



2016

Social Narrative and Sustainability of a Danish Diaspora Community in the American Midwest

Craig A. Molgaard

Amanda L. Golbeck

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge>



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Regional Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Molgaard, Craig A. and Golbeck, Amanda L. (2016) "Social Narrative and Sustainability of a Danish Diaspora Community in the American Midwest," *The Bridge*: Vol. 39 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/thebridge/vol39/iss2/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Bridge by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Social Narrative and Sustainability of a Danish Diaspora Community in the American Midwest¹

by Craig A. Molgaard and Amanda L. Golbeck

“The people of Jutland are like brown sparrows – you find them all over the world.” (Danish proverb)

Abstract

This longitudinal study (1972-2015) focuses on the largest Danish American speech community in the United States of America, which is in Audubon, Cass, Pottawattamie, and Shelby Counties in western Iowa (the towns of Elk Horn, Kimballton, Audubon, Harlan, Exira, and Atlantic). The sociolinguistic mechanisms (code switching, speech acts, storytelling) of Danish social and cultural narrative are identified and examples are provided. We examine the social aspects of sustaining identity and heritage in a now globally linked community, and note lessons learned for other communities seeking to sustain their heritage in a healthy and productive fashion.

Introduction

Between 1820 and 1980, 371,258 immigrants arrived from Denmark to the United States. This was a significant loss of population for a small country, comprising approximately one out of every ten Danish citizens. Many of these left for economic reasons, as the Danish economy of that period was particularly stagnant and American farmland was an attractive, inexpensive option under the Homestead Act of 1862. However, many others were refugees fleeing the First and Second Slesvig wars (Nielsen and Petersen 2000; Nelson and Petersen 2000; Petersen 1987).

The First Slesvig War or Three Years’ War was largely a northern spin-off of the Year of Revolutions in 1848, sparked by the downfall of the French king Louis Phillipe. The duchies of Slesvig, Holstein,

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability, January 21-23, 2015 in Copenhagen, Denmark.

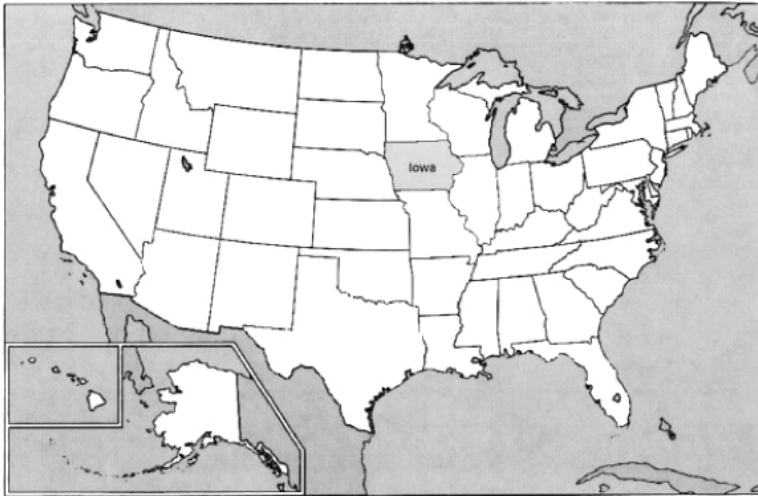
and Saxe-Lauenburg were inhabited by Germans, Danes, and North Frisians. The duchy of Slesvig was tightly linked to Denmark for demographic, cultural, and historical reasons, dating back to the 1200s at least. The remaining two duchies were controlled by Denmark, but were also members of the German Confederation. Rising nationalist sentiment in both Denmark and northern Germany as the Year of Revolution unfolded led to the declaration of a provisional government in the largely German city of Kiel, and sparked the onset of armed conflict. The Danish government deemed this movement to be open rebellion and war began. Prussia entered the war on behalf of the Slesvig-Holstein movement, which had the goal of keeping the duchies linked and under German control through the German Confederation. In brief, a reactionary Danish government that had just issued its first democratic constitution in 1849 under pressure from local liberals and revolutionaries of 1848 was involved in suppressing a German rebellion in two of its provinces in 1848 that was supported by reactionary Prussia (Derry 1979; Lauring 1999). It was a confused and confusing situation, for as British statesman Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) noted, "The Schleswig-Holstein question is so complicated, only three men in Europe have ever understood it. One was Prince Albert, who is dead. The second was a German professor who went mad. I am the third and I have forgotten all about it" (Palmerston, Thinkexist.com, accessed September 6, 2015.) The war ended in perceived Danish success in 1851, but many German and Danish "1848ers" fled Europe and escaped to Wisconsin (especially Milwaukee and Madison), Iowa (Davenport, Dubuque, and Keokuk), and Minnesota (Minneapolis), where they left a distinctive cultural tradition devoted to socialism, free speech, a free press, and high literacy.

