

I *Language adaptation*

FLORIAN COULMAS

Introduction

Introducing a new concept in a field of scientific inquiry is sometimes embarrassing because we could kick ourselves for not having thought of it sooner. ‘Language adaptation’ is one such concept. It is not our purpose here to investigate the question of why it has taken so long to give consideration to a linguistic phenomenon that seems both obvious and important for a better understanding of what speech communities do with their languages. Rather, it is to discuss in some detail what the notion of language adaptation is all about and what its significance for a socio-historical understanding of language is.

To begin with, some clarification is in order as to how the notion of language adaptation relates to similar notions in the pertinent literature, such as ‘language modernization,’ ‘language change,’ and ‘language development.’ The first one of these, language modernization, would be suitable for present purposes if it was not for the fact that the term ‘modern’ has largely lost its relative meaning of ‘up to date.’ Accordingly, ‘modernization’ is usually understood as referring to the process of making something suitable for the present time. Language adaptation, by contrast, is a process not restricted to modern times. For example, when in the fifteen century the Koreans decided to use their language for purposes of written communication, it had to be adapted to a variety of new functions, and new genres came into existence. Similarly, in the nineteenth century a number of European languages, such as Czech and Finnish, were charged with the new task of becoming national standard languages and had to be adapted accordingly. And in our present century, language adaptation processes can be observed in several languages, such as Arabic, Swahili, or any of the literary languages of India, which, like their respective speech communities, have come into contact with the realities of modern life rather suddenly. Obviously, then, ‘language modernization’ is not the most suitable term to cover all of these phenomena.

On the other hand, it seems prudent to make a conceptual distinction *vis-à-vis* ‘language change,’ the proper object of historical linguistics. Most

2 *Florian Coulmas*

students of historical linguistics have traditionally found it difficult to recognize deliberate intervention into linguistic evolution as a component of what they are investigating. To them language change is something that happens rather than something that is done. The possibilities of artificially influencing it are considered to be about as great as those for altering the course of the planets. Language adaptation is a kind of language change, but it has both natural and intentional aspects. Also, it focusses on what in historical linguistics are sometimes called ‘external factors’ of language change.

Finally, as ‘language development’ is mostly used, this notion concerns first and foremost external factors of language change. In a widely quoted paper Ferguson (1968) has identified graphicization, standardization, and modernization as the elements of language development, where ‘modernization’ is used in the above mentioned sense of adjusting to modernity rather than bringing up to date. In this sense, language development, unlike language adaptation, does not encompass unintentional language change.

Thus the notion of language adaptation to some degree overlaps with each of the three notions discussed, but is congruent with none of them. As will become more apparent in the following, it provides the conceptual foundation for a theory of how languages adjust when they come under pressure resulting from new or changed functional requirements.

Languages are often said to reflect the social realities of their speech communities. Serving as they do the particular communicative needs of individual speech communities, they must be able to deal with whatever needs to be dealt with in linguistic communication. Normally this is exactly what languages are: symbolic systems providing an adequate means of fulfilling all communicative functions relevant in a given community. One reason, or rather one explanation of why languages differ is that speech communities differ with respect to the ways they use their language(s) and the communicative functions that languages fulfill.

Plausible as such a general statement may appear to everyone who favors a functionalist approach to the study of language, it is not easy to substantiate it in more specific terms. It is easy to say that a language is ideally suited to the communicative needs of its society, but it is quite difficult to show what exactly it is that makes it suitable. Therefore the general claim that languages meet the communicative demands of their societies is hard to substantiate in a non-trivial way.

An alternative approach to the question of how suitable a language is for its speech community is to start at the other end, that is to look at languages that in one way or another are not adequately equipped to serve their societies properly. Just as we can learn something about understanding where understanding breaks down or is inhibited, we can throw some light on the notion of the suitability of a language by looking at languages that are wanting and unable to fulfill all of their societies’ communicative needs. One reason why

languages may suddenly seem wanting is that, for political or ideological reasons, they are suddenly assigned new tasks.

Multilingual societies typically use languages in a functionally specialized manner, which is why not all of their languages or varieties are equally suitable for all communicative domains. This is often seen as a sign of, and/or reason for, underdevelopment, for the advanced countries have cultivated the idea of the national standard language which encompasses registers for all communicative purposes. As I have argued elsewhere (Coulmas 1988), the 'national language,' like the nation state, is a European invention. Since the rather successful implementation of this idea co-occurred with Europe's phenomenal development since the Renaissance, it is tempting to assume a causal relation between social development and a unified language suitable for all communicative purposes. With the advent of decolonization, the former colonies, most of which became multilingual states, have therefore come under much pressure to assign to one of their languages the status of 'national language,' which should then be adapted in such a way that it could satisfy all of the communicative needs of its respective society.

