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Top-down approaches to language shift reversal: appropriate food for thought ?

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1. Introduction

Almost 25 years ago Joshua A. Fishman published a monograph entitled *Reversing Language Shift. Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (1991). The aim of this monograph is to offer both language activists and linguists a rational and systematic approach “to what has often hitherto been a primarily emotionladen, ‘let’s try everything we possibly can and perhaps something will work’ type of dedication” (Fishman 1991: 1).

In *Reversing Language Shift*, Fishman not only expands on a topic that had been introduced by Ellis and Mac a’Ghobhainn in 1971, yet was treated rather marginally in literature throughout the 1980s. He also pursues a line of research that he and some of his colleagues had already developed in the 1960s. In 1968, for example, Fishman, Ferguson and Das Gupta published an edited volume on *Language Planning in Developing Nations* in which they sought for solutions to the language problems which members of language communities in developing nations were confronted with. That work has been criticised from a ‘postcolonial’ and ‘postmodern’ perspective for using a ‘modern’ rational approach to language policy and planning that reflected a belief in progress that was typical of the post-WWII society (cf. Tollefson 2002). However, notwithstanding an ever-growing interest in the ideologies that underlie language policy and planning in many corners of the world, one can witness a ‘pragmatic turn’ in contemporary literature that calls for a reevaluation of a more practical approach to language policy and planning. The basic idea behind the so-called ‘pragmatic turn’ is that more attention ought to be paid to “the implementation of language policies” and to “practical and empirical issues” (Schiffman 2013: 3091). Researchers should not only reflect on *what* kind of LPP (= language policy and planning) activities are or should be developed in a specific context and *why* certain activities may be said to be more justified than others, but rather *how* certain LPP goals can be reached and if some practical way of reaching them is preferable to other ways (cf. Grin et al. 2002; Grin 2003; Kymlicka and Grin 2003). In such a way they can, for example, be of more direct assistance to language communities that face societal language shift.

Rather than giving a critical account of the theoretical and methodological foundations of assistance to threatened languages as presented in Fishman’s work on language shift reversal¹, this contribution in a popularizing and generalizing way presents some main lines of thought in what one could refer to as ‘western’ literature on the more ‘practical’ side of consciously planned top-down measures aiming at language shift reversal. After an outline

¹ For details cf. the contributions in Fishman 2001; Darquennes 2005 and 2007; Lewis and Simons 2010.



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of some general theoretical principles, the focus will be on Wales because interested readers have the possibility to complement the all in all rather parsimonious description of LPP activities in Wales as provided here with more in-depth analyses that are amply available in scientific literature (cf. Williams 2000, 2008 and the many references cited herein). The main purpose of this contribution is not so much to provide a fully-fledged account of top-down language planning in Wales. The purpose rather is to provide some input for discussions on language shift reversal in the South American context and to add an additional perspective to other contributions on language revitalization that already appeared in *Donde la Palabra* (cf., for example, Plaza Martínez 2012). Parallel to engaging in further reading by making use of the references included in this text, readers should above all critically reflect on the issues presented below. They are invited to scrutinize the appropriateness of a rational ‘western’ approach to language shift reversal for the contexts they are familiar with themselves. They are also invited to address possible mismatches between the approach that is summarized in this contribution and the non-Anglo-Western contexts they are much more familiar with than the author of this contribution².

2. Reversing language shift: general principles

In order to explain societal language shift, Haugen’s description of the direction of linguistic pressure is still frequently used. Haugen’s description is accompanied by the following scheme: $A > Ab > AB > aB > B$ (where A/a stands for the minority language and b/B stands for the majority language, cf. Haugen 1953: 370-371). Baker and Prys Jones (1998: 151) explain the scheme in the following way:

“Speakers of language A come into contact with language B. Language B is spoken by a socially, economically and/or politically dominant group. Over time speakers of language A become bilingual in language B. Language B becomes the preferred means of communication for an increasing number of language functions. Gradually, younger speakers of language A lose fluency in their native language. Language B becomes the preferred language of the younger child-bearing generation and most of them speak it to their parents. Eventually, no children are raised to speak language A. By this time only a few adult native speakers of language A are left. As these grow older and die, so language A dies out.”