The Second Slesvig War that occurred in 1864 was essentially a rematch. Virtually no issues had been solved by the peace treaty of 1851 and the Danish constitution of November 1863 violated the terms of the London Protocol. The rematch pitted a militant and Krupp-armed Prussia, led by Moltke and Bismarck, and its ally Austria, against Denmark. Both sides recklessly courted war, Germans in pursuit of access to the port of Kiel in the Baltic and an eventual canal to the North Sea for the German fleet and merchant marine, Danes in a desire to firmly establish the southern boundary of Scandinavia as a whole at the Eider River. The result was a military disaster for Denmark and, eventually, a very harsh peace treaty that resulted in a

massive refugee movement to escape the “Prussianization” of Slesvig. Of an estimated population of 150,000 Danes in North Slesvig, 50,000 left between 1864 and 1920 in what we are calling for present purposes the “Danish Diaspora.” Key motivating factors behind the diaspora were enforced language change in schools and churches, drafting of young men into the hated Prussian army, and property laws that allowed Danes to sell their property, but only to Germans.

Most emigrants from the area went to the United States. They formed a band of Danish settlements from Wisconsin, Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota and North Dakota, and eventually to Washington. The rich farm soil of Iowa and boom conditions in the Iowa lumber milling towns along the Mississippi were especially alluring to Danish settlers.

Figure 1: Location of the State of Iowa in the U.S.A.



Immigrants came to the western Iowa settlement area in three major waves: the first wave (the true Danish diaspora, largely from Slesvig) lasting from the late 1860s into the 1870s, the second from 1880 to 1890, and a third wave from 1900 to 1910. An additional wave of immigrants began arriving in the United States starting in the 1950s and continues to the present, with immigrants often settling in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Many communities and neighborhoods of Danish ethnicity in the United States were fairly quickly assimilated into the mainstream culture.

Figure 2: Danish Settlement Counties and Key Urban Areas in Iowa



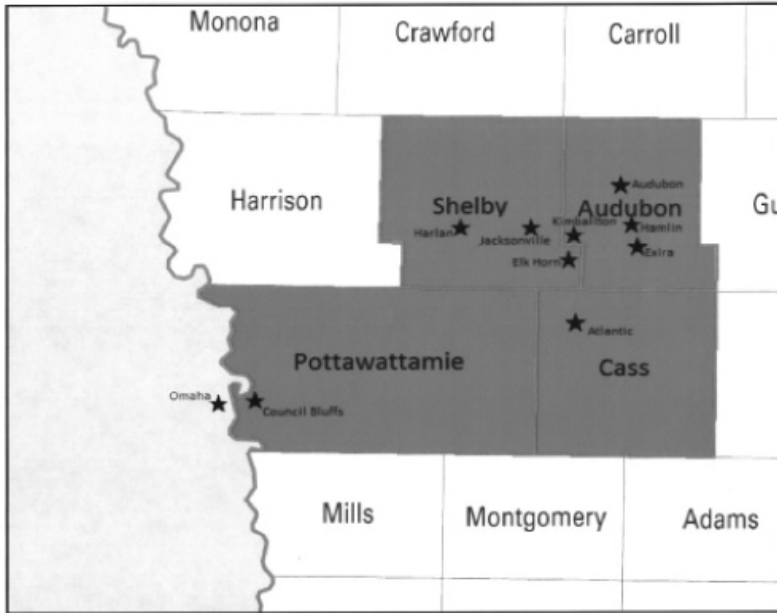
The communities that sustained and maintained their ethnic heritage most saliently and energetically were Shelby and Audubon Counties in western Iowa. In this paper we will examine the sociolinguistic factors of social and cultural sustainability that facilitated the survival of this remote outpost of Danish culture.

Methods

Ethnographic participant observation: This longitudinal observational study was an anthropological participant observation over a fifty-year period. This investigation has recently been extended by the first author's invited membership in 2013 on the Board of Directors of the Museum of Danish America in Elk Horn, Iowa.

Analytic approach: This analysis will focus on the sociolinguistic correlation between speech acts/practices and social groups. We will use the approaches of ethnolinguist John Gumperz to social identity captured by his work in the ethnography of communication and sociolinguistics.

Figure 3: Danish Communities in Key Iowa Counties



Results

Code switching: Code switching can be defined in the present context as switching from English to Danish and vice versa, and was common in this area for emphasis, for masking of delicate conversational content from children, or most typically for comedic effect between adults. As time progressed, the code switching activity per se served to define ethnic identity in the community.

