

SOME THEORIES ON LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION

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Abstract

One of the focuses of the linguistic world nowadays is language shift phenomenon. Many different approaches dealing with language maintenance and shift can be found in the literature on minority languages. All weight the importance of the various factors influencing language maintenance differently. Their importance differs according to the situation in which a linguistic minority lives. This paper tries to describe some theories on revitalizing the languages which are in endangered situation. Some theories give consideration about how to save the languages.

Many different approaches dealing with language maintenance and shift can be found in the literature on minority languages. All weight the importance of the various factors influencing language maintenance differently. Their importance differs according to the situation in which a linguistic minority lives. The situations of linguistic minorities vary for instance significantly depending on whether the minority is immigrant or indigenous. Immigrant minorities usually experience a far greater pressure to assimilate than indigenous minorities. There is often a clear expectation that they relinquish their original language at some point in time. The situations of indigenous linguistic minorities may also vary considerably depending on the biodiversity, climate and topography of their regions, the amount of contact they have with the majority culture and the political and economic situation of their country.

Before discussing the theories of reversing the shift, it is important to agree on the definitions of the most frequently used terms. These are 'language shift', 'language death', 'language maintenance' and 'language revitalisation'. 'Language shift' is generally used for the process in which "a

particular community gradually abandons its original native language and goes over to speaking another one instead" (Trudgill 1995: 175). Such a process usually continues over several generations. With immigrant communities it mostly occurs within three generations (Stoessel 2002: 94). In the case of indigenous linguistic minorities, language shift can go on for centuries.

The final stage of language shift is called 'language death'. This is when the last speaker of a language has died (Southerland & Katamba 1997: 562). Nettle and Romaine distinguish between two types of language death. In a), "top down death, the language retreats from official institutions and public domains like the courts, the church, and perhaps the worlds of commerce and politics first, so in the end it is restricted to use in the home and perhaps among friends" (Nettle/Romaine 2000: 91). In b), "death from the bottom up, a language has retreated from everyday use and survives primarily in ceremonial or more formal use, such as school" (Nettle/Romaine 2000: 92). As examples for type a) they give Breton and Scottish Gaelic and for type b) Sanskrit.

'Language maintenance' is generally defined as "the absence of language shift" (deVries 1992: 214) or as the "antonym of language shift" (Clyne 1986: 486). A language maintenance situation is a contact situation in which two languages co-exist in a fairly stable relationship and mother-tongue transmission of the less influential language is functioning (Southerland & Katamba 1997: 561).

Fishman uses the phrase 'reversing language shift' to refer to the opposite process of language shift. It always implies language planning, a process that can either begin with the reconstruction of a dead language or at a stage where there are still some native speakers. The term generally refers to a whole set of measures that will be looked at in the next subchapter. 'Language revitalisation' is often used as a synonym of 'reversing language shift', but always for a language which still has some native speakers (e.g. Crystal 2000: 130.; Clyne 1986:487).

1. JOSHUA FISHMAN'S THEORY OF REVERSING LANGUAGE SHIFT

Fishman believes that language shift occurs for three main reasons: physical or demographic dislocation, social dislocation and cultural dislocation. Under physical and demographic dislocation he subsumes on the one hand dislocations caused by natural disasters (such as floods, earthquakes, famines) and on the other dislocation caused by human intervention. These interventions can be mineral or forest depletion, soil exhaustion or industrialisation of agriculture and production. All of these human interventions bring foreigners (settlers, foreign occupants and immigrants), who do not speak the minority language, into the area. Intercultural neighbourhoods and marriages become increasingly common and occasions for speaking the language become increasingly rare. Apart from such direct contact with foreigners that move to the area, these human interventions often bring trade and mass media which also have a cultural and linguistic impact on the minority community.

