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Abrupt Transmission Failure in Obsolescing Languages: How Sudden the "Tip" to the Dominant Language in Communities and Families?

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One of the regrettable but interesting things about language death is its long history. It's anything but a new phenomenon, and we have a lot of extinct languages littering the shores of linguistic history to prove it. On the other hand, our own time seems a little curious in one special respect, namely in respect to the number of languages which have persisted with pretty fair strength for what seems like a long period, only to weaken in what seems like a rather short time and suddenly wind up in a downslide toward extinction.

In this country and Canada, for example, some long-established populations with very distinctive customs and languages which have been secure for centuries are suddenly in trouble. The geographical region doesn't seem to matter -- it's the same story regardless of location. Cajun French in Louisiana is in the same trouble as French Canadian in Maine. Pennsylvania Dutch (that is, German) among the secular (non-Anabaptist) Pennsylvania Dutchmen is threatened in the same fashion as Scottish Gaelic in Cape Breton. None of these is a particularly johnny-come-lately immigrant language -- the oldest of them have been in place for several centuries, and their speaker populations have been relatively loyal and stable, sometimes also reinforced by continuing immigration (this is the case with Canadian reinforcement of the French-speaking population in Maine and Highland Scottish reinforcement of the Gaelic-speaking population in Nova Scotia, whereas the Cajun and Penn Dutch populations seem to have recruited more by absorbing incomers or non-native locals than by major inflows of new immigrants).

In general the twentieth century seems to be notable for the large number of languages which are either obviously dying out or showing marked signs of contraction such as simplifying structure, functional restriction, and loss of speakers at the margins of the community. Whether this century is actually any more characterized by these phenomena, or whether we're only better informed about the number of cases and their wide geographical distribution is unclear.

Some people are inclined to argue that this is a particularly pernicious time for languages which are

isolated, or enclaved, or represented by rather thin populations, or heavily outbalanced by languages of wider currency. People of this persuasion usually point to ease of modern travel, the "global village" phenomenon, the power of the modern nation-state to affect the lives of even its most outlying citizens, the savage thoroughness of the more modern instances of genocide or attempted genocide, the spread of literacy, the penetration of radio and television, and so forth.

I think there is no denying any of these factors. They are all very real and very potent. Anyone who has worked with even a single threatened language can attest to the force of negative policies (or even only negative attitudes) spreading out from a central government and discouraging, or perhaps penalizing, speakers of languages or dialects other than the officially state-promoted language. Similarly the ouster of traditional activities which fostered minority languages -- social gatherings like the ceilidh in Scotland and Ireland, pedagogically-oriented verbal routines such as Aesopian tales, fairy tales, and rhyming genres (all directed toward children) in Albanian-speaking Greek communities (Tsitsipis 1983:27), the most formal styles of public speaking in the Cupeño and Luiseño communities in California (usurped by English; Hill 1973:45) -- by passive or active verbal events which involve only or mainly the state-promoted language has a pronounced, unmistakably deleterious effect on the strength of the minority languages in most cases.

This is the usual outcome, more or less the predictable outcome, and it surprises no one. It's not the inevitable outcome, however, since people seem to be capable of quite remarkable segmentation of their lives, including linguistic segmentation. It's hardly encouraging for a language to be excluded from the schools, ignored in broadcasting, discouraged in public life, and unprovided for in any officially sponsored activities whatever. But in some societies it seems to be possible for people to accept a very restricted role for their native speech form, such that they assume it will be used only in the hearth-and-home sphere; they may even welcome the specialization of their mother tongue as an in-group marker. Where there is a deep gulf between the minority-language group and the dominant-language group, as with certain Native American tribes, the home language may be jealously guarded from members of the majority-language group, treated along with things like religious ceremonials as a privileged form of in-group knowledge, not to be casually exposed to outsiders or

shared with them. There are entire societies in which the home language has good standing but has been traditionally restricted in use without any threat to its ultimate viability (German Switzerland, where Schwyzertütsch is seldom written and almost never used in circumstances of any formality is a case in point), and of course quite a lot of societies exist in which the language of highest prestige is not the local language -- most often where religion is involved, as in many Islamic but non-Arab societies.