Since a unified, all-purpose language is a standard attribute of advanced countries, it has often been argued that making such a language available would be a significant step for the advancement of developing countries. The question is whether this is not putting the cart before the horse. Languages cannot be made suitable for serving new functions in thin air. That the functional range of a language is first expanded and that that language is then used to carry out the respective new functions is less likely than that it gradually becomes fit to serve new functions as a result of the speech community's desire to employ it for tasks that it used to carry out with other languages or not at all. It is using a language for purposes of modern communication which generates the necessary registers and thus leads to functional expansion. Not all languages are subject to this kind of pressure to adapt, especially in multilingual societies, where only some languages are used in all domains of modern life. Languages, therefore, differ on a large scale.

While this is not a very popular notion in modern linguistics, much can be said in favor of an approach that recognizes socio-functional differences between languages. Linguistic research in this century was shaped by the general positivist trend in the social sciences and by the value attributed to democracy by Western intellectuals. In conjunction with each other these tendencies generated an implicitly egalitarian perspective on the study of language: all languages are equal. At the beginning of this century, such a claim meant genuine progress in linguistics, which was still in the grip of European ethnocentrism. Realizing that languages are, in principle, of equal complexity was, however, a very abstract insight. Linguistic research of the last fifty years has proceeded on the basis of this insight and has led to a remarkable understanding of the fundamental structural make-up of

4 *Florian Coulmas*

languages; but, as a consequence of the egalitarian perspective, much less has been done on the functions and functionality of languages in society. In this regard languages are clearly not equal.

It is an undeniable fact that social development and language change are not always well attuned. For a variety of reasons social development may sometimes proceed at a quicker pace than linguistic development, especially when speech communities are subject to external influences such as war or colonization. As a result a situation arises where a language cannot satisfy in all respects the communicative needs of its speakers. Such a language is in need of adaptation. If it is not adapted to the new social conditions, it risks decay and eventually replacement by another language.

In the course of history, languages have been known to adapt successfully, thus recovering their full communicative potential after a period of retardation or degeneration. At present, a great number of languages, especially in Third World countries, are faced with demands to fulfill new functions that meet needs for educational, social, economic, scientific, and technical development. They are not yet well adapted and fit for the job.

While it is not surprising that a contemporary social phenomenon – the maladaptedness of vernacular languages in developing countries – has its predecessors in history, it remains to be seen in what respect language adaptation processes of the past are comparable with those of the present. In order to study the mechanics of language adaptation, it will be necessary furthermore to supplement this historical question with the typological question of how different languages and their speech communities react when they come under pressure to adapt under comparable circumstances. Let us first consider a historical example.

An attempt at enlightened language adaptation: the German case

Three hundred years ago, the German language was badly in need of adaptation. After the Reformation had stimulated the development and standardization of the vernacular varieties to a unified *Hochdeutsch*, the destruction of religious and political unity in the seventeenth century brought first standstill and then corruption and decay. The language was neglected by those whose support and care it needed most – the intellectual and power elites – who adjusted to the language and culture of their more highly developed neighbors. The situation became so critical that there were serious reasons to question the ability of German to survive as a medium of expression for more than the lowest and most ordinary functions. However, some concerned scholars and politicians realized the ever growing contrast between the boorish German and the cultivated languages of adjacent countries – French, Italian and Dutch in particular, but also Spanish and English. They also realized the political dimension of linguistic neglect and decay. Thanks to their attention and concern, the case of German language adaptation is well documented.

The most prominent witness was Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, one of the greatest scholars of his time. He was not a neutral bystander, however, but an active promotor of German language adaptation and cultivation. He was concerned about the fate of the German language, because he was convinced that the well-being of language and nation went hand in hand: 'it is found in all history that usually nation and language bloom together' (Leibniz 1683/1916: 19).¹

The fact that Leibniz himself wrote about ninety percent of his works in French or Latin may seem ironic in the light of his pressing for the improvement and use of German. Yet this very fact vividly illustrates the calamity. In order to reach his audience, that is the intellectual elite, Leibniz had to publish in either French or Latin. As Pörksen explains in more detail (see chapter 9), scientific or philosophical writing in German was almost unheard of at the time, and Leibniz was quite bitter about it: 'There are few straightforward books written in the German language that have the right taste or savor . . . Usually we write books containing nothing but a hodgepodge of copies from other languages' (Leibniz 1683/1916: 12).²

