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Independent, Dependent and Interdependent Variables in Language Decay and Language Death

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This contribution gives in its first part an overview on factors of the decay and death of whole languages, focusing on dependency relations between these factors. They are organised along the following dimensions: socio-political, socio-economic, socio-cultural, socio-psychological, and linguistic dimensions. The order of these dimensions partially represents a causal chain from left to right, but with many feedback relations. The second part of this article deals with early (socio-)linguistic indicators of language decay and discusses in this respect massive and asymmetric borrowing from the dominant into the recessive language, the loss of productivity of word formation patterns in the latter (illustrated from Breton), changes in name-giving (doubtful), shift of 'foreign accent' from the dominant to the recessive language, borrowing of morphological and syntactic patterns (inconclusive).

Introduction

Within the history of linguistics, systematic investigations in this area started only in the 1970s, but have aroused new interest in this century due to a new focus on language revitalisation and language revival as well as due to greater awareness of how many languages are in danger of vanishing. Krauss[1] reckoned with the imminent disappearance of between 20% and 50% of all contemporary languages and with a final survival of only 10% (cf. Refs 2–13). Moseley's[13] *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* considers 43% of all contemporary languages to be endangered, of which, in a scale of endangerment, 574 languages are considered to be critically endangered, 529 severely endangered, 645 definitely endangered and 595 vulnerable (for the original definitions see Ref. 2, p. 7ff). The most endangered type, i.e. the critically endangered type, partially overlaps with the older notion of moribund language.

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There are many different types of language decay and language death that are not covered in this contribution, such as genocide and connected linguacide, i.e. by killing all or nearly all native speakers of a language, and other types of 'sudden death' or 'radical death', which are not preceded by a period of language decay,[1,10] language attrition of immigrant heritage languages[14] or of second language competence.[15] Then there is so-called language decay of standard languages, as deplored by purists. This contribution focuses on early phases of threatening 'gradual death', connected with a gradual shift from a minority language to a dominant language in a situation of unstable multilingualism[16,17], i.e. decay of a minority language. Such a language shift is preceded by unstable bilingualism, which concerns not only language competence but also general communicative competence.

During language shift from a recessive to a dominant language there appear language contact phenomena which are deplored by those who want to maintain the recessive minority languages, especially by purists as language decay, e.g. massive intrusion of loan words, in recent times especially of loans from English, as in the infamous *franglais*.

How can it be decided, about an endangered language, whether an observed change is a sign of language decay or simply a development that also occurs elsewhere in diachronic change? And in particular, which indicators of real or apparent language decay represent irreversible changes, which doom the survival of a language? As a consequence, the questions arise of whether and how changes can be successfully reversed by language revitalisation measures.

A successful descriptive or explanatory study of language decay has to be both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. The main field typically involved is sociolinguistics, but a second field should be diachronic linguistics because lack of a diachronic perspective often leads to false prophecies about the imminent death or survival of an endangered language. Such inadequacies are often connected with an illusionary belief in the scientific ideal of monocausality, which is much easier to establish in 'hard' sciences than in the 'soft' human sciences to which linguistics belongs in spite of all efforts to the contrary. So far, all phenomena of language decay and language death that I am aware of are instances of multicausality. Here, two types of factors have to be distinguished: on the one hand, convergent factors to be conceived of as mutually independent factors that combine or conspire in determining or promoting a certain result, with the problem of establishing the mutual independence of these factors and of weighting the relative importance of each. On the other hand, there are interdependent factors. Here, the ideal solution is to subordinate one factor to another one, without falling into the trap of undue reductionism. Whenever we find general correlations, we should try to transform them into implications, and whenever symmetric, reciprocal implications are established, one should try to subordinate such implications under a higher-level motivation.

In order to try to fulfil the programme sketched so far, one would need an interdisciplinary series of volumes, due to the multitude of factors involved in language decay. My way of giving a concise report here of the most salient factors involved is to divide them according to fields of study and put these fields into a sequential causal

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order without considering interdependencies other than unidirectional subordination (more information can be found in the work of Dressler and de Cillia,[18] cf. also Thomason[10]). Other parameters are used by the UNESCO,[2,11,13] but I want to stress the subdivision into research areas which must interact in an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary way.

