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15 Methodological issues in language shift research

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One of the consequences of (international) migration movements is the emergence of language contact situations. Language contact generally leads to changes in the language behaviour of the individuals and groups that are involved. At a certain point in time, in certain contexts, individual immigrants may opt for the language of the immigration country instead of their mother tongue. Such individual language choice processes, be it or not in combination with processes of first language loss (Andersen, 1982) or incomplete learning of the mother tongue (Gonzo & Saltarelli, 1983), at group level, over generations, are likely to lead to a situation of permanent language shift.

Referring to the design and some of the results of a large scale research project in language shift and language loss that we have been working on in the last few years, we will mainly discuss some aspects of the methodology of language shift research and, additionally, formulate some suggestions for crosslinguistic research into language shift.

The sociolinguistic research project which we carried out, is mainly focusing on the social conditions that influence the processes of language shift and language loss in Turkish and Italian immigrants in The Netherlands and Flanders, the Dutch speaking part of Belgium. In this project some 800 subjects were interviewed by means of a rather lengthy questionnaire. Questions were included on the choice of language in different situations, on the social, cultural and educational background of the subjects, on assumed language proficiency and attitudinal factors. To this questionnaire a number of language proficiency tests in Turkish and Italian were added. In this context we will limit ourselves to the language shift part of the project. As to the language loss part, we refer to, e.g., Jaspaert & Kroon (1989).

Defining language shift

A first question to be answered is what we consider to be language shift, i.e., how language shift is to be operationalized. Although under the heading of language maintenance and language shift a multitude of different processes are investigated, some basic characteristics can be .observed. Language shift usually refers to the gradual disappearance of a language in a community where it used to be spoken. The main distinction between different approaches lies in the choice of linguistic facts that are used as an index for this disappearance. The candidates for this position can be divided into two groups: language use and language proficiency. Our position in this discussion is that we refer to changes in language use as language shift, and to changes in language proficiency as language loss. The fact that we opt for language choice as the basis for language shift implies that we consider language use as the more fundamental element in the gradual disappearance of a language. This implies that we believe a diminishing language proficiency to be a consequence of the fact that a language loses (some of) its functions rather than vice versa.

In order to explain the way in which we operationalized language shift in our research we will take a closer look at language contact situations. Imagine, for the sake of argument, a group that migrated to an area in which another language than their mother tongue is the dominant language and that stops using its own language in a period of three generations. The disappearance of the ethnic group language is really the outcome of a number of changes that have occurred in the ethnic community. Being confronted with another dominant language probably meant in the first place being confronted with speakers who are monolingual or at least do not speak the immigrant group's language. This implies that there is a problem when people of the immigrant group want to communicate with the speakers of the dominant language. This problem is typically one of coordination, i.e., the type of problem that instigates the creation of social norms (Ullmann-Margalit, 1977; Bartsch, 1985). In this context members of ethnic groups have different options which have, in turn, different chances of becoming the norm. We will discuss four different options.

Option 1
The ethnic group chooses not to communicate with people who do not speak their language, thus avoiding the emergence of communication

problems. As far as intergroup contacts are unavoidable these can be structured in a way that only a small number of ethnic group members are involved in the communication process. An example of this option is the relative isolation of the Pennsylvania Dutch or German in the USA (Huffiness, 1980). An important factor here is the dominant group's reaction. As long as the idea exists that the ethnic group will one day return to its country of origin the option of isolation is likely to be favoured by the dominant group. Examples of this position are to be found in Western Europe with respect to the early groups of migrant workers (cf. Boos-Nünning & Hohmann, 1989 for a discussion of this policy in the Federal Republic of Germany). But as soon as groups have settled permanently in another language area, as is the case with the groups we are studying, the choice for abstinence of communication becomes an unlikely option for both the dominant group and the ethnic group.

Option 2
The ethnic group tries to establish communication in its own language. This option, too, needs the consent of the dominant group to become the norm and it is clear that this consent will not be easily obtained. Although segregation or integration policies may lead a dominant group to accept to communicate with the minority group in the minority group language in a limited number of well defined situations, it is very unlikely that minority language use becomes the norm in less formalized surroundings.

