Dynamics of language contact: English and immigrant languages

By Michael Clyne


Reviewed by Mary Ruth Wise
SIL International

Description

This monograph examines the dynamics of contact between immigrant languages in Australia. The languages discussed are German, Dutch, Hungarian, Italian, Spanish, Croatian, and Vietnamese. The author analyzes how and why the languages change and why some survive longer than others in the Australian context. Immigrant generations are compared as well as bilinguals with trilinguals. The “core data which was collected over nearly four decades is from plurilinguals whose language other than English – German or Dutch – is related to it” (p. 6).

Synopsis

Chapter 1 introduces Australia as an immigrant country in which only forty-eight aboriginal languages were recorded in the 1996 census (in contrast with about 250 spoken there in 1788 when the first European settlers arrived). The total number of languages spoken today, however, is only slightly less than 250 since there are so many immigrant languages. Australia does not have an official language policy although English, “the lingua franca, fulfills most of the functions of an official language” (p. 16). “Interactive multiculturalism and not ethnic separatism” (p. 17) has been the norm.

Chapter 2 deals with individual factors which contribute to language shift (LS) or language maintenance. Exogamy is a key factor in LS; LS tends to be higher among males than females in the first generation. The relation between concentration of “community languages” in urban centers and shift varies according to the history of the language groups. Various models of language shift/maintenance are also discussed.

Chapter 3 discusses terminology, some language contact frameworks, and the treatment of morphological and syntactic transference and convergence. Some typological characteristics of German and Dutch and other languages (Italian, Spanish, Croatian, Vietnamese, and Hungarian)
are summarized in order “to study the impact of typological variation on contact-induced language change and on bilingual and trilingual speech production” (p. 102).

Chapter 4 discusses “how bilinguals and trilinguals make their languages more similar (convergence) – and how some of them . . . try to differentiate them (divergence)” (p. 103). Convergence, transference and drift, and the evidence for multiple causation of language change are discussed. Detailed examples of changes such as case loss and restructuring are given. The data show how the drift of a language is utilized and extended through language contact and how the various levels of language work together in the convergence of the system.

Chapter 5 discusses the dynamics of “transversion,” i.e., the crossing over from one language to another. The various levels of language, “working together in the convergence of the systems, provide structural facilitators of transversion” (p. 191).

Chapter 6 considers questions that convergence, transference, integration, and transversion pose for psycholinguistic processing models. Clyne asserts that “some speech processes can be observed more clearly in plurilinguals than in monolinguals” (p. 193). He evaluates current processing models and enumerates questions arising from his data that are not accounted for by those models. He concludes that “convergence at all levels demonstrates that storage and access of the two or more languages of a plurilingual cannot be separate” (p. 214).

Chapter 7 addresses the dynamics of cultural values in contact discourse. The use or abandonment of pragmatic features such as diminutives and forms of address are considered. Pragmatic contracts, e.g., in the selection of certain second person pronouns to indicate solidarity or politeness, are major contributing factors in avoidance-conditioned code-switching.

Chapter 8 summarizes the wealth of data presented in preceding chapters. Clyne asserts that his data suggest tendencies rather than constraints or universal rules. He adds that the various models of language maintenance and shift all contribute to an understanding of the processes.

The book concludes with references and useful indexes of authors, languages, and subjects.

**Comments and Evaluation**

Clyne's discussion of various models and his terminological framework is an excellent introduction to the study of language contact. The tables throughout the book provide helpful summaries of the data. A few of them, however, are not referred to in the text (e.g., table 2.11); so the reader is left to infer the significance of the data presented.

The focus of this book is on contact between immigrant languages and English, the dominant immigrant language of Australia. The immigrant languages discussed are not endangered since there are large populations in their countries of origin; consequently, little attention is given to language endangerment. In contrast, there are currently in many other countries small enclaves of endangered languages such as Rapa Nui (from Easter Island). A study of language shift / maintenance in those communities would be useful for understanding the implications for displaced speakers of indigenous languages.