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978-1-107-12388-5 - Sociolinguistics from the Periphery: Small Languages in New Circumstances

Sari Pietikäinen, Helen Kelly-Holmes, Alexandra Jaffe and Nikolas Coupland

Excerpt

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1 Small languages in new circumstances?

In Saariselkä, a centre for Lapland tourism in northern Finland, a long-standing hotel has branded its new conference facilities and accommodation block with the Northern Sámi word *Gielas*, which refers to the geographical location of the resort. This is the first time that a Sámi word has been used in this tourist context to brand a hotel. On the island of Corsica, vendors sell plain black and white T-shirts adorned only with the Corsican language name of a local brand, *Bianc'è Neru* ('black and white'). The Corsican language brand is presented in an unexplained, minimalist way, in the style of a global brand such as Hollister or Ralph Lauren. Meanwhile, in Ireland, a thriving web-based enterprise markets T-shirts printed with Irish language slogans such as 'Luke, is mise d'athair', a direct translation of 'Luke, I am your father', the catchphrase of Darth Vader from *Star Wars*, the global media phenomenon. And, finally, to round up our anecdotes, we come to Wales, where a brand of organic, artisan potato crisps uses Welsh-language-branded sea salt, *Halen Môn*, to complete a distinctive and exclusive brand identity.

These four small-scale, local branding activities exemplify the kinds of shifts that brought us to the writing of this book. To the four of us, working in different sociolinguistic contexts, phenomena such as these seemed increasingly to represent a growing and more widespread trend, a new moment for what we call 'small languages'. That is, while the commercial use of these languages is not a new phenomenon, the particulars of their use in these examples – ranging from playful appropriation of mainstream and even global iconography (Irish) to discreet normalisation (Corsican) to indexing high-end or luxury products by recontextualising 'old' and traditional places and values (Sámi, Welsh) – are novel, reflecting both new sociolinguistic developments and an increasingly reflexive stance towards language and culture. Further, it seemed to us that this new moment might represent not just an interesting trend in the use of small languages in peripheral spaces but one that was also illustrative of much broader sociolinguistic shifts whose significance may extend beyond these immediate contexts and indeed beyond the field of minority language sociolinguistics.

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2 Small languages in new circumstances?

Mainstream sociolinguistics has largely been built from data, ideas and scholars based in and emanating from ‘centres’ – in linguistic, geographical, economic, cultural and even institutional terms – with peripheries constituted by their variation and deviation from those centres. Minority language sociolinguistics is a case in point here. However, a growing focus on the sociolinguistics of late modernity (see, e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2012; Pennycook 2010; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2013; Rampton 2006), including an explicit concern with globalisation and mobility (e.g., Blommaert 2010; Coupland 2003a, 2010a, 2010b), has challenged received conceptualisations of centres and centrality, as well as peripheries and peripherality. Our own way of engaging with late modernity and globalisation in sociolinguistics in the present book is organised around four concepts we feel are particularly relevant and helpful in illuminating the ‘new circumstances’ in which small languages find themselves: *reflexivity*, *authenticity*, *commodification* and *transgression*.

The starting point for our collaborative research was our common concern with understanding four multilingual sites which might be defined by their peripherality, at least in geographical terms. However, deconstructing the meanings of centre and periphery is also a focus of the research itself, since the centre–periphery relationship is never fixed but instead constantly renegotiated. Centre and periphery are themselves mutually constitutive, the one implying the other in specific dimensions and fields of practice. We are particularly concerned with how spaces currently understood as peripheries – whether under the modernist nation-state regime or from the point of view of urban metropolises – are now transforming into developing economic hubs under the influence of contemporary globalisation processes, which bring new possibilities as well as constraints for languages and their users. Striking practices are becoming characteristic of multilingual sites: commodification of authenticity, branding of heritage and capitalising on previously stigmatised local and individual linguistic resources. Such developments increasingly blur modernist binary oppositions between centre and periphery, standard and vernacular, big and small, majority and minority, and old and new (see Duchêne and Heller 2012; Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2013). These processes are neither linear nor complete, but are rather overlapping, complex, sometimes contradictory and always open-ended. Our goal, therefore, is not just to apply sociolinguistic theories of late modernity and globalisation (in terms of our key concepts of reflexivity, authenticity, commodification and transgression) to the four small languages in their supposedly peripheral sociolinguistic contexts but to attempt to rework these fundamental theoretical concepts, specifically from a critical centre–periphery perspective.

