

Universals of Language Maintenance, Shift and Change

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ABSTRACT

Since Greenberg the recognition of linguistic universals has been the backbone of language typology. Earlier Garvin had already divided universals into absolute and potential ones, the former uncontested cornerstones of linguistic theory, the latter commonly accepted generalizations among experienced professionals. The 'universals' to be discussed here are of the latter type: tried and tested principles of language maintenance and of language change, whose applicability has been established in numerous language contact and conflict situations in different communities. Among the principles displayed and discussed are the following: Fishman's 'intergenerational dislocation' of language reproduction; Haugen's 'dialect fragmentation' of languages vs. Garvin's 'unification' and standardization; Fishman's claim of the complementary distribution of language functions as a guarantee of stable bilingualism; Wölck's disparate distribution of minority language maintenance along the social scale. Evidence for those and some other 'universals' of language maintenance and change will be provided from a 30-year longitudinal survey of Quechua-Spanish bilingualism in Peru; from Seneca-English bilingualism in New York; from studies of diglossia in Scotland and North Germany, of German-Hungarian bilingualism in Hungary from the Ladin survey in Italy and the Sorbian Project in Germany, and from the EUROMOSAIC survey.

Key words: *universals, language maintenance, language change, bilingualism*

Language Maintenance and Shift

Language maintenance, language use, language knowledge, language loyalty and language attitudes are all well-known and well-studied phenomena in the field of contact linguistics, the study of mul-

tilingualism. And although it should be obvious, it must be mentioned at the start that all five stand in a mutually dependent and some of them in a serially dependent relationship to each other. A se-

rially dependent relationship holds between the first three: Maintaining a language implies using it, which is only possible if one knows it. Positive language attitudes are a well-known condition for language maintenance (see below), and language loyalty is closely correlated with language maintenance¹. Language shift from one of the contact languages to the other is often considered as the lack of or the opposite of language maintenance, although it has to be acknowledged that this is usually a matter of degree, at least in the case of maintenance, and even shift is seldom complete and total. The well-recorded historical process of language change, the diachronic development of a language, usually when spoken monolingually, is, however, quite different from what happens when two (or more) languages in close bilingual contact change by influencing one another, which we are going to look at at the end of this paper.

By way of introduction and to put the following remarks in a familiar context, I

have summarized the major factors considered as determining minority language maintenance from the standard literature^{1–6} in Table 1.

Table 2 lists the determining factors of language maintenance among several minority language groups in the United States, especially among the three 'official' language minorities, viz., Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans and Native Americans, and of some selected immigrant language minorities, based on studies of my own and of my associates and on some of the literature cited *passim*.

Universals of Language Maintenance and Shift

In a very recent article⁸, I made a first attempt at generalizing some of the well-known and published findings of contact linguistics into a set of nine 'general principles', which I have somewhat daringly called 'universals'. For ease of reference, I have listed them in Table 3. More than

TABLE 1
GENERAL DETERMINANTS OF MINORITY LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE
(IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER)

Attitudes, of the majority	Linguistic variety (standardized, un-written language, dialect)
Attitudes, of the minority	Organization, political
Distance, linguistic/cultural from the majority	Physiology (looks)
Divisions, generational	Policy, (inter-)national
Divisions, linguistic	Policy, regional, local
Divisions, political	Proportion (to majority)
Economic activity	Settlement area
Education	Settlement density
Immigration, continuity of	Settlement history
Isolation, religious	Size of population
Isolation, cultural	Type of minority (assimilationist, pluralistic, separatist/militant, extranational or intranational)
Isolation, societal	
Language state of health (flourishing, healthy, ailing, dying) ⁷ .	
Language education (bilingual education, subject of instruction)	

TABLE 2

SPECIFIC DETERMINANTS OF LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE OF US MINORITIES (IN RANK ORDER)

National policy	Religious isolation
Popular political attitudes	Societal isolation
Political divisions	Population concentration
Generational divisions	Population size
Linguistic divisions	Education (quality of)
Language standardization	Linguistic/cultural distance
Minority type (Wirth's)	Settlement age
	Migration continuity

half of them are relevant to language maintenance and shift. I shall list and discuss them here in what I believe to be their order of importance. The figures after the text refer to the numbers in Wölck (2003)⁸.

