

The influence of missionaries on language shift in historical Louisiana

Examining the shift from French to English in Louisiana, this historical sociolinguistic study examines the role of missionaries in facilitating and inhibiting language shift in the community of practice of the Catholic Church. Besides contributing to the account of language shift in Louisiana, the study more generally explores the role of religious identity and the influence of religious institutions on language shift.

Using the community of practice as the basis of analysis, Dubois (manuscript in progress) found a strong correlation (0.005 significance) between factors measuring the presence of denominations of Protestant churches and the switch of Catholic communities of practice to English usage. This extension of that study uses primary documents to examine the influence that missionaries of three religious institutions had on the linguistic and social practices of the French speaking population in Louisiana and especially on their respective communities of practice in the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church during the mid and late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, which was a time of extraordinary growth as the number of Protestant churches increased from 30 to 196.

Each of the three institutions was in competition for religious affiliation of the population though each institution started from different areas of strength and weakness. The largest church in United States in the era, the Methodist Episcopal Church, attempted to expand from its English-speaking base in Texas into French dominant areas of Louisiana. In contrast, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the prestigious English-speaking church in much of the Southern United States, attempted to retain a growing English-speaking population. Combining both of these approaches from the opposite linguistic heritage, the dominant church in Louisiana, the Catholic Church, not only tried to retain its French speaking population but also attempted to convert English-speaking immigrants.

Looking at the churches from the perspective of communities of practice, the overt institutional norms, the role of the community religious leaders, and the characteristics of target practitioners are used to understand the process of shift that was occurring at the time. Father Chambost is the focus of an in-depth case study since as a French-native Catholic missionary his French, English, and bilingual letters emphasize many areas of the Catholic Church's language practice from his service in a French dominant area in south Louisiana to his service in a bilingual community in middle Louisiana to his mission work among the English-speaking populations. He also provides metalinguistic comments about community language practices. The Methodist church's influence is particularly explored in its work in the heart of Cajun country in the area below Lafayette, Louisiana, while the Protestant churches influence is examined primarily in competition with other churches.

In conclusion, this study provides a detailed analysis of language shift in a historic context through the perspectives of religious institutions and speakers forming communities of practice. In addition preliminary information on the religious community of practice of the now-extinct dialect of the Bruli Spanish speakers will also be presented.

Dubois, S. (Manuscript in progress). Study of language shift in the community of practice of the Louisiana Catholic Church.