

14 EPILOGUE

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“Anyone who thinks we are close to final answers, or that we know how to find them, must surely be mistaken.”

Wallace Chafe. Discourse, Consciousness and Time. 1994.

1.

In 1992, more than twenty years ago, Kenneth Hale, Michael Krauss and several other linguists began a world-wide crusade to save what they labelled ‘endangered languages’ (Hale et al. 1992). Especially graphic was the message of Michael Krauss who wrote that “at the rate things are going the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90 % of mankind’s languages”.

Krauss asked:

“What are we linguists doing to prepare for this or to prevent this catastrophic destruction of the linguistic world? It behooves us as scientists and as human beings to work responsibly both for the future of our science and for the future of our languages, not so much for reward according to the fashion of the day, but for the sake of posterity. If we do not act, we should be cursed by future generations for Neronically fiddling while Rome burned” (Hale et al. 1992).

Two years later, Krauss’s dire predictions were repeated in a report written for UNESCO (Krauss 1994). A draft of this report was circulated among his colleagues, and provoked a serious discussion. The community of linguists, followed by the media, the NGOs, and – last but not least – the funding agencies, turned their attention to the problem of language endangerment.

As often happens, the problem was known much earlier, but had no serious effect on the activities of the international community of linguists. The ground-breaking paper by Morris Swadesh was published as early as 1948 (Swadesh 1948), but passed more or less unnoticed, as usually happens with publications that are ahead of their time. John Gumperz used the phrase ‘language shift’ as a commonly accepted term already in 1968 (Gumperz 1968). The first comprehensive collection of papers on the topic appeared in 1977 (Dressler and Wodak-Leodolter 1977); it contained all the necessary ideas and formulas to prove that the authors were fully aware of the catastrophic situation (“the drama of dying languages that is taking place around the

world,” the editors wrote in the Introduction). However, for some reason the problem became everybody’s concern and attracted broad attention only 15 years later, after the above-mentioned publication appeared in *Language*.

This was a great change of direction for modern linguistics: an increasing number of human and financial resources were now redirected from desk work to field work, from theorising to monitoring, documenting and revitalising endangered languages. We should be grateful to those linguists who convinced us that language shift was dramatic and dangerous, that we the linguists have no right to ignore it, even though there may have been some exaggerations in early interpretations of language shift. There can’t be too much water in the bucket if the house is on fire.

Today, meticulous statistical analysis presented, for example, in Simons and Lewis (2012) demonstrates that, on the one hand, the largest number, fully two-thirds, of the languages of the world are at least safely maintained in everyday oral use in their communities or are sometimes at an even stronger level of development and recognition, but, on the other, 29% of the world’s languages are in some stage of loss or shift (ibid.: 17). This is much better than Michael Krauss’s 90% of the early 1990s, but, come to think of it, 29% is also bad enough. It is these 29% that the present book is about.

The geographic scope of the book comprises a vast and diverse area, mostly Asiatic Russia (Eastern and Western Siberia, the Arctic, the Far East) but with comparisons with European (Frisian and Kildin Saami), Chinese and South American cases. Most contributions rely on the first-hand field experience of the authors which is of course a very strong advantage of the whole collection.

This first-hand experience allows the editors of the present book to ask a difficult question: there are numerous attempts worldwide to maintain and (or) revitalise minority languages. At first sight it seems that most individual programmes and activities are appropriate and certainly quite useful. Why are the proclaimed goals – reversing language shift worldwide, preserving linguistic diversity – far from being accomplished?

It is quite clear that there can be, theoretically, two types of answers to this question. The first type – let’s label it ‘external reasons’ – blames the imperfection of the outside world: in order to preserve minority languages (and minority cultures), one must change social, political, economic and legal conditions in certain countries or regions. According to this approach, the responsibility for language shift and loss rests with the environment: as soon as we *change the environment* (adopt governmental programmes of language revitalisation, allocate sufficient funds, change the legislation, support NGOs that do the work, etc., etc.) the situation will change for the better.

