Language maintenance, shift and death, and the implications for bilingual education

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0. Introduction

The purpose of bilingual education programs traditionally has been transitional, promoting language shift. Current trends have begun to consider the rights and desires of minority groups, so that now language maintenance is seen as an important aspect of such programs. Perhaps the fault in the past has too often been to choose the goals and model of a program according to the educator’s/government’s philosophy with little consideration of language trends and needs of a community. This paper is an attempt to tie together research on language maintenance/shift and that on bilingual education, showing that the success of an education program can be enhanced by the two supporting each other.

1. Language maintenance, shift and death

1.1. Features of a community undergoing language maintenance

Language maintenance occurs in a community, either monolingual or multilingual, where the linguistic situation is stable. The degree of maintenance, however, may be quite different in the written and spoken forms of a language.

A bilingual (or multilingual) community is unlikely to undergo any major changes or shifts in language use if each language is restricted to specific domains (that is, a diglossic community). Certain of these domains may be more prone to language maintenance than others (for example, home), while initially others strongly support language maintenance until an authoritative decision is made (for example, by religious leaders) which may cause rapid shift. In a situation where domains are institutionalized, bilingualism becomes stable and universal. An example is the use of high and low German in Switzerland.

There are many examples of the maintenance of low-prestige languages, seemingly against all odds. A number of factors have been suggested which contribute to this phenomenon. Separateness, either geographical, religious, or social often leads to language maintenance (for example, the Amish community in the USA).

Ryan (1979) suggests that group identity, loyalty, and sentimental attachments contribute to language maintenance. Group contact often causes a community to seek symbols of distinctiveness of which language may be one. Bourhis and others (1979) elaborate this idea and suggest that, if a threatened community considers its status to be illegitimate and the intergroup situation is unstable, speech divergence occurs. They found that when the other group showed hostility, speakers of a subordinate language group tended to broaden their accent or to use their own language (for example, in Belgium and Wales). Fishman (1971) warns that this is not always the case, as group membership and loyalty are not always expressed in language maintenance.

Milroy (1982) suggest language maintenance is a symbol of identity and ethnic pride. In her studies in Belfast, she found that people who had relatively dense personal networks and who were linked with each other with multiplex ties, tended, because of the norm reinforcement and protective aspects of such a situation, to maintain their language use.

1.2. Features of a community undergoing language shift

Linguists and researchers have discussed language shift and its possible causes more widely than they have language maintenance. Language shift occurs in an unstable language community, typically where there is bilingualism and no diglossia, that is, two or more languages competing with each other for the same domains. Language shift is characterized by a steadily decreasing use of a particular language in certain domains.

In a situation where reading and writing have been attained in the mother tongue before the “other language” appears, shift may be more resistant than in a situation where the mother tongue is used only orally. Fishman (1971) also suggests that where there is shift, unconscious or resisted, inner speech may be the last aspect of the mother tongue to shift.
Dorian (1981) suggests that sociolinguistic factors distinguish a language in shift (specifically a dying language) from one undergoing “healthy” change. Attitudes toward a particular language are crucial to that language’s stability. For example, the Nahuatl language (Hill and Hill 1977) supports the speakers’ self-identification as Indians. With the high degree of Spanish loan words, the Nahuatl feel their language has been spoiled. This attitude has accelerated shift leading to language death.

Mackey (1978) elaborates on the importance of language attitudes, suggesting that the following components of language loyalty attitudes contribute to language maintenance or shift: the presence or absence of group identity; the proximity or distance from immigration; peer group approval or disapproval; cultural continuity or discontinuity; and inter-class communication or noncommunication. The minority may become fluent in the language of the majority when they regard their language as inferior, as in the case of the Pennsylvania Germans (Huffines 1980). A situation of unequal status roles may contribute to language shift, if the roles are not too far apart and social mobility is possible. In other words, shift can occur with negative language attitudes.

Williamson and Van Eerde (1980) found that the most serious factors promoting language shift in the three communities they studied were the high degree of migration to and from the community and insufficient usage of mass media in the second language. According to Mackey, these are components of language attitude. Migration to a new community or country often causes shift since the immigrant wants to adapt to the social and economic life of the majority, especially if migration is voluntary. This was certainly the case earlier this century with immigrants to the USA. Fishman (1969) suggests that interactions with other immigrants of different language groups and feelings of rootlessness and powerlessness also helped to hasten language shift. Historically immigrant groups do not always adopt the language of their hosts, as Fishman (1969) points out; the hosts may adopt the language of the immigrant group, both may use a lingua franca, or they may live side-by-side with no bilingualism. He also points out that the smaller group does not always accept the language of the majority. The direction of shift, therefore, is not always predictable.

