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# Language Shift and Maintenance among Danish Immigrants in the US

by  
Karoline Kühl

The destination of most participants in the mass emigration from Denmark around the turn of the twentieth century was North America. In total about 400,000 to 450,000 Danes immigrated to the United States between 1820 and 2000, the majority between 1880 and 1920 (Grøngaard Jeppesen 2005, 265ff., 323). Danish immigration to the United States was, generally speaking, a story of socioeconomic success due to rapid assimilation based on both sociodemographic factors and attitudes. Between 1870 and 1940, when most Danish immigrants settled in the United States, the group included, to a larger degree than most other European groups, young, unmarried men, 55–65 percent of the total (Hvidt 1971, 188f.). This led to a high degree of exogamy (marriage outside the ethnic group) and thus intermingling with other (mostly European) ethnic groups (Grøngaard Jeppesen 2005, 282ff.). Although earlier Danish immigrants in particular formed tightknit communities—Chicago was the home to some major Danish communities before 1930, for example (cf. Nielsen 1993)—the general picture of the Danish immigration to the US was one of social and geographic mobility. Danish immigrants and in particular their descendants moved on in search of opportunities, leading to above-average socioeconomic success (Grøngaard Jeppesen 2005, 179).

The efforts of *Dansk Folkesamfund* (Danish Folk Society), founded in 1867 and based on a Grundtvigian mindset, led to the establishment of a number of Danish settlements with Danish churches, Danish-language primary schools, Danish folk high schools, and the possibility of leading a Danish-speaking life (Bredmose Simonsen 1990, 1993). These settlements were mostly established in the Midwest, but the most recent of the settlements is Solvang, California, founded in 1911, which still is considered a prototypical Danish American village. Yet such Danish ethnic enclaves were the exception to the general rule that the Danish Americans were willing to immerse themselves into the surrounding majority society. Moreover, disagreements

within the Danish Church with regard to the religious orientations of Grundtvigians and adherents of the Inner Mission were transplanted from Denmark to the US, ultimately leading to the formation of two separate synods. In consequence, the Danish American Lutheran church never became a common landmark for all Danish immigrants. The Inner Mission settlements (known as “the Holy Danes”) and the Grundtvigian settlements (“the Happy Danes”) are reported to have kept very much to themselves despite geographic proximity (cf. Bredmose Simonsen 1990, 1993), thus leading to (further) fragmentation of the Danish ethnic group.

The nationalistic spirit and patriotism in the US during World Wars I and II put pressure on all immigrant groups to become core Americans and thus reinforced the already ongoing disintegration of Danish Americans as a cohesive group. Not surprisingly, the loose ties within the Danish American community affected the maintenance of Danish language in the United States: as a general rule, the Danes gave up their native language in favor of English already in the first US-born generation, implying that the intergenerational language transfer from the Danish-born group to American-born descendants was vulnerable (cf. Kühl 2015, Kühl et al. 2017). However, a closer look at individual speakers yields a picture of processes of language shift and assimilation that is much fuzzier, including accounts of Danish immigrants refusing to learn English for several years and intense engagement in Danish American associations with the aim of promoting Danish culture and language.

In line with this observation, this article presents a study of a small subset of fifty-seven either Danish-born or first-generation US-born speakers of Danish ancestry with regard to language use and attitudes towards cultural and linguistic assimilation. The study combines analyses of the amount and type of bilingual features in the consultants’ speech with sociolinguistic variables such as Danish-born immigrant speaker vs. US-born, age at emigration, gender, place of residency (together with other Danish Americans or not), etc., and a content analysis (Scheier 2012) of the interviews with regard to motivation for emigration, acquisition of English, participation in Danish American networks, language use and language maintenance in the

family, and engagement in Danish American “communities of practice” (Meyerhoff 2002).<sup>1</sup>

