

# 1 Language endangerment, language revitalisation and language policy

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## 1.1 Introduction

In the last twenty to thirty years, there has been a significant increase in interest in minority languages and the phenomena of language shift, endangerment and loss. Public awareness and institutional support (e.g. from UNESCO or the European Union) have burgeoned since the turn of the millennium, and ‘popular science’ publications such as Crystal (2000), Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Dalby (2002) drew public attention to the imminent demise of between 50 per cent and 90 per cent of the languages currently spoken in the world (the proportion cited depends on the source).

Of course, languages have developed, changed, grown and waned in importance, and ceased being used throughout human history. However, it seems to have been only in the late twentieth century that the loss of linguistic diversity became a cause for widespread concern. On the one hand, such concern can be seen as a meme (prevalent idea) of late modernity, which some relate to globalisation (Robertson 1992; Trudgill 2004; Costa forthcoming b), and the reassertion of ‘unique cultural identity’ in the face of what are perceived as assimilationist trends (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 2–3). On the other hand, linguists point to an unprecedented quantifiable decrease in the level of linguistic diversity (e.g. Krauss 1992; Sutherland 2003) as varieties of major world languages such as English take the place of a multiplicity of typological diversity among languages. Indeed, it cannot be denied that there are many languages which are being spoken less and less – including those which are the focus of the case studies in this book.

As noted by Grenoble (2009), ‘In this time, the issue of language endangerment has engaged increasing numbers of not only anthropologists and linguists, but also members of the general public’, i.e. Western media consumers. A category which is conspicuously absent from Grenoble’s list is the people belonging to speech communities that are in the process of language shift or who are directly affected by it. As pointed out by Moore (2007), Labov (2008) and Spolsky (forthcoming), all too often the focus in both linguistic and ‘popular’ writing is on languages rather than people (see below).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03061-9 - Attitudes to Endangered Languages: Identities and Policies

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Excerpt

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Yet people and their language practices are at the core of language endangerment and its study: not only the most basic aspect, i.e. language choice and usage, but also their reactions to language shift, including attempts to halt or reverse it. The term *language policy* is often used to refer to such reactions, especially at governmental or group level, although individuals and families also have language policies, albeit often not overt or conscious ones (Spolsky 2004; Shohamy 2006). Individual and family practices may be affected by top-down (official) policies intended to regulate or manage the ways in which people speak, and thus language policy may be seen as cyclic: both affecting and responding to language practices. Family practices are also highly likely to be affected by ‘folk linguistic’ language ideologies (Nieldzielski and Preston 2003; Ó hÍfeárnáin forthcoming). Ideology, in its wider sense of deep-seated beliefs about language and how it should be used, is a major influence on both policies and practices; this will be discussed specifically in Chapters 3, 5 and 7, although it is related to virtually everything in this book.

Much of the coverage of language endangerment, for both academic and general audiences, has been uncritical, characterised by enthusiasm rather than reflection or evidence-based discussion (Cameron 2007; Lüpke and Storch 2013). Treatment of the issue has also been fairly pessimistic in that it has focused largely on highlighting ‘language death’ and the ‘threat’ to linguistic diversity (often in an alarmist fashion (Hill 2002)) rather than on the numerous language revitalisation movements that have arisen during the same period.

This book focuses on responses to language endangerment, primarily in the area of language planning and policy that is concerned with language maintenance and revitalisation. It looks at examples of language-related activities in sociolinguistically comparable small island polities around the British Isles – the Channel Islands (between Britain and France) and the Isle of Man (between England, Scotland and Ireland) – and relates them to theoretical issues regarding language policy and revitalisation. These islands have roughly the same size and population, and similar sociolinguistic and political status: all three are semi-autonomous polities with indigenous languages in danger of disappearing. The book compares the contrasting ways in which language policies have developed in response to the potential loss of the indigenous languages of each island.

In the Channel Islands, the indigenous vernaculars (varieties of Norman, belonging to the *Oïl* language family of northern France) declined significantly in the twentieth century and are now critically endangered (i.e. with a dwindling elderly population of traditional speakers); however, attitudes in the two main islands, Jersey and Guernsey, have become noticeably more positive in the last thirty years. In the Isle of Man the last traditional speakers of Manx died in the 1970s, but since the 1980s there have been sustained and concerted efforts to bring Manx back into use. In all three locations, language

is increasingly seen as a valuable marker of island distinctiveness, which has led to a degree of government support, increased visibility in the ‘linguistic landscape’ and public rhetoric supporting the island languages and their symbolic value.