Language shift may also occur with the arrival of large numbers of monoglots in the second language, as was the case in East Sutherland, Scotland (Dorian 1981) when educated, affluent English speakers arrived. This also happened in the case of the Parāči in Afghanistan (Kieffer 1977). Dorian (1981) and MacKinnon (1977) support Williamson’s second factor, noting that the improved communication system and mass media, all in English, contributed to the decline of Gaelic use in East Sutherland and Harris communities.

Another factor of language shift which can often be related to mobility is a change in the economic situation which causes demographic shift. Urbanisation and industrialisation have often been cited as being present in language shift situations. Dressler and Wodkaolter (1977a) point out that a minority group in a preindustrialised community can maintain its traditions more easily than in an industrialised community, since industrialisation leads to centralisation. Centralisation tends to favor the expansion of a national language at the expense of minority languages. Denison (1977) suggests that language death is actually language suicide when a speech community decides to suppress its language for economic reasons. Kieffer (1977) found this to be true among the O*r*muri of Afghanistan.
Major political events or movements have historically been found to be present in situations of language shift. These may be the cause of industrialisation or mobility and may be enhanced by the rise of a nationalist movement which does not consider language maintenance to be important, as is the case in Ireland (Agnew 1981).

Huffines (1980) also suggests that language maintenance requires supporting institutions, whether they be political, educational, religious, or whatever.

When a language ceases to have a function in a rapidly developing educational system, shift may occur. A nonstandard orthography and a lack of literature may contribute to this. Huffines (1980) suggests, from her study, that a language needs to promote learning to be maintained. Dorian (1981) found that in the East Sutherland situation, when education passed into the hands of the state, English dominance in the community became total. She suggests that school policy only leads to language shift in a wider context of hostility and prejudice toward the language and its speakers. This will be discussed more fully later.

As Dorian (1981) points out, while all or some of these factors may be present in communities experiencing language shift, their presence cannot predict shift. She claims there is nothing foreordained in the shift and death of a language; however, consideration of some of the above factors may have given some indication of the future stability of a language within a community.

1.3. Features of a community undergoing language death

Language death is a final product of complete language shift. A dying language shows the same sort of change which a healthy language shows, but the time-span for the changes is greatly reduced. Denison (1977) says “languages die, not from loss of rules but from loss of speakers” (21), and it is the negative attitude of these speakers toward their language that is of primary importance. Often speakers of a dying language will admit that it is dying, probably contributing to a more speedy death by their attitude, as witnessed with Gaelic speakers in East Sutherland (Dorian 1980) and in Harris communities (MacKinnon 1977). Schlieben-lange (1977) says that if a language no longer performs a function as either a “language of power” or a “language of solidarity” it will be abandoned by its speakers. The question remains, of course, as to when a language is to be considered dead.

While some of the factors may not contribute directly to a language’s death, they often influence the attitude of speakers and so contribute indirectly to language death. The factors cited for the case of language shift also apply here. Other factors include the

- smallness of a group
- lack of unity
- “polluted” accent and lexicography
- lack of “language vitality”
- standardisation
- autonomy and historicity

• decreased use by younger generations
• absence of diglossia
• emergence of semispeakers
• loss of self-appointed monitors of grammatical correctness, and
• changes in linguistic aspects.

These signs characterize a dying language. The most crucial factor is whether or not the parents are teaching their children the language. Dressler and others (1977) suggest that language death is associated with secondary socialisation of children in the second language. In other words, the mother tongue is used only in the home and for casual relationships, while the second language is used for all other situations. They found this to be the case in Brittany, where Breton was used for primary socialisation and French for secondary, and where Breton is “dying.” This need not be the case, especially in a strong diglossic situation. However, when parents fail to teach their children the mother tongue, it can be seen to be “dying” as in the case of Gaelic in East Sutherland (Dorian 1982).

2. Bilingual education and language maintenance or shift

2.0. Introduction

Bilingual education can play a role in language maintenance or shift within a community, although education has never been the sole cause of either. “Schools tend to follow and reflect society, not to lead” (Edwards 1981:39). The goals of bilingual education generally tend to reflect the views of society but will, in turn, enhance either language maintenance or shift.

