Summer Institute of Linguistics

Tilting at the future:

how can we know whether minority language development

is a viable proposition?

-- dimensions of decision-making --

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1. Criteria: once for all?

For those seeking to allocate resources and plan ahead in any sector of
social development it is tempting to want to set up unequivocal criteria
which can be applied in a foolproof way. However, in the social sciences the
search for and redefinition of decision-making criteria is an ongoing
process. As soon as a satisfactory list seems to have been established,
there are sure to be further factors looming up over the horizon, so complex
and numerous are the variables involved. Such factors may at first be only
partially visible, and their precise shape indeterminate and unpredictable,
but they are perceptible nevertheless. The search for criteria is not
thereby invalidated, but must always remain a dynamic - and humbling -
process.

For those concerned to investigate the possibilities of promoting minority
languages, the search for criteria is especially crucial.[*1] Throughout this
paper the promotion of minority languages is understood to be part of a
multilingual approach to communication in a multilingual environment (cf
Robinson 1992, 1993), and is complementary to the appropriate use of other
languages.

In projecting language development efforts into the future, what we all
would like to know is how 'viable' and how 'vital' the minority language is,
and the community of the speakers of that language. Indeed, these are
questions which concern members of such communities themselves in different
ways, from the majority-assimilated élite, to the ethnic identity activist.
Yet these questions are hugely complex and defy anyone seeking definitive
answers - indeed there are none, and it is as well to acknowledge this from
the outset. Having said that, we can and should look for directions and
indications which, interpreted through the values we bring to the search,
can serve as a basis for making decisions about language development
projects.

Various different kinds of data are needed in order to assess language
viability. How a minority language is used and perceived by its speakers
must be a starting point for decisions which respect local-level input.

Similarly, the wider picture of social life and relationships in a community and with other communities provides the environment in which data about language must be set. A further set of data must be examined where decisions about the investment of resources for the future is in view, namely the influences which shape the direction of change. Such influences are frequently found in the shape of the policies of those who wield decision-making power, or who are in a position to give input to such decision-makers. These policies may operate at the local level, and, often more significantly, at the national and international levels.

These different kinds of data may be labelled the sociolinguistic dimension (encompassing also the strictly linguistic data), the cultural dimension, and the policy dimension. These dimensions intersect, and they influence and inform each other. I will argue that it is important to recognise the nature of the criteria which are supplied in each dimension and that failure to do so may lead to asking interesting but ultimately inadequate questions about language development viability.

2. The sociolinguistic dimension

Sociolinguistic data provide raw information about the reality of a local situation; they do not indicate by themselves what *decisions* should be taken, nor how worthwhile, successful, relevant or useful a language development project might be. These questions require interpretation of the data.

Thus data in the sociolinguistic dimension includes levels of comprehension, language relatedness, bilingualism, language use and language attitudes. It is clear that, even *within* the sociolinguistic dimension, there are different levels of ease of interpretability; data about comprehension is more easily interpretable than data about language attitudes. It is easier to test comprehension in such a way that the results reliably indicate how far a population understands language A and language B. Language attitudes, tested directly or indirectly, are dependent on many more variables (for example, personal history, preferences, relationships) and generally can only support other data or throw it into question.

The following list gives examples of the kind of data which are available to decision-makers through sociolinguistic investigation:

>   knowledge of languages:
>   rates of bi-/multilingualism
>   levels of bi-/multilingual competence
>
>   use of languages:
>   by different social groupings: men, women, young, old,
>   ...
>   in different domains: home, church, market, school, ...
>   for different purposes: social, economic, personal, ...
>   in different styles, dialects and registers: formal,
>   informal, scientific, ...

in written and oral form

attitudes towards languages:
    regarding relative prestige
    regarding relative usefulness
    regarding the speakers of the languages in question
    regarding the allocation of languages to domains and
        purposes

Sociolinguistic surveys have achieved a great deal in developing and
refining methods for the collection of such data (cf Bergman s.d.); however,
as Simons (1989:77) pointed out at the previous conference of this kind,
there is a danger in becoming "unbalanced in knowing more about how to
collect good data than about how to make good decisions with those data."
While the data are an essential part of the decision-making process, as
Simons went on to point out, they are not adequate in themselves in
assessing language viability and vitality.

This is not surprising since the use of language in a linguistic group
reflects other social realities:

> ...language is both effectively involved in the production
> and reproduction of other social practices; and is itself
> produced and reproduced by linguistic as well as other
> social practices and categories. (Kress 1993:8)

These 'social practices and categories' in turn depend on a range of
political and socioeconomic factors. Language is always intertwined with
other social and cultural phenomena, and it is for this reason that
Fishman's (1991) use of the phrase 'language-in-culture nexus' seems
particularly apt; in the context of reversing language shift (RLS) amongst
ethnolinguistic minorities Fishman writes:

> Ultimately, ... RLS and language maintenance are not about
> language *per se*; they are about language-in-culture. RLS is
> an attempt to foster, to fashion, to attain and to assist a
> particular language-in-culture content and pattern. (Fishman
> 1991:17)

Language vitality is embedded in ethnocultural vitality, so data on language
knowledge, use and attitudes can reveal only part of the picture. Since the
use of languages raises wider questions about society and social
relationships, some clues about the viability of language development must
be sought by looking at trends in other aspects of the culture.