Linguistic minorities are often socially and economically disadvantaged. As a consequence, the minority language may become associated with backwardness, both in the eyes of the majority and the minority. Thus, the minority population is faced with the dilemma of either being true to their cultural and linguistic roots and putting up with social disadvantages or of abandoning their traditions with the aim of improving their way of life. This disloyalty to the cultural roots of the talented and ambitious is what Fishman calls 'social dislocation'. Cultural disloyalty means giving up the distinctive practices and traditions of one's culture, of which the minority language is a part. Fishman stresses that most democracies favor cultural disloyalty via their most central social, economic and political processes, i.e. the processes of democratisation and modernization. These processes are dangerous for linguistic minorities as they bring with them increased contact with the majority culture, so much so that the latter can become omnipresent even in the minority community. However, Fishman

stresses that one does not have to be against modernization and democratization when attempting to save lesser used languages. He believes that cultural disloyalty could be avoided by extending the concept of democratization to the culture as well. In such a 'cultural democracy' the cultural and linguistic rights of minorities would be protected and cultivated (Fishman 1991: 63-64).

Fishman gives not only reasons for language shift, but also provides the reader with a very useful tool for saving threatened languages: his stages of reversing language shift. They should be read as a scale, so that stage 8 is the lowest step in the language maintenance process. 'Xish' is used as an abbreviation for the minority language and 'Yish' for the dominant language. 'RLS' is short for reversing language shift (Fishman 1991: 395):

2. DAVID CRYSTAL'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE REVITALISATION

According to David Crystal, the process of language decline happens in three stages. First, the minority becomes exposed to immense pressure, whether political, social or economic, to speak the dominant language. It may be either "top down", that is "in the form of incentives, recommendations or laws introduced by a government or national bodies" (Crystal 2000: 78); or "bottom up" in the form of peer group pressure or fashionable trends. The result of this pressure (stage two) is a period of emerging bilingualism, in which the minority people become increasingly proficient in the dominant language. During the third and last stage, this bilingualism starts to decline as the younger generation increasingly identifies with the new language and may often be ashamed to use the old language outside their homes (Crystal 2000: 78-79).

Crystal insists that chances for success are best if efforts to maintain an endangered language are focused on Stage 2, as it would be impossible nowadays to influence the factors which underlie the first stage in this process. Trying to influence the third stage would be too late for most languages. However, in the bilingualism of Stage 2 he sees an option for peaceful co-existence and a state in which both languages are seen as

complementary (Crystal 2000: 79). Crystal establishes several 'top priorities' for saving endangered languages. First, he believes that public relations' activities in favour of language diversity are necessary as is developing in people a sense of the value of a language. Second, the gathering of information on endangered languages is important when pinpointing the most urgent cases. Data on the number of speakers, their age and fluency as well as the attitudes of the minority and the majority groups are crucial for assessing linguistic vitality and the possibility of revitalisation. Third, a theoretical framework is needed to identify similarities and differences between the situations of endangered groups. His fourth priority is fund raising to finance a grammar and a dictionary of the endangered language. Furthermore, Crystal mentions physical well-being, without which people have other more pressing concerns than language maintenance. Last but not least, language activists should foster positive community attitudes, as positive self esteem of the speech community is crucial for any language revitalisation efforts (Crystal 2000: 92-112).

In order to find prerequisites for the process of language revitalisation, David Crystal evaluated several rather successful language maintenance projects. He came across six factors which appeared so frequently that they can be recognised as postulates of a theory of language revitalisation aimed at making an endangered language "a tool for inter-generational communication" in the home and neighbourhood (Crystal 2000: 130):

"1. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community."

To increase prestige, the minority has to become visible. Therefore, it should obtain access to the media, and in the long-term to more sectors of the public domain. The media, however, will only report about a minority if there is significant community activity, so that enhancing this activity needs to be the first step (Crystal 2000: 130-131).

"2. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community."