The first question which should be asked is whether schools should support language maintenance, shift and death or whether they should attempt change. The rest of this paper assumes that attempts at change are futile, although I recognise that for political reasons, and so forth. In many places, schools are required to be agents of change.

2.1. Why consider language maintenance and shift for a bilingual education program?

The sociological variables of a given community can be highly predictive of the success of a bilingual education program. Student and program variables are secondary in importance.

Fishman and Lovas (1972) assert that the failure of some bilingual education programs may be due to the school’s adoption of a maintenance program while the community is experiencing language shift, or vice versa. Before importing a program which may be successful elsewhere, Mackey (1978) suggests the need for studying the genesis of a model bilingual education program, comparing the two situations. He urges that the innovators look at such aspects as


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• language status
• cultural coverage
• relatedness and language admixture
• degree of literacy
• language availability and adaptability
• political ideologies
• educational needs and nature of the community, and
• which languages are appropriate for what subjects in school.

Edwards (1981) also recommends that before a bilingual education program is established, an assessment should be made of the general climate of tolerance/support for ethnic diversity and what the views of the ethnic community are regarding maintenance and shift. For example, he notes that among immigrant groups only those in political and academic institutions have strong feelings of language loyalty, while there is generally little language maintenance beyond the first generation. However, most bilingual education programs assume that immigrants want language maintenance. He questions (39) attempts of education to “prop up communicative functions of a language” against a community’s trends. The community’s attitude can best be seen by their control, rather than the support, of the bilingual program.

It seems obvious, then, that for a “successful” bilingual education program, it is best to match the model with the needs and trends of the community. The question remains, of course, whether education should and can be used as a tool of change. This question will be mentioned again later.

2.2. The role of the community

Despite the multiplicity of bilingual education models and goals, people still believe that a bilingual education program of any type facilitates maintenance. Experience has shown us that this is not the case. In the past, it appears that aspects of community language shift and maintenance have rarely been taken into consideration when a model is chosen.

Most maintenance programs focus their attention on developing and/or maintaining bilingualism in the individual, rather than in the community as a whole. We cannot assume that a language maintained by a few students (and not all will succeed in the program) is going to cause language maintenance in the whole community. There are too many other factors at play in the wider community as discussed earlier under language shift factors.

Hernández-Chávez (1978) goes so far as to say that if the goal of bilingual education is not to maintain a close link between the individual and the community, then language shift will be accelerated. Individual bilingual education promotes opportunities for the individual (who may or may not contribute to the community), not for the community as a whole. It is usually the community, and not the school, that

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controls the community structure, its own residential and economic bases, domains and usage of languages, interaction with the national language, and so forth.

While the school cannot achieve language maintenance, revival, or revitalisation, it can have a role by serving the community. In any of the values and behaviours a school tries to teach, greater success will be achieved if those values and behaviours are rewarded by the home and community.

Bilingual schools can promote language maintenance, if they are carefully related to the compartmentalized home-and-community usage and values of language. Fishman (1980) says that even the first networks beyond the home are a threat to language maintenance, unless they are controlled by the home and community. He claims that the flow of language maintenance is much greater from the home or community to the school, than the other way around. A bilingual education program needs more than community involvement; it needs community responsibility.

Schools do have a role in language maintenance and community development. They prepare students for literacy related participation in other domains of life. In our society, language maintenance requires literacy. This may not be the case in a number of situations where SIL works. However, the model chosen must reflect the community’s desires and needs for literacy in each of the languages.

Language maintenance is a moral issue, and schools must support it as representatives of the government and wider community if they want the community to support it. Schools can also play a role in leadership training of minority groups by preparing them for interaction with the majority. Obviously, if there is a lack of funding or support from schools (including materials and personnel), or hostility from the dominant group, or if the minority community wants maximum training in the dominant language, then maintenance will be hindered.

2.3. Goals of bilingual education

Fishman (1975) sees three differing goals of bilingual education. A program may be compensatory, that is, to give all people equal opportunities, educationally and economically. These programs tend to be either transitional or uniliterate in structure, supporting shift and death. Enrichment oriented programs are for the economically, socially, and politically secure and tend to adopt programs of uniliteracy, biliteracy, or full bilingualism in all courses. Group maintenance goals are reflected in biliterate or full bilingual programs and tend to support language maintenance. (I will elaborate more fully on these models later.)