Option 3
Members of the two groups choose to communicate in a third language that they both know. Although in the intergroup communication between Italian immigrants and the Flemish majority in Flanders, French for some time has played this role of a third language, generally speaking this seems to be an exceptional choice since in most cases there will not be such a language available (Vanvolsem, Jaspaert & Kroon, 1991).

Option 4
Given the limited chance for the options discussed so far to become the norm in intergroup communication, the most likely norm for communication with members of the dominant group is, of course, the dominant group language. If a member of the minority group wants to ask direc-

tions in the street from a member of the dominant group, or when he is asked directions from somebody from this group, the conversation will almost certainly take place in the dominant group language. For more formalized situations the dominant group language will also be the norm, except in a few instances as described above, where an exception to this norm is allowed.

The above implies that when migration is followed by a more or less permanent settlement, and both sides choose for integration rather than segregation, members of the minority group almost unavoidably shift towards the use of the dominant language in most of their contacts with the dominant group. The extent of the shift process will be determined by the extent of the inter-ethnic communication that is established.

Returning to our previous example of the ethnic group losing its language in the course of three generations, it has to be remarked, of course, that this choice for the dominant language does not necessarily explain the shift that occurred in intragroup communication. As long as we are dealing with a group, i.e., as long as the group does not lose its group status, there is intragroup communication which does not necessarily follow the same norms as intergroup communication, and which therefore could go on taking place in the ethnic group language. Such a process would lead to a language situation in the community which could be described as a form of stable bilingualism: the minority language is used in intragroup communication and the majority language in all other instances (Fishman, 1972). Language death only occurs as a result of the disappearance of intragroup communication and this can normally only happen when the group itself dissolves due to demographic causes (Dorian, 1980). If the minority language disappears without group dissolvement, as in our example, this means that the members of the minority group have chosen to use the dominant language in intragroup communication. This form of shift is clearly different from the one in intergroup communication. The use of the dominant language in intragroup communication in general is no answer to a coordination problem. There might be instances in which coordination problems do occur, e.g., in the case of a large amount of linguistic diversity in the home country or a declining proficiency in the ethnic group language in the second generation which causes intragroup communication problems in the immigration situation. However, intragroup language shift is not primarily a question of the need to understand and the need to be

understood. It is not motivated by the need to establish communication but by the wish to establish communication in a certain way.

The difference between the two forms of shift can be expressed in a different way. In the first case norms have to be established as a result of the new situation. Once they have been established, they do not change anymore. What does change is the situation to which they apply. If, for instance, a minority group family moves from an area predominantly populated by members of the minority group to an area where no other members live, the amount of use of the minority language will drop drastically. The norm, however, i.e., speak the minority language with minority group members, will not change. With the second form of shift, the shift process does not only imply the creation of new norms, but the adaptation of old ones. This change of norms is an essential part of the shift process. If in the example of the family moving to an area where no group members live, the situation changes again so that other group members come to live in that area, the use of the group language will rise again. But if in the meantime the norm itself has undergone change, the new migration may not lead to increased use of the group language for that family. In other words, the choice of language in interaction with group members should be considered the form of behaviour which is central to questions of language maintenance. As long as there is a minority group and, as long as this minority group is not demographically broken up, the use of the minority language will not disappear unless the norms for language use within the group are changed. Whereas the first form of shift creates a stable bilingual situation, the second form destabilizes such a situation to the possible extent that bilingualism may disappear altogether.

This discussion on the nature of shift leads to the conclusion that in order to understand processes of language maintenance and language shift, it is imperative to study changes in language choice in intragroup communication. Only when we understand the mechanisms that govern these changes, will we be able to interpret correctly processes of maintenance and shift in demographically stable situations. In situations that are demographically unstable we will also need to study the demographic changes and the interaction between these changes and the normative changes.

Measuring language shift

As to establishing the extent to which group members use the group
language for intragroup communication, two different options seem to
be of importance. One can either take the position that shift is deter-
mined by the frequency with which the group language is used. Any
choice of the dominant language is then a next step in the process of
shift, regardless of the situation in which it occurred. Or one can take
the position that functionality of a language much more than frequency
of its use, is a key concept in determining the importance of language
choice for language shift. In the latter case the more important question
becomes in which situations or domains which language is chosen
(Fishman, 1970). The frequency of use of a language may change with-
out the functionality changing. An example may clarify this point. Take,
for instance, two individuals who interact with other members of their
community in two domains. In domain 1 they almost always use the
majority language, and in domain 2 they almost always use the minority
language. One individual, however, interacts most of the time in domain
1, whereas the other hardly ever finds himself in situations that do not
belong to domain 2. The functionality of the two languages in question
is equal for both individuals, the frequency of use, however, differs
considerably.

