LANGUAGE SHIFT – INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY – FINAL REVISIONS

Preprint · October 2018

CITATIONS
0

READS
342

1 author:

Salikoko Sangol Mufwene
University of Chicago
211 PUBLICATIONS **4,102** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Language Shift

SALIKOKO S. MUFWENE
University of Chicago, USA

Introduction

Although the concept of language shift (LS) at the population level can be traced back to Fishman (1964), it is really Fishman (1991) that made it particularly relevant to the discourse on language endangerment and loss (LEL), as also underscored by e.g. Ostler (2011) and Pauwels (2016). It can result in LEL under ecological conditions that disadvantage members of a minority, marginalized, or immigrant population (Mufwene ~~2017~~). Indeed, Fishman used *language shift* in reference to situations where a population gives up their heritage language for another which from thereon functions as their vernacular.

This new vernacular has typically been characterized as politically and/or economically dominant, and perhaps more prestigious, in their vanishing multilingual social ecology (Fishman 1991). The situation obliterates the egalitarian-style relationship attested among most indigenous languages before the rise of kingdoms or nation-states. This kind of ecology-grounded characterization offers the advantage of discussing the subject matter as part of language evolution, paying attention to motivation and to individual speakers' behaviors, where the action for population-level changes really lies (Mufwene 2001).

Fishman discussed LS initially in relation to immigrants, an academic interest he shared with, for instance, Haugen (1953) and pursued by others such as Clyne (2003). Immigrants typically appropriate the (dominant) language of the host population, in order to function competitively in the latter's economy. This is what most continental Europeans in Anglophone North America and Australia did as they gradually assimilated to the Anglo socioeconomic system and shifted to English at the expense of their heritage languages and economic practices. In the case of the United States, it generally took until after the American Revolution and sometimes up to the twentieth century before these immigrants contributed to making English the dominant language (see e.g. Haugen 1953 for Norwegians, and Wilkerson and Salmons 2008 for Germans).

The literature on LEL shows that LS has been the experience of indigenous peoples too in the same polities, although generally later than European immigrants (Mufwene ~~2017~~), especially because colonization has not only reduced them to demographic minorities but also marginalized them from the new socioeconomic world order. Regardless of whether a population is said to "shift languages" (as in the typical discourse about immigrants) or to "give up their heritage language for another" (as in the LEL discourse), the idea is the same, that is they adopt a new vernacular. The shift is the consequence of changes in the socioeconomic structure of their polity and the

The International Encyclopedia of Linguistic Anthropology. Edited by James M. Stanlaw.

outcome of the structural erosion and/or functional atrophy of the vernacular among the language shifters. I show below that LS may amount to, but need not result in, the death of the heritage language.

How does LS occur?

A convenient question to start with is how LS happens. It is like asking how a language dies. The loss does not happen in the same way that a person dies, at a particular time, for which a death certificate may be issued. On the other hand, both LS and language loss are associated with a particular place. Also, they both may take place in a particular polity but survive or even thrive in another.

This differential evolution was the case for African languages brought by the enslaved Africans to the Americas, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean. The languages died in the colonies but appear to have survived in their homelands, perhaps just most of them, although the subject matter still needs to be investigated. The same differential evolution is true of several European languages brought to the settlement colonies. They have died or are moribund in polities where they did not become the dominant languages but survive in Europe. In all these cases, LS occurred gradually from one speaker to another, spreading within the relevant community until the time when the relevant language was no longer spoken.

Even individual speakers have not stopped practicing the relevant language abruptly. LS occurs gradually, as speakers have fewer and fewer opportunities or motivations to speak their heritage vernaculars. Eventually, structural attrition kicks in; and they forget how to speak it or give up trying to. Under particular socioeconomic pressures, like becoming fluent in the language in which one must earn a living or that expected to facilitate integration within the host population, adults may refrain from communicating with their children in their heritage vernacular. The children themselves may independently show little or no interest in it anyway, because it may stigmatize them among their indigenous peers or disadvantage them in some other way. This happens faster when the immigrants do not live in their own, segregated urban neighborhoods or in isolated rural communities (but see below). Not learning the heritage language would contribute to its death, as it becomes history after its speakers in the previous generation are all dead. These are all possible scenarios of LS at the population level, when individual members converge either in speaking it less and less or in not learning it.

