

Structural convergence in minority languages in Europe

ANNE-JOSÉ VILLENEUVE

University of Toronto

NANNA HAUG HILTON

University of Groningen

In recent years, contact between immigrant languages and national languages in European urban centres has received extensive scholarly interest (e.g. Svendsen and Røyneland 2008, Cheshire et al. 2011). However, more than twenty years after the adoption of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, many questions about the outcomes of contact between indigenous minority languages and national majority languages remain unanswered.

Among the possible outcomes of long-standing language contact between minority and national languages, convergence is the most commonly mentioned. While some regional minority languages have received official recognition under the Charter, those which are closely related typologically to their respective national language continue to be viewed as 'rural' or 'peasant-like' (Gal 1978, Hilton et al. 2013) dialects by the overall population but sometimes even by speakers themselves. In some cases, the establishment of curriculum or the development of local literary movements (Auger 2003) creates a new linguistic awareness that may contribute to an increased distance between the two languages (divergence), or at the very least, delay the effects of convergence.

In this talk, we focus on two case studies - West Frisian in the Netherlands and Picard in France - to examine the social and ideological factors that favour convergence (or divergence) in contact situations with indigenous or regional languages. We also tap into the role of standardization on the outcome of language contact. Based on results from quantitative variationist analyses, we show that although the majority language, as the national linguistic norm, influences some minority language speech patterns, purist ideology towards the minority language is often expressed through divergence.

Thus, we contribute to language contact research by showing that structural changes occurring in the same geographic area of Europe, but within different socio-political contexts, can be affected by standardization or legitimization of regional variants.