3. The cultural dimension

I am taking the concept of culture in a wide sense to mean "the whole
complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional
features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only
the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the
human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs" (quoted in ICE

1992:4).*2 The very breadth of this definition indicates how widely a
concern for language compels us to range. The particular cultural issues
which constrain language vitality are group cohesion, identity, perceptions
of ethnicity, ethnic vitality, and relations between culturally
differentiated groups. Sociolinguistic data may give an indication of the
direction of these cultural processes, but the latter will also have
important manifestations in other parts of the social fabric. Trends in
such processes, although difficult to observe and document, significantly
impact the viability of minority language development. Data can be
collected of a self-reported nature, but must be supplemented by knowledge
of current realities and trends in many areas of social life, such as:

        history
                relationships with other groups: domination,
                        subordination
                ethnic movements and leaders
                migration

        demography
                birth rate
                population size
                life expectancy

        political system
                authority structure
                majority/minority relations
                pluralism
                accountability mechanisms

        economics
                food production
                opportunities for paid work
                markets

        development intervention
                models of development
                sectors of intervention
                communication strategies
                impact of development intervention

Further areas could be listed, for instance in the realm of educational and
cultural activities. The difficulty of adequately delineating ethnocultural
vitality is amply demonstrated by the large number of areas of social life
which affect and condition it (and therefore the use of languages), both
historically and in the present.

I am not suggesting that a complete study of trends in these areas and
others should be made, but rather calling for attention to be given to such
areas alongside quantitative (statistical) and qualitative (ethnographic)
sociolinguistic data - cultural trends provide the framework within which
sociolinguistic change takes place. Such a plea has implications for the
methods by which data is collected; cultural data of this kind must be

collected on an ongoing basis. What is important is the picture that such factors build up about the cohesion, self-image and viability of the ethnic group in question. If the group itself is under threat, or feels itself to be so, it is likely that the pattern of language use will also reflect that. Language maintenance/revival take place in the context of the maintenance/renewal of cultural identity, rather than vice versa.

Sociolinguistic data and the cultural picture serve to indicate the forces that have been and are at work in an ethnolinguistic group bringing change and determining the environment in which language development may be pursued. What is possible in the future, however, depends also on the third dimension, that of policy.

4. The policy dimension

When making decisions about the viability of a language development project, the data, sociolinguistic and cultural, must be interpreted. As Simons (1989) pointed out, the language development worker brings her own values or philosophy to bear on the interpretation. However, others – the local community, the national government, the international professional agencies – also have their values and philosophy on the minority language issue. These are expressed in policies which are rarely static and which influence what is possible, desirable and imaginable – even down to the level of the attitudes of the individual. Sociolinguistic and cultural data must be considered in the light of such influences.

In general, those involved in the promotion and development of minority languages are well aware of current language policy. If such policy is positive, then work goes ahead in a supportive environment with the expectation that it will be generally reinforced by political pronouncements and legislation, or be specifically promoted with resources of finance and personnel. Where policy is unformulated or negative, work goes ahead on a small scale with little opportunity for institutionalising the widened use of minority languages.

The level at which policy is most prominent is that of the nation-state – government language policy. However, policies operate at other levels too: an ethnolinguistic group may have its own policy towards language, expressed formally, or implicitly through the activities of members of the group. At an international level also, policies towards minority languages may be expressed, more or less officially. A well-known and much cited example is UNESCO's 1953 pronouncement favouring the use of local languages (mother tongues) in education.

As with the sociolinguistic and cultural dimensions, the policy dimension is dynamic. We must note the direction of change and the influences on those who make policy. In terms of decisions about language development projects, *current* policy is only one element in the debate. What is of equal or greater import is the direction which *future* policy might take at any level. It is the policy dimension which frequently determines the direction of change in the wider cultural areas mentioned above, and a *fortiori* the direction of change in the use of minority languages.