Educated people did not care to write in German, and as a result the language developed a deficit in abstract terms which in turn made it ever more difficult to use for expository writing:

There is, however, a deficit in our language in those things that you cannot see or feel, but attain by contemplation only: such as expressions of emotion, virtue and vice, too, and other matters of morality and government: further those relating to more refined and polished insights that are brought into circulation under the names of logic and metaphysics by those who strive for wisdom in their act of thinking and the general doctrine of things.³ (Leibniz 1697/1916: 27)

Leibniz's diagnosis of the weaknesses of German was very specific. While the language was well adapted to the communicative needs of trades, such as mining, hunting, and navigation, it could not function adequately in the higher domains of communication: 'Just as one would have expected, we experience the worst insufficiency in words referring to morality, passion of the mind, social intercourse, governmental matters, and all sorts of affairs of civil and public conduct; as one cannot fail to notice when translating from other languages into our own' (Leibniz 1697/1916: 29).⁴

Leibniz was aware that the insufficiencies he could not 'fail to notice' were not unalterable intrinsic traits of the German language. Every language, however poor it may be, can, after all, express everything, but unless a language is cultivated or if it is neglected it may not lend itself so easily to the expression of complex thoughts (Leibniz 1697/1916: 41). The heart of the problem was therefore not to be found in the linguistic substance, but rather its speakers were to blame, many of whom had 'forgotten their German without learning French properly' (Leibniz 1683/1916: 66). Leibniz's critical judgment is unambiguous. He concludes that 'the Germans do not lack the ability, but the resolution to elevate their language throughout' (1697/1916: 27f).

6 *Florian Coulmas*

An appropriate attitude towards language adaptation is vital for its success. This insight was at the bottom of Leibniz's concern and the reason for his two pleas quoted here, 'Admonition to the Germans' (1683) and 'Of German Language Cultivation' (1697). He knew that the only chance of redirecting the unfortunate course of development on which the German language was set was to change the snobbish attitude of the intellectual and political elites, whose preference for French was a means of dissociating themselves from the lower classes and defending their social privileges. As he could hardly argue that the elites would themselves profit directly from cultivating German, he had to convince them that it had to be done for the benefit of the nation as a whole.

Leibniz was not content with pointing out the shortcomings of the German language and pleading for its reform. He also proposed specific remedies. First of all, the language needed to be enriched. In order to be an elaborate means of higher forms of communication, the vocabulary had to be as voluminous and diverse as possible. In the 1697 article he suggested four steps towards that end: '[1] search of good words that already exist, but do not come to mind in time because they occur so rarely, [2] further, the recovery of old and forgotten words of special quality; [3] also nativization or naturalization of foreign names where they are deserving of it, [4] and finally, where other means fail, careful coinage or composition of new words' (Leibniz 1697/1916: 42).⁵

Enriching the vocabulary was important. However, upgrading the language was not confined to the lexicon. A normalized grammar was just as important: 'The purity of language, speech and writing consists in that both words and phrases have a proper German sound and that the grammar or art of language is seemly observed' (Leibniz 1697/1916: 46).⁶ A codified grammar was necessary because it would make the language a more precise and potent instrument and because it would enhance its status:

While we Germans thus need not be surprised or ashamed that our grammar is not yet in a welcome state, methinks it is still too far off the mark and, therefore, greatly in need of improvement. This would serve our glory and destroy the delusion entertained by many that our language is incapable of rules and has to be learnt almost entirely through usage.⁷
 (Leibniz 1697/1916: 51)

A norm was deemed necessary for both linguistic and political reasons, but Leibniz's conception of how to arrive at a proper norm again shows great insight in matters of language. While he explicitly states that rules must be there so that he who learns the language is provided with guidelines other than just usage, he nevertheless recognizes usage as the final authority and source of rules: 'Usage is the master' (Leibniz 1697/1916: 52). His aims for adapting the German language were thus greater uniformity and exploitation of the available resources rather than adherence to rules for the rules' sake and narrow-minded purism.

Enrichment and normalization were the two points Leibniz stressed most. He was, however, by no means a bigoted purist as many of his less enlightened followers were. Rather, he acknowledged the necessity and positive effects of foreign loans: 'I am, therefore, not of the opinion that one ought to become a puritan in language and, for superstitious fear, avoid a foreign but handy word as a mortal sin, thus debilitating oneself and depriving one's words of emphasis' (Leibniz 1683/1916: 29).⁸

As a matter of fact, he explicitly commended the introduction of educational and cultural achievements from Italy and France, emphasizing their beneficial influence on development. However, he was strictly opposed to uncritically copying neighbors and adopting their language, because 'taking over a foreign language normally has brought with it loss of freedom and a foreign yoke' (Leibniz 1697/1916: 30). In his proposals Leibniz was eager, therefore, to strike a balance between purism, on the other hand, and alienation, on the other, recognizing, as he did, the multiplicity of resources a language can and should exploit for its development.

