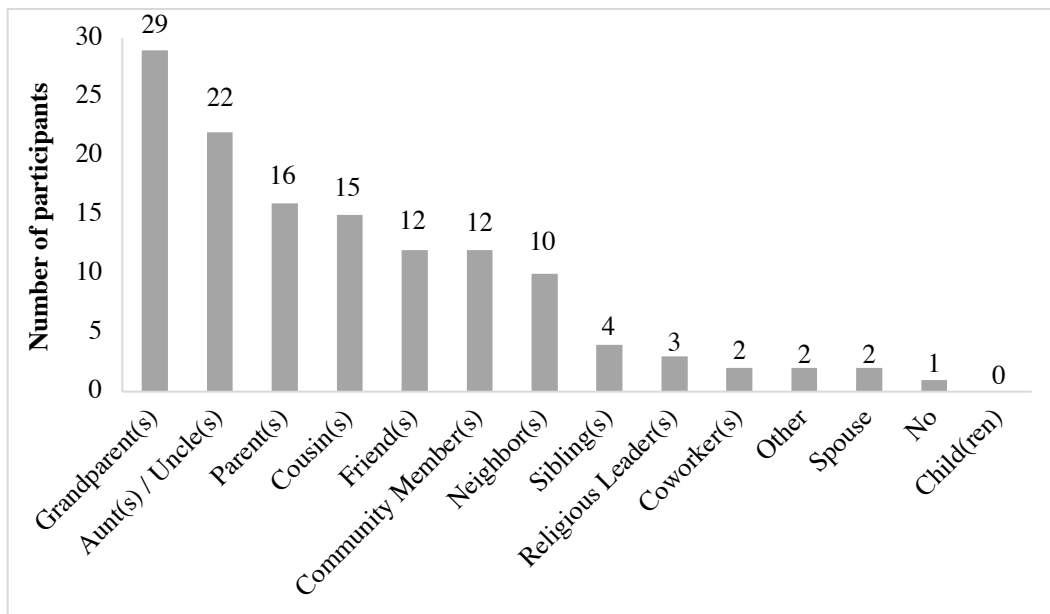


Figure 3: Responses to the question “Do you know anyone who speaks / spoke Low German?”

Although most participants reported no active proficiency of Low German, it seems that receptive knowledge is somewhat more widespread, as Figure 4 suggests. Even though about half of the participants reported understanding “barely anything” or “not at all” when others speak Low German, the other half stated that they understand Low German at least to some degree, with nine participants saying they understand “things related to particular subjects,” four understanding “most things” and two “almost anything.” The fact that only two participants selected “almost anything,” although eight participants reported to speaking Low German, is unexpected. This may point to the self-reported Low German speakers either overestimating their speaking skills or underestimating their receptive proficiency. Once more data is collected, it would be interesting to investigate this trend with regard to participants’ age, in order to explore whether older participants report higher levels of active and passive Low German knowledge than younger speakers. For now, it can be tentatively concluded that Low German has lost most of its communicative functions and the shift to English is almost complete.

It is worthwhile to explore whether the Low German language is important to participants’ identity construction in spite of their self-reported lack of proficiency. When asked how important being able to communicate in Low German is to their identity (Figure 5), eight participants responded “not at all,” and 12 participants stated “slightly important.” Only one third of the participants found communicating in Low German to be “moderately,” “very” or “extremely important” to their identity.<sup>2</sup> Given that only eight participants reported being able to speak Low German, the fact that the majority of participants found the language to be at least

<sup>2</sup> One participant did not answer this question.

slightly important to their identity construction shows an unexpected appreciation for the heritage language.