The question now is whether one should measure the amount of
group language used within a community in order to determine the
scope of the shift process, or concentrate on how functional the lan-
guage is within that community. Although most researchers in language
shift research work with the domain concept (e.g., Pauwels, 1986), i.e.,
base themselves on measures of functionality, we decided to include
both, functionality and frequency of use in our study. This means that
on the one hand we gathered information on the language choice people
make in a certain number of domains. On the other hand, we collected
information on the relevance of these domains in intragroup communi-
cation, and we asked some general questions on the amount of group
language use, without reference to domains.

We distinguished eight domains: family, neighbourhood, clubs and
meeting places, work, religion, shopping, friends and family outside the
community, and other contacts. Of all these domains (and subdomains
within these) the informant was asked whether he or she came into
situations which belonged to that domain. When the informant affirmed
this, he/she was asked whether he/she met group members in that situa-

tion. When this was again affirmed, the informant was requested to indicate on a five point scale whether he/she met in this situation:

(1) almost exclusively group members
(2) more group members than others
(3) group members as frequent as others
(4) more others than group members
(5) almost exclusively others.

Next the informant was asked which language he/she usually employed with group members in that situation. After having chosen from the possible alternatives (Dutch, Turkish/Italian, Italian dialect, other), the interviewer asked whether the interviewee sometimes used another language with group members in that situation. When that was the case, the informant was invited to tell something more about the circumstances in which this happened. The interviewer was instructed to listen to this story and pick out of it to which circumstances this occasional use related, thereby using four categories to structure these circumstances:

(1) characteristics of the interaction partner in terms of generation
(2) persons present during the interaction
(3) the place of interaction
(4) the topic of conversation.

As to the frequency of use the informants were asked to generally consider their contacts with group members during the course of one week, and to indicate on a five point scale to what extent they used Italian with certain categories of group members. The five point scale consisted of the following possibilities:

(1) almost always Italian/Turkish
(2) more Italian/Turkish than Dutch
(3) an equal amount of Italian/Turkish and Dutch
(4) more Dutch than Italian/Turkish
(5) almost always Dutch.

The different groups the question was asked for were:

(1) group members of the first generation
(2) group members of the second or third generation
(3) when group members of different generations are present
(4) when non-speakers of the group language are present.

Language shift data

As to the results of the language shift part of our research we will limit ourselves here to some global shift figures on the Italian and the Turkish group respectively, without discussing the social correlates of these data (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon, 1991).

The data show that in the Italian group, roughly speaking, intra-group communication takes place in Dutch in about 40% of the instances we recorded. The differences between the domains that were included appear to be lower than was expected: there is no domain that is especially resistant to Dutch and there are no domains that have almost completely been affected by shift. An interesting point is that the family is certainly not the stronghold of the ethnic minority language since communication with siblings is the situation most favourable to the use of Dutch (about 60%) and even for communication with the parents Dutch has become the usual language in about 40% of the cases. The domains that seem to be most resistant to Dutch are neighbourhood (27%) and church (19%).

The figures concerning occasional use of Dutch in intragroup communication in the Italian group are on the whole rather low. Less than 20% is found to use Dutch occasionally. The few switches that occur are usually triggered by the characteristics of the persons present at the interaction, with the presence of non-speakers of Italian being the most important incentive.

In the Turkish group the number of subjects claiming Dutch as usual language in intragroup communication is much smaller and in quite a number of domains even negligible (less than 10%). The number of subjects claiming occasional use of Dutch is much larger than in the case of the Italian group (almost 48%). Resemblances can be found in the order of Dutchification of domains. As is the case with the Italians, neighbourhood, church and visits are the domains least affected by shift. Sportsclubs, work and communication with siblings are the domains in which Dutch is used most often.