In this introductory chapter, we begin to interrogate the key words in the title of the book – ‘small languages’, ‘new circumstances’ and ‘periphery’ – with

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reference to the languages and sociolinguistic sites in which our fieldwork has been conducted, namely Sámi, Corsican, Irish and Welsh.

1.1 Small languages

Smallness is of course a relative concept, but a particular agenda of critical considerations becomes salient when we orient to a language on the basis of its smallness. The usual sociolinguistic term is ‘minority language’ (e.g., Baker and Jones 1998; Hornberger 2008), but adopting the informal term ‘small’ allows us, we hope, to go beyond presupposing the status and use of the focal languages that this book deals with: Sámi, Corsican, Irish and Welsh. That is, we intend to examine our four languages through multiple lenses, which include but are not limited to the ways they have been affected by minoritisation in relation to another language or other languages.

In fact, one of the issues that we explore in this book is whether and to what extent ‘smallness’ is a potentially productive (and to that extent a new) way of being for languages like Sámi, Corsican, Irish and Welsh in the current era. The attribute of smallness not only recognises and acknowledges the minoritised status of the languages on the one hand (in relation to ‘big’, majority languages) but also embodies the idea that smallness can be a valuable feature in globalised, late modern society on the other. Small languages can offer distinction and exclusivity; they can turn their minoritised histories to profitable use, as we shall see in the cases examined here. These languages can become flexible and malleable resources for reflexive, even transgressive identity work; they offer a means for authenticating and distinguishing places and speakers in a world where homogenisation and heterogenisation are occurring simultaneously; and they can provide access to new markets while transforming commonplace products into exclusive commodities. These possibilities indicate (albeit to different degrees and in terms of different temporalities) a qualified coming of age for small languages that reflects the consequences – intended and unintended – of modernist language policy and planning. Without the state-supported language policy and planning programmes of the modern era, such languages might have disappeared altogether. At the same time, top-down policy-making and language planning have tended to be based on segregationalist (Mühlhäusler 1996) or monolingual (Heller 2007) ideologies of language, which sometimes sit uneasily with the eclecticism and flux of late modern sociolinguistic circumstances. Planning, for example, has generally targeted ‘full’ and ‘native-like’ competence in a minority language, whereas the developments we see at our four sites do not necessarily involve this level of competence. Nonetheless, without top-down policy and planning, widespread competence in these languages would probably not be possible, and

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the case studies examined in this book illustrate well the interdependence – however problematic at times – between modern and late modern ways of being for small languages.

The smallness of these languages is twofold: they are ‘small’ in terms of numbers of speakers compared to the dominant, national languages, and they are ‘small’ in their diminished numbers of speakers among those who claim a shared cultural identity. Responses to these two conditions have traditionally involved serious and committed forms of engagement with revitalisation built on broadly nationalist principles, but today’s reactions to language smallness are open to reassessment and recontextualisation in particular kinds of playfulness, creativity and contestation. These occur in complex and nuanced ways and not just in relation or opposition to ‘big’ or majority languages, as our analyses show. In the case of Sámi languages, for example, subversive representations of dominant indigenous language politics and protagonists would have been of marginal relevance at best during the time when modernist revitalisation and language policy and planning dominated the local landscape and, for that matter, the socio-linguistic agenda. The term ‘small languages’ is therefore intended to imply that, in late modernity, such languages can – and indeed must – function outside the framework of minority–majority political relations, and they can also have other ways of being. It is exactly these ‘other ways of being’ of the Sámi, Corsican, Irish and Welsh languages that we want to explore further in this book.

