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The current status of European minority and regional languages

In my presentation, I would like to concentrate on a couple of basic theses. (1) First, cooperation among specialists in many different fields is an absolute necessity if we want to make progress in safeguarding the linguistic and cultural diversity of our continent and our world. I know that this may sound trivial and obvious, but I will argue that many shortcomings in various endeavours at promoting the use of lesser-used languages are due to the lack of understanding all relevant features in the frameworks of disciplines such as linguistics, ethnology, environmental studies, politics, economics, and technology.

(2) Secondly, Europe is much wider than the European Union, and even if one would want to focus on the situation within the Union, it must be remembered that this political unit is expected to expand further relatively soon, and irrespective of the schedule of the expansions of the European Union, most non-member countries in Europe are already closely interacting with it, not least in the field of languages or information and communication technologies.

(3) Furthermore, the number of minority and regional languages in all areas of Europe, in and outside the European Union, is larger than usually assumed, in other words, there are several language communities that are often marginalized or totally ignored in general discussion and decision-making. These considerations will open questions about how to define languages versus dialects on the one hand, and languages versus literary traditions on the other, and these questions would lead us to a preliminary typology of European non-official languages based on factors relevant to the applications of information and communication technologies, but on this occasion I will have the opportunity to say just a few words to that direction.

(1) In 1998, at a conference of the Foundation for Endangered Languages in Edinburgh, I presented a paper on the status of endangered languages in an area which, for a smaller part, overlaps with Europe, namely the Russian Federation. That paper was even more narrowly restricted to linguistic details than what I want to present in this context, but my overall conclusion was similar to my first topic, which is the call for cooperation and interaction of linguists and other specialists contributing to the study and promotion of lesser-used languages.

It is, I believe, self-evident that one person never masters all or even most fields relevant to a complex social issue. Linguists can discover useful things about the inter- and intragenerational use and different functions of languages, effects of language planning, bi- and multilingualism, and so on, but it is difficult or impossible to achieve any real progress in strengthening language communities without specialists such as ethnologists, sociologists, psychologists, environmental researchers, political scientists, legal scholars, economists, and experts on technology.

Ideally, then, every threatened language community would be served by a team of several devoted people with different backgrounds and agenda but with a shared interest in and knowledge of the language and culture of the nation they are committed to. Getting such teams together and working is not an easy task or a trivial undertaking at all, and tensions and conflicts are bound to occur in the course of collective work. The only crucial rule to be respected by everyone involved is that the will and interests of the language community in question must come first, which is, again, not unproblematic, because different opinions and personal priorities often arise among community members. In cases of serious disagreement, one should not try to force consensus where it does not exist, but offer different solutions and let them be tested by time. Such a pluralistic approach would be highly recommended for implementing information and communication technologies, in particular.

My earlier paper emphasizing the need for cooperation and dialogue between a wide range of specialists as well as members of language communities was rather severely and, I must say, quite justly criticized by some colleagues of mine. From their point of view, my conclusions were flat and my words empty because they did not give a clear answer to the question how language endangerment can be stopped. While this is obviously true, I am afraid that situations vary too greatly from one language community to another to make an overall solution to an immense multifaceted problem like ours unlikely.

Unfortunately, all we can do now and in the foreseeable future is to continue working with our communities pursuing our own fields, as well as trying to keep informed about the development of other disciplines and in touch with specialists that approach the problems from different view-points. I am pleased to notice that positive signs of intensifying cooperation are immediately present in this conference: our last speaker tomorrow, Bojan Petek, has participated in Foundation for Endangered Languages conferences and greatly contributed to them by sharing his ideas on the implementation of information and communication technologies with a linguistically-oriented audience.

(2) My second aim is to try to counterbalance to some extent the Western European and EU bias in current discussions and publications on European minority and regional languages. It is quite understandable that the best-known languages, that is, Basque, the Celtic languages, Frisian, and Romansch, as well as, perhaps, Sámi or Sorbian, dominate the field of studies, yet the number of non-official languages and the numbers of their speakers in eastern and east central Europe are far from negligible. The features and traditions of the languages outside the European Union may also occasionally warrant different solutions for information and communication technologies, and I am happy to have found out that these questions will be discussed in other presentations at our conference. I will now discuss two maps that may be studied in more detail later.

The first map is the one published by the European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages and confined to the European Union. This map also includes data on communities of speakers of majority languages outside the countries where those languages have an official status, actually as many as 17 of the 46 languages included in the map belong to this category, leaving 29 languages that are "lesser used" everywhere. The colours on this map refer to branches of language families, but genetic classification is one topic that is beyond the scope of my presentation, and I basically think that all languages are equally valuable irrespective of their genetic affinities.

The other map was prepared by the present author for the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, which was edited by Stephen Wurm and published by UNESCO and Pacific Linguistics in 1996. A new edition is due to appear soon. This map covers all of Europe, defined so that it excludes Caucasia, which as is well known is an area with a multitude of languages, but they will in this case fall outside the presentation. It also provides information about the state of the languages in terms of their degree of endangerment.

From a practical point of view I understand that many people are more ready to invest in Western Europe and the EU countries, because the market is better known and easier to access, but at the same time it must be remembered that the market is growing faster in those areas that are now catching up with the West. In non-EU countries, including the Russian Federation, financing is available to various projects in information and communication technologies from the EU cooperation funds, other organizations both official and non-governmental, as well as private sources. I would also like to argue that working in areas and with communities that have received little attention so far is not only economically profitable but also humanly rewarding.