The second type of answer – let’s call it ‘internal reasons’ – recognises the necessity of all measures mentioned above but doesn’t expect external social, political, legal or financial changes to directly affect the situation of endangered languages. The only way those changes can work is if they influence the *motivation of the communities* to maintain their ethnic languages.

In a recent book on language revitalisation, the authors list separately internal and external obstacles on the road to language revival (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 176 ff.); interestingly, potential *internal* problems (unrealistic goals lead to disappointment and lack of motivation; conflicts in the community, especially if the revitalisation programme develops successfully; lack of trained teachers; the 'short wind' of many local enthusiasts) are more numerous and are described in more detail than the *external* ones (language and educational policy of the state; funding; professional expertise).

The present book doesn't aim at a consolidated answer to the question: different authors naturally have different opinions about it. The editors seem to be more on the side of the 'internal' type of solution: they write in the *Introduction*: "Most vital for the success of any activity to sustain linguistic and cultural diversity is the motivation of the local people to share these concerns". Erich Kasten further supports this position in his contribution; some other authors share this approach as well. I, too, feel that this approach is worth supporting: more than 10 years ago, I suggested, in my book on language shift (Vakhtin 2001), a rather pointed formula to explain why people shift from their ethnic language to a majority language: "people don't speak their language because they don't want to", meaning insufficient motivation to use the ethnic language due to its low prestige.

Yes, low prestige and low motivation. The editors write in the *Introduction*: "The particular cultural heritage of one's people or ethnic group often no longer has sufficient status in the given native community". True, so what can we do to help the cultural heritage of these peoples acquire a higher status? and who is supposed to do it? The present volume aims to answer these difficult questions.

There are at least four actors in play: the minority ethnic group itself, ethnic activists, researchers, mostly linguists, and 'the outer world': government, local administration, local industries and business, etc. Whose behaviour is crucial for language preservation? I assume that language shift is highly probable unless *the first* of these actors, the group itself, is motivated to continue to use it. As far as Russian minorities are concerned, specifically, Northern (Siberian) minorities, "... strange as it may seem, inside ethnic minorities themselves, the attitude to this phenomenon [loss of ethnic languages – NV] is mostly neutral and indifferent" (Burykin n.d.).

Some authors of the present book also list 'external reasons' for language loss, and, consequently, suggest 'external action' as a way to stop or slow the process. Alexandra Lavrillier lists insufficient representation of indigenous minority *intelligentsia* in governmental institutions, insufficient governmental support, the lack of a system of NGOs that could "counteract this lack of financial support", and, very importantly, the lack of interaction between speaking communities in villages and the indigenous *intelligentsia* which has some power to act and to access funding. All this is true, of course. However, I am not sure that direct external measures, such as suggested by Tjeerd de Graaf and Hidetoshi Shiraishi ("The Ainu case can be ... used as a model for

possible (legal) measures to be taken regarding minority languages and cultures such as Nivkh ...”) can be productive unless the indigenous minorities themselves actively join the movement.

Another answer suggested by the editors of the present book to the question “why the proclaimed goals are far from being accomplished” is lack of coordination (“What might be missing is a coordinated strategy that places more emphasis on some very basic considerations for future orientations and relevant efforts”). This suggestion contradicts an approach that I like very much, namely, the one expressed in Ash, Fermino, Hale (2001):

“There is reason for optimism because local language communities all over the world are taking it upon themselves to act on behalf of their imperiled linguistic traditions in full understanding of, and in spite of, the realistic perception that the cards are stacked against them. There is, in effect, an international movement in which local communities work in defiance of the forces pitted against their embattled languages. It has something of the character of a modern miracle, if you think about it – while they share the goal of promoting a local language, these groups are essentially independent of one another, coming together sometimes to compare notes, but operating in effective separation.

Two factors in our optimism are the very existence of the movement itself and what is sometimes decried as a flaw in the movement: the feature of independence, the fact that local language projects operate separately from one another. But this is a strength, in fact, a true reason for optimism” (Ash, Fermino, Hale 2001: 20).

