‘Language dominance’ in historical immigrant communities

Joseph Salmons*

Abstract. The notion of ‘dominance’ is ubiquitous in research on bilingualism and heritage language linguistics, but it is used in a remarkably wide range of very different meanings and contexts. I first briefly lay out a few of these and begin to explore how they can fit together. I outline how they can be applied to historical settings, looking at how these patterns are dynamic over time. Finally, I sketch one kind of trajectory of change in the course of historical immigrant language shift, drawing on the verticalization model, and suggest how it may contrast with the situations of many contemporary immigrants and refugees. This programmatic paper was thus aimed at setting the stage for a panel held at for WILA15 on the topic of ‘language dominance’.

Keywords. dominance; heritage languages; bilingualism; migration; historical sociolinguistics; verticalization

1. Introduction. The initial version of this paper was presented at WILA14 in Flensburg specifically to launch a bigger discussion of ‘language dominance’ with a panel at WILA15, held at the University of Georgia. That panel covered a range of perspectives like those outlined here.

Research on heritage languages typically defines or assumes some notion of ‘dominance’. These definitions cover a remarkable range of kinds of ‘dominance’, from psycholinguistic to social and political dominance, and how these connect to issues of identity and race (e.g., Aalberse et al. 2019; Montrul 2015; many others, and see below).

This is less a case of different definitions based on theoretical or empirical considerations of the sort linguists know with regard to what constitutes a ‘word’ or what a ‘phoneme’ is. Rather it is more like polysemy, where specialists in various areas of linguistics have created uses that serve their particular research focus, whether it might be psycholinguistics or language policy, for example, where the uses share essentially only a meaning of a hierarchical relationship between two linguistic varieties but little more. Only relatively recently, though, has research begun to address how these fit together and this has not yet been pursued in historical contexts. Drawing on historical US data, this chapter takes an initial step toward this, starting from the question of who has how much exposure to what linguistic varieties and assuming, with Wiese et al. 2022 and many others, that these bilinguals are native speakers of both their languages, leaving aside the serious questions raised in much recent work on the notion of ‘nativeness’ itself, see for instance the work of the Role Collective.

I adopt the perspective of ‘verticalization’ to organize this discussion (Salmons 2005a, 2005b; Brown 2022). ‘Verticalization’ comes from the work of Roland Warren (1978), a key figure in the development of community studies, where local institutions and social functions are tied to some extent to one another within the community (horizontal ties) and also to extra-community institutions and functions (vertical ties). Verticalization involves, as Brown & Salmons (2022: 11) put it:

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> the relative shift of control over [major community functions] from the hands of local, community-oriented and interconnected actors to extra-community actors. It has profound impact on language use across a set of fundamentally different domains, from private economic institutions to the broad organization of economic activity in a community, religious and other cultural institutions, and government.

Drawing case studies from American communities, Warren called this process "the Great Change" and he examined historical change in community structure from (often hyper-) local control of those functions to regional, state, national and often international control of economic organization, education, religion and other domains. Starting from Salmons (2005a, 2005b), a rapidly growing body of work leading to and now since Brown (2022) has applied this to how communities maintain their local language or shift to a language of the broader society, essentially with maintenance supported by horizontal ties and language shift promoted by more vertical ones. Mostly tested to date in North American settings, work has steadily expanded to new settings and new perspectives, like Hoffman (2024) on Swedish in Kansas. Various studies in progress are probing how or whether the model works more generally for settings around the world. Indeed, an anonymous reader suggests that classic work like Hill & Hill (1986) treats Nahuatl-Spanish contact and language shift in similar terms.

As noted by Brown and Salmons (2022), verticalization bears resemblance to pieces of many other views on language shift, though it brings them together in a new way. Sometimes the connections are surprising. Bronham et al. (2022) find that road density correlates with language endangerment, but they do not see this as a direct correlation. "Instead, road density may reflect connectivity between previously remote communities and larger towns, with increase in the influence of commerce and centralized government" (Bronham et al. 2022: 167). This is quintessential verticalization, and their point ties the process to population mobility.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In §2, I review some selected definitions of 'dominance' in the context of bilingualism and heritage language linguistics and highlight key differences but also how they ultimately connect to one another. I turn in §3 to how we can use these issues to understand historical settings and language shift. Drawing on verticalization, §4 contrasts this historical scenario briefly with a proposal about how contemporary immigrant and refugee community might fit into this picture. I conclude briefly in §5.

