

Eng124: Language and Society

Societal Multilingualism

Empirical issues in societal multilingualism

Language Choice

- Not easy to determine who speaks what language in a given region
- Questions about language choice in a community are neither easy to frame nor easy to answer.
- Data gathering in multilingual contexts beset with three kinds of problems
 - Language ecology is dynamic.
 - Terminological issues
 - Extalinguistic considerations in language choice

- Reading Assignment

Suzanne Romaine's Language Choice

(A-One Photocopy Centre)

Census data

- Nation state as the reference point for bi/multilingualism
- Large scale surveys such as the Census are used to determine the linguistic composition of nation states
- By the time the census reports are out, the language ecology may have changed considerably.
- As a result any longitudinal comparisons lose their accuracy and validity.

Census data

- Data gathering through the census is faced with problems that challenge their credibility.
- A variety of constraints on questions that can be asked about multilingualism.
- Constraints of time and training of the surveying personnel – questions about patterns of language use cannot be investigated in detail, given the time spent.

Census data

- The respondent and the surveyor may not share their understanding of notions like mother tongue or home language or even the first language.
- Usually censuses do not recognise the presence of more than one mother tongues.
- Nor is it recognised that the language learnt first may not be the language mastered best.
- Changing definitions of these terms make longitudinal studies of census data difficult.

Language–dialect asymmetry

- After independence of India, while the Sikh Groups were asking for a linguistically homogeneous state for Punjabis, the Hindi enthusiasts claimed that the demand was unjustified since both Urdu and Punjabi were actually dialects of Hindi.
- Because of the serious antagonism going on among the language groups, Census 1951 abandoned the separate tabulation of the three languages.

Language-dialect asymmetry

- In 1971 Census, Maithili, then considered a dialect of Hindi, was returned by 6 million speakers as their MT.

Self report

- Self reports of language usage are subject to variance with respect to factors such as prestige, ethnicity or political affiliation.
- Punjabi-speaking Pakistanis in Britain reporting Urdu as their MT.
- Sikhs in Britain claiming Punjabi to be their MT for the same reasons.
- Census data do not manage to capture the complex relationships among religion, language, ethnicity and politics that define individual choices about linguistic identity.

Self report

- Macedonia: The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia
- One of the successor states of former Yugoslavia
- Conflicting census statistics were used to justify competing claims on the territory of Macedonia
- Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks, who fought over the territory of Macedonia claimed a majority for their own groups.
- The interrelationship between, ethnicity, nationality, religious and linguistic identity in peoples' minds gets exploited by the census, yielding a misleading picture.



- The Greek and the Turkish Censuses grouped people according to religion, thus privileging religion over language as the basis for identity (Orthodox Christian and Muslim).
- The Bulgarian census assumed that all Slavs living in the region were Bulgarian.
- Some of the Macedonian speaking declared their nationality as Albanian or Turkish depending on religious affiliation (Catholic or Muslim).
- Macedonian ethnic identity was totally suppressed in all the four censuses.

Ethnic Group	Bulgarian	Serbian	Greek	Turkish
Bulgarians	52.31	2.01	19.26	30.8
Serbians	0.03	71.35	0.00	3.4
Greeks	10.13	7.01	37.85	10.6
Albanians	5.70	5.77	0.00	0.0
Turks	22.11	8.06	36.76	51.8
Others	9.72	13.86	6.13	3.4

Linguistic Identity

- The politics of language and the concept of linguistic identity
- Language in the generic, abstract sense is easily defined.
- But what about 'a language'? Does it lend itself as conveniently to definitions?
- The answer is 'No'!
- A language is a construct deeply embroiled in the issues of nationality, ethnicity and other markers of identity, often inseparable from one or more of them.
- A language is a marker of allegiance rather than something out there.

Linguistic identity

- “Languages are different or same, depending on the political interests of those whose opinions matter in these circumstances.”
- Birth of modern Hebrew
- Croatising of Serbo-Croatian in Croatia ("If he is not shot or deposed, it is not impossible that Tadjman will make Serbian and Croatian mutually incomprehensible in 20 years' time").
- The birth of Bangla Desh
- Tamil-Sinhala conflict in Sri Lanka