Money is needed to raise the profile of a language, but prosperity also helps to raise the self esteem of a community and thus encourages people to use their language in public (Crystal 2000: 132). However, not all economic development helps to maintain threatened languages. Crystal believes that the service industry and especially tourism has an overall positive effect, but warns about the harmful effect of the primary industries, such as mining and quarrying, as they often imply exploitation by outside organizations.

"3. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community."

Crystal believes that there is growing sympathy in many parts of the world towards cultural and linguistic minorities. As signs of this trend he mentions the coming into force of the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages in 1998 and the Universal

Declaration of Linguistic Rights drawn up in 1996. However, many countries continue to

ignore language rights. Therefore, the need to maintain pressure on governments is as critical as ever (Crystal 2000: 133-135).

"4. An endangered language will progress if its speakers have a strong presence in the educational system."

Learning about the history, folklore and literature of a language in school can undoubtedly increase pupils' self-confidence. However, Crystal too warns against transferring all the responsibility to the schools. He would like to interpret 'educational system' in its broadest sense, and hence includes adult education courses and activity that comes under the heading of 'awareness-raising' (Crystal 2000: 136-137).

"5. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down."

A writing system is not only desirable for education, but generally for the maintenance of a language. Literacy cannot be substituted by audio and video recordings as the writing down of a language involves an analysis of

the language, in particular how the sound system functions (Crystal 2000: 138-139).

"6. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology."

If a writing system for an endangered language exists, the Internet offers a wide range of opportunities. It can help to raise the public profile of a language in a way that is less expensive than the traditional mass-media. The cost of a Web page is the same, whether it is written in a minority language or not. Furthermore, the Internet helps people to "maintain a linguistic identity with their relatives, friends, and colleagues, wherever they may be in the world" (Crystal 2000: 142).

Unlike Fishman's theory of reversing language shift, Crystal's theory of Language revitalization cannot be read as a series of measures. Though he mentions top priorities without which no language revitalization may be possible, he does not grade them or the six postulates, since he sees language revitalization as a battle, in which "we need to be active on several fronts at once" (Crystal 2000: 101). This is a good tactic if enough money is available; if not, Fishman's scale is certainly more useful as an intervention programme. Crystal's theory further differs from Fishman's because he never stresses the importance of mother-tongue transmission. However, as the goal of the revitalisation process he mentions "intergenerational communication in the home and neighbourhood" which normally results in mother-tongue transmission (Crystal 2000: 130). It is not always clear how quickly the proposed measures will help to establish this goal, especially the suggested use of electronic technology. An advantage of Crystal's theory is that he gives concrete recommendations. But - as he says - "only a community can save an endangered language" (2000: 154). Thus, if a community lacks commitment, the suggested measures may prove useless.

3. RICHARD BOURHIS' INTERACTIVE ACCULTURATION MODEL

Bourhis explains the mechanisms of language maintenance and shift with the aid of his 'Interactive Acculturation Model'. At the heart of this model lies the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality. By this he means "the vitality [...] that makes a group likely to act as a distinctive and collective entity" (Bourhis 2001: 16). The more ethnolinguistic vitality a group has, the more likely it is to maintain its language and to survive as a community (Bourhis 2001: 16).

Three types of structural variables influence the ethnolinguistic vitality of a group: a) 'demographic variables', b) 'institutional support' and c) 'group status variables'. Under demographic variables he subsumes the number of individuals, their distribution throughout a particular area, their birth rate, endogamy/exogamy and their patterns of immigration and emigration. 'Institutional support' "refers to the extent to which an ethno linguistic group has gained informal and formal representation in the various institutions of a community, region or state" (Bourhis 2001: 17). A group that has organised itself as a pressure group can provide informal institutional support, whereas group members who have gained positions of control and power in industry, mass media, or the government can provide formal institutional support. Finally, 'the group status' variables refer to the social prestige of a language community both within its own territory and internationally. The combination of demographic, institutional and status factors affect the overall vitality of an ethnolinguistic group (Bourhis 2001: 17).