LS is thus an evolutionary outcome of an ecology in which there are fewer and fewer opportunities or motivations to speak a particular language. Although linguists have been more interested in the process at the population level, individual speakers are the unwitting agents of the process, as they respond adaptively to social or economic pressures they experience (Mufwene 2001).

As noted by Fishman (1971), LS at the population level starts with a division of labor between the heritage language and the host or dominant one. It is fostered by the advantages the latter offers or promises to the minority or immigrant population. Adults may start by using it in their professional and/or public life, while still speaking the heritage language in their private socialization. If the socioeconomic structure exerts pressure on

the minority or immigrant population to be culturally assimilated, the target language can encroach on domains hitherto reserved for the heritage vernacular. If the minority or immigrant children attend the same schools as those who speak the target language, which is used as the medium of instruction, peer pressure and age-grading are likely to get them to adopt it as their vernacular. This is the case of most immigrant children from the Global South in the Global North. Parents may easily accommodate them if they also fear that socializing them in the heritage language may disadvantage them in school and on the job market.

LS and language death

As also remarked by Fishman (1971), multilingualism need not be resolved in monolingualism. While one can claim that an important proportion of the African elite have adopted the European official language of their nation as their vernacular and as an emblem of their higher socioeconomic status, they have not given up their heritage languages. These still serve several useful functions for them, including communicating successfully with the house help and less privileged relatives, bargaining prices with market and street vendors, and participating in popular culture. There is to date no reason to fear that the rest of the national populations will shift to the European colonial languages. The sub-Saharan socioeconomic structures are not culturally assimilationist. The disenfranchised seem resigned to the informal use of interpreters when they have to deal with the government, the higher level of public administration or of the judicial system, or healthcare providers from outside their communities (see e.g. Deumert 2010), just as during the colonial period. Most people still survive on a subsistence or informal economy (Vigouroux 2013), which operates in indigenous languages they speak natively or know.

While sub-Saharan Africans are typically at least bilingual in the regional indigenous lingua franca and their heritage languages, the lingua franca is normally for interactions with people of different ethnic groups. In urban centers, the heritage, ethnic language is maintained among adults for socialization with relatives and members of the same ethnolinguistic group. Their children usually also develop passive competence in their ethnic language, which some activate as adults, under pressure to assert (loyalty to) their ethnic culture, especially in times of interethnic conflicts, usually fueled by politics.

While urban population structures in sub-Saharan Africa are not entirely segregated, the patterns of socialization of their residents, which privilege intra-ethnic relations, sustain plurilingualism in individuals. Although addressed by their parents in the prestigious official language, children of the elite, typically a small minority, still have to interact with the larger population. They partake in popular culture with peers from less affluent families whose preferred language is the indigenous urban vernacular. They refrain from using the elite vernacular with the latter and especially with the less affluent members of their extended families. Visits to or from those residing in the rural areas motivate them to speak their parents' language(s) or the urban vernacular.

All the above social dynamics and others prevent individual cases of LS from converging into population-level LS's. Thus, unlike most indigenous languages of

the Caribbean, the Americas, and Australia, those of sub-Saharan Africa and of many other places in the Global South have not been endangered by the colonial European languages, which still function as (one of) their official languages (Mufwene 2017a). To be sure, we must note that in these polities the Natives have remained the overwhelming majority relative to the former European colonizers. The less educated and economically underprivileged segments of the national populations also remain demographically far superior to the elite class and practice primarily informal economy in indigenous languages. The stratified language regimes introduced during the colonial period, with the division of labor in domains of use between the different languages of one's repertoire, has remained in place.

Ethnolinguistic "super-diversity" in Western Europe

Patterns of international migration have diversified since the wake of World War II. Reverse migrations from the Global South to the Global North, combined with migrations from East and Central Europe to Western Europe, have produced in Western European cities what Vertovec (2007) termed "super-diversity." As explained in Mufwene (2017b), the relevant linguistics discourse (e.g. Blommaert and Rampton 2011) also suggests that immigrants from the Global South may not necessarily wind up losing their heritage languages. As they are not fully assimilated or cannot afford housing in affluent neighborhoods, where they would be isolated from each other, most immigrants tend to cluster in the same less affluent neighborhoods of the host cities, such as the French *banlieues*. One is struck by neighborhoods' names such as Matonge in Brussels (from the name of a neighborhood in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC]), Little India in London, Little Haiti in Miami, Little Senegal (within the Harlem neighborhood) in New York City, and China Town in several major cities of the Global North.