One quite traditional way of understanding our four ‘small’ languages is in demographic terms. And from this perspective, Sámi languages can be considered to be quite small indeed. There are nine Sámi languages in all, of which Northern Sámi has the highest number of speakers (c. 30,000), while the other Sámi languages have as few as 250–400 speakers each (Aikio-Puoskari 2005; Kulonen et al. 2005). Sámi languages belong to the Finno-Ugric language group, and while the languages share some linguistic features, they are not mutually intelligible. These languages are spoken in a region in Northern Scandinavia encompassing parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, which is often referred to as the Sámi homeland, Sápmi. In this space, Sámi languages are clearly not ‘big’ in terms of numbers of speakers, but they do have significant prestige and presence: they are legally recognised indigenous languages in Norway, Sweden and Finland, with acknowledged rights and resources, and they are the focal points of Sámi politics and of certain well-defined cultural practices (see, e.g., Lehtola 2012).

As in all situations of language contact and language change, counting languages and their speakers confronts numerous difficulties and complexities deeply rooted in historical, political and ideological frameworks, as well as practical problems with the actual counting practices themselves (Moore et al.

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2010; Urla 1993). This is particularly the case with the Sámi languages, due in part to national language categorisation practices and in part to the lack of recent sociolinguistic research on the numbers and competences of Sámi language speakers. It is estimated that approximately half of the Sámi people (60,000–100,000) speak their particular language to varying degrees, and today no monolingual Sámi speakers remain. All Sámi languages are classified as endangered, and there are various language revitalisation projects taking place (see, e.g., Olthuis et al. 2013).

The ‘smallness’ of Corsican is also readily apparent from its changing demographic distribution. As in the other language contexts addressed in this book, the history of Corsican’s decline as a spoken language of everyday interaction involves economic, political-economic and ideological factors. Before the First World War, the majority of Corsicans learned and spoke Corsican as a first language. French was learned at school, where, for the most part, students were taught that the Corsican they spoke was a ‘patois’ that they would do well to shed if they wished to succeed and be good citizens. Even before the First World War, Corsicans were leaving the island and its largely agro-pastoral economy to seek advancement as government employees on the French mainland and in the colonial service, where Corsicans were overrepresented relative to their population size. These attractive jobs required French, and led to marriages with non-Corsican speakers from the mainland. Their children were socialised in French-speaking populations, and family language practices tended to work to the detriment of Corsican language transmission. The First World War is often cited as a linguistic turning point, both because of the large numbers of Corsican men who served, and died, for a country that defined French as a core identifying value, and because of the positive orientation to the French and things French that returning soldiers brought back home. Corsican out-migration continued at a rapid pace throughout the twentieth century due to the limited educational and economic opportunities on the island. While the opening of the University of Corsica in 1982 attenuated the educational exodus, there has been no concomitant economic growth, and professional opportunities on the island are still relatively sparse, limited to government employment and the service sector. This constant flow of Corsicans to the French mainland contributed to the devaluation of Corsican (and corresponding lack of family transmission of the language) well into the 1980s.

We see the results in accounts of Corsican language acquisition. According to a 1999 survey by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), almost 70 per cent of those born before the First World War learned Corsican from their parents, a figure that dropped to between 41 per cent and 55 per cent after the Second World War (Janik

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2004). In a 2007 survey conducted by the Corsican Territorial Collectivity (CTC), 26 per cent of children under six learned Corsican as their first language: 14 per cent with monolingual usage and 12 per cent in bilingual households.