At the end of the seventeenth century, the German language was in a precarious state. The Thirty Years War had destroyed religious unity; the Holy Roman Empire of German Nations had disintegrated; there was a vacuum where other European nations had a capital defining standards of conduct, fashion, language, and the like; and finally, the elites were blinded by the glamor of the culturally more advanced neighbor and prone to despise their own heritage, including their national language. Those were very unfavorable conditions, all of which Leibniz clearly recognized (1683/1916: 12). He was convinced, nevertheless, that the German language could be improved and adapted to the needs of all communicative functions. However, this was a major task, much too heavy for individuals to carry out. It needed political support and an institutional frame.

Leibniz, therefore, recommended the foundation of a society or academy whose members would occupy themselves with cultivating and guiding the German language, much like the Accademia della Crusca in Florence and the Académie Française in Paris did for Italian and French, respectively. No institution of similar authority ever came into existence in Germany, but in 1700 the Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften was founded with Leibniz as its *spiritus rector*. This body, however, never had anything like the impact of the French Academy. Political disunity in Germany did not allow for a language academy to evolve that could claim nationwide recognition. So much more important was the role of the grammarians and lexicographers who devoted themselves to implementing Leibniz's ideas about language reform. Gottsched, Adelung, Campe, and later the brothers Grimm, are only some important names. It can be argued that the German language would have adapted to the conditions of the changing world anyway – to urbanization, industrialization, and the general elevation of knowledge in the wake of compulsory education. To some extent this is undoubtedly true.

8 *Florian Coulmas*

However, there is no denying that the process of adaptation was influenced by ‘the language makers’ (Harris 1980). Most of them must have known Leibniz’s appeals; in some cases this is evident.⁹ Their attention to what he said was, however, selective. It seems that he was best understood where he argued against the pervasive contamination of German and least where he advocated tolerance towards foreign investiture.

What needs to be stressed here again is that conscious intervention in the ‘natural’ course of language development is not a new phenomenon typical of the now underdeveloped post-colonial countries. What the chapters of this book illustrate, each in its own way and for a variety of different languages, is that language adaptation is a necessary condition for the survival of a language in a speech community affected by rapid social, economic, and technological changes. This may sound Darwinian to some: they may very well accept the challenge of coming up with a theory that explains the conditions of ‘the survival of the fittest’ in the realm of languages.

Admonition to the Indians

If Leibniz were to act as a language consultant to the government of India today he would very likely say about Hindi pretty much the same as he said about German three hundred years ago: it needs to be adapted, and it can be adapted. In spite of the fundamental and obvious differences between the language situations in seventeenth-century Germany and present-day India, there are some interesting parallels, parallels that are highlighted by our interest in language adaptation.

Consider, for instance, Gandhi’s views on language problems in India. If ‘English’ is replaced by ‘French’, ‘Hindustani’ by ‘German,’ and ‘Latin’ by ‘Sanskrit,’ his words sound like a repetition of Leibniz’s ‘Admonition to the Germans.’ He condemned the fact that the elites succumbed to foreign influence and accepted their cultural and linguistic domination: ‘In slavery, the slave has to ape the manners and ways of the master, e.g., dress, language, etc. Gradually, he develops a liking for it to the exclusion of everything else’ (Gandhi 1965: 101). Just like Leibniz with German, Gandhi recognized the attitude of the educated classes, rather than intrinsic properties of the language, as the main obstacle to the elevation of Hindustani: ‘If the English-educated neglect, as they have done and even now continue, as some do, to be ignorant of their mother tongue, linguistic starvation will abide’ (*ibid.*: 96). And just like Leibniz, Gandhi regarded the neglect of the native heritage as a national disgrace, ‘a loss to the nation’ (*ibid.*: 19). His criticism of the role of English in India is more than a little reminiscent of what Leibniz said about French in Germany: ‘We have impoverished our mother tongue because of our love for English. We demean ourselves by insulting our language’ (*ibid.*: 2).