2. Definitions and related matters. Let us consider two distinct takes on 'dominance' and then add a piece of broader context to those. First, what I take to be by far the most common definition of 'heritage language' is expressly formulated in terms of dominance, as with Rothman's (2009: 156) formulation that a heritage language is a language that "is not a dominant language of the larger (national) society". Indeed, Aalberse et al. (2019: 1) see this as the usual view: "Common to most definitions of heritage speakers is that they learned a language at home that is not the dominant language of the country." Such definitions put social and political considerations front and center, especially in terms of nation states. But it also gives a place to language acquisition, with heritage languages as (primarily) home languages.

Second, from another perspective, Montrul (2015: 16) writes:

> Language dominance refers to the relative weight and relationship of the two languages of a bilingual in terms of language use and degree of proficiency. Dominance implies a relative relationship of control or influence between the two languages of bilinguals. … In my view dominance includes a linguistic proficiency component, an external component (input), and a functional component (context and use).

Any psycholinguistic view naturally revolves around individuals (see the entire volume in which Montrul's essay appears), with Montrul adding the dimensions of acquisition and use to the core matter of proficiency. Context surely includes the social and even political sides but are perhaps less in focus here. For a general discussion of age in bilingualism, see also Birdsong (2014), on age of acquisition and bilingualism and ageing.

Another major facet of dominance is domain, since bilinguals' control of their languages is typically contextual and so varies across various social settings and across different skills, like speaking versus writing. Treffers-Daller (2019) lays out this issue while providing a broad treatment of 'dominance' along the way. As we will see below, this is a particularly valuable parameter for historical studies, since we often have reasonable data about educational and institutional usage where we obviously can infer very little about psycholinguistic considerations.

Third, the history and context of the concept matters. In correspondence about my original abstract for WILA14 and then in discussing the presentation, Josh Brown observed that:

> "Dominance" paradigms [are anchored] in 19th century western ideas of a monolingual nation-state. It's assumed that the struggle with dominance is the majority language variety … . This is a problem with much previous work — we've stepped back too far and see only English vs. heritage language and have not focused enough to see what are the actual language power plays involved within heritage language communities.

I started work on this topic wondering whether 'dominance' was simply too problematic as a term to be useful but had not considered this piece of the history of the issue. An interesting contrast, in fact, to this kind of thinking is found in some recent work on urban vernaculars, e.g. in Africa. Kerswill & Wiese's 2022 book contains six such studies in their Part A, on "Multilingual societal habitus". Even with the robust presence of colonial languages and institutional support, we see settings where it would be hard to force understanding into 'dominance paradigms' and there is no whiff of 'monolingual nation states'. The picture that emerges also counters the usual US (western?) narrative about simplification: Those case studies show remarkable kinds of complexification in long-term and intense contact. This suggests that there are at least situations where 'dominance' is less of a concern for researchers, a notion that is heavily ideologically loaded certainly in the United States context.

In this section, I have cited two major and very different notions of 'dominance' used in heritage language / migration settings, one societal and the other psycholinguistic, as well as considering the ideological loading of the notion in general. Let's turn to how they might play out in historical heritage-language communities.

3. Dominance in historical settings. How and to what extent can we deploy these notions of dominance in historical settings? Aalberse et al. (2019: 4–5) discuss the valuable idea of "language dominance shift", which they define as "A change over an individual's life time affecting which language is the dominant one". (And they are careful to note that this kind of idea is not new with them.) Especially in the US context, speakers may learn a heritage language early and later learn the socially dominant language and then eventually shift to using it entirely or almost entirely.

For the kind of historical perspective we are developing here, this notion is utterly critical. While it applies to the lifespan of individuals, it is present and even more dynamic and complex over time at the level of families, social networks, communities and up to the level of the national state. Let us now consider how it can be expanded and adapted to two different kinds of scenarios, both found time and again across North America and beyond.

First, in some communities, English was not widely known as late as the 1910 Census. In French-speaking Vermilion Parish, Louisiana, Ward 4 shows under 10% of respondents reporting knowledge of English over the first 14 pages of records (over 500 people). Spanish shows similar percentages in Mercedes, Hidalgo County, Texas, District 0063, and most of those reporting knowledge of English were recent arrivals with Anglo or German surnames. For most individuals in these communities French and Spanish were dominant in almost any sense, but extra-community forces already complicated that, where the ideologies of the broader society were invested in English dominance, something enforced legally in the same era, e.g., with the legal requirement of English schooling in Louisiana beginning in 1921 (CODOFIL).