The book aims to address two fundamental issues in language policy:

- What is meant by ‘saving a language’
- What effective language policy-making for language revitalisation might look like.

Even in the same small community, diverse stakeholders may have different goals and understandings of ‘language’ and ‘policy’, and what it means to ‘save a language’, which may not be stated but needs to be inferred from discourses and observations. This book will examine examples of language-related activities and discourses, and will discuss their rationale and outcomes and the extent to which language policy effectively supports the maintenance and revitalisation of the endangered indigenous languages.

## 1.2 Language endangerment

Most overviews of language endangerment begin with the by now well-known statistics that of the nearly 7,000 languages in the world, 50 per cent are likely to no longer be spoken by 2100 (Crystal 2000). Fifty per cent is a conservative estimate: according to Krauss (1992: 7), ‘the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages’. Krauss and his fellow presenters at the 1992 Linguistic Society of America round table on language endangerment deliberately couched their papers in alarmist terms: the colloquium and its published version in *Language* have since been referred to as the ‘wake-up call’ or ‘call to arms’ to the profession of linguistics. Krauss’s paper ends ‘we must do some serious rethinking of our priorities, lest linguistics go down in history as the only science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated’ (1992: 10).

### 1.2.1 Counting and defining languages

Krauss’s statistics are based largely on the list of the world’s languages in *Ethnologue*, ‘An encyclopedic reference work cataloging all of the world’s 6,909 known living languages’ (Lewis 2009). The introduction to the sixteenth edition of *Ethnologue* includes the statement that ‘Because languages are dynamic and variable and undergo constant change, the total number of living languages in the world cannot be known precisely.’ Statistics on language endangerment are thus hampered by the fact that complete information on all of the world’s languages is not available: the majority have not been recorded

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or analysed by linguists, have no dictionaries and often no written form, and are not recognised officially in the countries in which they are spoken. What information exists is often out of date: for example, for Guernesiais, the information in *Ethnologue* is based on a 1976 estimate and ignores more recent data such as the 2001 census (although even this has been shown by more recent research to be unreliable: see Chapter 2).

The sixteenth edition of *Ethnologue*<sup>1</sup> also recognises another problem with counting languages: that the definition and demarcation of ‘languages’ is itself debated. It summarises the issue neatly as follows:

Some base their definition on purely linguistic grounds. Others recognize that social, cultural, or political factors must also be taken into account. In addition, speakers themselves often have their own perspectives on what makes a particular language uniquely theirs. Those are frequently related to issues of heritage and identity much more than to the linguistic features of the language(s) in question.

The ‘linguistic grounds’ referred to are chiefly mutual comprehensibility: if users of two language varieties cannot understand each other, the varieties are considered to be different languages; if they can understand each other, the varieties are considered mutually comprehensible dialects of the same language. However, mutual intelligibility is notoriously difficult to measure, with both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic variables. Mary Chambers (personal communication, 5 January 2013) comments that the level of contact between the varieties also confuses the picture – all the speakers of Kubokota, a language she has researched in the Solomon Islands, understand the neighbouring language, Luqa, but it is unclear whether this is due to mutual intelligibility on a linguistic level, or due to familiarity through intermarriage and social interaction.

Attitudes and politics play a role – whether or not people *want* to understand each other, and also whether a particular variety has enough social and political status to be seen as a language. As well as the well-known saying ‘A language is a dialect with an army and a navy’ variously attributed to Max Weinreich, Uriel Weinreich, Joshua Fishman or Antoine Meillet (Bright 1997),<sup>2</sup> such attitudes are, in part, linked to whether a community considers itself to have a distinct ethnolinguistic identity – but members of a community may not agree about this. These issues are highly relevant for the case studies in this book.

Some linguists (especially sociolinguists and anthropological linguists influenced by postmodern theories) now question whether language boundaries can be identified at all (Irvine and Gal 2000; Pennycook 2005; Makoni and Pennycook 2006; Mar-Molinero and Stevenson 2006; Ricento 2006); according to Calvet (2006: 9), Haugen (1972: 335) was the first to express this view. As well as the difficulty of drawing lines between dialect continua, these authors point to ubiquitous tendencies to switch, mix and hybridise languages. Documentary

linguists have been criticised for perpetuating the view of languages as discrete entities. Nevertheless, the traditional approach to distinguishing languages is still followed by most field linguists, as well as by *Ethnologue* and the UNESCO *Atlas of Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (Moseley 2010). And despite their shortcomings, at the very least such compendia provide a useful guide to relative levels of linguistic diversity around the world.