Survey figures on the number of Corsican speakers are, as in all of these cases, based on self-reports. They are thus complicated by wide variability in the criteria used by respondents to evaluate themselves and to define ‘speakers’. This, as well as ideological and political orientations, can lead respondents to over- or underestimate their competence. These caveats notwithstanding, over the last decade or so, a consistent 50–60 per cent of Corsican survey respondents identified themselves as speakers of the language. With a population that has fluctuated between 250,000 and 280,000, estimates of numbers of Corsican speakers on the island range from 90,000 to 120,000. This does not account for Corsican speakers living in mainland France, who have not been polled. Younger Corsicans are less likely than older Corsicans to claim high speaking competence or practice. For example, a 2007 survey of Corsican university students found that 70 per cent evaluated their comprehension of Corsican as good to excellent; 30 per cent of these students (thus, approximately 21 per cent of all surveyed students) reported their speaking ability to be at the same level (Colonna 2007). In a 2013 CTC survey of a representative sample of people of all ages, 58 per cent claimed to understand Corsican well or fairly well (Collectivité Territoriale de Corse 2013). This survey also found a small rise in declared good oral competence among those aged 18–22 compared to those aged 23–34, suggesting gains due to school learning. These younger Corsicans are much more likely than their parents or grandparents to have at least some level of Corsican literacy, due to the fact that almost all of them have now been exposed to Corsican over many years of schooling. As will be elaborated below, Corsican does not have the official status of the other three languages examined in this book.

The status of Irish as a small language is complicated by apparent discrepancies. Irish can be described as both a privileged and a minoritised language, and that seemingly contradictory combination of adjectives sums up its complex situation in Irish society. While the Irish language is privileged as the first official language of the Republic of Ireland and in certain areas of public life and the education system, it is minoritised in many more domains of everyday life, including business and media, and English is the dominant language. (For an overview of the sociolinguistic situation in Ireland, see Mac Giolla Chríost 2005, 2006; Nic Pháidin and Ó Cearnaigh 2008; Ó Laoire 2008; for particular reference to media, see Watson 2003, 2007.) And though the language is ‘small’ in terms of everyday use compared to English, it is also ‘big’ in the Irish context, not only in

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terms of its official status, but in terms of its long and significant written tradition and its privileged position in educational and institutional settings. This special status extends beyond the Irish state and Northern Ireland to the European Union (EU), where Irish is recognised as an official language, with certain restrictions.

The decline of Irish began with the establishment of plantations by the English crown in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but speaker numbers have been dropping sharply since the middle of the nineteenth century. The catastrophic short- and long-term effects of the potato famine of the 1840s impacted massively on Ireland's population size, emigration patterns and language shift to English (see Crowley 2005; Hindley 1990; Mac Giolla Chríost 2005). Using de Swaan's (2001, 2010) global language system classification, Irish fulfils the criteria of being both a central and a peripheral language. It is central in terms of its official status within Ireland and beyond, but it is peripheral in that its functional use is limited to a specific geographical place (the island of Ireland), with the exception of some small diasporic communities; and even within that place, there are further domain-, participant- and location-specific limitations.

Since independence and the foundation of the Free State in 1922, the official policy in education, media and the public sector can be seen as a clear example of 'language planning in the service of nation-building' (Wright 2005: 97) and as an attempt to change an existing language regime, namely the dominance of English (for an overview, see Ó Laoire 2005; Ó Riagáin 1997). As a result, Irish is taught as an obligatory subject for most children throughout the period of compulsory schooling. However, this acquisition policy has not resulted in a widespread shift to speaking Irish, and in fact, many claim not to speak Irish once they leave school. This is borne out by recent census data, which show that 12.2 per cent of the population report speaking Irish daily within the education system, whereas only 1.8 per cent (about 77,185) report speaking Irish daily outside the education system (Central Statistics Office 2012). While Irish still exists as a community language in its heartland, the designated Irish-speaking areas known as the Gaeltacht, the language is seen as threatened even here. For example, a study of the linguistic vitality of Gaeltacht areas found, along with many positive indicators, 'low levels of use of Irish as a community language in some areas' and 'clear threats to the sustainability of Irish as a community language' (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2007; see also Ó hÍfearnáin 2013 in relation to language practices and attitudes in Gaeltacht areas).