Even in immigrant communities founded in the 19th century, as laid out in work since Wilkerson & Salmons (2008) and through Salmons (2022 and forthcoming), immigrant-language monolingualism often remained widespread for generations, into the early 20th century. English speakers often learned German and other local languages in such areas. Both Haugen (1953) and Munch (1949) note that non-Norwegians sometimes learned Norwegian as well (also Salmons forthcoming). The case studies in Brown (2022) and much other work show how these speakers were often supported by a full range of private and sometimes public institutions in their languages.

Litty (2017) provides an excellent sketch of a general trajectory of language shift from German to English in Wisconsin German communities, shown in Figure 1.

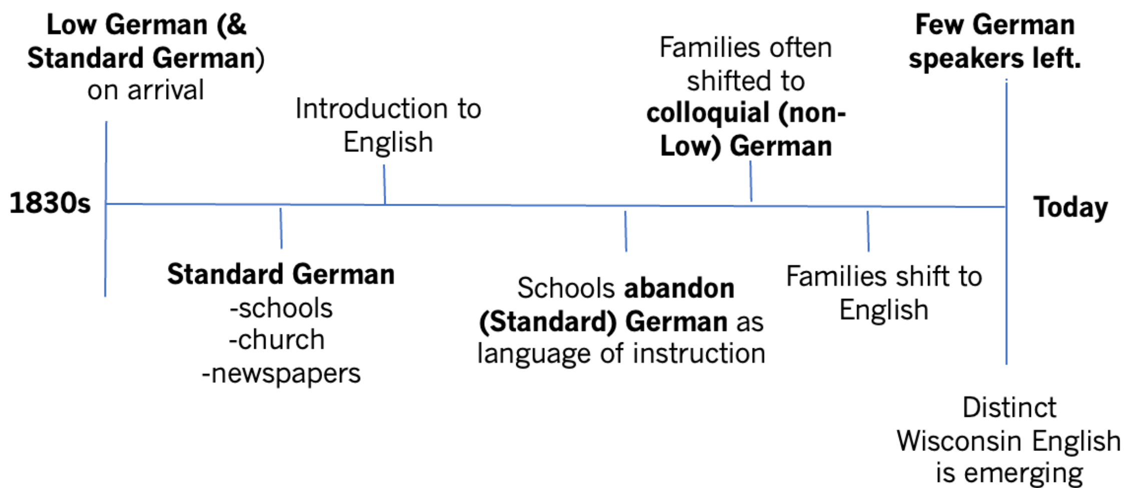

Figure 1. Shift trajectory of Wisconsin German, from Litty (2017: 86)

Consider this timeline in terms of dominance. In the early years and decades, English is barely present within the community and dominant only outside and beyond the community, though some people clearly learned English early, and most places had at least some Anglo-American or other immigrant population. It could be asked whether English was really the 'dominant language' language of the broader society in some communities. Typically by the late 19th century, English has begun to encroach to varying extents and at varying times and in varying domains. In the scenarios developed in Brown (2022) and other work, this often took paths like these: The economy becomes more vertical, with a shift away from family farming and often toward wage labor, beginning late-19th through the mid-20th century. Schools suffered early blows from laws mandating English instruction from the 19th on, but the key shift to English was in the early-20th century up to the 1930s. The press often continued through the early- to mid-20th century. As English displaces German in institutions, religion was often the last to fall, with German services

in the mid- and even late-20th century. Part of this change bears directly on domains, as access to the standard language and written language falls away.

By this time, English finds its way into essentially all families and social networks until it eventually reaches all individuals. We do not know when the last functionally monolingual speakers lived in such communities, though it was surely into the 20th century. I have never encountered any in fieldwork since the late 1970s, but speakers have regularly talked about parents and other relatives who never acquired English. The last larger groups of speakers raised with German as L1 were typically born in the mid-20th century, and even those who were securely German L1 undergo dominance shift to English.

While some communities had large numbers of American-born monolinguals, people in others acquired English relatively quickly but retained their heritage languages essentially just as long. Even where English was widely known and verticalization was advancing, much evidence indicates that it was thoroughly possible to participate broadly in community life without knowing English and many people clearly did, as with German in Wisconsin (Wilkerson & Salmons 2008; Salmons 2022). In contrast, knowledge of English quickly became almost universal in many Norwegian-American communities. From what I've seen, children and adults there were exposed to ranges of styles, registers, regional and other variation roughly similar to what a monolingual speaker would be exposed to (Salmons forthcoming). Many of these communities were linguistically very diverse, with remarkably distinct regional and social variants. As an anonymous reviewer rightly notes, discussions of such heritage settings "usually take for granted definitions of languages as distinct entities (dominance in language a vs. language b), but this is in itself a sociocultural construct". In Wisconsin German communities, for instance, people often spoke Low German varieties far from mutually intelligible with the standard language and with other varieties of 'German' spoken in a given area. See Litty (2024) for particularly rich examples of this on both sides of the Atlantic.