In short, societal language shift in general implies that the use of the minority language in official, semi-official and/or private domains of language use loses ground compared to the use of the majority language. Surely, societal language shift is to be considered as a gradual and non-linear process the extent and the course of which differ from case to case (cf. Haugen 1972 as well as Mackey 1980). In the case of European language minorities,

² Cf. also the content of the conference ‘Globalising Sociolinguistics’ organised at Leiden University (The Netherlands) from 18-20 June 2015 (<http://www.hum.leiden.edu/lucl/globalising-sociolinguistics/> Retrieved February 2015)



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however, one notices that most (if not all) of them face the challenge (albeit to differing degrees!) to prevent their minority language from losing ground *vis-à-vis* the majority language in the process of intergenerational minority language transmission.

In order to turn the tide, efforts are needed that aim at promoting the transmission and the use of the language (both are under pressure) as well as at positively influencing its societal status and prestige. It is, therefore, not surprising that the authors of the SMiLE-report (SMiLE = Support for Minority Languages in Europe) stress that ensuring the vitality of a minority language requires three complementary conditions: (1) the capacity to use the language, (2) opportunities to use it, and (3) the desire to do so (Grin, Moring et al. 2002). In other words: attention needs to be given to the (1) the cognitive, (2) the social, as well as (3) the affective dimension related to language use in society (cf. Darquennes 2005 and 2007). Or, in the words of Strubell (1999: 239): it is necessary to recognize the functional relationship between (1) language competence, (2) the social use of a language, (3) the presence and demand for products and services in/through that language, and (4) the motivation to learn and use that language. Most researchers also agree that one should not ‘only’ pay attention to language competence, language use and the attitudes towards the language when developing context-dependent and tailor-made measures that aim at language shift reversal. One should also take care of the language itself (cf. Fishman 2006). I.e.: communities should invest in the language itself (for example in its terminological elaboration and modernization, in the development of a written standard, ...) so as to facilitate the spread of the language in its written form in different domains of language use.

In sum: what is needed if one intends to counter societal language shift is the development of a total package of context-dependent, tailor-made, complementary and mutually reinforcing top-down as well as bottom-up measures that aim at (1) promoting the acquisition of a language and, by doing so, at increasing its number of users, (2) influencing the societal status and/or the functional range of a given language, (3) raising the societal prestige (or, in other words: the “reputation”, cf. Lo Bianco 2013: 3100) of a language, and (4) modifying the corpus of a language through the standardization and/or elaboration of its lexicon, grammar and/or orthography³.

It is, of course, easier said than done to develop a ‘holistic’ top-down approach to language shift reversal. However, in regions such as Wales, Catalonia and the Basque Autonomous Community language planning agencies have invested considerable time and resources in the development of strategies to counter societal language shift (cf. Williams 2008 for details). Unfortunately, there still is a lack of scientific literature that provides a clear and comprehensive description (i.e.: a sort of manual) of the practical steps that need to be taken when planning top-down measures to promote a language. Looking at some of the

³ Cf. also Baldauf (2004: 2) who states that the list of ‘activity types’ in language policy and planning makes sense “for descriptive-pedagogical purposes”. One should, however, be aware of the fact that in reality the overlap and the interplay between these activities are far more complex than the neat division suggests.



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documents and articles that deal with top-down language planning in Wales does, however, provide an idea of the kind of goals language planners aim at and of how they intend to achieve those goals.

3. Planning language shift reversal in Wales

Following the Welsh Language Act (1993) which placed a duty on the public sector in Wales to treat Welsh and English on an equal footing, the Welsh Language Board was established as a non-departmental statutory organisation that does not have any direct responsibility for policy formulation but rather acts as a facilitator and an advisor that shares its vision and mission with its partners. The Board (which was replaced by a Language Commissioner in 2012) had five core functions. It had to (1) promote and facilitate the use of the Welsh language, (2) advise on and influence matters relating to the Welsh language, (3) initiate and oversee the process of preparing and implementing language schemes (cf. *infra*), (4) distribute grants to promote and facilitate the use of Welsh, and (5) maintain a strategic overview of Welsh-medium education (cf. Williams 2008: 265-269 for details).