If we compare the language shift data of the two groups, the resemblances in the order of domains as to the importance of use of Dutch suggest that we are dealing with a more general process of shift. In this process the two groups have clearly reached different stages. The Italian group has reached the stage in which Dutch is the usual language for an important part of the group. Within the Turkish group, there are hardly any individuals for whom Dutch is the usual language,

but an important part of the group occasionally uses Dutch. Splitting up the data of the two groups into tables for each of the specific places in The Netherlands and Flanders where data were gathered, shows that we are in fact not dealing with two homogeneous groups of Italians and Turks. Without going into much detail here, it is clear that different settlements have reached different stages in more or less the same process of language shift. Some elements of the way in which this process proceeds are clear reminders of what has been called the wave theory (Bailey, 1973). In a first step Dutch becomes the occasional language in some domains for a limited group of people. Next the occasional use of Dutch spreads to other domains and people, and at the same time a number of occasional users in a number of domains switch to Dutch as a usual language. This wave movement continues, turning certain domains into all Dutch domains, and gradually Dutchifying others. The final outcome, if the process keeps going, is the total Dutchification of the intragroup communication. In this sense language shift is only a special form of language change.

These different stages in such a wave process can also be observed in the data related to frequency of use of Italian and Dutch. The frequency figures show that for communication within the ethnic group, Dutch is used with a larger frequency by the Italian group than by the Turkish. For both groups the minority language is used more often with members of the first generation than with members of other generations, and more when no Dutch speakers are present than when Dutch speakers are present.

Explaining language shift

On the basis of these figures two language shift measures were constructed, one for functionality and one for frequency. These measures were then used in a series of statistical analyses that aimed at establishing the social correlates of the shift observed. Neither the construction of the shift measures, nor their social correlates will be discussed (cf. Jaspaert & Kroon, 1991). They are mentioned here for the sole purpose of introducing the conclusion that statistical correlates between language variables such as shift on the one hand and social factors on the other are insufficient tools for the understanding of the processes underlying this form of language change.

This type of correlational analysis falls within the tradition of the exploration of the importance of what is called distance variables influencing

language change (Extra & Vallen, 1989). Research has been done, for example, into the influence of communicative, social, economic, juridical, linguistic, cultural, religious and demographic distance. In this research, it is remarkable that these factors do not in all situations consistently work in the same direction. In one group of subjects the factor inter-ethnic marriage, for example, favours language shift, whereas the same factor in another group counteracts to these processes. Furthermore, in many research projects it is not at all clear to what extent these factors are related to each other, to what extent, in other words, they have individual explanatory power. At the moment it is generally accepted that the factors that were mentioned before, and possible other sociological factors, do not directly influence the processes of language choice and language shift, but exert their influence through intervening or intermediating variables or concepts (Appel & Muysken, 1987). To construct these concepts it is necessary to work on the basis of a more general theory of sociocultural contact and sociocultural change (Fishman, 1972). In this respect, several proposals have been put forward in the literature. Depending on the theoretical backgrounds of the researchers, central importance is given to concepts like attitudes (Giles, 1979), ethnolinguistic vitality (Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977), social networks (Tandefelt, 1992), ethnic identity (Fishman, 1985), or symbolic exchanges (Jaspaert & Kroon, 1991). An important limitation of the models that have been proposed on the basis of these central notions is that in most cases they have not been empirically tested on a large scale with different groups of subjects. Even more importantly, they cannot be tested on the basis of (rather superficial) census data that are available (Fishman, 1992).

In our study, groups are incorporated that differ among each other as to their immigration history, culture, religion, language background, and social, economic, juridical, and demographic position. We ultimately aim at testing the models that have been proposed.

Conclusions

One of the main insights that we gained from the research that we have been working on is, that the development and empirical validation of a theoretical, explanatory model of language choice and language shift cannot be limited to just studying two groups in a particular language area in which processes of language shift occur. We therefore decided

to expand our study to other ethnic minority groups in different circumstances, countries and language environments.

Until now we managed to have data collected on language shift in Italian immigrants in London (n=100) and in Panjabi speaking Sikhs in Birmingham (n=100). The data of these and other groups will make crosslinguistic and crossnational analyses of language shift processes possible. The envisaged international and crosslinguistic expansion of our study seems to provide a good guarantee for the acquisition of a more profound insight in possible sociolinguistic consequences of language contact for the patterns of language use of individuals and groups involved. The acquisition of such insight is also relevant from a societal perspective, for example, in view of questions of the development of national and international policies in the field of language and education.

Acknowledgements

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