Generational continuity and language transfer especially from parents to children are crucial for linguistic reproduction. [9]

The importance of this condition has become very clear in the results of the EUROMOSAIC survey of 48 minority language communities in the European Union⁶. The importance of linguistic 'tradition', in the anthropological sense of the transfer of linguistic skills and values through generation is obvious, and plays a central role in any modern survey of the vitality of a speech community, under the more sociological label 'reproduction'. Most researchers of language contact and conflict agree that one of the first signs of language attrition is the lack of language use by the 'middle' generation, the situation where grandparents use their language with their grandchildren, parents still with their parents but no longer with their children. What Fishman calls 'inter-generational dislocation' is well known to lead to language decay⁹. In our work in Peru on Quechua, in Hungary on German¹⁰, on Seneca in Western New York,

on Sorbian in Lusatia¹¹, and in many other reported contact scenarios this has been clearly attested.

Linguistic unification and standardization are helpful, diversification and dialectal fragmentation more likely to be harmful to minority language maintenance and survival. [7]

Unification and solidarity are helpful, divisions are harmful. Compare the situation of Ecuadorean Quichua or Bolivian Quechua, which have been unified through the power of native organizations to the factional separation of the situation in Peru; or the history of Mohawk, Oneida or Cree in native North America to that of, e.g., Seneca in my own neighborhood. While Seneca and neighboring Onondaga are mutually intelligible varieties (i.e., dialects) of northern Iroquoian, their leadership as well as some collaborating linguists insist on their linguistic independence. The two Sorbian varieties in southeastern Germany, which are separately literalized, might also have a better chance of recognition, maintenance and survival if they were united¹¹.

In most societies with a tradition of formal school education the use of minority and indigenous languages in education is difficult if not impossible without written materials. While purely oral instruction is in principle and in practice

quite feasible, hardly any teachers trained in traditional education schools are capable or willing to transmit knowledge or skills primarily or entirely through the oral medium. My own experience as a consultant to the Seneca education program in Western New York and the early results – and failures – of Quechua education in the Andes bear out this caveat. Haugen also points to the negative effects of 'dialectal fragmentation'⁴. Besides its use as a medium of formal education, an accepted written standard serves the very important purpose and function as a symbol of linguistic identity and loyalty¹.

Sharing domains of usage with the majority language strengthens the vitality of a minority language just as much as, if not more than, a complementary separation of domains. [5]

For a long time it was assumed that the best if not the only way for the maintenance of a minority language in a language conflict situation was its functionally complementary contribution vis-à-vis the majority language. The more separation and mutually exclusive distribution across different domains of usage there is between the two languages, the more probability of survival of the minority language and for the stabilization of the linguistic situation¹². Most minority languages of the Third World are un-written pre-standardized languages threatened with extinction, whose original domains of usage have gradually been taken over by the contact majority language. Our longitudinal survey of the use and maintenance of the largest and best preserved native language of the Americas, Quechua^{13,14}, clearly shows that it is not the clear separation of domains of usage by languages, which always favors the majority language, but rather the co-presence of both languages in the same domains which slows the erosion of the minority language, promotes its survival

and produces a more stable type of bilingualism. In the linguistic contact and conflict between Quechua and Spanish in Peru, a considerable opening of domains long reserved for Spanish to their treatment in Quechua, as well as in Spanish, has more than offset the reduction in Quechua monolingualism in the region. This is confirmed by studies of similar and comparable situations across the world and demonstrates that this kind of 'co-existent' bilingualism can lead to more stability and functional protection of minority languages than functional separation and complementation.

Minority language use is higher at the two ends of the social scale, i.e., among the lower and upper social class, than in the middle class. [4]

This recurrent distribution, which we had observed as early as the 60's in our Andean surveys, was proven statistically in our survey of German-Hungarian contact¹⁰. There is a relationship between social class/education and minority language use and maintenance such that the lower and the higher social strata, i.e., people at the two ends of the social scale, have the highest degree of language maintenance, while the middle class shows the lowest amount of minority language use. The reasons are, however, quite different for the peaks at the two sides of the inverted bell curve. The lower social class has relatively little knowledge of the majority language and needs to rely on the minority language for most of its communicative needs. The upper class has such good mastery of the majority language that it can afford the luxury of cultivating the minority language. The middle class is characterized by 'linguistic insecurity'¹⁵ and is too concerned with their ambitions to succeed in the majority language society to have the time and interest to spend on the minority language.