Advocates of assimilation promote transition or compensatory programs. Edwards (1981:30) cites Kjolseth (1972) who, in 1972, stated that 80 percent of the bilingual schools in the USA reflected the assimilation or “melting pot” ideology. Advocates of pluralism and diversity (often the secure elite) usually support an enrichment and/or group maintenance oriented program. Fishman (1981) suggests that a combination of these two views would more realistically reflect most societies. His choice of a bilingual education model will be discussed below.

2.4. Typologies of bilingual education

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There are a number of typologies of bilingual education outlined, but I will mention only a few, concentrating on Fishmans. The model chosen for a bilingual education program should reflect the state and values of the community and goals of the educators.

Fishman and Lovas (1972) outline four categories of bilingual education which correspond to a continuum proposed by Hernández-Chávez (1978). At one extreme of this continuum is the Pluralistic model, in which the program is initiated by the community leaders and designed on the basis of sociolinguistic research. This model uses a number of different varieties of languages together for a minimum of nine years and has a high degree of community involvement, thus, supporting language maintenance.

At the other end of the continuum, the Assimilationist model uses the ethnic language for three years as a bridge to the second language. There is no community involvement. This model is a reflection of many bilingual schools.

Type I of Fishman and Lovas’ model corresponds with the Assimilationist’s end of the continuum. It is called Transitional Bilingualism, where the mother tongue is taught in the early grades until the children’s mastery of the second language is sufficiently developed that they can continue education in it. These programs support language shift and make no long-range considerations of institutional development or support of the mother tongue.

Type II programs, or Monoliterate Bilingual programs, develop the aural/oral skills in both languages, but develop reading and writing skills in the second language only. They tend to support language maintenance initially, but ultimately lead to language shift because the rewards of literacy in the society at large encourage use of the second language.

Type III, Partial Bilingualism programs, develop aural/oral skills and literacy skills in both languages but instruction in the mother tongue is restricted to certain subjects. This model supports both language and culture maintenance. Usage of it would seem especially appropriate in situations of diglossia or where the community has definite ideas of which languages are appropriate for which subjects, for example, Egypt (El-Dash and Tucker 1975) and Philippines (Sibayan 1975). A similar model of bilingual/bicultural maintenance is suggested by González (Trueba 1976:17). In this model, the subjects taught in the mother tongue are culturally related to the mother tongue.

The Type IV, Full Bilingualism programs, develop all skills in all subjects. This type of program, while aiming at language maintenance, seems unrealistic since there is probably no such thing as a fully-balanced bilingual society. In other words, where two or more languages exist in a community, they will generally not be used equally in all domains. Fishman (1969) recommends contextualising language instruction, that is, taking into account language usage, styles, domains, and attitudes and teaching languages in and for contexts useful for the students.

Unlike Hernández-Chávez, Fishman and Lovas do not include the component of community involvement in their model, although they stress the need for it.
González (Trueba 1976:11) also suggests a further type not already discussed, called the Bilingual/Bicultural Restorationist model. This type of program attempts language revival, although it is rarely successful if only the school supports it.

2.5. The effects of bilingual education programs on language maintenance and shift

In many cases, the traditional school has been very effective in facilitating language shift. Dorian (1978) points out that, since the school system reflects the wider community, the ignoring of a minority language probably reflects the society’s lack of enthusiasm for the language and for the minority group itself. Refusal to use a minority language speaks volumes without there having to be punishment and so forth associated with its use.

If the school does not see the language as one valuable for instruction, parents may not teach the language to their children, as Dorian (1978) found with Gaelic-speaking families in East Sutherland. There, the school showed its disapproval of Gaelic by banning it from the school grounds, having a teacher make home visits to discourage its use, and more recently by refusing to allow high school students to study it, although time and a teacher were available. This is not always the case, particularly in a diglossic situation.

There have been very few documented examples of research on bilingual programs showing the degree of language maintenance. Most studies tend to show statistics indicating success by the number of students who made the transition to the second language. This is not surprising, considering that the goals of most bilingual programs are transition or assimilation. There have been successful programs promoting assimilation in Brittany in France, in many North American schools, and so forth (Ferguson and others 1977). These programs have facilitated language shift in communities already undergoing shift.

There are examples in Ghana, Soviet Russia, Holland, Japan, and so forth where a second language is taught in a bilingual program to promote national unity, to facilitate communication with the outside world, or to gain economic advantage. These cases are examples of additive bilingualism where there has not been a shift to the second language.