A simplified causal chain frequently starts with socio-political events of, directly, national language policies (especially in education); and indirectly with imperialism, centralisation and/or nationalism, beginning in Europe mainly with the French Revolution. This leads to marginalisation, assimilation, repression of large sections of speakers of minority languages. But this may also lead to resistance against oppression, as in the case of Catalan, a language that paradoxically appeared to be in certain respects more vital during the later stages of the Franco regime than since the autonomy of democratic Catalonia. Contributing factors are co-territoriality instead of spatial separation, especially with an additional status of autonomy (as with Faroese and Greenlandic versus Danish) and the demography of relatively small numbers of speakers, their mean age and percentage of fluent young speakers.[11]

A second level, often dependent on the socio-political one, is the socio-economic level. Its main elements are economic pressure via economic subordination, urbanisation, industrialisation, and greater geographical and social mobility.

A third level, dependent on both or one of the preceding levels, is sociocultural. Here the keywords are acculturation, racism, folklorisation, loss of prestige, perceived small linguistic distance between recessive and dominant language, and limited use in the media, where now the new media give a new chance to recessive languages marginalised in the print and audiovisual media.

A fourth level, depending on the preceding ones, is the sometimes forgotten mediating socio-psychological level, with the dimensions of internal and external attitudes toward dominant versus recessive language, degree of language loyalty, and lack of identification with the recessive language.

Linguistic factors, belonging to a fifth level, are first of all dependent on the previous levels, but they usually feed back into the previous causal chain, with effects on language fluency and security about internal norms (insecurity may result in much variation). In particular, a decaying language may be difficult to identify with and to be loyal to. Thus, older generations may despise young generations' usage. The decaying language may become more and more dysfunctional within the domains of communicative competence, not only by the reduction of functional domains where the recessive language is used, but also by less efficient use of it in the remaining domains.

All this leads ultimately to the final so-called 'tip' which dooms the decaying language, i.e. to the unwillingness of parents to successfully transmit the decaying language to their children and to the children's unwillingness to acquire it or to adolescent discontinuation of regular use. This leads to a break in the intergenerational transmission of the recessive language.

If I may venture, at the end of this first, general part of this contribution, out to the area of language revitalisation, I suspect that revitalisation efforts should take into

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account all of these five levels, the socio-political, the socio-economic, the socio-cultural, the socio-psychological and the linguistic one and, where possible, try to reverse the negative factors enumerated above for language decay and try to neutralise the other negative factors.

Early Linguistic or (More Precisely) Socio-linguistic Indicators of Language Decay

Detrimental factors of early phases of language decay to be discussed here are linguistic phenomena which indicate that a potentially endangered or vulnerable language turns into a definitely endangered language. This is complementary to the normal procedure of focusing on indicators of language vitality.[2,10] My exemplification comes from changes in Breton in the first decades of the twentieth century.

A first lacuna in research is the lack of well-established implications among early phenomena of language decay. Is a phenomenon of language decay just typical for early phases of decay or is it necessary? Does the occurrence of one decay phenomenon imply or presuppose the earlier occurrence of another decay phenomenon? Or do we find only extra-linguistic preconditions, i.e. political, economical, social, and psychological preconditions?

Among early linguistic indicators of language decay, massive and asymmetric lexical borrowing from the dominant to the recessive language (Ref. 19, p. 409; Ref. 20, p. 56; Ref. 21, p. 79 ff.) mirrors the social, socio-psychological and usually also the economic and political hierarchy between the two language communities. Massive lexical borrowing is a precondition for language decay, but it is in itself not sufficient to initiate language decay or to indicate it to the beholder. The typical accompanying properties are that borrowing does not simply enrich the lexicon of the minority language but replaces indigenous words and has structural effects (see Ref. 16,22 ff), i.e. there is lexical replacement or re-lexification.[10,23–25] Moreover, typically there are little or no puristic reactions against borrowing (see Ref. 22, pp. 11, 14), but this may be not yet a phenomenon of language decay, except in the eye of purists. Evidently, the decaying language is not deemed to be worth retaining its lexical integrity. And this is a prelude to the evaluation of a decaying language not meriting preservation. In addition, at some point, loanwords cease to be integrated phonologically and morphologically (see, for example, Ref. 26, p. 100 ff.; Ref. 27, p. 473 f.; Ref. 28, p. 326). But again, it is not yet clear whether this is an early indicator of forthcoming language extinction. This factor partially overlaps with the UNESCO factor 5 'Response to new domains and media' (Ref. 2, p. 11).

A second lacuna in research is that the notion of critical mass has not yet been operationalised for studies in language decay: what is the critical mass of borrowed words necessary for initiating language decay?

A more reliable early indicator of language decay is the loss of productivity of word formation patterns (Refs 23, 29, 30; Ref. 27, p. 474 f.; Ref. 31, p. 74, Ref. 32,

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p. 304 f.; Ref. 33, p. 154 on the island of Jersey). One of the two basic functions of word formation, namely of enriching the lexicon, is not served anymore by word formation of the recessive language but by borrowing from the dominant language.

