

A Phenomenological View of Language Shift

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ABSTRACT

Sociolinguistic studies of language shift have in their majority framed their research object in a horizon of theoretically received variables such as class, ethnicity, locality, attitudes etc. In spite of a limited usefulness of such conceptual variables, and of a recently emerging focus on agency, negotiation, and praxis the best results we obtain have not questioned in a coherent and theoretically sound manner the continuing hegemony of mechanistic-metaphorical models (language death, language suicide). In this paper I propose to examine language shift as a multifaceted phenomenon, joining in this respect work by other linguistic anthropologists researching similar areas. I specifically argue that by replacing vertical concepts such as age and generation, and dichotomous logics such as center and periphery with phenomenologically inspired concepts such as typifications, consociateship, contemporariness, and stream of consciousness we are in a better position to generalize about language shift dynamics. Data for this work is derived primarily from the Albanian speech communities of modern Greece, but also from other communities for comparative purposes.

Key words: *language shift, Arvanitika, Greek, language community*

Introduction

What I propose to examine in this work is the status and usefulness of some inherited concepts in the study of what is generally known as language shift, or obsolescence. I will suggest that the investigation of the mechanisms of shift has profited from the use of some traditional sociolinguistic tools, but other dimen-

sions need additionally to be taken into account.

It should be stressed in this context that my analysis is intended to be both, other-oriented and reflexive, since it addresses (without offering detailed references and citations) the main body of research in the area, implying and inclu-

ding (under the critical umbrella) also my own work. My main criticism of language shift studies is that concepts developed in sociolinguistics and in (frequently unexamined or unwittingly adopted) social theory, have been responsible for isolating the phenomenon for the sake of its investigation, but have not been always rigorous in examining sociological parameters that could enrich the cadre of the field under scrutiny.

Concepts such as fluent, terminal, or semi-speaker, or the progressive replacement of one grammatical system by another in speakers' repertoires, or negative and self-deprecating attitudes towards the lesser spoken language etc., are quite important to the extent that other useful conceptual apparatuses are not erased from sight^{1,2}. This more traditional framing of the field has undoubtedly benefited a lot from a shift of focus in the direction of the dialectic between structure and praxis. And it is this praxis framework that I want to explore further here (for praxis in linguistic shift, see Hill and Tsitsipis)^{3,4}. But let me elaborate a bit more on my critical remarks before I embark on the positive aspects of the discussion. Objectification (which seems to lurk behind many language studies) of the dynamic process of language shift (and other similar phenomena for that matter) resembles the ways speakers of a language (and linguists) reify language structure in the expression of their meta-pragmatic ideological discourse, that is, in the conflation of function 1 as their understanding of linguistic interactional purposivity with function 2 as the actual manipulation of signs in Silverstein's sense⁵. Objectification usually involves a great deal of metaphorical thinking. This metaphorical frame has been critically examined by Errington with regard, for instance, to code-switching in Javanese Indonesia⁶. Errington discusses there Gumperz' s metaphorical (and to some

extent reductionist) trope of the »we«-»they« opposition showing the little relevance it has for the building of local subjectivities. When, we, scholars, working in the area of so-called language shift, declare the language or languages of speech communities threatened due to shift (a focus on interaction and pragmatics notwithstanding), we actually isolate the most transparent aspects of the process metaphorizing from other areas of the social and biological sciences. Thus, we engage in a discourse of replacement which is vindicated for our research by having first isolated grammatical structures, and most importantly, lexations, as well as speaker-categories pidgeonholed to these transparent structures.

These scientific conclusions gain, of course, strength from well-formed empirical hypotheses. No doubt, the conclusions are convincing to a great extent either one deals with progressive replacement or with a sudden type. In an interesting paper Haberland has questioned metaphors stemming particularly from biology, concerning reduction and death⁷. My own work, even though for a period squarely embedded in the traditional sociolinguistic paradigm, started some time ago questioning the linearity of a process with a death telos, discussing, in addition, creativity as the locus of interaction even with grammatically reduced resources⁸.