## The Data

The data for this study is a subset of interviews with fifty-seven Danish Americans extracted from the *Corpus of American Danish*, a corpus of spoken Danish in North America and Argentina located at the University of Copenhagen.<sup>2</sup> The North American part of the corpus contains the speech of 195 Danish Americans (as well as forty-five Danish Canadians), of which almost all were recorded by the late Danish linguists Iver Kjær and Mogens Baumann Larsen between 1966 and 1982 on their journeys through North America (cf. e.g., Kjær and Baumann Larsen 1978). The data for the present study were recorded in 1973. With regard to text type, the recordings can be characterized as sociolinguistic interviews which has quite often resulted in autobiographical narratives. This text type provides a lot of information on the changes in the use of Danish across the interviewee’s lifespan. Iver Kjær and Mogens Baumann Larsen both followed a consistent set of questions with regard to sociolinguistic factors such as birth year, birth place, year of emigration, engagement with other Danish Americans, etc. They differ, however, with regard to how much the speakers were allowed to digress from a subject brought up by the interviewer. Table 1 provides an overview of the speakers that the present study is based on.

**Table 1: Speaker Sample**

Speakers	57 (28 female, 29 male)
Birth year	1876–1933 (median: 1889)
Country of birth	Denmark: 45; North America: 11
Year of emigration	1887–1955 (median: 1912)
Average emigration age	age range 3–43 (median: 23)
Average age at the time of recording	age range 40–97 (median: 84)

It is important to note that the speakers in this set do not form a group *per se* in the sense of all participants living in close vicinity to each other or belonging to the same communities of practice. The sample contains only two groups that can be assumed to have interacted

on a daily basis: one group is made up by the four speakers from the small town Lake Norden in rural South Dakota, representing a married couple and a pair of life-long friends, and another major group are fourteen speakers recorded at the Danish Home for the Aged in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, to which they had moved from other places in the United States. The other speakers in the dataset lived in Chicago, New York City, and Minneapolis at the time of the recordings; there is nothing in the recordings to suggest that they know each other. This implies that most of the speakers only cluster due to group-external factors, namely that they were immigrants from Denmark or the descendants of such, they could speak Danish, and they agreed to speak to the interviewers. Still, as with all kinds of historical sociolinguistic data, the lack of evidence does not disprove the existence of interpersonal ties (Bergs 2005, 45).

The selection of the speakers for this study came about rather randomly. The decisive factor was whether the recordings had been transcribed at the time the study was conducted. However, taking into account what we know about the generally fragmented nature of the Danish immigrant group, these speakers may actually turn out to be representative.

### **The Study**

The design of the present study is quite simple, consisting of a qualitative, in-depth assessment of the contents of the interviews made by listening and noting down the speakers' statements regarding a number of previously defined topics, such as their motivation for emigration, motivation for and way of acquiring English, etc. (see below). In a second step, the interviewees' speech was characterized with regard to English influence on lexicon and grammar. Finally, the speakers' sociodemographic characteristics, their statements about topics related to Danish language, and the linguistic analyses were aligned in order to see if and how these aspects go together. In a simple world, one would expect homesick immigrants to be very much engaged in such contemporary Danish American expat networks as Danish American lodges, sports clubs, and other similar communities of practice characterized by mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and

a shared repertoire (Meyerhoff 2002), and to have maintained Danish. Anticipating those results, the picture that emerges is much blurrier.

### **Getting the Picture:**

#### **Social Factors in Language Maintenance and Shift**

This section presents an in-depth analysis of the speakers' narratives with regard to their reasons for emigration, motivation for and way of acquiring English, if and how they maintained use of Danish within the family, as well as their engagement in Danish American communities of practice as a sign of affiliation with the ethnic group.

#### **Motivation and Mechanisms of Emigration**

The main reasons for emigration given in the interviews are escape from poverty and the societal limitations of Denmark around 1900, the aim of achieving a higher income, chain migration (i.e., following a previously emigrated family member), and a spirit of adventure. The first-named reasons—poverty, unbearable working conditions, and limitations of individual development due to societal norms—are typical for the very early migrants in the sample, i.e., those who left Denmark around 1900. Very often, these are stories about families with many children and a small income where the children (the future emigrants) had to perform hard work from an early age. The extract below represents Minni Jensen, born 1890 in the northernmost part of Denmark, who emigrated in 1906:

Extract 1

MIJ: *den sidste år jeg var derhjemme der arbejdede jeg for en gårdmand # og når en pige er hyret ude der # hvor jeg var hyret ude så kan du øh # ikke forstå jeg var overbøjet og arbejdede # jeg samlede sten ude på æ field # og hvilede i dynger # og de sendte mig ud og # sprede møg # gødning # ja # og det regnede det var ikke # xxx kørte ud på æ field # de øh de skulle ikke ud # men jeg skulle ud og øh og sprede # da jeg kom hjem og det var vådt øh strippede jeg mine klæder # og det når jeg var en pige # og der var både en karl og en mand og en dreng der # men de var ikke ude #*

(the last year that I was home I worked for a farmer. And as a servant girl, can't you understand, I was burdened and worked. I was picking stones on the field and I rested in stone heaps and they sent me out to spread manure, dung, yes, and it was raining [xxx] drove out on the field. They didn't go out, but I was told to go out and spread manure. When I came home and it was wet, I took off my clothes. And I was a girl. There was a farm hand and a man and a boy, but they didn't go out).<sup>3</sup>

Interviewer: *var det # en af grundene til at du tog herover # var det derfor du tog herover#*

(was that one of the reasons that you came here # was that why you came here)

MIJ: *ja*  
(yes)

One would not expect much nostalgia with regard to the homeland in these cases. The need or hope for a higher income is definitely a recurring theme in the narratives but it is by no means the only one.

The interviews clearly show that love of adventure also emerged as a reason for migration and that both young men and young women were attracted to North America for the chance to see something new. Alma Petersen's (born 1884 in Copenhagen, migration in 1910) account of her decision to migrate is marked by excitement about the unknown and promising land:

Extract 2

Interviewer: *ja hvad øh hvad v-hvad var ideen bagved at øh du tog til Amerika*

(well why did you go to America)

ALP: *åh jeg synes at det var man havde lyst til at se sig lidt om og at tingene er lidt anderledes mente man og tingene var bedre den gang end end de var hjemme der var mere frihed her og man fik bedre løn og øh så det syn- øh det var meget bedre*  
(well I thought that it was- I had a good mind to look around a bit and things were a bit different I thought

and at that time things were better than they were at home there was more freedom here and one could get better wages and uh it look- uh it was much better)

The idea of the US as the land of possibilities and freedom definitely was strong and it is mentioned often as a reason for emigration by the interviewees, though most often by those who migrated later than 1900. It is remarkable that none of the speakers express disappointment with regard to this narrative that brought them to leave their homeland, despite hard times during the Great Depression in the 1930s and other blows of fate that they met in the US.

Many of the emigrants, both poor and comparably well-off, followed a previously migrated person, either a family member or a family member of a friend. Sometimes, these previously migrated persons paid for the trip, making the decision for either temporary or permanent emigration easier. This is described in the following account of Carl Christiansen (born 1887 in Copenhagen, migration in 1902), whose uncle paid for the transatlantic crossing of no less than thirteen persons:

Extract 3

CC:

*en onkel han havde været farmer herover i Utah han kom herover i 1860 og øh begyndte farming ude i Utah øh og så øh var solgte han hans farm der og rejste til Danmark for han ville blive i Danmark i hans han var oppe i alderen then and øh han var hjemme to år og jeg var bydreng på den her bicycle shop og min mor arbejdede på det her mælkeri og alle vores bekendte øh tanter og onkler og folk der kom besøgte os i København og alt det han lå billetten ud for jeg var bare en dreng han lå billetten ud for tolv jeg tror det var tolv [...] han lå billetten ud for tretten af os til at komme herover*

(an uncle had been a farmer here in Utah. He came here in 1860 and uh started farming out in Utah uh and then uh he sold his farm there and went to Denmark because he wanted to stay in Denmark in his- he was old the and uh he was home for two years and I was an errand boy in this bicycle shop and my mother worked in a creamery and all of our acquaintances uh aunts and



uncles and people who came to visit in Copenhagen and he paid the tickets for all those. I was just a boy, he paid the fare for twelve I think it was twelve [...] he paid the tickets for thirteen of us to come here)

Even if previously migrated family members could not provide money for travel, they provided a safe haven for the first period of time in the new country and could often arrange a first job, too.

Danish American institutions also provided both shelter and Danish-speaking company as described by Dagmar Christiansen (born 1892 in Chicago).