Programs in Ireland, Wales, Scotland (MacKinnon 1977), and America in after-school hours (Ferguson and others 1977) have reported success in language maintenance for individual students as well as preservation of ethnic ties. However, no significant changes have been noted in the communities which are in language shift situations. A bilingual education program supporting language maintenance is more likely to succeed where the national or second language is not the language of the majority in a community (for example, most of the successful programs with Australian Aboriginals are in this type of situation), and where knowing a second language does not necessarily indicate that upward mobility will be realised.

Programs aiming to give equal status to two groups or to reconcile separate communities have claimed success. An example is the French-English project in Canada (Lambert, in Ferguson 1977). This project achieved maintenance using an additive bilingual approach. I found no examples of programs aimed at revitalization of dying languages, although they may exist.

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3. Measures of language maintenance and shift

How, then, can educators determine whether a community is undergoing language maintenance or shift and whether its members support it so that decisions can be made concerning the type of bilingual education program needed? While language maintenance and shift are impossible to predict with complete accuracy, study of some of the factors found in communities undergoing shift and maintenance may give some clues.

Dorian (1981) suggests a study of the competition of the two languages, in terms of political and cultural contexts. Fishman (1971) suggests study of intergroup contacts that attend to important processes other than language, for example, urbanization, industrialisation, nationalism, and so forth. Fishman recommends Schermerhorn’s (1964) suggestion to study such factors as unequal power configurations, incorporation, plurality and immigration, stratification and mobility, acculturalisation, de-ethnisation, and industrialisation also in a comparative sense.

Spolsky (1975) gives an example in his study of language maintenance among the Navajo. He recommends looking at the language of six-year olds as they enter school, as an indication of the language parents have chosen to teach their children. This is a crucial question for language maintenance and shift. His example is certainly the easiest to administer for school staff, but probably needs to be combined with a study of factors, such as those mentioned by Fishman.

Lewis (1978) suggests looking at the sources of heterogeneity within a community and the type of community it is. The first includes such things as economic differences, extent to which the language is regarded as central to the maintenance of the culture, degree of political participation, diffusion, and settings. The latter could be stable, marginal, isolated, mobile, and so forth. Some of Fishman’s considerations may be the cause of a community’s state.

Giles and Saint-Jacques (1979) suggest using censuses to determine language shift and maintenance. Using one census, a child’s language usage (from ‘mother tongue’ questions) can be compared to present day usage (from “home” language questions). Observations from two or more censuses (preferably adjacent in time) could be compared. Again, they do not take into account any factors other than language.

Bourhis and others (1981) assert that a measure of a community’s “ethnic vitality” can suggest a language’s status. Assessment of status, demographic considerations, and institutional support will show a community’s vitality. The difference in their approach is that they attempt to get an insider’s view of the factors that Fishman and Lovas (1972) consider from an outsider’s point of view. They are piloting a questionnaire to be given to high school students that will determine these features for a community.

Lieberson (1980) more fully outlines procedures for surveying language maintenance and shift. He comments that, without a temporal dimension, a sociolinguistic survey is handicapped when it comes to measuring change. Like Spolsky, Giles and Saint-Jacques and Bourhis and others, his procedures measure actual changes in a language situation rather than making predictions on shift or maintenance for the future.

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He suggests that such techniques as retrospective questions, study of parent-child changes, and cross-sectional usage of age data may give some ideas on the processes of change in a community. Reasons for migration and length of residence need to be taken into consideration. He gives suggestions on sampling which should allow for goals and the type of model used. A program which supports a community’s values will have greater success than one which runs counter to them. A program which is the responsibility of the community itself will be the one most likely to reflect and support the community values.

Study should be made, not only to determine the language situation in a community, but to compare it with other communities before choosing an appropriate model. Since language shift and maintenance cannot be predicted by any easy measure, these decisions will not be easy to make, because problems might be encountered with changes which could occur unexpectedly.

This, of course, is an ideal, one which realistically would require a lot of time, money, and personnel. Yet, it also reflects the attitudes of educators that are genuinely concerned for the community they are working with, if they can aim towards following this ideal.

Further research needs to be done on the effects of various models of bilingual education on the total community and its language situation, rather than simply dealing with individuals’ language maintenance and shift.

Further topics for research in language maintenance, shift or death might include the following:

1. Comparison of industrialised/preindustrialised countries
2. Programs for immigrants versus those for indigenous minority groups
3. Methods of teaching or teacher’s use of language in relation to language maintenance or shift
4. Personnel involved in a research project (for example, teachers, sociolinguists, indigenous people, expatriates, and so forth)
5. Program planning and implementation: implications for funding
6. Specific case studies dealing with the tonic, or with any of the above.

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