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

Julia Sallabank

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Attitudes to Endangered Languages

Language attitudes and ideologies are of key importance in assessing the chances of success of revitalisation efforts for endangered languages. However, few book-length studies relate attitudes to language policies, or address the changing attitudes of non-speakers and the motivations of members of language movements.

Through a combination of ethnographic research and quantitative surveys, this book presents an in-depth study of revitalisation efforts for indigenous languages in three small islands round the British Isles. The author identifies and confronts key issues commonly faced by practitioners and researchers working in small language communities with little institutional support.

This book explores the complex relationship of ideologies, identity and language-related beliefs and practices, and examines the implications of these factors for language revitalisation measures. Essential reading for researchers interested in language endangerment and revitalisation, sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology and language policy and planning, as well as language planners and campaigners.

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Preface

Ever since I was very young I have been fascinated by the indigenous language of Guernsey, in the Channel Islands between England and France. I consider Guernesiais to be my ‘heritage language’ because my mother comes from the island and my father spent some of his formative years there; but none of my family will admit to speaking Guernesiais, although I have experienced flashbacks to scenes from childhood when hearing certain words. From an early age I was also aware that Guernesiais (and its speakers) were regarded with both affection and ridicule. This fascination fuelled my passion for languages and how they work and my interest in language attitudes and ideologies, as well as my concern for linguistic diversity and celebration of multilingualism.

I mention this autobiographical background because ‘researcher stance’ is still a hot topic in linguistics, which as a discipline could be said to lag behind social science and anthropology in discussion of research methods, positionality, epistemology and their implications. This book is a sociolinguistic study of people’s reactions to perceived changes in language use, and such research can only be carried out with people; clinical detachment will not get you very far.

I thus position myself as an ‘insider’ with activist leanings, rather than as a dispassionate external researcher. This involvement is reflected in the use of language in the book itself: for example, it is the reason why I say ‘in’ the islands rather than ‘on’ Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man.¹ My background and my own feelings towards my heritage language make me aware that subjective attachments to language (or the idea of a language) are very real for some members of endangered language communities. I will examine such issues in Chapters 1 and 2, but feel that I should declare the ‘involved’ nature of my research from the outset.

As I hope to demonstrate in Chapter 3, an insider perspective, and hopefully insights, does not preclude a rigorous approach to research; nor does it prevent me from asking questions which can at times seem difficult and unpopular.

This book is based on thirteen years of sociolinguistic study into Guernesiais, the endangered indigenous vernacular of Guernsey, Channel

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Islands, and comparative research into language policy in other Channel islands and the Isle of Man (see the map in Figure 2.1). In the preface to their book *Saving Languages*, Grenoble and Whaley (2006: ix) point out that because of differences in circumstances it is impossible to make blanket statements about how language revitalisation should be carried out. That is not the aim of this book either. I attempt instead to address what it means to ‘save a language’, with particular reference to what it means to people involved – and affected – in the specific contexts of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. However, by reflecting on the findings in the light of theoretical concepts and frameworks such as language ideologies, as well as findings elsewhere, I hope that the insights gained will be of use to people involved and affected in language revitalisation efforts in other contexts too.

Grenoble and Whaley state that ‘an honest evaluation of most language revitalisation efforts to date will show that they have failed’ (2006: ix). They do not state what benchmark(s) they are using in this somewhat pessimistic assessment, but point out that

creating an orthography or producing a television program for children in a local language is a major accomplishment in its own right, but it will not revitalize a language. A longer-term, multifaceted program, one which requires a range of resources and much personal dedication, is needed. (*ibid.*)

In this book each chapter is intended to contribute towards understanding what ‘saving a language’ means, informing the discussion in Chapter 7 of ‘success’ and how it might be measured. It is clear from experiences around the world that it is probably still rather early to draw conclusions on ‘success’ or ‘failure’; language revitalisation is still a young field, and it could be argued that several generations are needed to gauge how well a language is doing. However, it is possible to discern trends and anticipate some likely outcomes.

Joshua Fishman (1991; 2001), one of the founders of the field of study of endangered languages, emphasised that the most important point of reference in ‘saving a language’ is the family: ‘Without intergenerational mother tongue transmission ... no language maintenance is possible. That which is not transmitted cannot be maintained’ (Fishman 1991: 113). However, as pointed out by Romaine (2006), the majority of language campaigners and planners around the world seem to ignore Fishman’s advice, focusing instead on ‘high-stakes’ spheres such as formal education and official status. Although there is relatively little discussion of official status in the Channel Islands and Isle of Man, formal lessons have been a major focus for people who want to ‘save the language’. Why might this be? And why is there hardly any mention of attempting to reinstate local languages into family life?

Language supporters often launch into activities without what Fishman calls *prior ideological clarification* (Fishman 1991, 2001; Dauenhauer and

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Dauenhauer 1998; Kroskrity 2009). This means, for example, that there is a tendency not to specify short- and long-term goals (except in very vague terms such as ‘saving the language’), and to avoid evaluating outcomes. In order to investigate motivations for language revitalisation, as well as its outcomes, it is necessary to consider questions such as the following:

- Why is language revitalisation desirable?
- Who is it for?
- How do we go about it?
- What is being preserved/revived?
- What kind of language/culture is envisaged?
- Is it effective?
- And crucially, who has the authority to decide on such questions?

This type of clarification involves investigating beliefs about language, culture, identity, language change, ownership, legitimacy and authority, which will be examined in the chapters that follow. I look particularly at the symbolic value of language, which is not always the same as its sustainable use in the community; I also examine other value(s) which might be invested in language (e.g. political capital or social revitalisation).

This book would not have been possible without, first and foremost, the many people who have given up their time to talk to me, to fill in questionnaires, who have been willing to be observed, etc. I would particularly like to thank the following for their key or long-term help: Lois Ainger, Ann and Bob Battye, Peter Budd, Rose-Marie and Jonathan Crossan, William T. Gallienne, Roslyn Guilbert, Pat Hooper, Yan Marquis, Julie Matthews, Keith Le Cheminant and Lloyd Robilliard. Special thanks to the islands’ Language Officers for information and contacts: Adrian Cain, Colin Ireson, Geraint Jennings, Yan Marquis, Rob Teare, Tony Scott Warren. I would also like to acknowledge the editorial assistance of Mary Chambers. *Merci bian des feis / gura mie ayd!*

I am also grateful for the support and guidance of my PhD supervisor, Paul Kerswill, and to Peter Austin, Adrian Cain, James Costa, Yan Marquis and Tadhg O hIfearnáin for their readiness to discuss concepts and share information, and to an anonymous reviewer for comments on the manuscript.

Much of the research would not have been possible without funding: from the UK Economic and Social Research Council (for my PhD scholarship); Reading University Research Endowment Trust Fund; the Nuffield Foundation, the British Academy, the Endangered Languages Academic Programme at SOAS and the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme funded by Arcadia. Working for Oxford University Press for (too) many years gave me the opportunity to learn more about sociolinguistics and applied linguistics, and enabled me to attend conferences such as those of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, where I learnt about the worldwide phenomenon

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of language endangerment and attended a presentation on ‘learning an ancestral language as an adult’ at the 1999 conference, which inspired me to conduct research into my own heritage language.

Last but by no means least, I would also like to express my thanks to my partner, Kelvin White, and our daughter, Gwen Sallabank, for their encouragement and forbearance; and to my parents, Margaret and Roy Sallabank, for bringing me up to love Guernsey.