Data on explicit language policies is easily obtained and is generally
documented in studies of the viability of language development projects.
Less attention is given to observing, documenting and interpreting
directions of change of policy in the language sector, let alone of policies
in sectors which have an influence on language. Just as a whole range of
sociocultural areas must be examined to assess their possible effects on
language development, so the policy debates relating to broad areas of
social life must be *followed and understood.* Data is therefore in the form
of ideas, statements, recommendations, speeches and pronouncements. At the
local, national and international levels, such data could be collected from
a variety of sources, as the sample list below shows. Note that the
relevant policy areas could cover most facets of social life: language,
cultural issues, education, minorities, development, gender issues, ...

        local level
            policies, statements of cultural associations,
                development committees
            pronouncements (speeches, training sessions) of
                development agencies, churches, missions
            activities (language/culture-related) of entrepreneurs,
                intellectuals

        national level
            published government policies and statements
            government pronouncements and speeches
            newspaper articles
            meetings in relevant areas
            university debates, lectures, seminars

        international level
            recommendations, statements from international bodies
                (UNESCO, ACCT, ...)
            intergovernmental and NGO meetings, conferences in
                relevant areas
            international academic debate (conferences, journals)

In making decisions about projects it is crucial, therefore, to keep our
antennae tuned to trends *likely to influence policy* towards minority
languages. In any particular case, an assessment of the policy environment
will make clear what kind and level of support for minority language
development can be expected and from what quarter it may come. Of
particular interest will be the debate concerning majority/minority
relations and the ebb and flow of the pluralism/assimilation debate.

It is, for instance, enlightening to observe the *increasing concern* for the
place of minorities, culturally and economically, in the nation-state. Up to
the present it has overwhelmingly been the case that minority-language
speakers have had to move to the majority language for social, economic and
political advancement. There is increasingly a feeling, however, that such
transfer (at worst assimilation) ought not to be a necessary concomitant of
redressing the balance of social power. It <u>ought</u> to be possible to remain

fully a member of a minority community (linguistically, culturally) while participating fully in the social and economic advantages of the wider society. How exactly that might work is not clear; how a society can be genuinely pluralist - giving attention and rights to minorities and allowing them social and cultural space - and genuinely ensure a fair distribution of wealth and power remains a thorny question. The dominance of majorities (those who currently hold power) is an obdurate problem, as Fishman (1991) points out; he highlights the 'incorporative capacity as well as the incorporative ideology' of majorities in many societies which oblige minority language speakers to shift languages and cultures - in Fishman's neologisms: 'translinguification and transethnification' (p.60).

Nevertheless, the feeling that cultural assimilation ought not to be necessary may create an environment for innovative policies which give more space to minorities, their cultures and languages. In relation to education, the 1992 International Conference on Education (Geneva) noted as an important criterion in language choice:

> ...the right of individuals and various ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity, of which their language is one of the most important vehicles. (ICE 1992:4)

In the light of the growing globalisation of issues such as the environment and democratisation, there is concern that the richness and variety of local cultural identities should not be levelled into a homogeneous form of culture driven by the mass media (cf Arizpe 1992).

Such world trends, particularly prominent in the deliberations of international gatherings, may seem remote from the questions of language use and vitality in a given minority language group, but are in fact of critical concern. It is such debates today that will inform policy formulation tomorrow. In the search for adequate criteria to determine the viability of language development projects there can be no final answer. Persson (1989) pointed out that the scope of language development (specifically, Scripture translation) is non-finite, though not infinite, precisely because the decision-making parameters may change over time. We can - and must - make an assessment of situations as they are now, sociolinguistically and culturally. Such assessments must be left open to the possibility of re-assessment in the light of factors which may alter the direction of sociolinguistic and cultural change. I am calling such factors the policy dimension, the forces and influences - social, political, intellectual and ideological - operating at local, national and international levels.

5. And so...

Caution has rightly been advised in collecting and interpreting policy data (Forum 1983), but this may have resulted in a lack of confidence to make a start. Landin (1989) concludes his assessment of the success and failure in SIL programs by identifying policy as the most central issue; in his article, his concern is with church and mission policy, but it must be widened to include the policies of all those with influence and decision-making power.

Landin tentatively asked whether SIL could be in a position to influence policy in positive ways. The reply must be that if we are concerned to understand the policies in relevant areas which affect minority language development, then we must *take part* in the debate. As we do so, we shall inevitably influence others and be influenced by them. The degree of influence will depend on institutional (and personal) relationships. The question is not whether we should or should not seek to influence policy, but how far we want to understand the policy debate. Influence may or may not follow.

As an organisation - certainly the largest - involved in minority language development, SIL has the opportunity to dialogue with decision-makers and those who influence them, both through the continued practical implementation of language projects and by active participation in the policy debate at all levels. Such participation has never been more possible and more critical than today when so many intellectual currents are running in favour of minority ethnolinguistic groups.

NOTES

*1 The expressions 'promoting minority languages' and 'language development (projects)' are taken to mean efforts to maintain or expand the range of uses of a minority language within a multilingual environment and as part of a multilingual approach to communication: such *efforts* may include the graphisation of the language, its introduction into educational contexts, the production of literature and its use in the media.

*2 This is not the place to debate the nature of the links between language and culture. Suffice it say here that language is conceived as being instrumental in accessing a particular culture, and that the maintenance or loss of a particular language affects insider and outsider perceptions of cultural identity. See Edwards (1985), Fishman (1991), Ingold (1992) and Street (1993) for further elements in the debate.

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