In 1999-2000 the Welsh Language Board developed a language strategy entitled ‘The Welsh Language: A Vision and Mission for 2000-2005’. At that point the development of such a strategy is considered necessary because of the following concerns regarding the vitality of the Welsh language:

- In half the families where only one parent can speak Welsh, the children are unable to speak it.
- 40% of children who complete primary education as first language Welsh speakers commence their secondary education as second language Welsh speakers and take their curriculum through the medium of English.
- The Welsh Language Board’s commissioned surveys show that more than 40% of Welsh-speaking adults lack confidence in using the language, and therefore use it infrequently.
- During adolescence, many bilingual teenagers use the language less frequently as they grow older (though this trend may be reversed in later life).
- Geographically, the Welsh language has tended to decline by a westward movement, with many communities lessening in their everyday use of the Welsh language (Welsh Language Board 2000: 96-97).

As stated before, for those interested in the more ‘practical’ aspects of language planning ‘The Welsh Language: A Vision and Mission for 2000-2005’ (cf. Welsh Language Board 2000 for a reference to the full text) is interesting in that it contains a number of clear goals or targets and provides general information on the way in which these goals could or ought



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to be reached. The targets centre around 4 types of language planning: acquisition, status, corpus and usage planning⁴.

As to **language acquisition planning**, a distinction is made between language transmission in the family and Welsh-medium and bilingual education (i.e. language transmission in an educational setting). As far as **language transmission in the family** is concerned, the document contains two targets:

Target 1: To provide information, advice, guidance and support to new parents on the advantages of early bilingualism. This will include extending the training of midwives and health visitors to all areas of Wales.

The idea is to provide crucial information on the transmission of Welsh to children as well as on (Welsh-English) bilingualism in so-called Bounty Packs (i.e. packs of free samples and information given via hospitals to new and expectant mothers), to train midwives and health visitors to provide information about bilingualism to parents and to work with schools and organisations that deal with young people to encourage young people to discuss the advantages of raising children bilingually. These initiatives should also help to attain the second target.

Target 2: By the results of the 2006 intercensal survey, an increase in Welsh language transmission both in homes where both parents speak Welsh as in homes where one parent speaks Welsh.

Next, the document deals with **language transmission in educational settings** without, however, listing any concrete targets. The document rather announces the development of initiatives related to the transmission of Welsh at the level of pre-primary, primary, secondary, further and higher education as well as in the context of lifelong learning. Reading the document, it is clear that the Welsh Language Board recognizes the need to provide continuity in offering Welsh at all levels of compulsory education and beyond. When it comes to **usage planning**, a distinction is made between instrumental and integrative use of Welsh. Instrumental use refers to the use of Welsh in the economy and the public sector. The targets related to the **instrumental use of Welsh** include:

Target 3: To develop and expand the use of Welsh in the private sector (i.e. in private companies).

Target 4: To market and develop vocational training and the use of Welsh in the workplace.

Target 5: To monitor the instrumental use of the language.

⁴ 'Classical' language planning literature does not usually make a distinction between 'status' and 'usage' planning.



The **integrative use** refers to the use of Welsh in the community in as many domains of (especially private and semi-official) language use as possible. This is considered to be important since the Welsh language has moved away from being reserved for particular domains. Since Welsh faces competition with the majority language (i.e. English) most certainly in the domain of media and popular culture, one has to see to it that the Welsh language is maintained in as many areas of culture and leisure as possible. The targets related to the integrative use of Welsh include:

Target 6: To extend and develop community based language activity.

Target 7: To increase the cost effectiveness of resources.

Target 8: To monitor the integrative use of the language.

It is important to point out here that in order to reach the targets, the Welsh Language Board intends to invest in the development of materials that allow for the expansion of the use of Welsh in business centres as well as in marketing materials to raise awareness of the importance of, for example, bilingual vocational training among small and medium sized businesses. The Board also stresses the importance of community based language activity aiming at community leaders and decision makers in both the private and voluntary sectors. When it comes to the promotion of the integrative use of Welsh, the community language initiatives (the so-called *mentrau iaith*) are seen as vital. They are considered to be of great help in marketing the use of Welsh, in providing social opportunities to use Welsh and in revitalising the use of the language in the communities (cf. Williams 2008: 131-134 for details). In case of the development of activities aiming at an increased use of Welsh, prioritising should help to come to a better cost-effectiveness given the limited resources the Board has at its disposal.