In these ecologies, the working-class adult immigrants continue to socialize primarily among themselves and in their heritage vernaculars or national lingua francas, while their children grow up either as bilinguals in the host and heritage languages or with dominant competence in the host country's vernacular. These adults can learn enough of the host country's language, sometimes just at the interlanguage-level, to be able to function in the economic system or to communicate, when necessary, with speakers of other languages, while those in the white-collar sector develop social networks in which they speak the host country's language as their vernacular.

The above observations appear to be consistent with the received view, according to which the heritage language will die by the third generation, once the grandparents have died and there is little motivation for the children of immigrants to maintain some competence in their parents' heritage languages. However, immigration from the Global South may continue for as long as there are growing economic disparities between it and the Global North, bringing with it more and more speakers of the same languages to the same neighborhoods, in which they become self-segregated. As intercontinental travel and telecommunication become more and more affordable, the immigrants' languages are also becoming more and more sustainable in the host countries. Language shift at

the communal level may not be predictable, as long as the immigrant populations are not assimilated culturally and economically.

Multilingualism and plurilingualism are not transitions to monolingualism

Multilingualism and plurilingualism do not ineluctably lead to communal or individual monolingualism, respectively. They are the dominant state of affairs in the Global South. Likewise, after over half a century of bilingualism in their respective national languages and in English (or another European language), Nordic European countries are still far from evolving into "English-only" polities, *pace* Phillipson's (2003) fear, for example.

Since the wake of World War II, the Global North also appears to have become more tolerant of multilingualism and plurilingualism. This evolution appears to be a consequence of its greater participation in worldwide academic, business, and diplomatic globalization. In Western Europe it also reflects the limited integration of immigrants from the Global South, as noted above.

Even when the individual immigrants experience LS, this may not always be in the direction of the host country's dominant language. According to Vigouroux (2013), some immigrants who feel that their chances of economic survival in the host country's (dominant) language are (very) limited and that they can survive only or primarily thanks to practicing informal economy within the immigrant community shift to the language associated with this economic practice. This is one of the national languages of the country of origin, that is Lingala or Swahili in the case of several DRC immigrants to Cape Town, South Africa.

To be sure, the shift is facilitated by socialization with native or vernacular speakers of these languages. Some of the shifters may also learn the local non-European language, e.g. IsiXhosa in Cape Town, if they do some business with non-English-speaking Natives (Vigouroux 2013). LS depends on several factors; it does not always proceed in favor of the language that is economically and/or politically dominant in a particular polity.

Note also that LS need not pervade all domains of language practice. Plurilinguals, particularly in the Global South, often apply a division of labor to the different languages of their repertoires. For example, they may use the European colonial language only or primarily in their professional lives, while they maintain their indigenous lingua franca for communication in the public sphere, especially when they interact with people from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. They still use their ethnic languages at home or maybe just when socializing with people of the same ethnic group or with relatives who are less well off.

Relocation to an area where a different lingua franca is used may cause a shift, but this may consist only in change of dominance, because the former lingua franca may continue to be spoken with people from the same home region. In many parts of the world, plurilingualism is so pervasive that regional mobility just prompts migrating individuals to expand their repertoires. Thus, LS as discussed in the earlier literature up to Fishman (1991) may be typical of polities that have embraced the ideology

of monolingualism rather than of any situation where there is a demographically dominant language.

Why language mixing need not be symptomatic of LS

Contrary to the discourse on LEL, language mixing or code-switching does not necessarily portend LS, especially when the practice is correlated with change of topics in an interaction. An issue with these terms is whether a plurilingual should be interpreted as the juxtaposition of two or more monolinguals into one speaker, who should keep the systems separate from each other (Kirsten 2017). Such a theoretical assumption suggests that language mixing and code-switching are deviations from the norm, while they appear to be normal behavior in multilingual communities in which interlocutors share more or less the same language repertoires. For such speakers it may simply be convenient to use whatever resource is more immediately accessible in their feature pool (Mufwene 2001) during their interaction.