Welsh can be considered the 'least small' of the four small languages in our research, in the sense that there are towns and regions of Wales that do indeed function bilingually and where many people consider themselves to use Welsh as a first language across all or most communicative domains. In

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statistical terms once again, 56 per cent of the population of Gwynedd (in the north west of Wales) reported the ability to speak Welsh (at the 2011 census), with the counties of Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire (along the Mid-Wales western coastline and in the south-west) reporting 47 per cent and 44 per cent, respectively. Even though they are still subject to the complexities and mobilities that we research in this book, and even though they are clearly exceptions to an English-dominant norm across most of Wales, Caernarfon, Aberteifi/Cardigan, Rhydaman/Ammanford and many other small Welsh towns continue to function bilingually through Welsh and English outside of educational and ceremonial contexts. The Wales-based case studies that we have included in this book are representative of those communities where the Welsh language is not so firmly embedded in regular, day-to-day bilingual practice and where it tends to feature in more context-specific, ethnosymbolic and performative functions. Indeed, this is the majority experience in Wales.

The history of the decline and planned revitalisation of Welsh maps quite closely onto that of Irish, and several of the key legal, educational, media and community initiatives to revive Welsh parallel those we see in Ireland. This is not surprising, given that there is close critical comparison and coordination of the planning regimes in the two countries (see, e.g., the 2012–2015 Research Councils UK-funded comparative project titled ‘The Office of Language Commissioner in Wales, Ireland and Canada’, led by Colin Williams; see also C. Williams 2010, 2012a, 2012b, 2013). The history of Welsh is one of minoritisation, but rights and entitlements to learn and use Welsh are more strongly institutionalised today than at any time in the last century. Although campaigners and activists would disagree, Welsh is at once both minoritised and privileged – indeed, probably even more so than Irish.

Welsh is widely cited as a rare case of successful revitalisation of a threatened minority language, thanks in large part to ambitious initiatives spear-headed by the former Welsh Language Board (*Bwrdd Yr Iaith*), which was incorporated into the Welsh Assembly Government in 2012. A period of stabilisation between 1981 and 1991 halted a seemingly inexorable decline in speaker numbers through the twentieth century (Jones 1998; C. Williams 2000). The UK census of 2001 documented an historic upturn: self-reporting Welsh speakers accounted for 20.5 per cent of a population of 2,805,701 residents in Wales aged three years and over, a total of 575,640 speakers (Aitchison and Carter 2004). However, statistics from the 2011 census showed an unexpected decline to around 19.0 per cent (562,016), to which the Welsh Government (2012) responded by formulating a new ‘Welsh Language Strategy 2012–2017’ titled ‘*Iaith Fyw: Iaith Byw*’ (‘A living language: A language for living’), which was based on a ‘vision ... to see

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1.2 Old circumstances and enduring contexts

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the Welsh language thriving in Wales' and 'to see an increase in the number of people who both speak and use the language'. The Strategy targets increased use of Welsh in families, among young people, in the community and in the workplace, and it commits to improving Welsh language services and strengthening infrastructure, particularly digital technology.

Statements of this sort point to policy and planning goals that are common across many minoritised or small language communities. The planned development of Welsh is generally seen in quantitative terms, with Welsh treated as a singular entity; planned outcomes apply to the whole of Wales, which is itself viewed as a bilingual national territory, and to all or most domains of social life. Our attempt to characterise new sociolinguistic circumstances across the four national sites fully recognises that language policy and planning strategies continue to be important parts of the language ecology in these enduring sociolinguistic contexts, as we discuss in the following section.