At the time of the first three Danish migrations, the Danish language in Denmark was still split into several distinct dialects (most notably the Copenhagen dialect, the south Jutland dialect, and the north Jutland dialect, among others). Although Danish disappeared from Lutheran church services among immigrants in the 1930s and is rarely heard on the community streets now, code switching between English and Danish has long been common as a form of ethnic identification.

As an example of code switching under the pressure of dialect variability, an anecdote tells of an eel salesman from Chicago arriving in

Elk Horn in the 1920s to hawk his eels to local Danish Americans, who at the time considered eel soup a great ethnic treat. Several members of the community gathered to purchase eels from the salesman. Unfortunately, the eel salesman was originally from Copenhagen, and the assembled crowd was from North Slesvig, and the dialects did not work well together. Communication failed. Frustrated, one of the members of the crowd began yelling in English at the salesman: "Goddammit, if you are a Dane, why don't you talk like one?!"

Another example is one where the first author of this paper, upon leaving a sumptuous family dinner at his aunt's house, thanked his aunt at the door by incorrectly saying *Takkete Kaffe* (thanks for coffee). His aunt then replied, with sarcasm dripping like brown gravy from every English word, "Oh, was coffee all that you had?" The correct exit line would have been *Tak for mad* (thanks for the meal).

In a further instance there was the new Lutheran minister assigned to the Danish Lutheran Church in Hamlin, Iowa. He was a fine, elderly gentleman of grace and strength who led his congregation well; nevertheless, his Danish roots and language skills were suspect despite his characteristic Danish last name. On a given Sunday the announcement had to be made for the annual *aebleskiver* (pancake balls) supper in the church basement, an event much appreciated by the Iowa Danes. In making the announcement from the pulpit the relatively new minister managed to mispronounce all four syllables of the name for the spherical pancake. The congregation roared with laughter at the embarrassed man of God, until he managed to mumble a few words about not having bumped into this type of pancake before.

Finally, there was the example of the family guests from Jutland, Denmark and the local family picnic in their honor in a lovely country park in the mid 1970s. During the picnic one of the Iowa Danes and one of the Denmark Danes learned that they both knew the same Danish children's game song, and proceeded to take turns singing the entire song with alternating verses in Danish, to the delight of the onlookers. Unfortunately, a few minutes later one of the Danish Danes asked who was the man at the picnic who did not seem to understand any Danish at all. The singing Iowa Dane answered that it was because he was German American and had married into the family. The Danish Dane then answered in Danish, "Well then, we can call him a dirty dog." Feelings remained very hard between the Danes and

Germans for many decades after the Slesvig wars and the First and Second World Wars. The singing Iowa Dane then answered in Danish to the Denmark Dane, "What you need is a taste of the whip!" (*piske!*). The singing Iowa Dane and the German American fellow were close personal friends.

Patronymic placing: This ancient Danish practice involved children having the last name of their father. For example, Jens the son of Mads would be known as Jens Madsen. Sigurd the son of Jens would be known as Sigurd Jensen. Thus last names would change in each generation. In 1856 the Danish government abolished the patronymic system. Today a vast number of Danish names end with "-sen." Jensens, Nielsens, Hansens, Petersens, Jorgensens, Sorensens, Madsens, Christensens, Simonsens, and Olsens abound in Denmark, and in the Elk Horn and Kimballton area.

The Danish tendency for storytelling (see below), especially at the traditional late evening meal or "natmad" when relatives and friends visited, was often confused by patronymics in terms of who the story was being told about. It became necessary to "place" the person sociolinguistically within the Danish American community so that the story could continue. Nicknames proliferated as a solution to the placing problem.

As a simple example, we can provide the story of "Mike Jorgensen and His Hat." At a rural party a man named Mike Jorgensen started fighting with several other attendees. Eventually his opponents knocked him down and inserted his head and arms between the wooden spokes of a wagon wheel, pinning him, and asked him if he would now go home. Each query Mike ignored, but simply stated: "I want my hat." After numerous rounds of this, someone in the crowd asked if Mike would go home if they got him his hat. He answered in the affirmative, received his hat, and then went home. Hence he was known as "Fighting Mike Jorgensen," among the many Mike Jorgensens in the community in the 1920s. Other examples were "Chris Christensen the carpenter" as opposed to "Chris Christensen the scalper (livestock dealer)" or "Nels Lauritsen the painter" as opposed to "Nels Lauritsen the blacksmith."

Storytelling: Even to this day the emphasis on storytelling in a ritualized format still exists among the Iowa Danes. Beginning with a usual formulaic opening that is: "Now that is some story!" or a variant

thereof, the opening serves to designate the speaker as holding the floor until delivery of the story is finished.