4. CHRISTINA BRATT-PAULSTON: ISOLATION AS KEY FACTOR IN LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Christina Bratt-Paulston has a very different perspective on language maintenance and shift. She identifies three major reasons for language maintenance:

a) 'Self-imposed boundary maintenance' that always occurs for reasons other than language, most frequently religion. The Amish people and the orthodox

Jewish Hassidim are examples. Self-imposed boundary maintenance is, however, rather unusual (Paulston 1994: 20).

b) 'Externally imposed boundaries', "usually in the form of denied access to goods and services, especially jobs" (Paulston 1994: 21), but also in the form of geographic isolation. An example of the first form is the African American community of the past, whereas Gaelic in the Hebrides is an example of language maintenance for geographic reasons (Paulston 1994:21).

c) 'A diglossic-like situation', which means that two languages exist in a situation of functional distribution, each language having its specific domains in which it would be considered impossible to use the other language. The use of Guarani and Spanish in Paraguay is such an example (Paulston 1994: 21).

A fourth reason for language maintenance according to Paulston is the deliberate choice of language loyalty. Minority groups may see their language as a social resource or as a symbol in their fight for independence or whatever goal they are striving for. Paulston stresses that there is, however, "nothing inherently 'natural' about group language loyalty but rather that it is a deliberately chosen strategy for survival" (Paulston 1994: 22). Thus, language loyalty is often an important aspect of nationalism, that may have its own political status or the safeguarding of the social and cultural institutions of a group as its goal (Paulston 1994:35).

In Paulston's discussion of the reasons for language shift, we find many factors that have already been discussed above, such as economic advantages from learning the majority language or the higher social prestige of the dominant language. Furthermore, she mentions different factors that facilitate access to the dominant language, such as access to mass media, to roads and transportation, travelling, trade, vast in-migration or continued migration, exogamy, compulsory military service, and primarily universal schooling (Paulston 1994: 17-20).

Paulston's theory of language maintenance is thus characterised by a strong emphasis on isolation, whether man-made or geographical. According to her theory, minority groups would be most likely to maintain their language if they had almost no contact with the majority culture and majority language speakers. Thus, it follows that minority members should be as immobile as possible, i.e. never leaving their community and working in their immediate neighbourhood. However, even then they might come into contact with majority members (in the form of tourists, state employees, etc).

Paulston's reasons for language maintenance are certainly correct, but they do not seem to be useful as a guideline for any language maintenance project. Since today's world is characterised by ever growing globalisation and mobility, it seems impossible that any minority group would renounce this trend for the sake of saving its language.

5. NETTLE AND ROMAINE'S GLOBAL VIEW OF LANGUAGE SHIFT

Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine see the question of language maintenance and shift from a very broad perspective. They believe that until about thousand years ago, there had been a linguistic equilibrium in the world, with the number of languages being lost equaling the new ones created. This equilibrium, however, has been lost for two main reasons: the development of agriculture and the industrial revolution. As these phenomena spread across the world, they put many languages at risk. Nettle and Romaine believe that agriculture "set off the development of economic differences between human communities on a scale which had not existed before" (Nettle/Romaine 2000: 98) and that it culminated in European farmers overcoming Australian hunters and gatherers. The industrial revolution has created further inequalities between communities, especially in the field of technology, and has thus intensified language shift pressures (Nettle/Romaine 2000: 98).

Many of the factors Nettle and Romaine stress as important for language maintenance have already been mentioned. Like Fishman, they

believe that language use at home must be secured first, before any effort to promote the language in other domains is undertaken. They too stress the importance of the community and of conferring power on the minority people, as official support is usually no guarantee for language maintenance. They believe that 'topdown strategies' such as official support in the form of language policies, for example, can only be helpful in addition to voluntary efforts in the community, the so-called 'bottom-up strategies' (Nettle/Romaine 2000: 39-200).

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