In a thriving language, word formation has two main functions.

(1) The first is to motivate derived or complex words of both derivational morphology and compounding, both in meaning and form, i.e. morphosemantically and morphotactically.

(2) The second function of word formation is lexical enrichment, i.e. the expansion of the lexical stock whenever speakers feel the need for it. This function can be fulfilled within word formation, in an unconscious or subconscious way, only by productive rules or patterns. Unproductive rules or patterns are used for creating new words only in a conscious way or by surface analogy, i.e. they are paradigmatically or even syntagmatically motivated by the model of a specific existing word. An example is in French the creation of *amerrir* 'to land on water' (of a plane) on the model of *atterrir* 'to land' (the orthography with the two *-rr-* proves *terre – atterrir* to be the source). Later on, such surface analogies were continued by *alunir* 'to land on the moon' and now by discussions on *amarsir*.

In fulfilling this function of lexical enrichment, productive rules or patterns are in competition with loan words from a foreign language, and more rarely with extra-grammatical operations such as blending and reduplication.

Now, an early sign of language decay is that this second function of lexical enrichment is not fulfilled anymore by rules or patterns of the minority language but simply by borrowing words from the dominant majority language and then integrating them phonologically, and, if necessary, also morphologically, such as by adding a thematic vowel in E. *to dribble* > Sp. *dribl-a-r*, It. *dribbl-a-re*. Only then does a borrowed word become a neologism of the loaning language.

Let us exemplify this with Breton. In addition to loss of lexical complexity, this was the only safe sign of decay that we found in the South Bigouden dialect area in Southwest Bretagne with the older, fully fluent informants investigated by Dressler and Hufgard.[34]

Up to the time of the First World War, new products of industry or fashion received Breton names which were then generally used by Breton speakers, e.g. *marc'h-houarn* 'bicycle' (lit. 'iron horse' with productive left-headed noun compounding), *skriv-er-ez* 'type-writer' (lit. 'write-fem.agent suffix'), sometimes in several variants, e.g. F. *machine à coudre* 'sewing-machine', literal translation *mekanig da wriat* = *gwri-er-ez*, *gwri-ad-er-ez* (from the root or stem of the verb *gwriat* 'to sew').

In the nineteenth century, the French name of the newly invented thrashing machine *batt-euse* was translated literally into Bret: *dorn-er-ez*, from the verb *dorn* + *añ* 'battre' and the composite feminine agent suffix *-er-ez*. However, Fr. *moissoneuse-batteuse* 'mowing and thrashing machine,' invented after the First

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World War, was not translated anymore, but was simply taken over without further morphological integration and only partial phonological integration. A symptomatic example is a Breton information pamphlet for peasants from 1932:[35] its language (based on the Northern Léonard dialect) contains only French neologisms, which are printed in French orthography and in italics, i.e. as citation forms or guest words without any attempt at integration into Breton, e.g. *scarificateur*, *extirpateur*, *marc'hadourien* ('merchants') *sélectionneurs*, *evit ar Frañs a-bez* (lit. 'pour la France entière,' thus avoiding the Breton term for France: *Bro C'hall* 'Country Gaul'). Also for new sports, matches and competitions no Breton terms were introduced and used.

A further telling sign is the fact that during my first Breton fieldwork (areas of Trégorrois and Bigouden dialects) in the 1970s, my fluent informants did not use and even ridiculed Breton neologisms introduced by Breton nationalist purists, such as *pell-wel* 'television' (lit. *pell* 'far' + root of *gwel-out* 'to see' with root-initial compound lenition), *daou-a-gezeg* 'Deux Chevaux,' name of the then very popular smallest version of a Citroen car (lit. *2* + particle + *kezeg* 'horses' with root-initial compound lenition), *goude-skrid* 'post-scriptum' (literal translation).

The First World War led to this big rupture, although Breton was currently transmitted to children as the first and often only language well after the Second World War. In my opinion it was the excruciating war experience of Breton soldiers, old and young, in the Eastern and Northern French ditches, where their non-existing or only partial command of French (and at least their strong Breton accent) resulted in humiliation and more-than-average death rates.

This may have been the main direct or indirect cause for the functional shift in lexical enrichment from Breton to French. The minority language system was no longer felt to be adequate for enriching the vocabulary. Loss of creativity of Breton word formation did not entail loss of the first function of word formation, i.e. morphosemantic and morphotactic motivation. My older and fluent informants of the 1970s, although not using recent Breton neologisms themselves, were able to judge correctly the grammaticality of such neologisms that I presented to them and they reacted differently to neologisms formed via productive versus unproductive word formation rules.

