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| ANTH 1766: Endangered Languages |
| A Comment on Popular Language Symbolism in the Process of Language Shift |
| Short Paper Assignment #2 |

Popular notions of what a language stands for plays an inherent role in the process of language shift. As David Crystal explains, “It is intimately connected with people and it cannot be treated simply as an intellectual puzzle to be solved.” (Crystal 2000, 25) Prevailing cultural norms assign stereotypical attributes to the speakers of a specific language or dialect. As unjust as it may be, listeners are prone to judge a speaker’s intellect, industry, education, and values largely based on the language the speaker uses. If the stereotypical attributes assigned to a language are sufficiently negative, language shift will take effect through the assignment of economic, social and cultural stigmas.

Language shift occurs “[when] the members of a local speech-community begin pervasively to abandon the use of one linguistic variety in favor of another, regardless of whether or not the language being abandoned continues to be spoken elsewhere.” (Moore 1999: 65) This is often achieved because the popular idea of what a local language stands for imparts powerful negative attributes to the speakers of it.. Undesirable economic, social and cultural identities may be placed on speakers of that particular language in an attempt to make a different language seem more advantageous.

Often, a minority language is seen as a threat to national identity or unity. A negative connotation is associated not only with the language but also the people who speak it. I will investigate the popular perceptions of three minority languages – Breton in France, North Frisian in Germany, and Hungarian in Austria. These examples illustrate how a majority language can be used as a cultural tool to promote national identity and a minority language can be made culturally vulnerable based on the collective idea of what that language stands for.

Breton is a Celtic language spoken by the inhabitants of Brittany in the northwestern region of France. The attachment of strong political symbolism to the Breton language and its speakers is a relatively new phenomenon. The French Revolution of 1789 transformed the country’s idea of what the national language stood for. “From this period on, being a Frenchman was to mean being French” (Kuter 1989:77). A single unified language was perceived to be key in achieving the egalitarian goals of the French Revolution (Kuter 1989:76-78). The first step in the Breton language shift was political motives to create a unified national identity and insure equal participation in the Republic. This political disturbance placed a negative cultural tone on Breton and its speakers in France.

As the French economy became more advanced, the urban areas were seen as progressive and modern while rural Brittany remained an agricultural community perceived as stuck in the old ways (Kuter 1989:79). The Breton language became a characteristic that branded its speakers as a backward peasant people. The political desire for a unified French nation motivated the socio-economic stigma which Breton speakers desired to avoid. As a result, the majority language in Brittany began to shift from Breton to French.

Similar to Brittany, Schleswig-Holstein experienced language shift due to an unstable political identification of the area. North Frisian is a West Germanic language spoken by a small population inhabiting the Schleswig-Holstein region of northern Germany. The language itself is not unified. North Frisian is broken into two main dialects which are further divided into nine smaller dialects spoken by small communities in and near the North Frisian islands (Biddulph 1988:2). These islands lie on the coast near the Germany-Denmark border. In an ongoing political struggle for the region, the use of North Frisian language has slowly shifted to the habitual use of German or Danish, depending on who has political control of the region (North Frisian Institute 2009).

After the German Reformation, German became the official, ecclesiastical and educational language of Schleswig-Holstein (North Frisian Institute 2009). North Frisian was reduced to a purely oral form and it wasn’t until the 18th century’s “Frisian Movement” that emphasis was finally placed on maintaining the language in written form. The popularized saying, “Never cease to be Frisian”, surfaced in the 1840’s and expressed the spirit of Frisian speakers and their desire to maintain their language and culture (North Frisian Institute 2009).

As the Germans and Danes started to separate economically, aspirations for an independent Frisian identity was hampered by the national efforts to maintain a strong identity. The German occupation during the 1940-50’s was a major drawback to the Frisian Movement. North Frisians truly thought Hitler would bring them their long-expected freedom and independence. The cyclical push of German language as a characteristic of national unity has substantially hindered Frisian independence efforts (North Frisian Institute 2009). Luckily in the case of North Frisian, as well as with Breton in Brittany, the minority language has seemed to hang on in the face of politically motivated language shift and impending language death. The collective efforts of native speakers have kept the spirit of the language alive through intergenerational connections.

The final example of language shift demonstrates that the process need not be in the wake of grand national issues. Sometimes the power to change begins in humble hearth and home. German-Hungarian bilingualism was common in the Austrian town of Oberwart. However, the post-war process of industrialization provided political incentive to shift from bilingualism to pure German monolingualism (Gal 1978:3). Susan Gal comments on sex roles in the language shift of this Austrian town. Oberwart was a Hungarian agricultural town which grew into a large, industrial German city after WWI. People associated the Hungarian language with the agricultural and peasant way of life in a negative way. Those who spoke Hungarian or associated with Hungarian speakers on a daily basis were depreciated in social value and branded as peasant people. The German language represented the idea of money, prestige and the working class (Gal 1978:4-5).

The political status of women placed them in a position uniquely capable of contributing to the language shift in their Austrian town. Being a peasant wife in Oberwart was a difficult life to lead. The hours and effort of labor were more strenuous and their need for technological and mechanical help was second in preference to the machines available for men. A household would place priority on combines and machines for the men’s work over washing machines which were substantial work savers for the peasant wife (Gal 1978:12). Oberwart women saw the life of worker’s wife to be substantially advantageous to the life of a peasant’s wife. In order to economically mobilize to industrial work force, women began to solely speak the language which stood for that way of life; German. The political differences between genders in Oberwart lead to the economic stigma of Hungarian as the language of a depreciated agricultural community. Language shift in this area was driven by the strategic choice of young women to advance their social and economic status.

The ways in which speakers and non-speakers perceive what a language stands for contributes to language shift. As illustrated by the history of Breton in France, North Frisian in Germany and Hungarian in Austria, political disturbances provide incentives to place negative connotations on a language. These negative connotations take the form of economic disadvantage, social stigma or cultural inferiority. No one person is responsible for the shift of a region’s language use. Rather, the collective action of a popular definition of a language creates an identity for both the language and its speakers which motivates a shift in their habitual use of the language.

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