In other words, language revitalisation programmes are strong precisely because they are not coordinated: thousands of groups on all continents work independently, moving towards the same goal. It is very good of course that these groups can exchange experience, exchange types of teaching materials, sometimes employ the assistance of the same professionals – linguists, language teachers, computers or media specialists – but each programme, if it wishes to be successful, should form as a grass root initiative; its specific shape will depend on specific local conditions.

2.

The issues discussed in this book are extremely complicated. Perhaps the most complicated side of the problem is the relations between the local community and the researcher. In the Russian North, it isn't a rare situation when almost the only person who advocates language maintenance is the researcher: a Russian or sometimes a foreign linguist or anthropologist. The members of the community are often rather indifferent to the task and agree to make moves towards language (cultural) revitalisation (or sometimes, still worse, to *imitate* such moves) only so long as they gain from it, directly, by payments, or indirectly, by various kinds of 'symbolic capital'. As soon

as the money flow runs dry, their enthusiasm also dries out, and all 'language revival' activities stop. Should we the researchers agree to such a role? Should we insist on language revival against the apparent resistance of the community?

A second aspect of the problem is connected with the above. Insistent appeals "to preserve heritage languages and cultures" can be interpreted (and sometimes are interpreted) as suppression of an alternative view, as a threat to diversity: if the dominant culture asserts the absolute value of all languages and cultures, why should minority cultures accept this assertion?

This is an old argument. In 1992, in the same issue of *Language* where the endangered language discussion was launched, there appeared a small note by Peter Ladefoged under the telling title *Another view of endangered languages* (1992). There were people, he wrote, who didn't consider their heritage language of value: for them, to shift to the dominant language was a highly desirable means of vertical social mobility, a conscious and voluntary choice. He gave several examples:

"[The Toda] have accepted that, in their view, the cost of doing this [i.e. becoming part of modern India] is giving up the use of their language in their daily life. Surely, this is a view to which they are entitled, and it would not be the action of a responsible linguist to persuade them to do otherwise" [Ladefoged 1992: 810].

And another one:

"Last summer I was working on Dahalo, a rapidly dying Cushitic language, spoken by a few hundred people in a rural district of Kenya. I asked one of our consultants whether his teenaged sons spoke Dahalo. 'No,' he said. 'They can still hear it, but they cannot speak it. They speak only Swahili.' He was smiling when he said it, and did not seem to regret it. He was proud that his sons had been to school, and knew things that he did not. Who am I to say that he was wrong?" (ibid: 811).

One year later, Nancy Dorian published 'a response' to Ladefoged in the same journal (Dorian 1993). She wrote (my apologies for the long quotation):

"I would answer Ladefoged's rhetorical question about the smiling Dahalo speaker, 'Who am I to say that he was wrong?'..., by noting that the Gaelic-speaking East Sutherland fisherfolk have in one sense already been proven 'wrong', in that some of the youngest members of their own kin circles have begun to berate them for choosing not to transmit the ancestral language and so allowing it to die.

Third-generation pursuit of an ancestral language is a phenomenon with a fairly obvious social basis. The generation who do not transmit an ethnic language are usually actively in search of a social betterment that they believe they can only achieve by abandoning, among other identifying behaviours, a stigmatising language. The first generation secure as to social position is often also the first generation to yearn after the lost language, which by their time is no longer regarded as particularly stigmatising. Some of these descendants see an ethnolinguistic heritage which eluded them and react to their loss, sadly or even resentfully. <...>

In other populations, rising consciousness of cultural loss resulting from a colonial past or other historically disfavoured circumstances produces similar results among modern-day descendants. <...> Reporting only on the abandonment phase of a language within a social group can obscure a longer-term dynamic, however, by overlooking reacquisition efforts on the part of members of a later generation within some social settings” (Dorian 1993: 576–577).