We even find in Gandhi’s appeals the same mixture of rational and emo-

tional argumentation as in Leibniz's, and the same paradox, of which he was painfully aware. Both Leibniz and Gandhi used the foreign elite language while promoting the use of those native languages that should assume the functions of national languages: 'I have no doubt in my mind that Hindustani . . . is the national language. But I have not yet been able to prove this in my own writing or speech' (*ibid.*: 98).

Like all intellectuals and figures of national prominence, Gandhi felt that he could not dispense with English. Also, he had no intention of confusing the issues at hand and using his pro-Hindustani arguments as a lever to stimulate xenophobia and provincialism. But he was as proud as he was sagacious, foreseeing, as he did, that a decline in the standards of English in India was an inevitable consequence of the end of British rule, and that it was therefore vitally important to adapt Hindi (and other native languages) to the functions of modern communication which they would have to fulfill.

At the time of independence neither Hindi nor any other Indian language was well adapted to the needs of education, technology, and management. To change this was a matter not only of national pride, but of economic necessity as well, and to bring about changes was a matter of urgency if further damage was to be averted:

English should not be allowed to transgress its rightful place. It can never be our national language, nor the medium of our education. We have impoverished our languages by using it as such. We have imposed a great burden on our students . . . This slavery to an alien language has kept our millions deprived of a great deal of necessary knowledge for many years. (*ibid.*: 131)

Just as the neglect of German by the intellectuals had been diagnosed by Leibniz as the major reason for its precarious state, Gandhi blames his compatriots. He echoes Leibniz's complaint, for instance, that no German grammar written in German and for Germans was available, when he says: 'I have not yet seen a single complete grammar of the Hindi language. Such as exist are in English and have been written by foreigners' (*ibid.*: 17). Not only was the language not standardized, it also lacked entire domains of vocabulary necessary for advanced communication because of the exclusive use of English for these functions: 'There are no equivalents for scientific terms. The result has been disastrous. The masses remain cut off from the modern mind' (*ibid.*: 5).

Like Leibniz, Gandhi realized that language adaptation could only be brought about by making use of a variety of resources. And like Leibniz, he was more enlightened and less of a purist than many of his successors. Coining new words on the basis of Sanskrit roots was not enough; foreign words, too, had to be accommodated in the language: 'The introduction of new words into any language enriches it' (*ibid.*: 104). To guide the language adaptation process, Gandhi called for 'language experts,' a request that was later met by the establishment of various institutions such as the Central Institute of

10 *Florian Coulmas*

Indian Languages in Mysore.¹⁰ Most important, however, for the adaptation of Hindi and other vernacular languages was their active employment for all purposes of higher communication. The point at issue was to break the vicious circle of linguistic degeneration caused by neglect and reluctance to use the native languages because of their thus produced shortcomings. The weaknesses of the autochthonous languages were, in fact, the greatest strength of English:

The lure of English has not left us. And until it goes, our own languages will remain paupers. Would that the people's Governments everywhere do their work either in the national or provincial languages! But to attain this, they must have language experts and the public must be encouraged to write in their provincial or national language. (*ibid.*: 108)

Leibniz's goals for the cultivation and adaptation of German were not achieved overnight, but eventually they were. Hindi is still in the process of adaptation and has to overcome certain weaknesses such as its lack of generally accepted technical terms. Just how this should be achieved is a matter of considerable controversy. There is no doubt, however, that the process continues and that its success is important for the nation as a whole. Nobody would predict that in the foreseeable future English will be reduced to insignificance in India as French was in Germany, but Hindi will have to assume increasingly more functions of English, because 'it is now clear that the declining use of English at all levels of education and administration is both inescapable and irreversible' (Di Bona 1970: viii).

The path of Hindi is thornier than that of German in the Renaissance because it faces not only English as a formidable adversary, but also the other native languages of India, notably those of Dravidian stock, whose speakers are not yet all prepared to concede Hindi the privileged position that English used to occupy. Rather, these languages too are undergoing a process of adaptation which, Daswani argues, will eventually put them in a position to reclaim some of the territory now occupied by English (see chapter 5). Many more languages with highly respected literary traditions are involved in India than were ever spoken in Germany, and therefore the adaptation process of Hindi and its promotion as *the* national language for all Indians are so much more complex than was the case with German. Nevertheless, there are enough striking parallels in the two situations to invite a systematic look at the essential components of language adaptation.

The analogies between Leibniz's and Gandhi's arguments are especially noteworthy because the contexts of language adaptation in Germany and India are not analogous if we look at them from the point of view of social development. The adaptation of German was the result of the re-organization of the power structure over several centuries. As such it was both a by-product of, and a stimulating factor for, the full-fledged development of capitalism, which went along with urbanization, industrialization, general education, and