Investigation and Prediction of Language Shift: The Inadequacy of Existing Models

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Abstract

Although a number of descriptive and predictive factors have been identified as significant in relation to language shift, a straight-forward search for the causes of language shift and maintenance has been unsuccessful. Several scholars have developed theoretical or empirical models to describe language maintenance and shift and have more or less presented these models as applicable universally. In the light of data from a language shift situation, this paper will explore the validity of two models namely, 'Perceived Benefit Model' and 'Network Analysis'. The paper will demonstrate that because of the diversity of the range of variables and their relative values in different social and cultural contexts, it is not possible to develop a mathematical formula which has the predictive power for something as complex as language maintenance and viability. The paper will conclude that in the absence of a single universally accepted paradigm for the consideration of language maintenance and language shift, the researchers should combine different models to suit the requirements of the language situation that they intend to study.

Introduction

In the context of studies on language viability, the term 'language shift' is often used. Nijmegan (1996) defines language shift as loss of linguistic skills between generations. Fishman (1965: 73) believes that language shift is closely linked with language choices, 'Language choices, cumulated over many individuals and many choice instances, become transformed into the process of language maintenance or language shit'. With a focus on socially constituted linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s, the phenomenon of language shift gained central position as shift 'presented a dramatic instance of how social function, socio-political context, and cultural evaluation can affect language' (Gal, 1996: 586). Since then a number of studies have been carried out in this area using different methods and strategies (see e.g., Asif, 2005a; Dorian, 1981; Gal, 1979; Hill and Hill, 1986; Kulick, 1992; Li Wei, 1994). The aim of researchers in carrying out research on language maintenance and shift is not only to document the state of certain languages(s) and make some predictions about their future but also to enhance the awareness of speech communities about their languages on which that research is carried out and to sensitise others to these issues.

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The Investigation and Prediction of Language shift

A number of descriptive and predictive factors have been identified as significant in relation to language shift. But although there is general agreement that different social, attitudinal and demographic factors are important in predicting or explaining language shift, it is also accepted that 'a straight-forward search for the social correlates or causes of language shift and maintenance has been unsuccessful' (Gal, 1996: 588). Fasold (1984: 217) also points out that there has been 'very little success in using any combination of [factors] to predict when language shift will occur' and admits that there is 'considerable consensus that we do not know how to predict shift'. Not only the lack of predictive but also the limited explanatory power of such macrosociological factors has been traced by the researchers (Gal, 1979).

Several scholars have developed theoretical or empirical models to describe language maintenance and shift and have more or less presented these models as applicable universally (e.g. Karen 2000; Li Wei, 1996; Li Wei & Milroy, 2003). It should be kept in mind, however, that 'neither our database nor our understanding of the impact of social variables is yet sufficiently complete for a mathematical formula to be developed…which has predictive power for something as complex as language maintenance' (Clyne, 1991: 107).

In the following sections this paper will examine two of the well established models namely, and 'Network Analysis' and 'Perceived Benefit Model' in the light of data from a language shift situation and will explore their validity.

a. Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift

The perceived benefit model of language shift, (Karen, 1996 cited in Karen, 2000; Karen, 2000; Karen and Stalder, 2000) is an individual-based model which deals with individual's motivations that influence language choice. 'Individuals with certain language use motivations modify and exploit their linguistic repertoires in such a way as to bring about what they perceive to be their personal good' (Karen, 2000: 65). According to this model the cause of language spread or shift is the individual's decision, made at the conscious or subconscious level, to use certain languages in certain situations. The individuals motivated by the consideration for personal perceived benefit exploit, modify, and expand their linguistic repertoires. These decisions comprise the basic elements of language shift. Language choice motivations, according to this model, are limited and comprise communicative, economic, social, or religious motivations. Karen (1996, cited in Karen, 2000) holds that the only way to influence language shift in a society is to alter the motivational fabric of the language community. Implicitly this model seems to assume that the adults use different languages simultaneously with younger members in a society where language shift is taking place, and out of these languages the children choose a certain language. Their decision is influenced by their own language use motivations which Karen calls the 'subset' (ibid: 74) of the motivations of older generation.