### 1.2.2 *Development of the academic field*

Before the 1990s there was little literature on language endangerment, although there were a few very early studies (e.g. Lach-Szyrma 1888; Brooks 1907), which can be seen as related to the Romantic movement's interest in Celtic and fringe cultures; this period also saw a blossoming of 'dialect literature', including in the Channel Islands. One of the first publications aimed at 'activist' audiences was Ellis and mac a' Ghobhainn (1971), a fairly idiosyncratic survey of language revitalisation efforts in twenty countries, mostly in Eastern Europe, which was intended to inspire language enthusiasts in Ireland and Scotland with success stories. In 1977 a special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* (Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977) was devoted to the theme of *language death*, one of the first uses of this term.

Two sociolinguistic studies from this period have become seminal works because of the ground-breaking nature of their research and because the phenomena identified have been recognised by researchers in other language areas as common to many minority and endangered language situations. The first (Gal 1979) is an ethnographic study of language shift in a Hungarian-speaking enclave in eastern Austria, where German was coming to be spoken more and more. Although Hungarian is not endangered in that it is the majority language of the neighbouring country, the processes of language shift and the underlying attitudes described are easily recognisable as pertaining to the situation of many communities, including those discussed in this book, where these processes are much more advanced. The second (Dorian 1981) is an in-depth study of a Gaelic-speaking fishing community in north-east Scotland, where the process of language shift had almost reached its ultimate conclusion in the disappearance of the local dialect.

As mentioned above, a special issue of the Linguistic Society of America's journal *Language* (Hale 1992) drew the attention of mainstream linguists to the scale of language endangerment. At the time this was seen as a radical departure from the then-dominant Chomskyan theoretical linguistics, which eschewed fieldwork (Colette Grinevald, personal communication, July 2012). The collection also included papers on revitalisation efforts and language policy in the United States and Central America.

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A number of studies identify linguistic changes which occur during what linguists term *language obsolescence* (e.g. part 2 of Dorian (1989) and part 3 of Grenoble and Whaley (1998)). It is common for normal diachronic change to be speeded up and for elements of a dominant language to enter a declining language, as structural changes and calques as well as lexical borrowings: Jones (2000, 2002) describes this process in Guernesiais. Although these studies focus on the effect of language endangerment on language itself, processes of linguistic change are of course influenced by sociolinguistic factors such as language prestige. Languages also change in the process of revitalisation, for example through standardisation and lexical development, as well as through interlanguage contact when they are learnt as second languages (King 1999). Although language change is normal and inevitable, people who want to reverse the process of language shift may see contact-induced change as undesirable or even pernicious, and may want to 'restore' their language to what they perceive as its 'pure', pre-contact state. This has led to considerable debate in language-related movements (Dorian 1994c; Barrett 2008; Marquis and Sallabank forthcoming), as will be discussed later in this book.

Outside the discipline of linguistics, the United Nations took up the cause of endangered languages, with a series of policy papers and guidelines for governmental action plans under the heading of safeguarding 'intangible cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2003b). However, a shift away from unreserved support can be discerned in recent changes to the UNESCO website (see Austin and Sallabank forthcoming a). The European Union also places overt value on linguistic diversity, as shown by initiatives such as the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML)<sup>3</sup> and funding such as the European Science Foundation's role in stimulating research into language issues.

In the 1990s and 2000s, an increasing number of publications appeared which aimed at providing principled guidance to practitioners in language revitalisation (e.g. Cantoni 1996; Reyhner 1997; Reyhner et al. 1999; Reyhner et al. 2000; Bradley and Bradley 2002; Hinton and Hale 2002; Reyhner et al. 2003; Grenoble and Whaley 2006). Many of these concentrate on North American indigenous languages, but there are also examples from other areas. The Foundation for Endangered Languages' conference proceedings also often have a practical focus (Ostler 1998, 1999; Ostler and Rudes 2000; Moseley, Ostler and Ouzzate 2001; McKenna Brown 2002; Blythe and McKenna Brown 2003; Argenter and McKenna Brown 2004; Crawhall and Ostler 2005). As noted by Grenoble and Whaley (2006: viii), such publications are 'written not only for linguists and anthropologists but also for language activists and community members who believe they should ensure the future use of their languages, despite their predicted loss'.

Since 2001 there has been an increasing number of edited collections of case studies of language revitalisation (King et al. 2008; Goodfellow 2009;

Flores Farfán and Ramallo 2010), as well as several in-depth studies which look more closely at language ideologies (e.g. King 2001; Kroskrity and Field 2009; Meek 2011; Urla 2012). Nevertheless, the majority of such works constitute discrete case studies; the development of policy and planning for endangered languages, and the processes and outcomes of language revitalisation efforts, remains poorly documented, especially on a comparative level.