The editors and the authors of the present volume are, in this argument, more ‘on the Dorian side’. In the Introduction, we read the following:

“... it is important for the credibility of the given joint effort that everybody lives up to the same standards that are proclaimed and set for the proper motivational foundation in such projects <...> *The entire native community should be convinced that it, in the first place, would benefit most in the long run from the expected outcome*” [my emphasis].

This is a rather strong claim; in order to counterbalance it, let me quote a similarly strong one from Ladefoged:

“So now let me challenge directly the assumption of these papers [in *Language*, 1992, vol. 68. – NV] that different languages, and even different cultures, always ought to be preserved. *It is paternalistic of linguists to assume that they know what is best for the community*” (Ladefoged 1992: 810; my emphasis).

Once again, in this controversy I am rather with the editors of the present book, not with their opponents. And of course I don’t mean to say that the contributors ‘impose’ language revitalisation programmes on the communities, or are acting in a ‘paternalistic’ way. On the contrary, they work with and for those community members who expressed the explicit wish to maintain and to transmit their traditional knowledge to future generations. Still, this is a very complicated issue: as Alexandra Lavrillier writes in her contribution, applied anthropology often “transplants onto traditional societies some alien/foreign resources, techniques and knowledge (together with the development)”. The authors of this book, as well as applied anthropology in general, have gone a long way from the paternalistic approach professed, for example, by Russian linguists in the early 20th century (see Elena Liarskaya’s contribution to the volume). But we still find ourselves in a ‘logical loop’: if our language revitalisation project is a success – aren’t we ‘transplanting’ alien values into the society we are supposed to be studying, thus decreasing the level of cultural diversity? Our struggle to preserve linguistic and cultural diversity at all costs can sometimes lead, paradoxically, to *unification* of approaches, to shrinking of diversity.

To which the editors of the volume could say:

“I do not really share your reservation about addressing values when we converse and interact with native people, as we do among ourselves. Why can’t we share our concerns and opinions with them that many of us see the loss of cultural and lin-

guistic diversity, globally, as a problem for the persistence of humankind? And why can't we address the proven fact that people who feel cut off and alienated from their particular cultural past often face certain behavioural problems, most prominent in many native communities who are currently experiencing such transitions? And why is it wrong to say that communities in the first place might benefit in the long run, if those who wish it are being assisted to maintain at least fragments of their traditional knowledge within their new modern-oriented lives? To address opinions and values does not automatically mean that we impose these on others – and here the circle closes, if we connect here to our proclaimed key issue of the free will and motivation of the given people to decide themselves if they want to get involved in this process" (Erich Kasten's letter to the author, 06.11.2012).

Of course my opponent is right. This only further proves that the present book addresses an extremely complicated problem, and I will not pretend that I know the answer to the dilemma described above. On the one hand, the mainstream conceptual framework of language revitalisation emphasises the absolute value of linguistic diversity and expects linguists, anthropologists and other field researchers to work hard for the sake of language and culture maintenance. On the other, to enforce one's set of values on other cultures, to persuade the indigenous communities that linguists and anthropologists 'know better' what is good for them sounds impossibly paternalistic. Thirdly, members of the local language community are often responsible and educated people, equal partners in the dialogue, who can of course "decide themselves if they want to get involved in this process".

We should, however, bear in mind what Dean Worth once wrote (on an entirely different topic), namely, that there are concepts that "can provide the necessary conceptual framework ... but they can also, and all too often, turn into a conceptual prison from which it is difficult to escape" (Worth 1985: 233).

3.

An epilogue is supposed not only to present a conclusion for the completed work but also to suggest directions for its continuation. The composition of the present collection, in my opinion, clearly calls for such a continuation.

In the 1920s and early 1930s in Russia (provisionally called at the time 'the Soviet Union') a very intensive and broad discussion took place: hundreds of articles in periodicals ardently discussed the very issues that constitute the core of the present collection. One can find there some most interesting discussions of the role of stick and carrot, that is, external pressure and internal motivation for developing indigenous languages. There are interesting arguments on the perennial problem of different dialects that have to be united, for the sake of formal education, under the single umbrella of a 'literary language'. A lot was written about the problem of the norm in general and the orthographic norm in particular: Cyrillic or Roman? Roman or

Arabic? Is it better for the school children to study one orthography for both their indigenous language and Russian, or is it easier for them to keep the two systems apart when they read and write?