Extract 4

DC: *min mor og m- og min tante de havde det danske ungdomshjem det danske ungdomshjem her i i Chicago de rendte det. ikke øh ikke med logi men med kost see øh og der fik du din kost her for fire øh fire dollars om ugen øh tre måltider for fire dollars om ugen ha [...] nå det var et hjem de kaldte Det Danske Ungdomshjem og der var hvor det var en forening [...] der kunne alle nykommere komme og og bo til de fået øh plads og til de kom der og spiste og nogle og levede de- der var nogle der levede der og der boede og nogle boede i kvarteret der og de kom hver dag og så når de havde deres kærester pigerne de kom der om torsdagen når de var fri og mødte dem og så havde de dans og [...] kaffegilde og [...] dans hver torsdag*  
(my mother and my aunt they had the Danish Youth Home here in Chicago, they ran it. Not with lodging but with board, see. And there you could get your board for four dollars a week, three meals for four dollars a week ha [...] well that was a place they called The Danish Youth Home and it was a club [...] all newcomers could come and live there until they got a job and they came and ate and some actually lived there and some lived in the neighborhood and they came each day and then when the girls had their boyfriends, they came on Thursdays when they were free and met them and then they had dancing and coffee parties each Thursday)

All of these speakers seem to have migrated due to the prospect of opportunities to improve their lives, either financially or with regard to gaining experiences. It is remarkable that only very few express nostalgia towards their homeland, and no one seems to have considered immigrating to the United States only to stay together with other Danes.

### **Acquisition of English**

The speakers' accounts of how and when they acquired English yield insights into their attitudes towards the new homeland, their willingness to integrate into American society, and not least their language learning strategies. In line with what we know about the general picture of Danish immigration to North America, most interviewees appear to have been willing to acquire the societally dominant language as quickly as possible and as well as was necessary. Nevertheless, some recount a great reluctance to acquire English due to homesickness. Rosa Hansen (born 1906 in Copenhagen, migration in 1929) reports how she refused to speak English for six years.

#### Extract 5

RH: *min mand han sagde når du er i dette land her taler vi engelsk så må du tale engelsk og når jeg gik ud med min søn så sagde han det er jo rædsomt drengen kan ikke en gang tale engelsk fordi de første seks år ville jeg ikke tale andet end dansk men så fandt jeg ud af at jeg skulle blive i dette land og jeg var nødt til at tale det engelske*

(my husband said when you are in this land, here we speak English, so you must speak English and when I went out with my son, he would say this is horrible the boy cannot even speak English, for the first six years I didn't want to speak anything else than Danish but then I found out that I would be staying in this land and that I had to speak English)

As she lived in English-speaking surroundings in New York City, Rosa Hansen at last accepted that she had to learn English, not least due to some situations where she felt deeply helpless because she could not ask for directions and was laughed at in a store.

Other speakers tell similar stories of either having a hard time or simply refusing to learn English, and some mention older relatives who never learned to speak English, such as Arnold Holmgaard's father (Arnold was born 1895 in Hetland, South Dakota):

Extract 6

AH: *i mange år skulle de køre helt til Hetland med deres avling og deres deres hvede og deres kreaturer det skulle de tage helt til Hetland for at komme af med det*  
(for many years they needed to drive all the way to Hetland with their crop and their wheat and their livestock. All that they needed to take all the way to Hetland)

Interviewer: *men var det ikke svært øh når din far ikke kunne så meget engelsk*  
(but wasn't that difficult when your father didn't speak English)

AH: *nej nej for der var jo altid en dansker til at de havde altid en dansker til at være clerk eller hvad kalder du det ja [...] ja ja som som kunne forklare det*  
(no no because there was always a Dane to- they had always a Dane as a clerk or what you call it yes (...) yes who could explain)

As the Holmgaard family lived in the Danish-speaking community of Lake Norden, South Dakota, old Holmgaard never felt the need to learn English.