I should finish this preliminary part of the general discussion with a final remark concerning a contradiction in our analytical discourse that stems from the previous observations. Whereas in our ethnographic and sociolinguistic analyses we adopt a historical view, and frequently a very detailed and cautious one, in our more abstract theorizing, language shift phenomena are cast in an evolutionary bend. This is not a trivial research state since history forms the terrain of contingency, whereas evolution forms the field

of necessity. It is evolutionary thinking that is more susceptible to refraction through ideological views, because what is perceived as necessary is also perceived as natural, whereas contingency is a kind of meeting-ground of various social and linguistic situations and as such is more indexical.

I propose to enrich the praxis orientation that language-shift studies have recently taken with some concepts from phenomenological sociology of the kind that Schutz has developed, keeping also in mind that works by Bourdieu or Giddens⁹ for example, have served well some corners of our enterprise. If nothing else, what is understood as language shift takes place not in an ideally isolated community of the kind that romantic views have constructed for »pristine« cultures which, suddenly, are imagined as threatened by an embedding society. Various abstract systems and embedding and disembedding mechanisms operating through these systems incorporate local communities⁹, and it is these national and globalizing networks that should be kept in mind while examining linguistic shift as a social and sociolinguistic process.

Arvanitika Communities

What is of central interest to my analysis is a view of the communities from within, but not in the static sense of the ethnoscience of an earlier anthropological paradigm as my remarks above indicate. I base my discussion on a single narrative excerpt (due to space and time limitations) from contemporary Arvanitika (Greek-Albanian bilingual) communities of Greece. This example has received elsewhere a slightly different analysis but not unrelated to the overall praxis frame². The relative success of the analysis offered here can be tested in the attempt to add to inherited concepts such as terminal, fluent speaker, reduced

grammar, one- or multi-dimensional attitudes etc. (already known from the relevant literature) some sociological consideration, as, for instance, Schutzian phenomenological sociology. In recent treatments of communicative practices, ideas derived from phenomenological trends of sociology, combined with other approaches, have proved useful for a more in-depth understanding of linguistic praxis¹⁰.

Schutzian notions such as consociation, contemporariness, or predecessorship, in-order-to and because-of motives are not just alternative classificatory labels but ways of seeing what sociolinguistics has frequently overlooked or left unspecified. I am not proposing these concepts as replacive of other, more traditional sociolinguistic ones, but as an endeavor to go deeper into the actualities of lived experience among those who are placed as members of a linguistic community suffering reduction in the use and structure of one of its codes. I must also stress that socio-economic transformations which have been cast in the literature as the vertical axis of the society¹¹ are to be reckoned with, even if for no other reason, at least because, as Bourdieu has observed in »*La Misere du Monde*«¹², ethnomethodologically-minded approaches frequently ignore the workings of the broader social structures. But my emphasis here is not on the socio-economic side of the process which holds trivially true for peasant elements of the monolingual Greek population too. Furthermore, even if a critique of ethnomethodology is appropriate, this does not render all ideas derived from sociological phenomenology equally vulnerable.

Arvanitika communities, who domiciled on what is now the Greek state-national territory for about five centuries, are bilingual in Greek and a version of Tosk Albanian discussed elsewhere^{4,13}. The frame of discussion has been that of language shift and obsolescence. How can

we derive useful conclusions about this state of affairs such that are minimally metaphorical of grand evolutionary or biolo-gistic models? Even further, what do interactive actualities reveal of the

process beyond what we learn from sociolinguistic speaker-categories, and proficiency profiles? Let us turn to the text under scrutiny*:

- 1 neve kakoshkuame, neve ata vitera
 we had a hard time, we those years
- 2 r(r)emonjeme, kladhepseme vreshtate
 [we] dug [the soil], cut the branches of the vines
- 3 punonjem me sust me karene veim
 we worked [the land] with a coach we went with a carriage
- 4 nek keim kje (...) kakoshkojne kozmos
 we didn't have oxen (...) people had a hard time
- 5 *ne ala dhoksa to theo omos*
 yes but God is blessed even so
- 6 shkonim me mir, shendoshat mira
 we had a better time, in good health
- 7 'dhe sherbenjem ala haim
 an' we were working but [we had] to eat
- 8 tatene keime njikokjir shum
 we had a caring (carrying) father
- 9 flit edhe mema 'linika
 and the mother spoke Greek
- 10 edhe tata na flit Elinika
 and the father spoke to us in Greek
- 11 neke ishne shum paleo
 they were not that old-fashioned
- 12 Arvanite, Arvanite kuvendoin Arvanite
 Arvanitika, Arvanitika they spoke Arvanitika
- 13 Arvanite ata pljekjte
 Arvanitika those old people
- 14 *Elinika kuvendjazame ta pedhja*
 Greek we spoke the children
- 15 *Dhen guvendjazame Arvanitika*
 we didn't speak in Arvanitika
- 16 *me tis ghries mazi leme t'Arvanitika*
 we the old women together we speak Arvanitika
- 17 *pjo efkolo tora ama vro tis sinomilis mu*
 It is easier now if I run across my age-mates
- 18 *me tis Arvanitises Arvanitika*
 with Arvanitika women Arvanitika
- 19 ox, ox panijir, ske ardhure ketu ne panijir
 oh, oh [the] feast, you haven't come here to the feast

* In the narrative excerpt cited, italic letters stand for switches to Greek. In order to simplify the printing process I have chosen not to indicate some phonological shwas (ê) in the text.

- 20 Arvanite che kechenjem *xoro* kendonjeme
[in] Arvanitika we were dancing *dance* we were singing
- 21 vejeme nde kljise, vinjeme nga kljisa
we went to the church, we came back from the church
- 22 *tora dhen xorevume dhen ganume*
now we don't dance we don't do [things]
- 23 *xalase o kozmos tora, u-xalas panijiri nani*
the world has now deteriorated, the feast has deteriorated now
- 24 skemi panijiri, neke ishte kozmi ai paleo che ish
we don't have the feast, there are no people like the old ones that used to be
- 25 neve jemi bastardhue *misho kje misho*
we are bastardized, *half and half*
- 26 *leme ta Romejka leme kje t' Arvanitika*
we speak in Greek and we speak in Arvanitika [too]

This narrative by an elderly speaker has a double orientation: it refers to real world experiences and to language habits. The token of this informal personal narrative serves well the purposes of the narrator, that is, its thematic orientation is in grasping those aspects of life that such a generic type is suitable to do. It satisfies therefore the internal orientation of the genre that Bakhtin and Medvedev have talked about¹⁴. Its external orientation is also followed appropriately, and this second dimension has to do with its contextual anchoring in the proper social circumstances of discourse production.

Notice that the diachronic event of linguistic shift which is generally read out of changes in linguistic structure-language competence, paired with macro-parameters such as age, socio-economic transformations etc., leaves its traces, and even is reproduced in the way the speaker handles his narrative material. This chunk of discourse becomes a site for the emergence of interpretively rich sociological aspects. The views, of course, of speakers themselves, as the ideological component of the process, are extremely valuable in completing the picture of the sociology of shift.

All references to past experiences are narratively linked to the use of Arvanitika. I have called this ideology an indexical totality. In the past, the minority language has been indexical of a social reality and the social reality indexical of the language. As in the case of other texts, this narrative too, is a product of *hybridization*. Hybridization according to Hanks alludes to the presence of more than one voice in different fields of reception contributing thus to narrative authenticity¹⁰. It takes into account both, the modern Greek national reality and the earlier, imagined as unfragmented, Arvanitika one².

In this text, basic phenomenological dimensions that Schutz proposes as crucial to social processes are strained in a marked way¹⁵. Due to the reflexive linguistic consciousness that speakers have of the fact that they speak another language, that is, that they somehow take part in the building of a different community from the surrounding world, they arrange accordingly (at the ideological plane) their relationships with consociates, those fellows that they grow older together with, their contemporaries, and their predecessors, the latter two constituting more remote categories. Notice

that, in reference to earlier conditions of life, the narrator (particularly lines: 1 to 16) construes predecessors as conforming to a very special kind of retrospectively projected consociateship that today appears as disturbed.

By looking at the community from the outside, that is, by endowing it with the thinginess of Durkheimian sociology¹⁶, we miss a lot of this reflexive understanding that acts dialectically back on sociolinguistic actualities carrying changes some steps further. This pattern of rearranging relations retrospectively conforms in many respects to what Hill calls a nostalgic ideology¹⁷.