The general context has changed greatly over the last 80 to 90 years, of course, as has the technology used at schools; but it is a pity that this abundant Russian experience lies unclaimed by the modern English-speaking (-reading) academic community. There aren't many publications in English describing this period and summarising the discussions that took place in it. Stephan Dudeck refers in his contribution to the famous book by Yuri Slezkine (1992), to a much less impressive publication by Dennis and Alice Bartels (1995), to Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer's 1999 book, and to two papers by Eve Toulouze (1999 and 2011). Perhaps one could add several more, but the list wouldn't be very long anyway. Part of Elena Liarskaya's contribution and a page in Dudeck's paper in the present volume that deal with the history of language policy and language planning in Russia is clearly not enough in this context.

For many academics today, especially younger ones, it is hard to believe that there could be anything from the 1920s worth reading today – with the exception of classical anthropological or linguistic works, of course. For many, 'real science' is only what has been published in the 2000s; even publications from the 1990s and 1980s are sometimes considered 'too old' to be interesting. This may be true in some fields; but language revitalisation belongs to a different category. Social environment, demographic circumstances, political systems and technologies can change dramatically; but the challenges of language planning; state paternalism vs. state indifference; variations of language attitudes, relations between minority and dominant languages and cultures, relations between vernacular varieties and the literary language are much less variable. So when I read that "In the 1950s six major 'Yi' dialects were identified, e. g. the Northern, Southern, Western, Eastern, Central and South-Eastern Dialects. Most of these are mutually unintelligible" or that "... determining the standard variety within each officially designated ethnic minority group was the most difficult and controversial aspect of language policy" (Olivia Kraef, *this volume*), I have a strong *déjà vu* feeling: these were exactly the problems Russian educators met with in the 1920s and 1930s, and they managed to find answers to some of them. In the great march for the noble cause of language maintenance and revitalisation, a lot could be learned from earlier experience, not only Russian.

To which the editors could say:

"Should one blame young, and often western, scholars, for opting to study in the first place the exciting dynamics and processes that were taking place in native communities at that time, instead of sitting in archives in Russian cities and studying the documents of the 1920s – while missing first hand experience of what was going on around them in the communities in this crucial transition period?" (Erich Kasten's letter to the author, 06.11.2012)

And again, my opponent is absolutely right. Still, it would be useful to compile a reader, in English, on early 20th century Russian language policy – something similar to what Professor Patrick Seriot and his school are doing in Lausanne (in French). Such a book would be, in my opinion, of great help for those who are struggling today with very similar circumstances: at least, they would not have to reinvent some wheels.

4.

By way of conclusion, let me remind the reader of a story told by Leanne Hinton in her excellent article *Sleeping languages* (Hinton 2001: 416). In Indiana and Oklahoma, she writes, there is an indigenous group called Miami. The last speaker of the language died in 1962. Luckily, the language had been documented by linguists: information about the language had been collected for almost two centuries. In the 1990s, linguist David Costa published a good description of Miami morphology. Daryl Baldwin, a member of the Miami (Myaamia) community and a talented linguist, graduated in 1999 from the University of Montana with an M.A. with emphasis on Native American linguistics. He learned to speak Miami using Costa's book and some archival materials, and later he taught his wife and children to speak it. For the children, Miami is now their first language. Two more families are reported to have joined the project: the Miami-speaking community has thus literally 'risen from the dead'.

Many aspects of language revival are of course beyond the control of linguists. But, as this optimistic story teaches us, linguists, especially indigenous ones, are able to accomplish a lot. So let's continue our work, bearing in mind the words once said by Michael Krauss: "not so much for reward according to the fashion of the day, but for the sake of posterity".

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