### 1.2.3 *Community responses*

It could be argued that at the ‘coalface’ of language practices in small communities, worldwide statistics on languages are irrelevant. Perceptions of endangerment are not necessarily related to objective assessment of the vitality of a language, even if this were possible. It is for this reason that social psychologists introduced the ‘subjective ethnolinguistic vitality questionnaire’ (Bourhis, Giles and Rosenthal 1981; Husband and Saifullah-Khan 1982; Johnson, Giles and Bourhis 1983; Giles and Johnson 1987; Currie and Hogg 1994; Landry and Allard 1994b). And even if there were reliable, objective statistics on language vitality, they would not necessarily alter perceptions. For example, Quechua and Catalan (with 5 and 10 million speakers respectively) are considered endangered by campaigners,<sup>4</sup> but some supporters of Manx deny that the language is endangered, let alone extinct.

It is increasingly recognised that language endangerment contexts are by definition bi- or multilingual. Languages never exist in isolation, but are always embedded in relationships with other languages and varieties, other codes, styles, registers, etc., in what has been termed a *linguistic ecology* (Haugen 1972; Mühlhäusler 1992, 2000; Calvet 2006; Grenoble 2011). Multilingualism, not monolingualism, is predominant around the world, and the linguistic practices of the majority of people involve switching between and among languages, dialects and registers several times a day. This book focuses on islands in Western Europe, which is not usually perceived as highly multilingual, but impressions of a predominantly monolingual society are often deceptive. Although Europe is the least linguistically diverse continent, it has a high proportion of endangered languages (Moseley 2010). Until recently a large proportion of Channel Islanders had access to a linguistic repertoire which included the indigenous varieties of Norman (which themselves have a high degree of local variation), French (both standard and local versions), standard English and local dialects of English (Ramisch 1989; Barbé 1995a). By no means all speakers perceive all of these as separate or distinguishable, although attitudes towards all local varieties have generally been more negative than towards standardised ones.

Community members are generally aware that their indigenous languages are being used less and less, and express varying degrees of regret, lack of

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concern or approval. Yet shifting patterns of language use may not be noticed by those involved at the time. Where language socialisation is seen as a community function, parents may not perceive a direct link between their own language practices and their children's lack of proficiency. As noted by Ladefoged (1992) and in my own research, parents or teachers may feel it is in children's best interests to learn a more widely spoken language for educational or economic purposes – or because they want their children to be spared the bullying and discrimination that they themselves suffered for not speaking the language of education when they started school, from both teachers and other pupils. Such reactions are based on a monolingual 'Standard Language Ideology' (Lippi-Green 1994, 2011) which assumes, for example, that proficiency in a language associated with power and economic success can only be gained at the expense of proficiency in a smaller language. It also indicates assumptions that a local language variety (or 'Low' language in a diglossic relationship) has less value than a 'High' or standardised language (Ferguson 1959; Landry and Allard 1994a; Hudson 2002; Schjerve 2003; Schiffman 2004) and can therefore be jettisoned; and that economic capital (in the terms of Bourdieu (1977, 1991)) necessarily trumps affective feelings, the identity- and relationship-forming functions of language, or social and cultural capital.

Members of endangered language communities (even in Western contexts) may be unaware that other individuals and communities are undergoing the same processes of language minoritisation and shift. If they are unaware of this, they are also necessarily ignorant of efforts to maintain or revitalise other languages, and of evaluations of their effectiveness. And even if they are aware of efforts in other language endangerment contexts, they may not feel that these are relevant to their own situation (as is the case for some people involved in language-related activities in Guernsey). What is more salient in specific contexts are the feelings, attitudes and reactions of individuals and groups towards what is happening in that context.

#### 1.2.4 Terminology and its implications

As with most concepts in the field of language endangerment, there is considerable discussion of the term *language death*. David Crystal, in his book *Language Death* (2000), which did much to raise public awareness of the phenomenon, takes a somewhat final view:

To say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead. It could be no other way – for languages have no existence without people . . . If you are the last speaker of a language, your language – viewed as a tool of communication – is already dead. (2000: 1–2)

Many supporters of endangered languages dislike this finality, especially given the relative success of efforts to 'revive' 'dead' languages in recent

years: e.g. Cornish and Manx in the British Isles, Miami, Mohegan and Mutsun in the United States, and Kaurna in Australia, among others. Some feel that using the term *language death* may in itself have a causative effect, hastening a language's demise. Campaigners for the Manx language, for example, trace continuity via linguists and enthusiasts who learnt the language from traditional native speakers in the 1950s, to a new language community of highly proficient adult speakers who are bringing up new young native (neo-) speakers; they are strongly critical of the use of the term *language death* in connection with Manx, although the last traditional speaker died in 1974.<sup>5</sup>

Crystal (2000: 17, n. 31) defines *language shift* as 'the conventional term for the gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another (either by an individual or a group)'. However, in the literature *language shift* tends to be used for the societal process, with *language loss* or *language attrition* being used on an individual level (Dorian 1980a; Hyltenstam and Obler 1989; Kouritzin 1999).

