

LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

I. Introduction

Many of us are actively considering entering some sort of language work – for some it will be literary projects and for others it will be translation projects. Whatever the specific choice, the bottom line of such goals adds up to a long term commitment of time and energy. That commitment is also tied up with the assumption that the projects we eventually enter and the languages we eventually learn will continue to be significant when we leave the place... 10, 15, or 20 years down the line.

HOW CAN WE TELL? More specifically, HOW CAN WE TELL WHAT LANGUAGE AN ETHNIC GROUP WILL RETAIN TO THE END OF THE LANGUAGE PROJECT? AND WILL THAT LANGUAGE BE THE ONE OF CHOICE FOR LITERACY OR SCRIPTURE?

Well, perhaps we can not predict with 100% accuracy, but we can a long way in recognizing positive trends... by assessing language attitudes before we “go in.” Because LANGUAGE ATTITUDE, in the long run, PREDISPOSES LANGUAGE USE. In turn, current patterns of LANGUAGE USE REVEALS (and SUBSTANTIATES) the ATTITUDES of the community toward the languages used in the community. If we care about what people think about their language, we are then more likely to adequately plan language projects.

Before I go on, I will say that I am very much in debt to Roland Walker’s draft discussion paper for the following.

II. DIAGRAM

OVERHEAD

(Walker, Roland W. nd. Assessing Language Attitudes. 6)

There are two opposing forces that mold language attitude and thus language use.

Inside Forces – work toward the maintenance of current language use.

Outside Forces – work toward a shift of language use

A. INSIDE FORCES

1. Strong Ethnic Identity and Enduring Traditional Values

EG. AMISH: this group, located throughout Pennsylvania and Ohio have wanted to maintain their ethnic/religious identity and have consciously use their language as a badge of that identity

2. Cultural Resiliency – the ability to borrow and adapt borrowings and make them uniquely their own.

EG. NAVAHO: the Navaho, according to Walker, have borrowed heavily both in the material and religious realms from the Spanish, Pueblos and Americans ... yet make the traits they have borrowed distinctively Navaho.

3. Vernacular Literature - the fact that the language is written and standardized enough to have a body of literature works toward strengthening positive attitudes. Thus vernacular literature is both one of the signs of a positive attitude and a significant contributor to that attitude.

EG. New Ireland Province of Papua New Guinea is currently addressing an active pre school literacy project in view of support for the island's vernaculars.

B. OUTSIDE FORCES

1. Economics

- a. Economic incentives pressure language communities toward the language of economic advantage.

EG. East Sutherland Gaelic - English

The decline of the fishing industry made it impossible to make a living in fishing, the traditional insular profession of Gaelic speakers. When the traditional "fisher folk" had to enter the mainstream of society to find jobs, there was no longer the impetus toward the use of Gaelic, in fact the opposite was true - the pressure was to learn English if one was to get economically ahead.

- b. Economics also bring about migrations (to jobs) and thus contact with a dominant language.

EG. The East Sutherland Gaelic is again a good example. In this case the Gaelic speaking fisher folk migrated out of the linguistic community into another in order to obtain subsistence work.

c. Counter balances to economic pressures.

Other than isolation ... which is becoming less and less possible in our shrinking world ... one factor the shelters minority languages from economic pressures toward another language (e.g. national language) ... that is having a DUAL ECONOMY. If the people group can subsist on traditional gardening, hunting, or gathering, and is not tied to a cash economy, then the pressures of economy is lessened.

2. Government Policies

- a. Laws discriminating vernaculars work toward a negative attitude toward the language by the subjugated peoples. "A government language policy which discriminates against the use of the vernacular ... will cause language attitude to shift in a generation or two" and with language attitude shift comes a shift in language use.
- b. Military conscription forces men from many vernaculars to use instead some lingua franca, often the national language
- c. As vernacular literature works to support a positive language attitude toward the vernacular in print ... so government policies limiting vernacular literature works toward a negative attitude.

EG. Apparently Ethiopia controls the languages in which literature can be published.

3. Migration

- a. People moving into the area of a vernacular who do not know or use the vernacular do serve as a negative pressure toward the use of that vernacular.
- b. Inter-marriage. The strongest domain for a vernacular is the home. When there is an inter-marriage situation this domain is weakened, along with attitudes toward the use of the vernacular.

4. Language Contact

Attitudes toward another language (whether the national language or a potentially stronger local language) aren't strongly developed if there is no contact. However, as contact with the alternate language grows, so does its influence on the language attitude of the local vernacular.

Indicators of contact: roads, airstrips, radios
distance away from the alternate
language's population center.

III. Further Thoughts

We have shown some of the factors that affect language attitude and thus language use. This is only part of the way toward gauging the potential viability of a language project. Walker continues his article with patterns of language use ... which will reflect on language attitude ... and how to get at those patterns of use (OBSERVATION) and well as interpreting results. This information should be taken along with Grimes (B. GRIMES, 1982. Comprehension and Language Attitudes. NOL. Special 2. 26-35) who addresses not only indicators of attitudes, but also the relationship between comprehension and attitudes in making a final decision.