The immigrants arrived with very different degrees of competence and employed a variety of methods to acquire English, from attending evening classes to picking it up in everyday life by immersing themselves into an English-speaking workplace, either deliberately or because they had no choice. Mary Christensen (born 1885 in Nykøbing on Mors, migration 1912) explains how she used a cookbook for acquiring English, thus building on her previous competence as a cook:

Extract 7

MC: *jeg studerede kogebogen [...] for der kunne jeg jeg vidste hvordan jeg skulle koge så jeg kunne på den måde lære så*

*mange forskellige ord som hja- that øh den var rigtig min øh min største hjælp*

(I studied the cook book [...] because there I knew how to cook so in that way I could learn so many different words that help- the cook book was my greatest help)

That their first exposure to English-speaking surroundings nevertheless must have been challenging, is described vividly by Peter Gantriis (born 1899 in Nørre Nissum, migration in 1926):

Extract 8

PG: *da jeg først hørte det engelske så tænkte jeg det det er altså det lærer du aldrig det det lader sig ikke gøre og det var jo akkurat som at høre en flok vildgæs over hovedet det det der var hverken sans eller samling til det men dog tog det ikke ret længe før et ord og to var sat sammen og efterhånden så kunne vi jo forstå hvad der blev sagt og senere føre en samtale på p- på sproget og så var vi jo øh for så vidt øh ovre ovre det den hårdes- den værste*

(when I first heard English, I thought I will never learn it. It's impossible to learn. It sounded like a skein of wild geese over my head, there was no sense in it, but it didn't take long before one word and two words were put together and gradually we would understand what was being said and later on have a conversation and by that time we were over the worst)

**Language use in the family**

The reports on language use in the family almost all agree that the children's start in school made a great impact, as exemplified by Clara Andersen (born 1886 in Copenhagen, migration 1916):

Extract 9

CA: *vi talte mest dansk ha I don't know det er ha- øh ha hard to tell det det mixede jo op når ha hvad hedder øh og børnene de gik jo i skole til til den de talte ikke dansk [...]*

(we mostly spoke Danish ha I don't know it's hard to tell, it mixed up when- what do you call it ah and the kids they went to school, they didn't speak Danish)

Interviewer: *talte I dansk til børnene da de var små?*

(did you speak Danish with the children when they were small?)

CA: *ja da de var små jamen så begyndte de gå i skole ikke sandt så skal de selv lære sproget så kan vi jo ikke blive ved at tale dansk til dem*

(yes, when they were small, then they started in school, you know, they have to learn the language and we cannot keep on speaking Danish with them)

Interviewer: *kunne jeres børn engelsk da de begyndte i skole?*

(did your children speak English when they started school?)

CA: *nej ikke et ord*

(no, not a word)

Clara Andersen points out the mechanisms in language shift in the families. Children of Danish-speaking families might have grown up as almost monolingual Danish speakers but the need for them to learn English quickly in order to be able to participate in school made the parents turn to English as a home language. The second effect of school was that the children brought English language into the home and passed it on to younger siblings, typically with the effect of the younger siblings developing the home language to a lesser degree. This effect of majority language schooling on the family language represents a recognized pattern in heritage languages (Polinsky and Kagan 2007).

Some speakers in the sample grew up or settled in Danish American settlements with schools that provided at least part-time Danish teaching, Danish church services, and neighbors and friends who spoke Danish. Within these Danish American communities, Danish naturally had a greater chance to be maintained in the family. Another stabilizing factor for the maintenance of Danish was non-English speaking parents or grandparents who came to stay with the families,

as described by US-born Dagmar Christiansen, who learned Danish from her Danish-born mother and mother-in-law:

Extract 10

Interviewer: *talte I så øh dansk og svensk øh hjemme hos jer*  
(did you speak Danish and Swedish at home)

DC: *øh dansk! mor talte altid dansk og Carls mor var øh var hos os*  
*[...] hun døde i 1960 og hun var seksoghalvfems år hun talte*  
*også øh dansk så jeg fik mest af det fra at tale med min mor og*  
*min svigermor*  
(uh Danish! Mom always spoke Danish and Carl's  
mother stayed with us [...] she died in 1960 and she was  
ninety-six she also spoke Danish, so I mostly got it from  
speaking with my mother and mother-in-law)

Only very few interviewees report that their children had maintained Danish as adults, thus corroborating the intergenerational language shift in the first or second US-born generation. Some children did maintain Danish to a certain degree, though, and they engaged with the homeland of their parents and grandparents by such means as visits to Denmark, employing their heritage language as a means of communication. Thus, in individual cases, they delayed the completion of language shift in the families for another generation.