b. Network Analysis

The model of language maintenance/shift, Network Analysis in social systems relates to 'a research strategy which is primarily concerned with the relations amongst individuals in social groups' (Li Wei, 1996: 805). The network concept has been applied in many studies to account for the social mechanism underlying language maintenance and language shift (see e.g., Gal, 1979; Li Wei, 1994). Li Wei (1996: 810) declares the social network perspective to be 'a dynamic and coherent social model of language contact'. He argues that 'social networks exert pressures on their members to use language in different ways in different contexts, 'Speakers with the same social network contacts would conform to certain norms of language use, while speakers with different network ties would differ in their linguistic behaviour' (Li Wei, 1994: 184). He further argues that the analysis of network structures enables us to understand and explain the social mechanisms underlying both synchronic variation and diachronic change in language choice patterns both within and across communities.

This model emphasises and presents networks as the most important factor influencing language choices and behaviour. The advocates of this model, however, do not recognise that in different speech communities other factor(s) may be more important than the social networks of the speakers in influencing their speech habits. It does not, for example, account for the ambitions of speakers or of parents about the language behaviour of their children. The individuals, at times, change their speech practices due to their desire to identify with a certain prestige speech group, or to be seen by others as a part of that group. They sometimes modify their speech practices even due to the hope of becoming a part of that speech group. Thus the study of social networks may not be claimed as the most important factor but this analysis together with other broader social, attitudinal, economic and political factors can account for patterns of language choice.

Based on my general observations and the data I collected to analyse the Siraiki language shift situation in Multan, Pakistan for my doctoral research (Asif, 2005a), I discovered some weaknesses in the above two models. In the ensuing sections I will discuss how these models fall short in their explanatory power in the context of my data.

Weaknesses of Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift

Before pointing out the weaknesses of this model I would like to briefly discuss the Siraiki language transmission Practices in Multan, Pakistan. This Siraiki language is not being transmitted to children among all Siraiki families (Asif, 2005c), This language is being transmitted to children in rural families but not in all urban families. In this region, language transmission practices seem to be determined by identity, attitudes, motivation, and social needs. Siraiki is being transmitted to children in rural Multan across all income groups. The desire for their children to be fluent in Urdu but not at the cost of Siraiki exists among the rural parents. This is partly the result of the social environment of the villages in Multan where Siraiki is the dominant language or even

the only language in all spheres and among all networks in the village; partly it can be attributed to the policy of the village schools where some of these children study. These schools do not make any demands on the parents as to which language they should teach their children.

Another major factor contributing to the maintenance of Siraiki in villages is that a vast majority of the rural families are tied to the land and work in the fields. The majority of the parents here are not fluent in Urdu and do not see any utilitarian value of teaching Urdu to their children who start work in the fields even before reaching their teens. The parents here only wish for their children to learn Urdu so that they should 'look' educated and sophisticated and can survive in the cities if they were to make a living there.

Conversely, not all urban parents are transmitting Siraiki to their children. Conversations and interviews with parents who are not transmitting or have not transmitted Siraiki to their children revealed how their everyday observations and experiences, personal and collective histories converge and combine to define and shape their perspectives, decisions, and practices of language transmission to their children. The reason one grandmother in a Siraiki family living in Multan gave for not transmitting Siraiki to her grandchildren was that she wanted them to identify with city dwellers and not the villagers. By 'saving' their children from the Siraiki language the parents and grandparent in this family are trying to secure a better future for them. For the adults those languages that yield the greatest social advancement are useful, and since Siraiki does not correspond to labour-market considerations it is not given a prestigious status. The parents are, therefore, not transmitting Siraiki to their children mainly due to the following three reasons:

1. To identify with a prosperous social group
2. Due to the demand of school authorities
3. They see no utilitarian value of Siraiki

I want to add to this list the erroneous notion of the parents, actively promoted by school authorities, that children should not be burdened with many languages at an early age, and that if they learn Siraiki along with Urdu and English at home as early languages then their Urdu and English would be 'contaminated' with a Siraiki accent. Although these parents see Multanis around them whose Urdu and English speech is not 'affected' by their Siraiki accent, even then many of them are not willing to teach Siraiki to their children. By denying Siraiki language to their children, the parents are making them 'subtractive bilinguals' instead of 'additive bilinguals' (Edwards, 1994). So far I have not encountered any parent who genuinely regrets the lack of fluency of their child in Siraiki. In fact it is presented as a matter of pride that their child does not know much Siraiki.