1.2 Old circumstances and enduring contexts

A major focus in sociolinguistics has been on the minoritising processes by which small languages have been forced to remain 'small', or indeed to become 'smaller', as well as on legal, political and institutional strategies for resisting and sometimes reversing this process, in the practical and theoretical vein of Joshua Fishman's (1991) notion of 'reversing language shift'. These approaches have tended to centre on the concept of ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g., Giles et al. 1977; Landry and Allard 1994), where the strength or 'livingness' of small languages has been measured and documented in the linguistic landscape and in domains such as education and media (e.g., Cormack and Hourigan 2007; Coupland and Aldridge 2009; Extra and Gorter 2001; Gorter et al. 2011; Kelly-Holmes 2001; Landry and Bourhis 1997; Pietikäinen 2008; Watson 2003; Wright 2006). The paradigm has subsumed quantitative studies of language attitudes (e.g., Bourhis and Sachdev 1984; Garrett 2010; Ó Laoire 2007; O'Rourke 2011), because perceptions of a language's vitality could be assumed to underpin people's decisions about whether or not to maintain, transmit or acquire a minority language. Another important strand of this research has had a strong link to interventionist practice, proposing and assessing particular strategies for boosting the status and use of minority languages. The paradigm's main parameters and concerns have included documented histories of cultural minoritisation (e.g., Crowley 2005; Dorian 1981; Hindley 1990; C. Williams 2000); struggles for higher levels of self-determination (Hourigan 2004; McCarty 2002; Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2010); discourse and lobbying in terms of language rights (Dunbar 2001; Kymlicka and Patten 2003;

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May 2003, 2011; Tollefson and Tsui 2004); the establishment of language policy and planning regimes (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997; Ó Laoire 2005; Walsh 2011; C. Williams 2000, 2008); strategising to reverse language shift (Fishman 1991; Hornberger and King 2001); planned revitalisation and restandardisation initiatives (Hinton and Hale 2001; Huss 1999; Kaplan and Baldauf 2003); and the development and monitoring of bilingual and multilingual schooling programmes (Baker and Jones 2000; Cenoz 2009; Cenoz and Genesee 1998; García 2011; García et al. 2006; Hornberger 1988).

Critical sociolinguistics has approached the same issues and contexts from a different perspective. Critical discourse and language-ideological studies, especially those informed by linguistic anthropology, have examined discourses surrounding the definition of minority languages, their legitimate speakers and related issues such as identity and ethnicity as a key part of their theoretical and empirical remit (see, e.g., Heller and Duchêne 2007; Jaffe 1999, 2006, 2007; Patrick 2008; Pietikäinen 2015; Pujolar 2007; Woolard 1989, 2008). It is in fact very difficult to avoid endorsing normative understandings of what a language is and treating languages as bounded, autonomous codes that speakers can choose or switch between – indeed we are doing this ourselves here, in our descriptions of the different sociolinguistic contexts of the four languages of interest. But as a variety of works (e.g., Duchêne and Heller 2007; Hill 2002; Pietikäinen 2015) have underscored, an array of conventional forms of reference to language – metalinguistic tropes such as ‘endangerment’, ‘vitality’, ‘language choice’ and ‘code-switching’ – has had the effect of naturalising and essentialising languages in their effort to document the outcomes of language contact, shift and revitalisation. Small languages are loci of political and social action, and we have to be continuously wary of foreclosing on important definitional contests in how we set research agendas. The critical current of research views the complex of minority and indigenous language practices, attitudes and discourses as being shaped by particular interests such as political economies, as well as by the ideologies about language, identity and legitimacy that underpin them. This approach may examine institutional contexts like schools, for example, but rather than measuring their outcomes against an idealised ‘native speaker’ norm, or only in quantitative terms of ‘how many speakers’ are generated by a planned intervention initiative, it also asks what models of language and individual and collective identity are enacted in educational and institutional practice; and it examines how processes of legitimisation and exclusion are tied to linguistic forms, styles, practices and the groups of speakers indexed by them (see, e.g., Heller 1996, 2006; Higgins et al. 2012; Jaffe 1999; King 2000; King and Hermes 2015; Pietikäinen et al. 2008).

Of course, these perspectives can only be mobilised with respect to the historical, political and economic circumstances that have shaped policy,