### **Engagement in Danish American Communities of Practice**

Many speakers report some engagement in Danish American institutions and societies and almost all say that they befriended other Danish immigrants. However, none of them reports the proximity of other Danes as a motivation either to stay or to move in order to be closer to others from the same ethnic group. As a general rule, engagement in Danish American communities of practice seem to have been strong until around 1940, but on the decline ever since. None of the speakers report their own children as engaged in Danish American societies.

Language use in Danish American associations was subject to a certain degree of linguistic pressure, both due to the intergenerational language shift but also due to the growth of nationalism related to

World War I and II, as Svend Aage Hansen (born 1900 in Copenhagen, migration 1920) recounts:

Extract 11

SGH: *ligeledes inden for Den Danske Odd Fellow Loge som jeg har tilhørt i syvogfyrretyve år vi talte kun dansk indtil den Anden Verdenskrig så blev det engelske sprog brugt og øh vi er jo blevet nødt til at kunne tale skulle tale det engelske sprog ved møderne da andre loger blev forenet med os som ikke var danske*

(also in the Danish Odd Fellow Lodge which I belonged to for 47 years, we only spoke Danish until the Second World War, then English was used. And well we had to speak English at meetings when other lodges that weren't Danish joined us)

Interviewer: *hvorfor gik grænsen netop ved Anden Verdenskrig?*  
(why did the line go exactly at the Second World War?)

SGH: *fordi under verdenskrigen blev det bestemt af storlogen i Amerika at vi måtte tale det engelske sprog og så troede vi at hvis vedlige- vedligeholdte det engelske sprog så ville vores børn måske kunne melde sig ind i vor loge fordi at de ikke forstod det ritualistiske arbejde på dansk som øh de ellers skulle*

(because during the world war the Grand Lodge in America decided that we should speak English and then we thought that if we kept up with English, then our children maybe would join our lodge because they did not understand the rituals in Danish which they otherwise would have to)

The internal and politically motivated external pressure towards a shift to English that obviously was at work within the Danish American societies had the effect that these groups could no longer function as a means of maintaining Danish. In general, the speakers express either indifference or consent to the language shift to English in the Danish American societies and also in institutions like Danish American churches. They apparently accept that the participation of

non-Danish spouses and younger generations with less competence in Danish requires a common language which cannot be Danish.

### **Linguistic Categorization**

This section provides a categorization of the interviewees' speech, reflecting the degree to which English and Danish is represented. I have taken this as a sign of how well Danish has been preserved by the individual speakers, which may in turn reflect their engagement with their Danish heritage. The linguistic analyses have led to a rough grouping of the speakers in four groups:

#### **(1) Maximal Danish**

This category includes respondents who spoke Danish with only little English influence. Typically, these speakers would use some English discourse words in their otherwise Danish speech (e.g., *well*, *til at begynde med* *vidste vi jo ikke rigtig hvad vi skulle gøre*), use English words for culture-specific terms with no Danish equivalent as e.g., *miles* (*du kan tage den tur på ti miles i den retning*), or an occasional slip into English for a single word, often a lexical cognate.

#### **(2) Maximal English**

This category includes respondents who answered mainly in English although the interviewers kept on speaking Danish.

#### **(3) Regular Language Mixing**

This category encompasses respondents whose base language clearly is Danish, judged by the number of Danish surface morphemes and the adherence to Danish word order in (the few) cases where Danish and English word order differs. Still, English influence can be observed at expectable points, e.g., lexical code-switching not only for cultural loans and discourse words, but also for core vocabulary. Also, the copying of English verbal semantics and syntactics into Danish (e.g., *vi rendte ud af vasketøj*, literally "We hurried out of laundry" from English "to run out of sth.") occurs.



#### (4) Intense Mixing

This category signifies that the respondents' speech contained both English and Danish surface morphemes with the switches between the languages occurring almost at random, cf. the extract below (bold signifying English, underlined signifying English influence that does not show in English surface morphemes as word order, semantics or argument structure). Intense Mixing and Regular Mixing do not differ with regard to the type of English influence that occurs; it's a matter of degree.