Since there are recognized instances of all these exceptions to any general tendency to succumb to centralizing dominant-language pressures, the question may be why there aren't more such exceptions rather than why there are any. In connection with the relatively long-standing ethnic communities now experiencing survival difficulties in the U.S. and Canada, it seems to be the temper of the times which works most against compromises which would allow continuance. Despite the "melting pot" myth, special provision for certain mother-tongue rights of long-established non-English populations was made in several cases into at least the early twentieth century: French in Louisiana (Kloss 1977:112-113), German in Pennsylvania (ibid.: 146-147), Spanish in New Mexico (ibid.:130-131), for example. Assimilative pressures have nonetheless been strong, of course, and the great nineteenth-century waves of European immigration undoubtedly created tensions for longer-established populations as concerns were increasingly voiced over the effect of home-school bilingualism on intelligence and on loyalty to the national state.

Although functional segregation in language use is a perfectly feasible way of managing and maintaining two or more languages, unless the wider community is one in which this is the norm (as in German Switzerland and in Somalia, for example; see Pride 1971 for the latter case), there seems generally to be little support for this course and little understanding of its frequency of occurrence in a good many parts of the world. In most of western Europe and the areas colonized by western European nations, the prevailing attitudes have most definitely not been favorable to full-fledged linguistic dualism of any sustained kind.

On the basis of my own work with two minority languages, one in Great Britain and one in the eastern U.S., and also on the basis of reports from other researchers working in similar settings, I would propose a rather widespread phenomenon which I have dubbed "tip" in describing the British case (Dorian 1981: 51). This phenomenon can be conceived metaphorically

as a gradual accretion of negative feeling toward the subordinate group and its language, often accompanied by legal as well as social pressure, until a critical moment arrives and the subordinate group appears abruptly to abandon its original mother tongue and switch over to exclusive use of the dominant language. Because of the seeming suddenness of the switch-over, it's rather like watching a structure slowly eaten invisibly away at the bottom topple over almost without warning. Yet when the tip has occurred and one begins to examine the period which led up to it, the tip is seldom if ever so sudden as it initially appeared.

The most striking level at which tip occurs is, to my own perception, that of the family. I would like to introduce two cases, one among the Gaelic-speaking fisherfolk of East Sutherland in the extreme northeast of the Highland Scottish mainland and the other among the secular Pennsylvania Dutch of the Hamburg area in Berks County, Pennsylvania. In each of these family cases there were a good many children: 7 in the Gaelic-speaking family, and 12 in the Penn Dutch-speaking family. The parents in each family were skilled bilinguals, but spoke Gaelic and Penn Dutch (respectively) by habit and preference with each other and within the home generally at the outset of their family life. In each of these families the elder children -- the first four of the seven in the Gaelic-speaking family, the first nine of the twelve in the Dutch-speaking family -- were raised as, and became, fully fluent speakers of the parents' original mother tongue. In the Gaelic-speaking family no conscious change in the parents' linguistic behavior toward the three youngest children seems to have taken place, whereas in the Dutch-speaking family there was an acknowledged though unexplained change of that type. In each family the three youngest children emerged as imperfect speakers (or, in the case of the youngest child in the Gaelic-speaking family, as a near-passive bilingual with very little ability to generate utterances in the parental mother tongue).

Several aspects of the two cases are especially interesting. One is that the parents' intentions probably mattered relatively little, since the results were the same in a case where the parents deliberately changed their behavior and in a case where they didn't. The behavior of the peer group outside the family and also the sheer number of older siblings who had attended English-language-only schools and were using a good deal of English among themselves in or around the home most likely had more impact on the language-acquisition patterns of the youngest children

than the parents' own linguistic behavior or transmission plans, since in both homes the parents continued to use the original mother tongue with each other and with the older children (and with all the children in the Gaelic household). This means that the youngest children received at least a good deal of exposure to that language.