Speakers may also mix or switch codes intentionally for particular pragmatic or communicative effects, such as ridiculing some protagonists in a narrative or indexing them by using the languages associated with them. It is not unusual for stories about heterolingual protagonists to be told in more than language, that is one for the storyline, used by and associated with the speaker, and the others for indexing the protagonists (Koven 2007).

Some students of LS claim that "interactional code-switching," produced by heterolingual interlocutors is symptomatic of communal LS in progress. As is evident from Wei (1994), this may reflect a situation in which the interlocutors are dominant in different languages, for instance, when immigrant children feel more comfortable communicating with their parents in the host country's language, which they use with their autochthonous peers too. For the children, the host language also serves as a tool for integration in the larger population. What one cannot predict is whether pressure from within the ethnic community, if this is segregated, will not force them to also activate their apparently passive competence in their ethnic/heritage language when they grow older.

The social factors that have sustained stigmatized varieties in countries such as the United States may also keep immigrant languages alive, especially when, as explained above, adult immigration does not stop and the immigrants live in their own separate communities of practice (Mufwene 2017a). Lack of cultural assimilation pressures can indeed prevent LS even in the Global North, as is evident from the maintenance of, for example, Amish and African American Englishes in the United States. On the other hand, when the pressures for LS apply, they may not be experienced in exactly the same ways, especially with certain immigrant groups promoting ethnic pride, which may entail pride in one's heritage language. This may explain why, for instance, "London Jamaican Creole" has hung around for so long since the middle of the twentieth century. National social clubs among some immigrants may even promote the vitality of some national lingua francas such as Mandarin, Nigerian Pidgin English, or Swahili, if not some specific ethnic languages such as Korean.

Conclusions

As acknowledged by Fishman (1971), the dynamics of language practice in multilingual polities have not been identical in different parts of the world. His original theorizing on LS was based on immigrants to the United States, whose socioeconomic structure favored evolution to monolingualism. This has been corroborated by the experience of immigrants to Australia (Clyne 2003). However, one has to think twice before extrapolating the same conclusion across the board to Canada, where the Francophone Québécois have succeeded in reversing the trend. White communities in South Africa have not evolved toward monolingualism either. The pre-apartheid population structure led the Afrikaners to be bilingual in Afrikaans and English, whereas the apartheid regime (1948–1994) forced other Whites to learn Afrikaans too. Several rural Afrikaners are even bilingual in Afrikaans and the local Bantu language of most of the indigenous people working for them (Mufwene 2017b).

Generally, like elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, South Africa's indigenous languages have not been threatened by the European languages, apparently because their speakers have remained the overwhelming majority. Perhaps a more important reason is the homeland system during the British colonial rule and the apartheid regime, which has not only marginalized their speakers from modern economic development but also kept them safe from the expansion of either English or Afrikaans. By contrast, Indian and Malaysian immigrants have shifted to English and Afrikaans, respectively, as their ~~vernacular~~.

This last contrast underscores the fact that multilingualism has not evolved toward the same outcome even within the same polity, that is LS everywhere and in favor of the same language. If we compare Native Americans with European immigrants, it also appears that population structure prevented LS from evolving at the same speed within all the communities of the same polity. This is actually also true of European immigrants to the United States, as French is still buying time in Louisiana. The current wave of immigrations from the Global South to the Global North also suggests that one should not confuse LS at the individual speaker level with LS at the population level. Even in small immigrant populations (such as Little India in London or Little Senegal in New York), there are still immigrants from the same places who keep their heritage languages alive while their children develop dominant competence in the host country's most important language. Likewise, because of continuous immigration from Latin America, some American politicians claim that Spanish is threatening the hegemony of English or the evolution of the United States toward being an English-only polity. However, many Hispanic parents are concerned that their children are not learning (enough) Spanish (Douzet 2004). Things may remain in a state of flux for quite a while.

I have shown in this entry that the traditional theorizing on LS, based on parts of the Global North at a time when particular ecological factors fostered evolution to monolingualism, needs revisiting. I have also shown that LS at the individual speaker level may at times be domain-specific. Domain-specificity may in fact be a critical factor controlling the pace of LS in general, such as when immigrant scholars discuss their disciplines more comfortably in the dominant language of their professional lives

than in their heritage languages, which they can still speak fluently in non-professional domains. LS appears to be a more diverse subject matter than usually been assumed.