But the text is also interrupted, so to speak, by the voice of the contemporary, typified structures: the modern Greek state and its representatives (including audience members disguising as consociates like the ethnographer), and thus the speaker in line 11 explains apologetically that people of the past, immersed in the indexical totality, were not that old-fashioned after all.

The exercise at this kind of analysis reveals the following: the community as a whole develops its linguistic and social ideology in conjunction with the three major kinds of meaningful social relations as described by Schutz: consociateship, predecessorship, contemporariness¹⁵. This suggests at least that under conditions of shift the way communities are reflexively and indexically anchored in their historical trajectory transcends distinctions among competence-proficiency gradients such as fluent-terminal-speaker etc. This is the meaning of the expression »the community as a whole« used above.

One can see this complex development of social consciousness when members of the communities are called upon to act in a double capacity. I have elsewhere discussed what I call *popular conferencing* in which, among other participants, Ar-

vanitika speakers are also included in such a way as to function in the double role of the quasi-academic and quasi-native^{18,19}. There, they narratively transform by projection their predecessors into consociates, as belonging together in the space of the indexical totality mentioned above, and their temporary consociates into contemporaries as belonging to the encompassing society of the institutionally accepted majority.

Arvanitika speakers who contribute their discourse to the same structured environment as anthropologists, political scientists, historians, activists (hence the notion of the *popular conference*), even though they do not undergo a radical transformation of their social consciousness, nevertheless are inclined to function outside the norms of their ritualized communalities, to use a term from Willis²⁰. They function, that is, outside their daily networked interactions in which they usually meet their friends and neighbors. In sites of the public sphere outside the conference context, speakers express ideologies that are in a dialectic with linguistic praxis. Inside the boundaries of the conference setting a reformulation is partly taking place so that Arvanitika speakers phenomenally express and adopt a portion of the official ideology hegemically transferred down to the communities and expressing the principles of standardization (and for which I offer no examples here for space limitations). Thus a lived reality emerges such that a continuity and a discontinuity with the rest of their daily life appears.

Conclusion

The major conclusions with regard to language shift phenomena can be summarized as follows:

When we study linguistic shift and replacement, death, and obsolescence we are striving to formulate conceptual

frameworks different from the ones used in so-called normal dynamic phenomena. Even though this approach is methodologically sound to some extent it suffers from an implicit structuralist bias that similar data should trigger similar treatments. Thus, if shift is inherently different from »normal« change, then new tools are required. Hence notions such as terminal, fluent speaker, self-deprecating attitudes and the like. These notions, which have innovated the field of language shift, if they stand alone, trap us in their logic and make us blind to social and interactional actualities. Depending on the concepts used then we can push

language shift studies to appear so much close to or respectively so much distant from other dynamic situations.

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FENOMENOLOŠKI POGLED NA JEZIČNU SMJENU

S A Ž E T A K

Sociolingvistička proučavanja jezične smjene uglavnom su uobličivala predmet svog istraživanja unutar horizonta teoretski prihvaćenih varijabli kao što su društveni sloj, etnicitet, lokalitet, stavovi, itd. Usprkos ograničenoj korisnosti takvih konceptualnih varijabli, kao i nedavno razvijene usredotočenosti na djelovanje, pregovaranje i praksu, najbolji rezultati koje dobivamo ne dovode u pitanje na koherentan i teoretski smislen način stalnu hegemoniju mehanicističko-metaforičnih modela jezične smrti ili samoubojstva. U ovom se članku jezična promjena istražuje kao višeslojni fenomen, uključujući pritom i rad drugih lingvističkih antropologa koji su se bavili sličnim istraživanjima. Posebno se zalaže za zamjenjivanje vertikalnih koncepata kao što su dob i generacijske razlike te dihotomijske logike centra i periferije fenomenološki nadahnutim konceptima tipifikacije, povezanosti, suvremenosti i toka svijesti jer on može pridonijeti kvalitetnijem zaključivanju o pitanjima dinamike jezične smjene. Podaci za ovaj rad uzeti su prvenstveno iz albanske govorne zajednice u Grčkoj, ali, radi uporedivosti, i iz drugih jezičnih zajednica.