

The main theme of the Sociolinguistics Summer School in Barcelona was « new speakers ». Of course, the number of possible types of situations is infinite, ranging from new speakers of a world language such as English, to learners of very local languages with very few speakers, and anything in between ! And that in itself led to a lot of discussions and further thinking...

What kind of minority language are we talking about ?

Being particularly interested myself in minority languages, one of the elements that struck me along the debates was the split (should I say the gap ?) between two kinds of minority languages.

On one hand there are what Joan Pujolar calls « in-between » contexts, such as Catalan in Catalonia and French in Quebec, where the minority language holds quite a strong position.

And on the other hand, we have minority languages that are not doing so well, most of them just struggling not to disappear.

Languages in an « in-between » context

In his presentation, Pujolar asserted that minority languages are still often associated with languages on the countryside, spoken by poor farmers, but although Nation-States did colonize and repress them in the past, there were changes after WW2 : states supported those minority languages, and a lot of new urban speakers emerged, who are working in key sectors such as services and tourism.

That might be true for a few local languages, in what he calls the « in-between contexts », such as French in Quebec, and Catalan, where « native speakers did not undergo language shift ». But it is certainly not the case for most lesser used languages, where activists are still fighting against states to get proper recognition (cf France which did not ratify the European charter for regional or minority languages).

« Thriving » minority languages and capitalism

There was quite a lot of talk about languages and capitalism/neo-liberalism (Monica Heller, Joan Pujolar), a strong link being established several times between decentralization and privatization. Pujolar quoted Rose (1993) who « describes the progressive decentralization and ongoing privatization of governmentalities, as different social fields are brought to operate like markets ».

Then some minority languages were described as potentially dominant, and even becoming a problem in a migrants' context. This almost gave the impression that supporters of minority languages were in turns bad neoliberal henchmen !

Cf Duchène & Heller 2012 : « During the 1990s and into the 21st century, we are witnessing a widespread emergence of discursive elements that treat language and culture primarily in economic terms ».

Here again, as a matter of fact, French language in Quebec, and Catalan in Catalonia (although they are still somehow fragile, and the number of speakers is not

obligatorily growing) seem to be doing pretty well, and appear to be very strong, including in the economic sphere. They are in a dynamics of recovering ground

« Weaker » minorities

But what is relevant for those two languages in their particular context, is not relevant for most minority languages in the world, which are not on a rising trend. On the contrary, despite the efforts of their promoters, the majority of them continue to lose ground and might simply disappear in the next few decades. They are certainly not facing the same issues.

Pujolar described the situation of two new speakers, one in Ireland and the other in Euskadi (south part). From these two examples, he pointed out the fact that « new speakers are socially and spacially better placed than native speakers to occupy positions of symbolic power: media, schooling ».

But again, one has to consider that Basque and Irish are not in the same situation as most minority languages : Irish is an official language in Ireland, and Basque has been gaining ground in the past decades (in the Spanish part of Euskadi).

Being more precise about Ireland, Ciaran O Braonain talked about his own research dealing with the motivations for Europeans to learn the Irish language. He came up with 12 types of orientations : culture, identity, language, Irish language, heritage, travel, pleasure, etc. When asked about the economic motivation, O Braonain answered that it was not very relevant since « the work market in Gaelic is growing, but nothing to compare with Catalan. Irish and Scottish language are far behind Catalan ».

In turns, Adam Dahmer talked about the fact that the population of Scotland still beleives that speaking Gaelic is of no help in real life when you look for a job. People there fear that one won't get work with Gaelic. He himself often heard them ask those who have a Gaelic degree : « so what do you do with that exactly ? »

I was myself brought up on a farm in Brittany, in a bilingual family. We have seen the number of Breton speakers going down from year to year (over 1 million speakers 100 years ago, less than 200 000 today, most of them above 70 years old), and our language is now considered severely endangered by UNESCO.

We are very far from the issues concerning Catalan and Quebecois. In particular, Breton language is miles away from bearing a real economic advantage. Of course, activists try to convince young people that learning Breton will open doors to various jobs. And of course, that argument is a heavy one, since the rate of unemployment is so high in France, and it is a major preoccupation in the population. But those jobs are actually scarce, and always in the militant sphere, mostly paid by public money : teachers in bilingual schools, some organizers in the cultural sector, and a few jobs in the media. No private employer will demand that an employee would speak Breton, unless he is himself an activist (which is a very rare exception) since there is no need for Breton language in the « real world » today.

Anyway, it really feels that Catalonia and Quebec are in a very specific situation that does not have much to do with what happens in most places where minority languages are spoken. In those, there is usually no economic argument in favor of

becoming a speaker and there is no real capitalistic/neoliberal issue there, as what was described about Catalan and Quebecquois.

Celtic languages

Quite a few researchers offered presentations about Celtic languages, which I was very interested in since I am myself a Breton speaker.

With most Celtic languages, in Ireland, Scotland and Brittany, we clearly are in the case of severely endangered minority languages which activists try to revitalize in order to avoid a fatal decline in the next few decades.