Now in this context of language transmission practices of adults and older siblings to children I would like to refer to evaluate the perceived benefit model of language shift. This model focuses on the decisions of individuals regarding their own repertoires.

Although there is value in this theory, one basic flaw of this model is that it fails to recognize the decision of adults/parents/older siblings, taken under the influence of their own motivations based on the 'present and future good of children' to transmit a certain language to their children. In this situation children do not have a choice to pick one language or the other. When children are growing up in the home environment, if they are only presented with one language, as is the case of two brothers in my data (Asif, 2005a) then the use of a particular language is not a matter of choice. These boys did not have more than one language to choose from when they were growing up. Thus this model fails to account for all language maintenance or shift situations.

Weaknesses of Network Analysis

The network analysis emphasises and presents social networks as the most important factor influencing language choices and language behaviour. The advocates of this model do not recognize that in different speech communities other factors may be more important than the social network of the speakers in influencing their speech habits. One basic flaw of this model became evident to me when I studied the language situation in Multan and analysed the data collected for this study. This model does not account for the ambitions of speakers or of parents about the language behaviour of their children. Individuals, at times, change their speech practices due to their desire to identify with a certain prestigious speech group, or to be seen by others as a part of that group. They sometimes modify their speech practices in the hope of becoming a part of that speech group or to redefine their identities. During the course of data collection for my doctoral research (ibid), I came across several parents/older siblings who teach particular language(s) to their children/younger siblings with the hope to fulfil their dreams of prosperous futures of their off springs. An excellent example of this was the four year old girl belonging to a low-income family living in urban Multan (Asif, 2005b). She was the only Urdu monolingual speaker in her family while the rest were bilingual in Siraiki and Urdu, with varied proficiency in Urdu language. This is not because she had different social networks (as she had not started school yet) but because her eldest twelve year old sibling desired her to know only Urdu due to her own positive associations with Urdu and negative with Siraiki. Where do speakers like this four year old girl fit in the social networks model? I am aware of the importance of social networks in influencing language choices and language behaviour. However, I am reluctant to call these 'the most important' factor in studying language maintenance and language shift. I believe that a study of social networks together with other broader social, affective, economic, and political factors can account for patterns of language choice.

Conclusion

A failure of similar mechanical theories of shift in finding universal patterns of causality led the investigators to realize that 'shift in language is caused, ultimately, by shifts in personal and group values and goals' (Kulick, 1992: 9). Such considerations have therefore, resulted in the ethnographic descriptions of the process of language

shift like Dorian (1981), Gal (1979), Hill and Hill (1986), Kulick (1992) who adopted their own strategies to investigate language shift situations.

There is no framework which can be universally applicable to study the phenomenon of language maintenance and language shift. This is because of the diversity of the range of variables and their relative values in different social and cultural contexts (David, 2002). In the absence of a single universally accepted paradigm for the consideration of language maintenance and language shift the researchers should combine different models to suit the requirements of the language situation that they intend to study requires. What I propose is that first of all the researchers must never lose sight of the fact that each language situation is unique and therefore a model that is successful in the study of one language situation may fail completely in another. I have already mentioned in this paper that the same language situation can vary to a great extent even within one family. The framework of such study should include the analysis of the interaction of some or all speaker variables such as age, sex, social class, education, economic group, location (rural/urban), generation cohort, and social networks with language choices. The language situation can be the best guide for the researchers in deciding on the most appropriate variables and their relative values. Equal importance should be given to the analysis of affective factors such as ambition and shame influencing the language practices of the individuals which should include both language usage and language transmission practices. The language transmission practices of grandparents, parents, and older siblings can account for the language practices of the children.

In this paper I have illustrated some weaknesses of two models, namely the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift and Network Analysis, purported to be applicable to all language shift situations. Based on the evaluation of these models I can thus safely advocate for the adoption of an eclectic approach to study the phenomenon of language maintenance/shift.

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