CHAPTER 15

Western Language Ideologies and Small-Language Prospects*

It might be said with a certain metaphoric license that languages are seldom admired to death but are frequently despised to death. That is, it’s relatively rare for a language to become so exclusively tied to prestigious persons and high-prestige behaviors that ordinary people become too much in awe of it to use it or are prevented by language custodians from doing so. By contrast, it’s fairly common for a language to become so exclusively associated with low-prestige people and their socially disfavored identities that its own potential speakers prefer to distance themselves from it and adopt some other language. Parents in these circumstances will make a conscious or unconscious decision not to transmit the ancestral language to their children, and yet another language will be lost. The power of the social forces involved is evidently considerable, since under better circumstances attachment to an ancestral mother tongue is usually strong. The phenomenon of ancestral-language abandonment is worth looking at, then, precisely because a good many people, especially those who speak unthreatened languages, are likely to have trouble imagining that they themselves could ever be brought to the point of giving up on their own an ancestral language and encouraging their children to use some other language instead.

Unless they become fossilized so that they persist in specialized uses without ordinary speakers, as sometimes happens in connection with religious practices (Latin, Sanskrit, Coptic Egyptian, Ge’ez, etc.), languages have the standing that their speakers have. If the people who speak a language have power and prestige, the language they speak will enjoy high prestige as well. If the people who speak a language have little power and low prestige, their language is unlikely to be well thought of. Because the standing of a language is so intimately tied to that of its speakers, enormous reversals in the prestige of a language can take place within a very short time span.

The arrival of the Spaniards brought about precipitous changes of this kind in the fortunes of two major New World languages, that of the Aztec empire in North America and that of the Inka empire in South America. Both

---

* I’m indebted to Christina Bratt Paulston for helpful criticisms of the first draft of this chapter and for suggestions for its improvement.
had achieved great dominance, expanding at the expense of neighboring languages for some centuries as the Aztecs and Inkas conquered new territories and made ever more peoples subject to their rule (Heath 1972; Heath and Laprade 1982). In a stunningly short time both empires were brought low by their encounter with the better armed Spanish, who represented an expanding Old World power. Neither imperial language disappeared, but each survived with severely reduced social standing. Today Nahuatl and Quechua are low prestige speech forms within the regions where they are spoken, and each is under some threat from still expanding Spanish.

To be sure, cases exist in which a conquering power has given up its own language and adopted the language of the very people whom it has conquered. The Vikings seem to have been particularly susceptible to this, going over to Romance speech forms in Normandy and Sicily and to a Slavic speech form in Russia. It is not unique to them, however; the western Franks and the Bulgars followed a similar pattern, as did the Normans in England, repeating the pattern of their Viking forebears in Normandy. In such cases the conquering group is usually numerically thin, compared with the size of the conquered population, and it may deliberately intermarry with the indigenous aristocracy (for lack of enough women of its own group or for the sake of adding legitimacy to its seizure of local power and property, or both). Distance from the original homeland probably plays a role in some such cases, as in the Viking kingdoms, all established far from Scandinavia. Military loss of home territories can have the same distancing effect. The anglicization of the Normans in England might have been delayed or even prevented if they had been able to retain control of Normandy; but they lost their Norman territories less than a century and a half after conquering England, and from that time forward their focus was on their English territories.

In any event, these are the unusual cases rather than the norm. In the more usual cases, the group that exercises military or political power over others will establish its own language as the language of governance in its contacts with those others. And when one speech form enjoys a favored position as the language of those who control obvious power positions (as administrators, governors, judicial officers, military officers, religious officials, major landholders, and so forth), it requires no great sagacity, but only common sense, to see that it’s likely to be useful to acquire some knowledge of that language. If members of a subordinate population have the opportunity to learn the language of the dominant group, some or all of them will usually do so. They will not necessarily give up their own ancestral language, however. It seems likely that it’s not so much the tendency to learn a dominant-group language which has increased a great deal in modern times, but rather the opportunity to do so, and,