Study debunks myth that early immigrants quickly learned English

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Joseph Salmons has always been struck by the pervasiveness of the argument. In his visits across Wisconsin, in many newspaper letters to the editor, and in the national debates raging over modern immigration, he encounters the same refrain: "My great, great grandparents came to America and quickly learned English to survive. Why can't today's immigrants do the same?"

As a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of German who has extensively studied European immigrant languages in the Midwest, Salmons discovered there was little direct research available about whether this "learn English or bust" ethic really existed.

To research the topic, Salmons and recent UW-Madison German Ph.D. graduate Miranda Wilkerson delved into census data, newspapers, books, court records and other materials to help document the linguistic experience of German immigrants in Wisconsin from 1839 to the 1930s. Their paper appears in the current issue of the journal "American Speech."

Focusing on German immigrants was a logical choice, Salmons says, since they represented the biggest immigration wave to Wisconsin in the mid-1800s, "and they really fit this classic view of the 'good old immigrants' of the 19th century."

What Salmons and Wilkerson found was a remarkable reversal of conventional wisdom: Not only did many early immigrants not feel

compelled out of practicality to learn English quickly upon arriving in America, they appeared to live and thrive for decades while speaking exclusively German.

In many of the original German settlements in the mid-1800s from southeastern Wisconsin to Lake Winnebago and the Fox Valley, the researchers found that German remained the primary language of commerce, education and religion well into the early 20th century, Salmons says. Some second- and even third-generation German immigrants who were born in Wisconsin were still monolingual in German as adults.

"These folks were committed Americans," says Salmons. "They participated in politics, in the economy, and were leaders in their churches and their schools. They just happened not to conduct much of their life in English."

One of the richest quantitative sources for the study came from the 1910 U.S. Census, which is digitized and available through the Wisconsin Historical Society. Wilkerson analyzed self-reports on the languages adults spoke in areas of heavy German settlement, which included nine townships in seven counties across southeastern and central Wisconsin.

Examples include the communities of Hustisford in Dodge County; Hamburg in Marathon County; Kiel in Manitowoc County; Germantown in Washington County; and Belgium in Ozaukee County.

In 1910, the researchers still found robust populations of German-only speakers in these communities. The census identified 24 percent German-only speakers in Hustisford, 22 percent in Schleswig (Manitowoc County), 21 percent in Hamburg and 18 percent in Kiel.

These numbers did not only represent first-generation immigrants, but

included many born in the United States. Of the self-reported German-only speakers in the census, 43 percent from Germantown were born in the U.S., followed by 36 percent in Schleswig, 35 percent in Hustisford and 34 percent in Brothertown (Calumet County).

"What this means for the learning (or non-learning) of English here is telling: after 50 or more years of living in the United States, many speakers in some communities remained monolingual," the authors wrote. "This finding provides striking counterevidence to the claim that early immigrants learned English quickly."

Salmons points to other straightforward evidence of how viable the German language remained in Wisconsin. Through state history, there were more than 500 German-language newspapers published in Wisconsin. Those small-town papers often consolidated into larger-circulation papers in the 20th century and remained commercially available into the 1940s.

Some other interesting findings from published data include:

-- A 1932 paper on 19th century immigration to northern Milwaukee stated that "English was not even necessary for their day-to-day interactions. Every person they came in contact with could speak German at least as well as English. In Ozaukee County, there is evidence that the Irish families who lived scattered among the Germans could speak German."

-- The researchers found correspondence in the 1890s from school districts to the office of the state school superintendent that were written entirely in German. This is after the Bennett law of 1889 that required schools to be taught in English.

-- They also found records in a UW-Madison dissertation about

Lebanon, Wis., from a Lutheran church in the community that was "introducing one sermon each month in English, on a trial basis." That decision was made in 1929.

One of the remarkable findings in the census was that being a German-only speaker "did not act as a barrier to opportunity in the work force," says Salmons. While they expected to find these people on the fringes of the mainstream economy, instead they found a wide range of occupations represented, including teachers, clergymen, retail merchants, blacksmiths, tailors, yard foremen and surveyors, in addition to farmers and laborers.

"The key issue seemed to be whether they had a big enough German-speaking community, where they had a critical mass for people to be comfortable being monolingual," Salmons says. "There was no huge pressure to change in those communities."

The look at century-old language patterns seems especially salient in the modern political culture, where "English-only" movements are cropping up everywhere and there is considerable debate about how quickly new Spanish-speaking immigrants should be assimilating a new language.

As evidence of how heated the rhetoric has become, the paper references a 2006 comment from popular talk show host Michael Reagan, who stated that "hordes of immigrants ... are chattering away in their native language and have no intention of learning English."

Adds Reagan: "Can you blame them? They are being enabled by all those diversity fanatics to defy the age-old custom of immigrants to our shores who made it one of their first priorities to learn to speak English and to teach their offspring to do likewise. It was a case of sink or swim."

Salmons says their study suggests that conventional wisdom may actually have it backwards - while early immigrants didn't necessarily need English to succeed and responded slowly, modern immigrants recognize it as a ticket to success and are learning English in extremely high percentages.

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