

EDITORIAL

Endangered languages: an introduction

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It is widely agreed that at least half of the world's 7000 languages are endangered and no longer being learnt as first languages by children, and that if nothing is done they will disappear within the coming century as the older generations who now speak them pass away (Krauss 1992; Grenoble 2011). The reasons for language endangerment are complex but typically involve a process of language shift as communities abandon their minority heritage languages in favour of larger more economically, politically and socially powerful tongues, most often those spoken by their neighbours and/or supported by local, regional or national governments and economic systems. In some cases, communities are actively engaged in language revitalisation in an attempt to stem or reverse the tide of language shift.

Attitudes to language are of key importance in assessing the chances of endangered language survival, a factor recognised in Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor's (1977) ethnolinguistic vitality framework, Bourhis, Giles, and Rosenthal's (1981) and Bourhis and Sachdev's (1984) subjective vitality questionnaire and UNESCO's (2003) language vitality scales. Negative attitudes towards minority and endangered languages by both the speaker communities themselves and by speakers of the larger languages within which they are embedded are well documented and are both an outcome and a cause of shift to dominant languages. Such attitudes may reflect long histories of marginalisation, racism, stigmatisation and disadvantage. They can lead to 'linguistic insecurity', which is related to Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, whereby subordinate groups come to accept the inferiority of their own ways of speaking as 'common sense' and 'natural'. Labov (1966, 489) claimed that in such cases 'the term "linguistic self-hatred" may not be too extreme'. Fishman (1991, 340) asserts that 'such self-views are reflections of the destruction of Xish self-esteem, due to decades of negative comparisons with Yish political power, economic advantage and modern sophistication' (where Xish stands for the threatened language and Yish is the replacing language). Use of the minority language thus comes to be stigmatised, and members of minority groups may come to believe that if they acculturate to majority society by shifting language, their social and economic standing will improve. This can lead to a self-perpetuating spiral of declining use: 'When the children object to speaking a language, gradually forget it or pretend to have forgotten it because they are ashamed of it, its future is much less assured' (Calvet 1998, 75).

Economic necessity or pragmatism are often cited as reasons for abandoning a minority language, since there may be little instrumental motivation for learning it.

Minority speech community members frequently adopt a negative instrumental attitude to their heritage languages and describe them as 'useless' (e.g. Gal 1989, 317; Williamson 1991, 114). Gal notes that on the Austrian–Hungarian border, where Hungarian is a minority language, 'while Hungarian is the language of the past and of the old, German is seen as the language of the future' (Gal 1979, 106). Nevertheless, members of minority groups may not even reap the hoped-for economic benefits of language shift, as language is rarely the only reason for discrimination against minorities (Nettle and Romaine 2000).

Empirical research on language attitudes in endangered languages communities has been rather sparse to date, and there has been a tendency in the linguistic literature to essentialise links between language, identity and attitudes. Baker (1992) notes that the literature on linguistic research contains very few references to attitude change, whereas this issue is well researched in the literature on social psychology (Giles and St. Clair 1979; Gardner 1985). 'Since much writing on minority languages is tacitly or overtly about language decay or restoration, connecting attitude change theory and language attitudes seems very desirable' (Baker 1992, 2). He points out that language planning and revival movements depend on the assumption that attitudes can (or should) change (Baker 1992, 97). Citing Katz (1960), Baker (1992, 99ff) concludes that attitudes change both as a function of individual needs and motives and as a function of social situations. Attitude change is essentially a cognitive activity yet is formulated through social activity.

The papers in this volume are contributions to empirically based research on language attitudes in endangered language communities in various locations around the world. James Costa's paper explores how the discourse about language endangerment and language revitalisation essentialises the link between language and community, as well as constructing communities as homogeneous, seeking to minimise internal and external conflict. He suggests that sociolinguistic research on minority languages in France may present an alternative way of talking about endangerment and revitalisation. Julia Sallabank's contribution explores the role of majority language attitudes in shaping the trajectory of minority language shift, based on her fieldwork in Guernsey on the local Norman French. Through questionnaires and interviews with a representative sample of the population (including politicians and civil servants) she finds there has been a shift away from a post-World War II 'culture of modernisation' and a monolingual ideal towards recognition of the value of a bilingual or trilingual linguistic heritage. This attitudinal shift has not, however, had a positive impact on the actual use of Guernsey Norman French.

The attitudes of Irish first-language speakers to language shift are the topic of Tadhg Ó hÍfearnáin's paper, which is based on quantitative and qualitative sociolinguistic research in County Cork, south-western Ireland. He looks in detail at issues of language proficiency, attitudes and actual language use across various groups and describes an in-group initiative to encourage Irish language socialisation. He also identifies some of the challenges faced in persuading Irish speakers of the merits of an all-Irish household approach to language retention. Oriana Reid-Collins draws upon interactional discourse and conversation analysis in her paper on the attitudes found among minority Kurumba speakers in southern India. She argues that in conversation minority speakers construct and position themselves in relation

to essentialising social representations similar to those found in the writings of many endangered language researchers.

The differences between expressed language attitudes and actual language use are the topic of Jane Simpson's paper. In her work with speakers in indigenous Aboriginal languages in the Northern Territory, Australia, she finds that there is a divergence between people's positive attitudes towards their languages (as indicated by public language activities) and their actual everyday talk. She focuses on the role of sociostructural features of political, social, economic and cultural control, as well as institutional control and status, together with demographic factors and interactional possibilities for language use. The final paper is by indigenous Australian linguist Jeanie Bell and it looks at the role of attitudes in language revitalisation, drawing on two examples from Australia: the Badjala (Butchulla) language programme, south-east Queensland, and the Jingulu and Mudburra programme in Elliott, Northern Territory. She explores the impact of positive and negative attitudes as challenges for these revival programmes and discusses the types of support needed for such activities to succeed. The papers by Sallabank, Simpson and Bell arise from a workshop on attitudes to endangered languages held at the annual conference of the International Association for Language and Social Psychology in Brisbane, Australia, in June 2010. We are grateful to Itesh Sachdev for suggesting that we organise this workshop. The other papers were specially commissioned by the editors for this issue.

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