TABLE 3
UNIVERSALS OF LANGUAGE CONTACT AND CONFLICT⁸

1. Language attitudes and self-reports of language usage are closely correlated.
2. Bilinguals are more tolerant than monolinguals.
3. Minority languages evoke more positive personal affective reactions, majority languages more instrumental institutional values.
4. Minority language use is higher at the two ends of the social scale, i.e., among the lower and upper social class, than in the middle class.
5. Sharing domains of usage with the majority language strengthens the vitality of a minority language just as much as, if not more than, a complementary separation of domains.
6. The symbolic function of a language is as crucial for its survival as is its usage.
7. Linguistic unification and standardization are helpful, diversification and dialectal fragmentation more likely to be harmful to minority language maintenance and survival.
8. Publication and employment in the commercial and artistic media strengthens languages (and dialects).
9. Generational continuity and language transfer especially from parents to children are crucial for linguistic reproduction.

'Mediarization', i.e., publication and employment in the commercial and artistic media strengthens languages (and dialects). [8]

Appearance in the mass media contributes considerably to the recognition and popularization of a linguistic variety, even of a 'dialect'. The existence of a written form definitely makes such use more likely, obviously in the printed media, though not necessary for radio and television broadcasts, although a certain amount of standardization and 'dialect leveling' are required for wider diffusion. The increasing popularity of Low German in the 1980's led not only to the production of more and more dialect comedies on North German television, even outside the Low German dialect area, but also to daily news broadcasts and department store advertisements in Low German. In the small sea-side resort of Eckernförde where I carried out a brief survey of the use of Low German in the late 70's the bookstores have since been full of books in the 'dialect', which has recently been recognized as a minority 'language'¹⁶.

Two Potential Universals of Language Contact and Language Change

Language contact contributes to the simplification of the inflectional systems of both languages.

Witness the following grammatical changes observable in language contact situations in which I have lived:

In Andean Spanish in contact with Quechua inflected verb forms have been replaced by compound constructions, especially the past and future forms, e.g. *estaba viniendo* (literally: s/he was coming) for *vino* (s/he came); *estaba haciendo* (s/he was making) for *hizo* (s/he made); *acaba de hablar, acaba de comer* (s/he stopped, is done talking, eating) for *habló, comió* (s/he talked, ate); *voy a viajar, llegar* (lit. I come to travel, to arrive) for *viajaré, llegaré* (I shall travel, I shall arrive). Instead of the inflected present, especially of 'irregular' verbs the 'progressive' aspect is used, as in *esta hierviéndose* (is boiling) for *hierve* (boils).

Similarly, in my native variety of East Prussian German near the Polish border,

simple tenses had as much as disappeared in favor of composite forms, e.g., *ich bin gewesen* (I have been) for *ich war* (I was) and *ich war gewesen* (I had been) for the dependent tense; *ich bin gefahren* (I have gone) or *ich habe, hatte gesehen* (I have, had seen) for *ich fuhr, ich sah* (I went, I saw).

And while every English teacher will tell you that the expression “*I have lived in New York four years*” implies that the speaker still lives there, in my hometown of Buffalo, NY it can very normally be followed by “*now my home is Buffalo*”. While this replacement of the past by the ‘perfect’ tense was once characteristic only of Polish and German ‘ethnolects’¹¹ it has long become an accepted and unnoticed part of general educated Western New York English.

Language contact accelerates processes of natural (phonological) change.

Near the end of my discussion of potential universals of language maintenance and change, I shall mention some of the more obvious and more easily documentable processes of phonological change in language contact situations.

English is one of the few Germanic languages which has not (yet) neutralized the contrast between voiced and voiceless consonants in final position under the unmarked member of the opposition, although the voicing it is already becoming weaker in less careful speech, a sure sign of a beginning change. In the strong European contact area of Western New York and Southern Ontario the devoicing process is nearly complete, thus *have* sounds like *half*, *his* like *hiss*, *hers* like *harse*, *cold* like *colt*, (stressed) *and* like *ant*; and even across morpheme boundaries we get *half**t*_o, *woul**t*_n*t* and *coul**t*_n*t* in Buffalo¹¹.

The well-known ‘flat A’ of Buffalo, with parallels in Detroit, Philadelphia and New York, is clearly due to contact.