Another interesting facet of the two cases is the clarity of the fully-fluent as opposed to the less-than-fully-fluent demarcation line among the children, and the unimportance of the size of the age-gap where the demarcation line falls. No one in either family is in any doubt about which child is the last of the fully fluent and which is the first of the imperfect speakers. The three youngest children in each family are just as aware of their less-than-fully-fluent status as the older children are, although in the Gaelic-speaking family the three youngest are not particularly sensitive about it whereas in the Penn Dutch family the three youngest mind very much that they are not as competent in Dutch as their older siblings. In the Gaelic family the last of the fully-fluent children is 2 years younger than the next oldest fully-fluent sibling and only one year older than the first of his imperfect-speaker siblings. In the Dutch family the last of the fully-fluent children is three years younger than the next oldest fully-fluent sibling and two years older than the first of the imperfect-speaker siblings.

My data from tests among the Penn Dutch-speaking siblings are not yet fully analyzed. But I can present here two sets of results from testing of the Gaelic-speaking family, offering clear indication of how sharply the fluency line can be drawn between siblings only a year apart in age. In Table 1, Speaker 1 is the mother of the family, Speaker 2 her fourth child, and Speaker 3 her fifth child. Neither child was married; both lived in the mother's household. There is only a year's difference in age between the two siblings. The test was for analogical levelling in four structures, the frequent use of analogically-levelled forms being a notable marker of the imperfect Gaelic of the less-than-fully-fluent. Identical sentences were presented to each of the three speakers, in individual elicitation sessions, for translation from English into Gaelic. (It should be noted that translation is a relatively natural, high-frequency occurrence in a community where kin networks include both bilinguals and monolinguals, since remarks or conversations in one language will often be recounted in translation at a later time to a kinsperson with

	Analogically-levelled noun plural (opportunities: 17)	Analogically-levelled verb stems (opportunities: 16)	Analogically-levelled 1st pers. sing. conditional verb (opportunities: 5)
Speaker 1	1[a]	Ø	Ø
Speaker 2	2	Ø	Ø
Speaker 3	8	3	5

	Analogically-levelled 1st pers. sing. future verb (opportunities: 5)	Total analogically-levelled forms: forms	# analog.	% analog.
Speaker 1	Ø	44	1	2
Speaker 2	Ø	43	2	4.5
Speaker 3	5	43	21	49

Table 1: Analogically-levelled forms supplied by three members of a single Gaelic-speaking household in which Speakers 2 and 3 differ in age by only one year

a offered in addition to the irregular, non-analogical form.

whom the language of the original interchange is not the normal language of social interaction). All three of these speakers knew me well, were comfortable with me, and had done this kind of work with me before; I had been around the district over a period of a good many years, and the test sentences were couched in a form of English which was reasonably normal for the local English dialect.

Speakers 2 and 3 may be only a year apart in age, but Speaker 2 is much closer to his mother, 29 years older than he, than to his sister one year younger, in his linguistic usage on this measure.

In Table 2, Speaker 2 is compared with Speaker 3 again and also with Speaker 4, the latter being the next younger sibling, another sister four years younger than Speaker 3 (and so five years younger than Speaker 2). The structures tested (by the same type of elicited translation procedure) were control of three tenses and control of three embedded structures (for discussion of the theoretical difference in the difficulty of the structures concerned, see Dorian 1982).

Although Speakers 3 and 4 show some marked differences in their control of the particular structures tested (Speaker 3 being distinctly better than her sister at using the conjunction 'that' and distinctly worse at forming relative clauses and at construct-

Correctly formed	Past #	Past %	Future #	Future %	Relative #	Relative %
Speaker 2	23 of 23	100	17 of 18	94.5	8 of 8	100
Speaker 3	24 of 24[a]	100	15 of 18	83	3 of 8	37.5
Speaker 4	23 of 23	100	16 of 18[b]	89	6 of 8	75

Correctly formed	'that' #	'that' %	'if' #	'if' %	Conditional #	Conditional %
Speaker 2	9 of 9	100	5 of 5	100	10 of 10	100
Speaker 3	8 of 9	89	4 of 5	80	6 of 11	54.5
Speaker 4	1 of 9	11	4 of 5	80	8 of 10	80