##### Extract 12

*så jeg havde gæs for (.) år oh for flere år (.) de er **nasty** ting (.) **messy** ting to have på en farm de **messer** alt over (.) græsset op in vor **garden** (.) oh (.) **and** (.) vi kan ikke sige et ord (.) eller (.) tale højt (.) de (.) de snakker med (.) der fra kommer det udtryk (.) **you** gås (.) **you're** dum som en gås (.) **because** de gæs de ville **screame** højt (.) mens oh jeg for oh instance råbte (.) xxx (.) oh (.) ned til **somebody** nede i (.) i (.) **on** farmen (.) et stykke **away** (.) oh de råbte op (.) til huset og så (.) **and then du hører dem** (.) skrige for en lang tid disse gæs (.) og (.) vi havde det (.) **I didn't like** jeg lær- jeg jeg kunne ikke lide dem men jeg (.) havde dem for fjer (.) og de var jo også dejlige for (.) steg (.) **you know** (.) gåsesteg (.) jeg **raised** jo også oh (.) ænder (.) men de var slemme til at gå i (.) **creek** som vi kalder den vandløb og og gå med vandet (.) så vi havde en tid med at (.) få dem hjem for natten  
(then I had geese for several years, but they are nasty things, messy thing to have on a farm. They mess all over the grass up in our garden and we cannot say a word or speak up, they would join in. That's where the expression comes from "you goose, you are stupid as a goose" because the geese they would scream when I for instance called XXX down to somebody down on the farm some distance away, they screamed up to the house and then you hear them scream for a long time, those geese. I didn't like them, but I had them for their feathers and they were also good for roast goose you*

know roast goose. I also raised ducks but they would always go into the creek as we call it and go with the stream, so we had a hard time to get them home again)

As the categories were established bottom-up, i.e., with the speakers' speech as a starting point of the categorization, the majority of speakers fit into one of the four linguistic categories. It is, however, not always possible to set up absolute limits between these speaker categories; they represent tendencies rather than undisputable facts based on quantitative analyses as some speakers fall in between categories, often because their speech mode (in the sense of Grosjean 2001) changes during the interview due to a change in situation, topic, or participants.

The linguistic speaker categories are not represented quantitatively balanced in the sample of fifty-seven speakers: "Maximal Danish" and "Regular Mixing" account for most speakers while the categories "Maximal English" and "Intense Language Mixing" make up only five or six speakers each. This represents a wide range of linguistic outcomes for people with similar biolinguistic profiles, a result that is in line with what we know about situations of language obsolescence, which produce notoriously heterogeneous linguistic outcomes (Campbell and Muntzel 1989, 186ff., Romaine 2010). It remains to be said that those speakers connected by interpersonal ties identified above (speakers from Lake Norden and speakers from Croton-on-Hudson, respectively) do not cluster in the linguistic categorization.

### **Correlating Linguistic Profiles with Sociolinguistic Factors and Attitudes**

The main result of correlating the linguistic profiles with sociolinguistic variables (such as gender, place of residence, immigrant speaker versus US-born speaker, age at emigration) is that there is no clear pattern with regard to the sociodemographic factors and the speech outcome, neither individually nor across the whole sample. US-born speakers do not represent either more mixers (i.e., speakers categorized as Regular Mixing or Intense Mixing) or a more intense degree of mixing, nor do they choose to speak English only to a higher degree. For Danish-born immigrant speakers the time spent in the

US seems to play a role with regard to language loss, but exceptions can be found: some speakers who speak a fluent, standardlike Danish without any influence after fifty to seventy years in the US must be characterized as Maximal Danish.

In addition, crossing the results of the qualitative content analyses with the linguistic profiles provides a rather fuzzy picture. Some consultants, such as Gertrud Petersen (born 1887 in Stenderup, migration 1902) in the extract below, explicitly mark a connection between language maintenance, loss, and the feeling of belonging:

Extract 13

GP: *jeg kan ikke forklare mig selv så jeg ved ved nok hvad øh hvad det kan unders- forstå alting men je- øh det er hard for me at forklare mig selv*  
(I cannot explain myself I know- I can understand everything but it's hard for me to explain myself)

Interviewer: *ja og derfor foretrækker du engelsk øh nå*  
(and that's the reason why you prefer English)

GP: *ja*  
(yes)

Interviewer: *det er blevet dit sprog simpelthen*  
(it simply has become your language)

GP: *absolutely this is my home*  
(absolutely. This is my home)

However, such clear connections are rare. Engagement in Danish American communities of practice seems to coincide with a high degree of language maintenance (realized as Maximal Danish or Regular Mixing); living in the vicinity of other Danish Americans may lead to language maintenance as Danish in these situations may be assigned to certain contexts, i.e., for card-playing evenings with friends, as Peter Gantriis (born 1899 in Nørre Nisum, migration in 1926) tells.