The topics of the story are often humorous, focusing on character and personality eccentricities of locals, recently revealed sexual liaisons with a humorous twist, or illustrating an ethical and moral quandary poorly solved.

For example, two men were discharged from the U.S. Navy following World War II and met on the main street of Audubon, Iowa. As they had not seen each other since before the war, they decided to celebrate by running the bars. In the wee hours they attempted to drive home, both intoxicated. They ran into a tree with their car on the way out of town at such velocity that the front wheels of the car were sheared off, although miraculously neither man was hurt. As they surveyed the damage of the totally wrecked car, the driver said to his passenger: "Aw, it's alright...I got another car at home."

In another example, following a horrific flood in the 1950s, many stores and homes were flooded out. The local grocery store in one village lost nearly everything, with much of its merchandise washed all about town. One wag entered the damaged grocery store with a soggy carton of Winston cigarettes in hand, and asked the proprietor if he could trade them for a fresh carton of Camels, his preferred brand.

Over the decades, sustaining Danish heritage in Iowa was a mission carried out by different and overlapping Danish American institutions. Whether it was the vigorous Danish press in America (*The Danish Pioneer*, established in 1872, and the *Americaletter* published by the Museum of Danish America), various religious organizations (the Priscilla Guild, the women's organization of the Lutheran Church), Grundtvigian folk high schools, Danish American colleges such as Dana in Nebraska or Grand View in Iowa, or the Danish American Heritage Society, the social narrative (spoken and written) of the Danish communities, especially in southwest Iowa, served to forestall complete assimilation to the mainstream American model. The narrative emphasized cognitive sharing and a partially populated (if not perfectly complete) linguistic frame and Danish vocabulary (also if not perfect understanding of high or Copenhagen Danish) that led to a continuity unusual for such a small and often geographically fragmented ethnic group.

In 1980 the notion of a Danish museum that captured the story of the Danes in America began to be seriously considered. Momentum

for such an entity grew, and in June of 1983 the Danish Immigrant Museum, now the Danish Museum of America, in Elk Horn, Iowa, was begun. The museum shares the legacy and continuing influence of Danish culture as realized in the experiences and contributions of Danish immigrants, their descendants, and the Danes living in America. The museum has served to preserve and/or reclaim many parts of Danish heritage, through its genealogy center, on-site exhibits, and online databases, as well as traveling exhibits to other museums. The artifact collection is especially prominent, including 39,300 artifact records and over 101,000 images, and is ongoing and growing. Other Danish communities and organizations (e.g., the Danish American Archive and Library, Roskilde Society, etc.) both in and outside Denmark are now successfully linked electronically to the Danish Museum of America and are part of the ongoing story of sustainability and belonging, and Danish interns from Denmark are continuously trained at the museum.

Summary

The Danish American speech community of western Iowa has relied on different mechanisms of social narrative to secure personal and community identity and sustain itself. Through a sociolinguistic analysis, this paper describes this process at both the personal-interactive and national level. The implication of this analysis is that the social and cultural sustainability of small communities, refugee communities, or marginal communities can be enhanced by a simple process of encouraging verbal and written narrative when and where possible. When interactive narrative remains strong and is valued, the linkages of community, public health, and community mission are continually reinforced.

References

- Derry, T.K. *A History of Scandinavia*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1979.
- Gumperz, John J. and Dell H. Hymes. *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1972.
- Gumperz, John J. *Discourse Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Gumperz, John J. *Language and Social Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

- Hanks, William, Charles L. Briggs, Marco Jacquemet and Deborah Tannen. "In Memoriam. John Joseph Gumperz, Professor of Anthropology, Emeritus, UC Berkeley," 2013.
- Larsen, D. "View Our Collection." Museum of Danish America, Elk Horn, Iowa. Accessed January—June 2015. <http://danishmuseum.pastperfect-online.com/> .
- Lauring, Palle. *A History of Denmark*. Copenhagen: Narayana Press, 1995.
- Molgaard, Craig. "Secondary Peasantry in Iowa." Department of Sociology and Anthropology and University Honors Program. Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1974.
- Nelson, Norma Lange and Wava Petersen. *Elk Horn Community History*. Audubon, Iowa: Audubon Media Corporation, 2000.
- Nielsen, John Mark. and Peter L. Petersen. "Danish Americans." In *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural Americans*, 3rd ed. Detroit, MI.: Gale Research, 2000. 410-23.
- Palmerston, Lord. "Lord Palmerston Quotes" Thinkexist.com. Accessed September 6, 2015. http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/the_schleswig-holstein_question_is_so_complicated/340148.html .
- Petersen, Peter L. *The Danes in America*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publication Company, 1987.