(3) My third and last task is to present an overview of the differences one comes across while exploring the linguistic diversity of Europeans. Geopolitical differences are the ones that come to mind first, and I will say a few words about each geographic area in Europe in a while if there is time left. Before that it may be worthwhile to try to define some basic concepts, not least the distinction between language and dialect. Many linguists would start and finish the discussion on defining this distinction by saying that it is all too relative an issue, and no absolute criteria can ever be found for making it. I do not share their view. While there are certain borderline cases, it is usually quite easy to say which linguistic isoglosses amount to language boundaries and which do not.

Most misunderstandings in these questions arise when languages are equalled with literary traditions, as many people either tend to forget or have never learned the early lesson in linguistic classes, namely that spoken language is primary, and writing is an imperfect, secondary, and dispensable reflection of speech. Even in Europe, where literary functions are often valued very highly, there are several language communities that would welcome implementations of information and communication technologies that are independent of writing. In any case, it would be desirable that the old-fashioned English terminology involving illiterate tribes speaking dialects and literate nations with languages became firmly obsolete, and all peoples and their languages were shown similar respect without reference to their use of writing.

Another source of confusion is the normative usage of speech dictated by elite groups of nation-states. Most readers have probably heard that "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy". It seems that many people have not understood the critical and ironic nature of this slogan, but this becomes obvious from the fact that it was first stated in a language without an army or a navy, namely Yiddish.

In my view, then, literary use or political boundaries do not define languages, but it is possible to work within a strictly linguistic framework, as long as one strives for maximally consistent criteria. Basically one has to choose between two policies, either a lumping procedure, where highly distinct varieties can at least historically be united and therefore regarded as dialects of one language, or a splitting strategy, which sees each straight-forwardly identified variety as an independent language. Since the latter policy is in much better accordance with ethnolinguistic pluralism, it is my choice and, I would like to think, the choice of most people who do active fieldwork in and with language communities. In this framework, no question about the status of, for instance, Frisian or Sámi arises, but they are undoubtedly language groups rather than languages. It can be noticed that in the EU map there are correctly three Frisian languages, while Sámi is inconsistently regarded as a single language.

At the same time it must be readily acknowledged that there are different kinds of languages, and also different kinds of dialects, with regard to their affinities with other varieties. Without going into further details, there are so-called regional languages that, while distinct from the official language, are sufficiently close to it to live in a diglossic situation with it. Regional languages are typical of large areas of many European countries, notably Germany, France, and Italy. There also cases which I would like to call co-languages, which refer two or more varieties that are linguistically very close indeed but whose few distinct features are nevertheless usually seen as decisive. An example close to us here would be the relationship between Galician and Portuguese.

Then there are varieties that are geographically detached from a very closely related larger variety, and these may be called either isolated or diaspora dialects. In the context of language endangerment, I would like to treat language communities speaking such dialects at the same level as those with distinct languages. Unfortunately, none of the isolated or diaspora dialects are included even in the all-Europe map. Many regional as well as all non-territorial languages like Romani and Jewish languages are also ignored in this version. Because of a practical necessity, my work excludes sign languages, classical languages, and artificial languages altogether.

On the EU map one finds symbols representing Croatian, Albanian, and Greek diaspora dialects in Italy, and in the case of Croatian, in Austria. One of the Slovene dialects spoken in Italy, Resian Slovene, is reportedly distinct enough to be regarded as an isolated dialect despite its geographic proximity to Slovenia. On the other hand, this map fails to properly recognize Low Saxon, which is only marked in the Netherlands while the bulk of speakers live in Germany where the language has not been granted an official status, and the traditional language of Danish Germans is Low Saxon, also known as Platt, rather than High German. Similarly, Francoprovençal is traditionally spoken not only in Valle d'Aosta but also across a large area on the French side of the border, where a symbol for the Oïl languages is placed instead.

We may now try to make a brief summary of European non-official languages. According to my present count which clearly needs to be refined in many areas, the total number of languages and isolated dialects currently spoken in Europe is 156, of which 32 have a state-wide official status. Not all of the remaining 124 non-official languages are endangered. Catalan and Tatar, for instance, have more speakers than many state languages and the numbers are not decreasing. Many regional languages also seem to survive without major problems in a stable diglossia with the official language. Yet the number of definitely endangered languages and isolated dialects in Europe is well over 100. Detailed surveys by the present author covering all of European languages will appear in two forthcoming publications, *Language Diversity Endangered* edited by Matthias Brenzinger and published by Mouton de Gruyter, and *Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages* edited by Christopher Moseley and published by Curzon Press.

Instead of a proper conclusion, I would like to share my general views on the applicability of technological solutions for minority language communities. It goes without saying that environmental issues must be on the top of any agenda, so I am not saying more about them. In social context, technology should ideally contribute to multiculturalism, including the possibility to choose to live without advanced technology, because for many people that is the way to lead a more satisfying life, and the number of such people is probably increasing rather than decreasing. What I am saying is that life without information and communication technologies can be good and equally valuable and welcome, just different from life with them. When modern technological applications are used, they should make it possible for all varieties and forms of culture to flourish and gain respect in the society, especially among younger generations. Strict norms should be avoided in language planning in particular, because variation feeds creativity, and creativity is the force that keeps a language and a culture alive.