In terms of **status planning**, it is clear that targets presented above that deal with the transmission of the language (in the family and at school) as well as with measures aiming at an increased use of the language also contribute to raising the status. In the case of more specific status planning actions, attention is given to institutions having an influence on status as well as modern domains of language use that can help to increase the status of Welsh. The status planning targets read as follows:

Target 9: To promote the language on the internet (cf. also target 12).

Target 10: To develop language planning links (i.e. to seek cooperation with other language planning agencies outside of Wales)

Target 11: to oversee the implementation and monitoring of Welsh language schemes and bilingual service provision.



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The language schemes referred to in Target 11 are an outcome of the Welsh Language Act as it was published in 1993. As mentioned above, the 1993 Act act gives an equal status to Welsh and English in public life in Wales and places a duty on the public sector in Wales to treat both languages equally when providing services to the public. More precisely, public organizations have to produce a so-called language scheme in which they explain which services they will provide in Welsh. Following the information provided on the website of the Welsh Language Commissioner such a scheme may, for example, explain how an organization will respond to letters, e-mails, online requests, phone calls from Welsh speakers or how the Welsh language will be used on signs, forms, publications, etc.⁵ Also private industries and companies which are named through a statutory instrument should prepare a Welsh language scheme⁶. The website of the Welsh Language Commissioner contains an overview of language schemes, including language schemes that have been developed by private companies on a voluntary basis⁷.

Finally, ‘The Welsh Language: A Vision and Mission for 2000-2005’ contains a section on **corpus planning** that centres around the need for linguistic standardisation and the need to develop a form of Welsh that is popular, used and useful. This section contains one target.

Target 12: To develop and standardise terminology and translation.

It is felt necessary that the Welsh language should be developed to reflect changes in society, for example in technology and science as well as in more everyday domains of language use (which makes it necessary to pay sufficient attention to the spoken varieties of Welsh and not to restrict the attention to written forms of Welsh).

4. Outlook

It might be a bit ‘strange’ for a contribution to focus on a language promotion strategy that has long been replaced by other strategies. It might also be a bit ‘strange’ for a contribution to present a past Welsh language promotion strategy in a rather isolated way, i.e.: without properly referring to the role of language legislation in Wales, the role of the Welsh Assembly in language policy and planning, the interaction of the Welsh Language Board (or at present: the Language Commissioner) with other regional and local actors, the importance of the availability of resources, the cost effectiveness analyses related to the management of resources, the need to complement more ‘technocratic’ approaches to language planning with language marketing campaigns that also tackle the social fabric of

⁵ <http://www.comisiynyddygyraeg.org/English/My%20language%20rights/Pages/Welsh-language-schemes.aspx> - Retrieved February 2015

⁶ <http://www.comisiynyddygyraeg.org/English/Law/welshlanguageact1993/Pages/cwmniaupreifat.aspx> - Retrieved February 2015

⁷ <http://www.comisiynyddygyraeg.org/English/Publications/Pages/SearchResults.aspx?Category=Welsh%20Language%20Schemes> - Retrieved February 2015



language communities, etc.⁸ Nevertheless, the summary of ‘The Welsh Language: A Vision and Mission for 2000-2005’ gives some insight into general principles underlying measures aiming at language shift reversal in Wales and could function as a source of inspiration for development of measures aiming at language shift reversal in other contexts. For those willing to further engage in or scrutinize the relevance of the Welsh top-down initiatives for their own particular context, it could be rewarding to have a closer look at the way in which language schemes are developed or are given shape (cf. also the document ‘From Act to Action’ for inspiration) and to consult document such as *As good as our words. Good practice guidelines for developing the use of Welsh language in the voluntary sector* (Jones 2008).

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⁸Readers are invited to have a look at the work of the members of the School of Welsh at Cardiff University (<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/welsh/>), the Welsh department at Aberystwyth University (<http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/cymraeg/>) and the Bilingualism Centre at Bangor University (<http://www.bangor.ac.uk/bilingualism/>).



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