It is increasingly common for members of endangered language communities, or their descendants, to want to start using languages again decades or even centuries after the 'last [traditional] speakers' (Broderick 1996; Amery 2001; Duffy 2002; Baldwin 2003; Ager 2009; Zuckermann and Walsh 2011). Campaigners in Australia prefer to speak of the 'awakening' or 'regensis' of 'sleeping' or 'silent' languages instead of the 'revival' of 'dead' or 'extinct' ones, having demonstrated that even languages with relatively few records remaining can be reconstituted (or reinvented). The term *reclaiming* is also used to indicate that the process involves a form of decolonisation, especially where a language has been prohibited or suppressed, as in the Basque Country (Urla 2012) or in boarding schools in the United States and Australia. However, even attempts to reframe such efforts in positive terms and to empower participants may be criticised, e.g. by Leonard (2012), who claims that 'reclamation' programmes evoke an essentialist notion of culture whereby participants feel pressure to act, think or speak in certain ways, particularly those that are deemed to be 'traditional'. This point (which will be discussed further in Chapter 5) has been raised by other writers in relation to the term *reversing language shift* (RLS) introduced by Fishman, which he defines as 'assistance to speech communities whose native languages are threatened' (Fishman 1991: 1). This could be interpreted as supporting or maintaining the current community of speakers rather than developing potential speakers (Marquis and Sallabank 2013; see below). Although Fishman denies that RLS is backward-looking, Romaine contrasts it with *revitalisation*, which she characterises as 'not necessarily attempting to bring the language back to former patterns of use but rather to bring it forward to new users and uses' (2006: 464). Some authors refer to this as *renewal* (Dunbar 2008), while

Cambridge University Press

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Spolsky (2003) uses the term *regeneration* for efforts which focus on widening domains rather than on traditional domains of use, as in diglossic relationships. The term *regeneration* has been adopted by language planning agencies in New Zealand, e.g. the Māori Language Commission, which issued guidelines in 2007 stating that:

regenerating a language involves:

- (a) raising people's awareness of language and language issues,
- (b) having positive attitudes towards and valuing a language,
- (c) learning the language,
- (d) continuously developing the language, and
- (e) using the language.

(Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori – Māori Language Commission 2007)

As discussed by Marquis and myself (2013), there is considerable overlap and contradiction in interpretations of the meaning and nature of the terms *support*, *maintenance* and *revitalisation* with regard to endangered languages. In this book I follow our definitions:

*Language support* can be seen as a synonym for *language maintenance* (Peter K. Austin, personal communication, October 2007); or it can be interpreted as support for language communities [see below], as in the Guernsey Culture and Leisure Department's 2010–14 cultural strategy: 'Support [for] local groups in the preservation and development of D'Guernesiais' [*sic*] (States of Guernsey 2010).

*Language maintenance* is (somewhat confusingly) defined by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997: 77) as 'a superordinate category that subsumes within itself ... language revival, language reform, language shift, language standardisation, and terminological modernisation'. However, the more accepted current definition is that of Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 13), who 'draw a conceptual distinction between language revitalization, or what Fishman (1991) calls reversing language shift, and language maintenance, which supports a language that is truly vital', i.e. it has speakers of all ages and is used extensively in day-to-day life.

*Language revitalisation* is defined by King (2001: 24) as 'the attempt to add new linguistic forms or social functions to an embattled minority language with the aim of increasing its uses or users'. According to Anderson and Harrison (2007: n.p.), 'Speakers create opportunities to use the language, and address the social attitudes that triggered the abandonment of the language.' (Marquis and Sallabank 2013)

In this book I also follow predominant current usage in the distinction between *revitalisation* and *maintenance*, as summarised by Grenoble and Whaley (2006: 13):

Whereas the goal of revitalization is to increase the relative number of speakers of a language and extend the domains where it is employed, maintenance serves to protect current levels and domains of use.

Marquis and I use the term *language support* as an overarching term for the support (encouragement, assistance, funding) of any activities that promote