Extract 14

PG: *til dagligt så taler vi engelsk men øh nu har vi mange venner og vi har vi har flere som vi spiller kort sammen med og så taler vi udelukkende dansk så taler vi udelukkende dansk*

*men ellers nu har vi naboerne og vi har folk der kalder her og telefonen går og og den slags ting øh det er meget lettere at holde sig til en øh et sprog for ellers øh ens øh ta- tankegang kan ikke holdes øh øh sådan rigtig i orden som den skulle hvis man hvis man blandede de to for meget.*

(normally, we speak English, but we have many friends and we have several that we play cards with and then we only speak Danish, then we only speak Danish, but otherwise we have the neighbors and people calling and the telephone keeps ringing and things like that, it's much easier to stick to one language because otherwise one cannot keep one's mind in order as it should be if the languages get mixed up)

In line with this, speakers who are categorized as Maximal English or Intense Mixing typically report little participation in Danish American communities of practice. Some speakers report that they live close to Danish American institutions and people but choose not to engage with them (“our friends said it was foolish to keep up with that [...] English comes first anyway,” Alma Frandsen, born 1889 on Læsø, migration 1912). Still, these speakers may have maintained Danish to a quite high degree. Regular Mixers may also scorn the company of other Danish Americans. This means that language maintenance does not presuppose this kind of engagement. Speakers who report no contact to other Danish Americans during their lifetime turned out to speak fluent and varied Danish when they were interviewed late in their lives, and the other way around.

## **Conclusion**

The in-depth analysis of a small sample of Danish American immigrant and US-born speakers from the time of mass immigration has corroborated the recognized pattern of a rapid language shift from Danish to English in the first or at the latest second US-born generation, in consequence of diffuse settlement patterns and the rather fragmented nature of the Danish immigrant group. The study has, however, also shown that this was not a straightforward and unilateral process. Some individuals did not learn English during

their lifetime for want of necessity, some refused outright to acquire the language for several years (thus separating themselves from the majority society), others deliberately chose to leave their Danish heritage behind and insert themselves wholly into the majority society. Still, the maintenance of Danish appears to be based on individual choice rather than on Danish being perceived as an important factor in the self-perception of the Danish American group (cf. Smolicz 2001, Garrett et al. 2009). In other words, language use seems to have been a question of pragmatism, not ideology.

In line with this, a crucial point for all speakers seems to have been the well-being of their children. The requirement of the American schools to speak English made whole families shift from Danish to English and from then on, only very few interviewees report that they shifted back to Danish once the children grew up. Most Danish Americans did not perceive the Danish language as a core value in their cultural value system which would have been worth fighting for, at least not for the speakers represented by the current study (cf. also Kjær and Baumann Larsen 1975).

Language maintenance and shift in immigrant groups, i.e., non-indigenous groups with no historically defined territory, seems to be particularly sensitive to certain extra-linguistic factors like settlement patterns, internal network structures, and not least sociopsychological factors, such as the usefulness of the migrant language and its status as a core value in the group's cultural value system. As this study has shown, several of these factors may be shaped by individual choices, thus accelerating or delaying the processes of language shift. Once again, this pinpoints the importance of speaker agency for linguistic development.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The paper is based on a presentation at the ICLaVE 8 conference in 2015 together with Jan Heegård Petersen. Many thanks to Jan for allowing me to write up the presentation as this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The *Corpus of American Danish* has been established within the project *Danish Voices in the Americas* (University of Copenhagen, 2014–18), funded by the *A.P. Møller and Hustru Chastine Mc-Kinney Møller Fond til Almeene Formaal*, the Carlsberg Foundation as a *Semper Ardens* project, and the Faculty of

Humanities at the University of Copenhagen. For a comprehensive account of the corpus, see Kühl et al. 2017.

<sup>3</sup> All interview translations by the author.

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