In other words, while English may have been in many senses dominant in a given area and widely known, many individuals surely remained psycholinguistically dominant in their heritage languages. This finally erodes only with the last generation of speakers, who acquire their heritage languages at home and moved into an overwhelmingly English-dominant world beyond the home. Such people eventually become primarily English speaking, often becoming uncomfortable with using their first language, undergoing dominance shift as described above.

This bullet point summary suggests an initial comparison to Litty's trajectory:

- Even after knowledge of English had become common, people were exposed to a range of styles, registers, regional and other variation including in institutions.
- Institutional shift progressed, but variably, sometimes rapidly – often with a quick shift in schools but far slower ones in religion.
- English became increasingly dominant in many contexts, but many individuals clearly remained dominant in their heritage languages.
- The final generation of speakers acquired their heritage languages at home and move into an English-dominant world beyond it, eventually become primarily English speaking.

This begins to tie dominance more directly to verticalization. Dominance is in this way dynamic across institutions, domains and individuals; and shifts in institutional patterns make their way clearly to the individual level. We might extend dominance shift to the full set of levels, in between, like particular institutions and social networks. However pervasive an English-monolingual

ideology may have been nationally or at the state level, it had limited impact on these kinds of communities for some time, as they were essentially insulated by their horizontal community structures.

One additional parameter that has not yet been explored but badly needs to be is geographical variation. We know that even within small areas some communities had more monolinguals than others and maintained their languages somewhat longer as a usual means of communication than other nearby communities, as Munch (1949) describes for Norwegian in western Wisconsin. This may perhaps be connected to demographics, where some communities had more outside contact with English speakers, and slightly earlier verticalization. So even in a given time and region, some communities were still more or less dominant in their heritage languages than others.

4. Another possible historical trajectory. A contrasting trajectory to these historical settings is readily visible in many contemporary immigrant and refugee communities, in the United States and elsewhere, where immigrants and refugees sometimes arrive with more limited communities from their homeland to connect with and do not or sometimes cannot establish a full set of major horizontal community structures to support their languages. A powerful presence of English, often driven by formal schooling in particular, means that children are quickly and heavily immersed in what is now far more clearly a 'dominant language of the larger society' than it was in the 19th century for millions of Americans.

Work on verticalization to date has barely engaged with these contemporary settings, but the simplest prediction would be along these lines: People are moving into an already highly vertically organized society and are able to establish horizontal patterns in often limited ways —sometimes informal (home and social networks) and sometimes in the shadow of English-speaking institutions, like limited and often unofficial education in the heritage language while children go to full-time school in English. This, in line with much research (see Portes & Schauffler 1996, for one example) and much anecdata, suggests that even the first American-born individuals and those who arrive as young children quickly become English dominant and most live in a heavily English dominant society. Once we have established this or some other scenario for recent arrivals, we can then test this against historical settings.

Verticalization, starting from Warren's Great Change, took place largely, at least within most American communities, during the 19th and 20th centuries. We have applied that to settings of language and migration, looking at the effects of verticalization on communities that had established horizontal community structures, to varying degrees, before and during the Great Change. Instead of generations of routine transmission of heritage languages, we now often see dominance shift in people who have moved to this country.

5. Conclusion. In this paper, I have compared and begun to integrate some distinct notions of linguistic dominance, especially societal and individual but also ideological, into a historical narrative of maintenance and shift in heritage-language communities, mostly founded in the 19th century.

All these various senses of dominance – and more – are relevant, but problematic; ultimately a focus on what learners were and were not exposed to and how and why can provide a nexus for connecting them. From the community perspective, millions of Americans lived for generations in worlds where their community languages were the main or exclusive language of the home and neighborhood but also vehicles for education, media, religion and often even government. When English came in, it often took generations for it to become central, sometimes first in community-external ideologies and policies, and often finally in the psycholinguistic profile of last-generation speakers.

Contemporary situations typically compress that timeline because the underlying situation is fundamentally different. Verticalization, I have argued, can provide a way of organizing and understanding these trajectories.

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