Chapter 14

How Much Udi is Udi?

Wolfgang Schulze

1 What is This Paper About?

This short essay entails some reflections about the object of ‘language documentation’ in a specific setting of functional bilingualism. In this paper, I start from a sociological stance that can be opposed to a linguistic approach of defining the object at issue. The perspective taken here is especially relevant because functional bilingualism grounded in the tradition of first language bilinguals (as it is the case with the subjects of this paper, namely the ‘Udis’) is best interpreted in terms of a holistic view (Grosjean 1982), who “argues that each bilingual is a unique individual who integrates knowledge of and from both languages to create something more than two languages that function independently of each other” (Reyes 2008: 79). As for the community of Udis, a small ethnic group dwelling mainly in the village of Nij in Northwestern Azerbaijan, the problem is even more complicated, because one of the ‘languages’ involved in this type of bilingualism can be considered as being massively influenced by the other language, namely Azeri, the official language of Azerbaijan. In order to illustrate this point, I refer to one example randomly taken from published Udi texts (translation of Jona), cf. (1):

(1) däniz-ä gele ost’ahar tufan-e bak-sa
    see-LOC much strong storm-3SG become-PRES
    ‘There comes up a strong storm on the sea.’ (Jona 1.4)
    (Translation by a translator group in Nij 2009)

Except the few morphological units and the lexical unit bak- ‘to become’, all terms are taken either from Azeri or are older (Oriental) loans. Hence, one may ask, to which degree it is justified at all if we relate this phrase to the ‘Udi’ language. In case the speech of the Udis would be under survey in terms of ‘language documentation’, one might thus ask what kind of linguistic object we have to deal with. According to the holistic perspective as discussed by Grosjean (1982) it would be appropriate to speak of a unitary linguistic knowledge system expressed in terms of a ‘mixed language’. However, this does
not seem to be the case among many speakers in Nij. Rather, their linguistic practices are characterized by a internally structured, nevertheless holistic knowledge system that is profiled towards Udi or Azeri according to the social and situational setting of communicative acts (supplemented by role features and the language biography of the speakers). The question of how to account for the given linguistic practices in terms of ‘language’ again becomes complicated, because the language components of bilingualism among Udis are marked for an unbalanced pattern with respect to language and power. In fact we have to deal with a typical pattern that contrasts a ‘powerful’ majotarian communicative system (Azeri) with a minotarian one (Udi) which again is majotarian in the small community of Nij itself. This complex situation invites us to reconsider the concept of ‘language’ at least when aiming at the documentation of linguistic practices in communities such as Nij. In my paper, I will propose some arguments that aim at a more sociological understanding of ‘language’ in terms of linguistic practices.

2 Linguistic Practices

Standard approaches to language documentation today usually refer to a usage-based perspective claiming that it is the actual use of a given language by members of the corresponding language community that should be under survey. For instance, Himmelmann (1998: 166) claims that the “aim of a language documentation is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community (…). This (…) differs fundamentally from (…) language description [which] aims at the record of a language (…) as a system of abstract elements, constructions, and rules (…).” Likewise, Woodbury (2003: 39) states that “(…) direct representation of naturally occurring discourse is the primary project, while description and analysis are contingent, emergent byproducts which grow alongside primary documentation but are always changeable and parasitic on it.” It is hence crucial to determine what is meant by “linguistic practices of a given speech community” at all and in which way these practices are related to what is called a ‘language’. The notion of “linguistic practices” does not make reference to a particular language but basically refers a set of linguistic actions that can “genuinely be regarded as forms of social behavior” (Skinner 1971: 1). Linguistic actions belong to the world of “rhetorical acts”, that “characterize collections of communicative acts that achieve specific medium-independent rhetorical goals and include actions such as identifying an entity, describing it, dividing