Adam Dahmer described the situation of Gaelic in Scotland : the language reached its maximum extent between year 1000 and year 1200, but has been consistently minorized since the Middle Ages. It was still widely spoken in the Scottish Highlands as recently as the 1850s. But figures are not good these days.

In Ireland, Stephen Joyce explained how the number of Irish speakers is also still decreasing (- 0,7% from 2011 to 2016, according to the two last census). Nevertheless, young speakers are finding new ways to convince others to learn the language.

Joyce described an interesting experience led by two youngsters in their thirties, who started a pub where only Gaelic is spoken. He insisted on the « importance of urban spaces of language socialisation outside traditional urban domains of Irish use, not explicitly linked to the Irish cause ». Those are called « safe spaces », and could be quite efficient to motivate new speakers since « spaces where language is used in an unrestricted and natural way operate like magnets, drawing people to the language ». That type of new initiatives promote a « counter-ideology that normalizes or re-normalizes the use of the threatened language in some sites, domains or situations ».

Last but not least, the exception among Celtic languages is obviously Welsh, which is in a much better shape than the others. There were around 500 000 speakers 30 years ago (more or less the same figure as Breton speakers) and they have managed to reverse the trend : Welsh is now spoken by close to 600 000 people ! And in his presentation Osian Harri Elias asserted that the goal is now to reach a million speakers by year 2050. Trying to do as well as Catalans ?

Native speakers vs new speakers

Quite a few researchers talked about the opposition between native speakers and new speakers.

Adam Dahmer described how Gaelic is becoming an urban language, with almost 20% of the speakers now living in the Central belt, which obviously changes the language status.

On one hand, « learners hesitate to speak with native speakers », which was also pointed by Joan Pujolar : « New speakers may have problems of access to old speakers' networks ». Then, says Dahmer, new speakers resent the idea that for

natives « once a learner, always a learner », and blame them for « language abandonment ».

And on the other hand, « native speakers have a perception of a new speaker invasion », speaking a « university Gaelic » or « middle of the Minch Gaelic » and belonging to a so-called « Gaelic mafia ». He also pointed the fact that « the social disconnect between native speakers and learners at university sometimes persists into adulthood ».

The issue of language quality

A corollary to the opposition between native and new speakers is the issue of language quality, which comes across strongly as soon as one talks about endangered languages and new speakers. In the debates, young people and new speakers who talked about it seemed not to be bothered : they consider that it is better to speak an endangered language, even with a lot of mistakes, than focus too much on the quality level. Quantity vs quality...

Native speakers usually do not quite share that point of view. But in his keynote speech, Joan Pujolar distanced himself from the « idea that native speakers have a privileged relationship to their language », and asserted that « new speakers produce new forms of linguistic legitimacy ».

Of course, languages evolve, and of course, speakers change. But as linguists say « each language bears a vision of the world ». This expression is certainly overused, and most people use it without understanding its profound meaning. Nevertheless, there is some truth in the saying, and the vision of the world that a language carries is in its structure, in its syntax, in the way sentences are constructed, etc. Those are as, if not more, significant than the vocabulary. And these linguistic treasures, which reflect people's thinking, are conveyed by the elders. It is thus regrettable that very often new speakers do not pay much attention to them and do not make the effort to fully study the subtleties of languages, especially when it comes to languages threatened with extinction. For in the end, what is the point of saving a minority language if it is transformed into a mere copy of a majority language, as is often the case?

« Sociolinguistics of late modernity »

Going a bit further in his « sociolinguistics of late modernity », Joan Pujolar went on describing his view of languages in contemporary societies:

- « Languages nowadays have shifted from emblems of national identity to elements constitutive of lifestyles at the level of individuals, family and specific communities ».
- « These lifestyles incorporate specific discursive trajectories (history), often including scientific and technical expertise as well as political rhetoric. Healthy lifestyles, consumption of bio products, cuisine, hip-hop, latino identities, new age culture, neo-rural. As such they have continuities with “hobbies“, characterized as non-earning productivity, but also with professional identities ».
- « Lifestyles often invest or are inscribed in political projects, language revitalization being a good example in which traditional discourses on language,

culture and nation are reproduced and adapted to new contexts. Lifestyle discourse may well involve contradictions ».

Those three points are certainly a general heavy trend among new speakers of endangered languages, wherever they are. But isn't it a bit short, though ? Is a language really just the mirror of a community (that eats organic, lives in an alternative way, etc.) ? Is it only part of a cultural and political « lifestyle » ?? Haven't we forgotten something along the way ?

And we are back to a question that Monica Heller asked from start: « What is a speaker ? what is a native speaker ? what is a language ? »

Yes, what is a language indeed ? What is it a reflection of ? What is its function ?

Considering a language as a simple lifestyle choice means totally ignoring a whole load of other elements: its intrinsic scientific value, the emotional part, the affective bonds ... Don't we miss something essential if a language is not a link between generations ? A link with a culture, and a vision of the world, that have come across centuries ?

In a few words, let's hope that not everything is quantifiable by the market economy !