SEE ALSO: Code-mixing and Code-switching; Endangered Languages and Language Death; Lingua Franca

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Blommaert, Jan, and Ben Rampton. 2011. "Language and Superdiversity." *Diversities* 13: 1–22.

Clyne, Michael. 2003. *Dynamics of Language Contact*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Deumert, Ana. 2010. "'It Would Be Nice if They Could Give Us More Language': Serving South Africa's Multilingual Patient Base." *Social Science and Medicine* 71: 53–61.

Douzet, Frédérick. 2004. "Le cauchemar hispanique de Samuel Huntington." *Hérodote: revue de géographie et de géopolitque* 115: 31–50.

Fishman, Joshua A. 1964. "Language Maintenance and Language Shift as a Field of Inquiry: A Definition of the Field and Suggestions for Its Further Development." *Linguistics* 9: 32–70.

Fishman, Joshua A. 1971. "Preface." *The International Migration Review* 5.2: *The Impact of Migration on Language Maintenance and Language Shift*: 121–124.

Fishman, Joshua A. 1991. *Reversing Language Shift*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Haugen, Einar. 1953. *The Norwegian Language in America: A Study in Bilingual Behavior*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Kirsten, Johanita. 2017. "What Is in a Language? Essentialism in Macro-~~sociolinguistic~~ Research on Afrikaans." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 248: 159–195.

Koven, Michèle. 2007. *Selves in Two Languages: Bilinguals Verbal Enactments of Identity in French and Portuguese*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. 2001. *The Ecology of Language Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. 2017a. "Language Vitality: The Weak Theoretical Underpinnings of What Can Be an Exciting Research Area." *Language* 93 (4): e202–e223.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. 2017b. "Worldwide Globalization, International Migrations, and the Varying Faces of Multilingualism: Some Historical Perspectives." Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies 174. https://www.tilburguniversity.edu/sites/tiu/files/download/TPCS_174_Mufwene_2.pdf (accessed 21 January 2020).

Ostler, Nicholas. 2011. "Language Maintenance, Shift, and Endangerment." In *The Cambridge* Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, edited by Rajend Mesthrie*, 315–334. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pauwels, Anne. 2016. *Language Maintenance and Shift*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Phillipson, Robert. 2003. *English-only Europe? Challenging Language Policy*. London: Routledge.

Vertovec, Steven. 2007. "Super-diversity and Its Implications." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30: 1024–1054.

Vigouroux, Cécile B. 2013. "Informal Economy and Language Practice in the Context of Migrations." In *Language, Migration and Social Inequalities: A Critical Sociolinguistic Perspective on Institutions and Work*, edited by Alexandre Duchêne, Melissa Moyer, and Celia Roberts, 296–328. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Wei, Li. 1994. *Three Generations, Two Languages, One Family: Language Choice and Language Shift in a Chinese Community in Britain*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Wilkerson, Miranda E., and Joseph Salmons. 2008. "'Good Immigrants of Yesterday' Who Didn't Learn English: Germans in Wisconsin." *American Speech* 83: 259–283.

The abstract and keywords will not be included in the PDF or any printed version of your article, but are necessary for publication on Wiley's online publishing platform to increase the discoverability of your article.

If the abstract and keywords are not present below, please take this opportunity to add them now.
The abstract should be a short paragraph up to 200 words in length and keywords between 5 to 10 words.

ABSTRACT

Language shift (LS) is interpreted in this entry as the outcome of fewer and fewer opportunities or motivations that particular speakers have to practice their heritage vernacular. As a process it may, but need not, lead to language endangerment and loss. It can be domain-specific and proceeds at different speeds among the members of the relevant population. It occurs especially in polities that are culturally assimilationist and where the socioeconomic structure exerts significant ecological pressures on minority, marginalized, or immigrant populations to adopt the dominant language of the economy. On the other hand, assimilationist pressures in the Global North have not been uniform, especially in relation to immigrants from the Global South, who now have more latitude to maintain their heritage languages. The absence of such assimilationist pressures in the Global South itself has also sustained multilingualism. Overall, LS is shown to be a more diverse subject matter than traditionally assumed.

KEYWORDS

domain; ecology; individual; language endangerment and loss; language shift; multilingualism; plurilingualism; population