Here the most difficult of English vowel contrasts, the /ε : œ/ opposition, non-existent in any other language I know and certainly lacking from all the European immigrant languages, is ‘shifted’ by raising and diphthongizing /œ/ to /eɪ/ and lowering /ε/ to /ɔ/ or almost to /ʌ/. Thus the small difference between *guess* and *gas* becomes much more obvious when the first sounds like *Gus* and the second like *gay ass*.

The monophthongization of secondary diphthongs, completed for the high level, i.e., for /iy/ and /uw/, in most parts of North America, has long affected the mid-range in Western New York and Southern Ontario. Not only are the vowels in *beat* and *boot* monophthongal, but so are the vowels in *bait* and *boat*. None of the developments mentioned above are explainable by pure monogenetic historical change, in particular the shift of /œ/ to /eɪ/, which occurred in such distant places because they shared identical contact languages^{11,17,18}.

Some susceptible categories

I shall conclude this brief discussion by mentioning two linguistic categories which have proven to be especially sensitive to ‘contact induced change’¹⁹. The first and almost trivially obvious is *prosodies*. In my home town of Buffalo it is the ‘rhythm’ of the Polish, Italian and German English ‘ethnolects’ of the monolingual descendants of immigrants that is the clearest local give-away of their ethnic heritage^{11,13}.

The second is *discourse pragmatics*. Two cases in point are, first, the transfer and integration of the obligatory category of speech act markers or evidentials from Quechua into Andean Spanish. Cp. the replication of the assertive Quechua suffix *-mi* by an enclitic, unstressed sentence-final *si* in contact Spanish: *no estoy enterado, no conozco Cuzco si*; Engl.: *I’m not sure, I really don’t know Cuzco*; or of

the reportive *-si* by an enclitic *dis* (from *dicen*), as in *estrañaba a su marido dis*; Engl.: *she's supposed to have missed her husband*.

One last discourse example from Buffalo: the narrative syntax of the Polish English ethnolect uses uninflected asyndetic verbal constructions: ...*get up early, let the dog out, check for school closings* ...; while the Italian variety uses gerundial forms: ...*getting up at six, starting breakfast, waking the kids*,...

I shall end by stressing that the 'universality' of the phenomena I have mentioned is by no means absolute, but at best potential and probabilistic²⁰. Mine are not claims but rather suggestions for review and critique and intended to stimulate discussion among (more) experienced colleagues. Ours is a particularistic discipline, and no two situations are ever exactly alike; but if we are not willing occasionally to abstract and generalize, we will forever be accused of being anecdotal.

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UNIVERZALIJE U OČUVANJU, ZAMJENI I PROMJENI JEZIKA

S A Ž E T A K

Od Greenberga, otkrivanje jezičnih univerzalija okosnica je jezične tipologije. Već je ranije Garvin podijelio univerzalije na apsolutne i potencijalne. Dok su prve postale neoborivi temelj lingvističke teorije, druge su za iskusne stručnjake ostale načelno prihvaćene generalizacije. »Univerzalije« u ovom radu pripadaju ovom drugom tipu univerzalija što znači da se radi o isprobanim i testiranim principima jezičnog očuvanja i jezične promjene čija je primjenjivost proizišla iz niza situacija jezičnog kontakta i konflikta u raznim zajednicama. Među principima koji se ovdje navode i analiziraju nalaze se Fishmanov »međugeneracijski pomak« jezične reprodukcije; Haugenova »dijalektalna fragmentacija« jezika nasuprot Garvinovoj »unifikaciji« i standardizaciji; Fishmanova postavka o komplementarnoj distribuciji jezičnih funkcija kao garancije stabilne dvojezičnosti; Wölckova neujednačena razdioba održavanja manjinskih jezika na društvenoj ljestvici. Primjeri za ove i neke druge »univerzalije« u jezičnom očuvanju i promjeni uzeti su iz tridesetogodišnjeg longitudinalnog istraživanja kečuansko-španjolskog bilingvizma u Peruu, senekansko-engleskog bilingvizma u New Yorku, istraživanja diglosije u Škotskoj i sjevernoj Njemačkoj, njemačko-mađarskog bilingvizma u Mađarskoj, istraživanja ladinskog u Italiji, lužičkosrpskog u Njemačkoj te naposljetku iz istraživanja EUROMOSAIC-a.