	# of errors	opportunities	% incorrect
Speaker 2	1	73	1
Speaker 3	15	75	20
Speaker 4	15	73	20.5

Table 2: Comparison of control of three tenses and three embedded structures by three siblings in a single Gaelic-speaking household

a The number of instances of a given structure sometimes differs across speakers because a particular speaker offered two variants for a particular structure, each of which was recorded, evaluated, and counted in arriving at the tabulation.

b The figures here differ very slightly from those recorded for Speaker 3 in Dorian 1982:39, where she appears as WR; results of testing of the future were retabulated and recounted subsequently, with one additional instance recognized for WR.

ing the conditional), the really striking difference is between their performances taken together as compared with their brother's. He in fact misproduced only one form in the entire set of sentences, whereas his sisters misproduced 15 each. Overall, then, they performed much like each other, despite the four years between them; the brother, though only a year older than Speaker 3, performed quite differently -- namely like the fully-fluent speaker he is.

For the Berks County Pennsylvania Dutch I can't be certain that intrafamily tip of the dramatic abruptness I found in the 12-sibling group is a frequent occur-

rence, since I worked extensively with two kin networks only. But among the East Sutherland fisherfolk I know of several similar cases where groups of siblings were sharply and abruptly divisible according to full fluency versus imperfect-speaker control of the local Gaelic, even though I undertook close testing of only this one highly available and highly cooperative family. The community at large was well aware of the phenomenon, in fact, and readily identified cases in their own kin networks or others'.

When it comes to tip on the community-wide level, the cessation of home-language transmission can seem equally sudden and surprisingly datable. In the smallest of the East Sutherland fishing villages, for example, I found that people were able to identify the last primary-school class whose members regularly used Gaelic on the playground whenever they were let out to play during the schoolday. The class only one year younger, everyone agreed, might occasionally use Gaelic on the playground, but did so seldom; and they did not typically become, or remain, fully-fluent speakers, whereas their immediate predecessors did. No one could give a particular reason why this change in language behavior should have come exactly when it did, but they agreed on its timing. It was as if a consensus had tacitly been reached among the children -- and that was that. Not merely coincidentally, the brother identified as Speaker 2 in the tables above was a member of the last primary-school class to use Gaelic regularly on the playground, and the sister identified as Speaker 3 was a member of the immediately following class, which did <u>not</u> regularly use Gaelic on the playground. This again suggests that even had the parents in that family made a concerted effort to keep their last three children in the fluent-speaker fold, the climate among the youngsters themselves would have made it an extremely uphill battle. Very strict and very determined parents are certainly known to succeed in producing fluent-bilingual children, and then to succeed in maintaining that bilingual fluency in their children, within communities unfavorable to the phenomenon; but in my own experience most such cases involve either middle-class (often intellectual) parents, or, alternatively, an only child. (One exception which comes to mind did involve a Scottish Gaelic family. They lived in a very isolated district on the west coast of Scotland; the parents were not middle class, nor, so far as I can recall, was there only one child, but the father was considerably older than the norm for a parent in that community and was a formidable and demanding figure in the household life.)

Reports of community-wide tip turn up with some frequency in the growing literature of language shift (see, for example, Gal 1979, Hinojosa 1980, Mertz 1980). Because parents in communities where transmission failure seems sudden often simply decline to raise their children as bilinguals, usually citing concern for the children's success in school or ability to get ahead in the world as reasons (Denison 1971:166-167; Dorian 1981:104; Huffines 1980:52; Pulte 1973: 426; Timm 1980:30), some scholars have raised the question of whether the passing of such languages ought rather to be considered "language suicide" than language death (e.g., Denison 1977, Greene 1972). But this is to ignore the long history, usually stretching centuries into the past, of relentless pressure on the non-dominant language.

