Chapter 8

Abrupt Transmission Failure in Obsolescing Languages: How Sudden the “Tip” to the Dominant Language in Communities and Families?

One of the regrettable but interesting things about language death is its long history. It’s anything but a new phenomenon, and we have a lot of extinct languages littering the shores of linguistic history to prove it. On the other hand, our own time seems a little curious in one special respect, namely in respect to the number of languages which have persisted with pretty fair strength for what seems like a long period, only to weaken in what seems like a rather short time and suddenly wind up in a downslide toward extinction.

In this country and Canada, for example, some long-established populations with very distinctive customs and languages which have been secure for centuries are suddenly in trouble. The geographical region doesn’t seem to matter – it’s the same story regardless of location. Cajun French in Louisiana is in the same trouble as French Canadian in Maine. Pennsylvania Dutch (that is, German) among the secular (non-Anabaptist) Pennsylvania Dutchmen is threatened in the same fashion as Scottish Gaelic in Cape Breton. None of these is a particularly Johnny-come-lately immigrant language – the oldest of them have been in place for several centuries, and their speaker populations have been relatively loyal and stable, sometimes also reinforced by continuing immigration (this is the case with Canadian reinforcement of the French-speaking population in Maine and Highland Scottish reinforcement of the Gaelic-speaking population in Nova Scotia, whereas the Cajun and Penn Dutch populations seem to have recruited more by absorbing incomers or non-native locals than by major inflows of new immigrants).

In general the twentieth century seems to be notable for the large number of languages which are either obviously dying out or showing marked signs of contraction such as simplifying structure, functional restriction, and loss of speakers at the margins of the community. Whether this century is actually any more characterized by these phenomena, or whether we’re only better informed about the number of cases and their wide geographical distribution, is unclear.

Some people are inclined to argue that this is a particularly pernicious time for languages which are isolated, or enclaved, or represented by rather thin populations, or heavily outbalanced by languages of wider currency. People of
this persuasion usually point to ease of modern travel, the “global village” phe-
nomenon, the power of the modern nation-state to affect the lives of even its 
most outlying citizens, the savage thoroughness of the more modern instances 
of genocide or attempted genocide, the spread of literacy, the penetration of 
radio and television, and so forth.

I think there is no denying any of these factors. They are all very real and 
very potent. Anyone who has worked with even a single threatened language 
can attest to the force of negative policies (or even only negative attitudes) 
spreading out from a central government and discouraging or perhaps penal-
izing speakers of languages or dialects other than the officially state-promoted 
language. Similarly the ouster of traditional activities which fostered minority 
languages – social gatherings like the ceilidh in Scotland and Ireland, pedagog-
ically-oriented verbal routines such as Aesopian tales, fairy tales and rhyming 
genres (all directed toward children) in Albanian-speaking Greek communi-
ties (Tsitsipis 1983: 27), the most formal styles of public speaking in the Cupeño 
and Luiseño communities in California (usurped by English; Hill 1973: 45) – 
by passive or active verbal events which involve only or mainly the state-
promoted language has a pronounced, unmistakably deleterious effect on the 
strength of the minority languages in most cases.

This is the usual outcome, more or less the predictable outcome, and it sur-
prises no one. It’s not the inevitable outcome, however, since people seem to 
be capable of quite remarkable segmentation of their lives, including linguis-
tic segmentation. It’s hardly encouraging for a language to be excluded from 
the schools, ignored in broadcasting, discouraged in public life, and unpro-
vided for in any officially sponsored activities whatever. But in some societ-
ies it seems to be possible for people to accept a very restricted role for their 
native speech form, such that they assume it will be used only in the hearth-
and-home sphere; they may even welcome the specialization of their mother 
tongue as an in-group marker. Where there is a deep gulf between the minor-
ity-language group and the dominant-language group, as with certain Native 
American tribes, the home language may be jealously guarded from mem-
bers of the majority language group, treated along with things like religious 
ceremonials as a privileged form of in-group knowledge, not to be casually 
exposed to outsiders or shared with them. There are entire societies in which 
the home language has good standing but has been traditionally restricted in 
use without any threat to its ultimate viability (German Switzerland, where 
Schwyzertütsch is seldom written and almost never used in circumstances of 
any formality is a case in point), and of course quite a lot of societies exist in 
which the language of highest prestige is not the local language – most often 
where religion is involved, as in many Islamic but non-Arab societies.