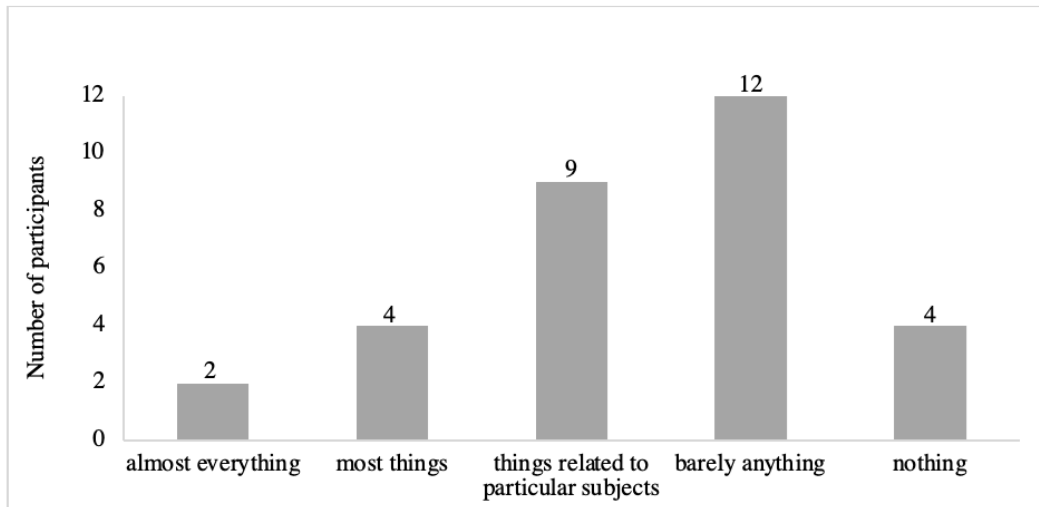


Figure 4. Responses to the statement “When others speak Low German, I understand ...”.

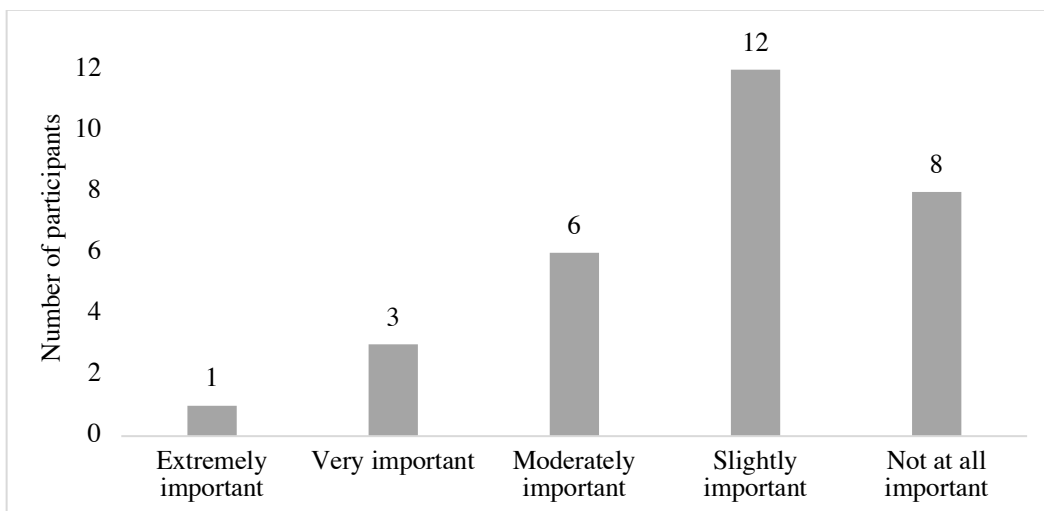


Figure 5: Responses to the question “How important is communicating in Low German to your identity?”

When asked about their opinion on the general maintenance of Low German as a heritage language in North America, participants’ attitudes were even more positive. Only three participants found the maintenance of Low German “not at all important,” while 10 participants found it “slightly important.” A majority of participants found it “moderately,” “very” or “extremely” important.<sup>3</sup> When asked in an open-ended question whether the language is now more or less important than it used to be, two interesting trends were found in the answers. While some participants stated that the language itself is less important now due to the passing

<sup>3</sup> Two participants did not answer this question.



of other speakers and the decrease of community ties, others pointed out that their interest in their cultural heritage had increased over the course of their lives. This can be summarized as a general appreciation and interest in the cultural heritage, which does not necessarily translate into action when it comes to learning the heritage language. In fact, participants seem to be aware of the challenges their heritage language is facing, as demonstrated in examples (1) and (2) from the survey:

- (1) The Ostfriesen [sic] Heritage Society in Wellsburg, Iowa has made an effort to preserve and use the language. I am glad that they are trying to preserve the language, but I fear that the younger generation has no interest in trying to keep it alive and as the older ones pass away, the language dies with them.
- (2) I know of the Platt [i.e. Low German, comment by the author] meetings at the Flatville Lutheran Church, and I think that's helpful for now, but all of those people are older and I don't think many younger people are learning the language.

Overall, it seems that the Low German language in the East Frisian-American community is affected by an ongoing language shift even though the identification as East Frisian and the attitudes toward the heritage language are more positive than expected. One participant points out particular values of the East Frisians that remain, as seen in (3):

- (3) I would say that it is more about values. Those East Friesens decent [sic] have a very strong work ethic, are faithful in their church attendance and are generally quite particular and orderly in how they live.