The Zapotec case presented by Hinojosa (1980) is particularly interesting, because Zapotec in fact showed a relatively unusual degree of resistance to the spread of Spanish among Mexican Indian populations. The Zapotec had been doubly resistant to dominant-language pressure, what is more, since in the pre-Conquest period they successfully fought off the Aztecs and retained their independence and identity to a unique degree (Hinojosa 1980:28). The town of Juchitán, not served by the railroad and the loser in the rivalry for capital-city status in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, remained strongly monolingual in Zapotec for a surprisingly long time. But in the early 1970s the discovery of oil in a nearby coastal area led to the creation of a new port, Salina Cruz, relatively near to Juchitán. For the first time there was strong economic incentive for Juchitán natives to acquire Spanish, since good jobs became available to those with control of Spanish (ibid.:28, 30). It would seem that the early signs of language shift documented by Hinojosa on the basis of fieldwork done in Juchitán in 1979 might be taken as a rather unambiguous case of a sudden change in language behavior clearly motivated by dramatically new economic factors. The change was sudden, and the economic factors were new and dramatically different.

Yet when one takes into account the long and complex history of language policy in Mexico meticulously traced by Heath in her volume Telling Tongues: Language Policy in Mexico, Colony to Nation (1972), it seems permissible and even necessary to doubt that the change from proud Zapotec language loyalty in Juchitán to sudden willingness to embrace Spanish as the language of economic opportunity could have taken place quite so rapidly without a long and sustained period in which first colonial and then state policy

disvalued the Indian and his language. And if it is true, as Heath reports, that "the Indian had been locked in a caste-like system, which defined his position at the bottom of the nation's socioeconomic hierarchy since Independence" (1972:156), then how much stronger the attraction of a sudden and entirely unexpected opportunity to move out of the lock-in and upward within the socioeconomic hierarchy? Perhaps the abruptness of what looks like an impending tip, leading Hinojosa to speculate on the basis of her findings that "if this tendency continues, the whole community will soon be bilingual and the children will begin to be socialized in Spanish" (1980:38), is abrupt in onset and potential outcome, but not in gestation.

This was certainly what I found to be the case in Gaelic East Sutherland, where the tip clearly took place during the nineteenth century, but the negative attitudes which had prepared the way for that tip could be traced within Scotland for at least six centuries and readily documented for Sutherland itself for a period of over 300 years. Just as the discovery of oil "opened" Juchitán to outside influences and the attendant pressures in favor of Spanish, so the construction of railroads, bridges, and roads in the early nineteenth century and the institution of schools toward the end of the preceding century "opened" East Sutherland to outside influences and to massive pressures disfavoring Gaelic and favoring English. Remoteness had buffered East Sutherland, as it had Juchitán; but with the loss of that remoteness, the buffering rapidly proved inadequate and centuries of distaste for the indigenous language made themselves felt. In the East Sutherland case, I tried to express this by suggesting that "suddenly, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain came to Sutherland" (Dorian 1981:51).

It is the existence of a long lead-in period which in the end effectively belies the apparent abruptness of transmission failure in communities where a language outside the national linguistic mainstream seemingly turns up its toes so dramatically after persisting with anomalous strength for so long. The failure of linguistic will under these circumstances is a measure of the potency of long-brewing negative pressures and the fragility of isolation as a buffer, since a serious breaching of that isolative buffer can produce such rapid decline in a previously resistant population. It's possible that less isolated communities, with longer experience of compromise (for example, such a compromise as the linguistic domain-separation discussed above), have an advantage in survival poten-

tial precisely because they have had a prolonged period in which to learn to cope with pressures for linguistic assimilation. Metaphorically speaking, the more isolated linguistic groups may resemble North American Indian tribes or South Pacific island populations exposed to measles for the first time and carried off in disastrous numbers by the unfamiliar contagion. The measles virus was long in existence, but slow to reach them; when it did, they succumbed with terrible swiftness. In something of the same fashion, the "virus" of hostility to non-mainstream languages may gather strength for a very long time and when it finally breaks through to an isolated community, carry the minority language off in an equally swift and deadly wave of social contagion, producing the phenomenon of linguistic tip.

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