This capacity differed strikingly from those of terminal and pre-terminal semi-speakers, although they retained words with high token frequency. A spectacular case is the nearly complete loss of diminutives in pre-terminal and terminal speakers, although diminutive formation had been a very productive word formation type, in stark contrast to French.

Thus loss of the function of lexical enrichment of word formation with ensuing loss of word formation productivity was a first sign of irreversible language decay. This decay resulted two generations, or about half a century, later in first partial and then complete loss of the first function of word formation, i.e. of morphosemantic and morphotactic motivation.

In contrast to Breton, the Austrian minority languages Slovenian in Carinthia, and Croatian and Hungarian in the Burgenland show only a strong reduction of

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speakers[36] but still fluent speakers expand their lexicon with productive indigenous word formation rules (cf. Ref. 21, pp. 325–329 for Hungarian, Ref. 37 for Slovenian, indigenous derivations from older German loans, passim in Refs 38–40). However, Gal[21] observed that the use of word formation, i.e. the token frequency of derived words, declines in the Hungarian language island Felsőőr/Oberwarth in the eastern-most Austrian province Burgenland (compare Mithun's[41] remarks on the decline of polysynthesis in the Iroquoian language, Cayuga). Presumably the decline in the use of productive word formation precedes loss of productive word formation. But this remains to be investigated empirically in recessive languages that dispose of enough earlier written documentation.

Other phenomena of language change are uncertain early linguistic indicators of language decay. Let us mention three.

First, change in name-giving from the recessive to the dominant language. However, giving first names only in forms of the dominating language (Ref. 28, p. 325; Ref. 42, p. 103 f., Ref. 31, p. 78, Ref. 43, p. 58) is not a reliable indicator of decay, and this is for several reasons: it may be due to institutional pressure, but within minority in-groups nick-names may be used in forms of the minority language, e.g. a Breton boy may be called officially *François*, but within the family and peer groups – *Fañch*. On the other hand, Bretons who do not speak a word of Breton may give their children Breton instead of French names. Finally, onomastic systems lie outside of the lexical and grammatical systems of a language, thus no implications can be drawn from name-giving to the state of grammar and lexicon of the same language. Thus, loss of indigenous name-giving *may* be an indicator of incipient or ongoing language decay, but it is a very unreliable indicator.

Second, a typical phonological change among bilingual speakers of the minority and majority language is the shift of 'foreign accent'. In Brittany, there were bilingual speakers up to the end of the twentieth century who had a native accent in Breton, but a foreign accent when speaking French, e.g. by substituting vowels, stressing the penultimate syllable, devoicing word-final obstruents. Since learning Breton as a second language became fashionable among French-speaking Bretons in the mid-twentieth century, the reverse phenomenon occurred, i.e. to speak French with an indigenous accent and Breton with a French accent. This is clearly a sign of ongoing language shift, i.e. of French and Breton exchanging the status of first versus second language, and such individual or group language shifts are neither a necessary precondition for, nor a very early sign of, language decay, but it is not a sufficient precondition. Moreover, the capacity of learning a second language without pronouncing it with a foreign accent depends so much on the individual language talent and on the conditions of learning that this is also an unreliable criterion.

A third phenomenon cited in the literature (see Ref. 44; cf. Ref. 45, p. 83 ff.; Ref. 46, p. 139) is loaning of morphological affixes and syntactic constructions from the dominant language which have no counterparts in the recessive language. However, such morphological and syntactic loaning occurs in language change devoid of language decay (cf. Ref. 47 for morphology).

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Conclusion

In the previous part of this paper, I have tried to differentiate early socio-linguistic indicators of language decay that transform a threatened language into a critically and then severely threatened language (from the phenomena of language decay), indicators that are shared by the general diachronic change of vital, thriving languages.

In the area of language endangerment, there has been much success in the transdisciplinary extension of research. But there is much less interdisciplinary cooperation between specialists of different disciplines. Of course, this occurs in collective volumes containing contributions by specialists of different disciplines, which represents additive but not integrative interdisciplinarity, but it occurs relatively seldom in joint research articles.

And if I may dare to extrapolate my attempt to assign different factors of language decay to the five different fields of socio-political, socio-economic, sociocultural, socio-psychological and socio-linguistic research to the field of language revitalisation and revival, I would suggest that all of these five fields and of the factors mentioned should be kept in mind. Of course, any strategy of language revitalisation and revival can only focus on reversing or counterbalancing some of these factors, but one should try to neutralise or block the detrimental effects of the other factors of language decay, because otherwise there is the risk that what has been gained by revitalisation or revival endeavours may be lost again.

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