Indeed, it seems that religious affiliations are still mostly in line with the East Frisian tradition, as 27 participants identified as members of Protestant congregations, including Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist. In addition, some food-related traditions were named as being of importance to the participants. Most prominently, this included drinking black tea with rock sugar and cream, as well as *Snirtjebraten* 'pork roast', *Speckendicken* 'pancakes with bacon', *Rullerkes* 'crispy rolled waffles made for New Year's Eve', and *Bohnsoop* 'raisins soaked in rum.' Some participants also mentioned participating in the annual "Ethnic meal," an event organized by the Ostfriesen Heritage Society in Wellsburg, which attracts East Frisians from across the Midwest. In addition, some more generally German traditions were named, such as drinking beer, eating bratwurst or participating in Oktoberfest events.

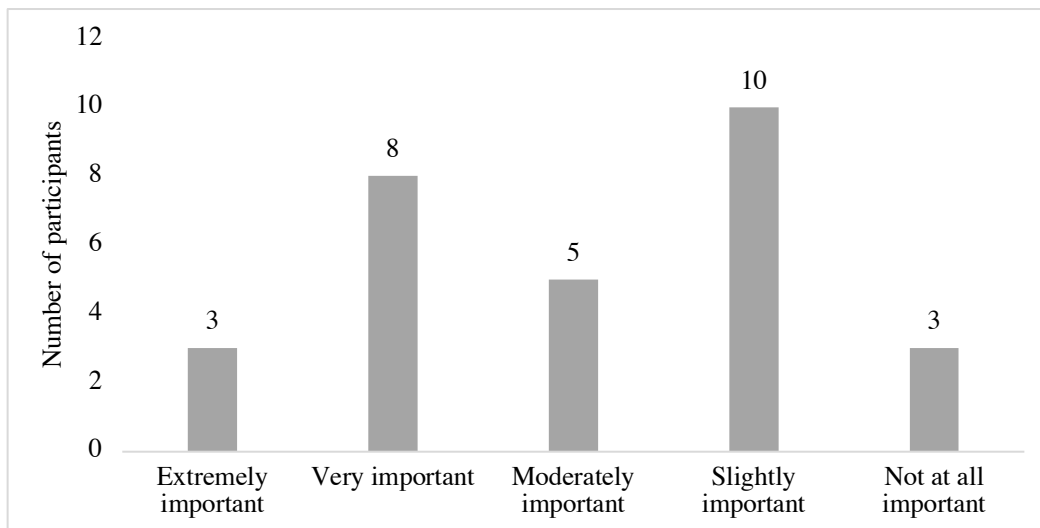


Figure 6: Responses to the question “How important is it to you that Low German be maintained as a heritage language in North America?”

## 6. Summary and outlook

The first results of a survey on attitudes and identity in the East Frisian-American community show that the Low German heritage language is indeed only spoken by a minority of participants, although most participants state that they identify (to some extent) with their cultural heritage. The findings are in line with other studies on (heritage) communities undergoing language shift and underline the importance of cultural traditions and artifacts beyond language proficiency.

Overall, the attitudes toward Low German are rather positive, with most participants finding it at least “somewhat important” to their identity, and even more responses saying that Low German should be preserved in the USA. Unfortunately, there seems to be a dissonance between the positive attitudes towards the language and the lack of action to preserve it, which has also been described by Boas & Fingerhuth (2017: 121) for the Texas-German community. Despite an acute awareness of the ongoing language shift, it appears that community members feel incapable of stopping this trend, especially in light of older speakers passing away. Although at least half of the participants self-report at least some understanding of Low German (in line with Boltokova (2014) and Sherkina-Lieber et al. (2011)), the language itself has lost its communicative purposes and has never gained the status of emblematic identity marker for those community members who do not speak it.

As such, it seems that postvernacularity may differ in communities undergoing language shift based on their level of geographic or historical removal. In autochthonous minority language groups, such as Low German speakers in East Frisia (Reershemius 2011), or Franconian dialect speakers in Bavaria (Niehaus 2018), the use of particular lexical items or phrases marks local identity and belonging, even if speakers are not fluent in the language/dialect. In contrast, heritage communities such as the East Frisians or Texas-Germans in the USA do not employ emblematic language use—except for a limited number of names for ethnic dishes. Rather, identity is constructed around cultural traditions or artefacts.

In a comparative study of two Finnish immigrant communities, Lane (2009: 466) finds that those individuals living in Norway bought objects from Finland solely for practical purposes, whereas community members living in the USA explicitly marked similar objects as “Finn” and used them as markers of their ethnic identity (and rarely for practical purposes). For the participants in this study, the affiliation with Protestant churches and the continuation of East Frisian food and tea ceremony traditions seem to be important identity markers. At the same time, there seems to be a trend towards identifying with German culture more broadly, which has already been evidenced in other German-speaking immigrant communities in the USA (Litty et al. 2015).

Since data collection for this group is still ongoing and this report only included a small number of responses, further analyses will explore the data in more detail, before a cross-linguistic comparison may shed more light onto processes of language shift and postvernacular community developments.

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