

## LANGUAGE SHIFT AND MAINTENANCE

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### Summary

Language shift and maintenance constitute a cluster of phenomena concerning aspects of language dynamics. Even though communities' linguistic codes are in a constant process of change in general, language shift presupposes stressful socio-historical conditions in order to take place. Linguistic shift is the replacement of one or more languages in a community's repertoire by a language which is socially more powerful. Efforts made by inside agents as well as outside institutions and authorities to preserve a language or a dialect constituting the particular community's local vernacular are called language maintenance. It is argued here that linguistic shift is a processual outcome of both outside forces stemming from regional, national, and global conditions as well as locally determined agencies. Language shift, thus, is a form of social praxis intimately involving speakers of the receding language(s) as well as factors and parameters originating in the wider, embedding society. Among the most important factors which are instrumental in both shift and maintenance are what are understood as linguistic ideologies. In language shift, in particular, both structural and functional aspects of language change should be examined. Thus, shifting vernaculars are structurally affected in various degrees in respect of their lexical, grammatical, and phonological resources, whereas their functional-pragmatic roles are transformed in a dialectic with the expanding social role and use of the dominant language. In the study of language

shift and maintenance we are called to answer important questions concerning science, on the one hand, and questions related to the needs of human communities, on the other.

## **1. Introduction**

The study of language shift and maintenance constitutes a central focus of contemporary linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics. Even though some of its central aspects have a rather long history in the field of study known as *language, culture, and society*, in the most recent research agenda interest in linguistic shift and maintenance has touched on almost all crucial areas of the study of dynamic language phenomena. It engages a focus on both linguistic structure and linguistic praxis, including language ideologies, discourse and interaction, micro- as well as macro-sociological parameters, issues relating the self and society to global concerns, and a feedback between what communities understand as their sociolinguistic condition and what scholars, academics, and various institutional sources of authority perceive as shift and maintenance.

In general, we consider the language or languages of a community as undergoing shift when the codes under scrutiny are being either progressively or more suddenly replaced by other languages in speakers' repertoires, with structural consequences for the receding codes, and sociocultural repercussions for the communities involved. Conscious efforts centered around various attempts to reverse the shift and retain or regain the structural and functional integrity of a threatened language fall within the social dynamic that is called language maintenance. Shift and maintenance are two poles in a complex dialectic since any social or intellectual movement voicing an advocacy for maintenance would be meaningless without the existence of historical contingencies that threaten to push languages in the direction of shift.

To view language shift and maintenance as unilinear phenomena obeying rules of a mechanistic nature whereby the language of a politically dominant community pushes, so to speak, out of use the expressive means of a subordinate community and later forces come upon the scene to save the minority language, even though true to some extent, would constitute an oversimplified perspective on a rather complex process. Crucial questions are: what specific conditions determine the shifting of a language, which kinds of agency are involved, and which particular aspects of language structure and use are affected. How are these processes mediated by agents' ideologies, and how do all these influence or are influenced by the political economy of language? This article has no ambitions to answer all these important questions. Its main goal is to offer a picture, as complete as possible, of some of the most recent problematics surrounding the study of linguistic shift and maintenance by directing the reader's attention to the major issues that relate structure to praxis in this subfield of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics.

## **2. Structural Functional Tendencies in Language Shift**

### **2.1. A Focus on Structure**

When a language is undergoing shift its structural aspects do not remain intact even though this holds also true for 'normal' language change. From a purely linguistic point

of view one has to find out which particular changes are due to the influence of the dominant language and which could be explained otherwise. Furthermore, the kind and amount of structural transformations related to shift are not the same in all sociolinguistic situations. A language can be replaced gradually by another, a socially more powerful code, with a minimum of structural change whether this affects grammar, phonology, or lexicon. On the contrary, significant changes may take place in the structure of the receding code, and new linguistic patterns may emerge that do not fit unproblematically the inherited schemes that have been used until recently to explain dynamic linguistic phenomena.

In the case of the Arvanitika language (a variety of Tosk, or southern dialect division of Albanian) as spoken in modern Greece for about five centuries, important changes have occurred, some of them due to contact with the dominant national language, Greek. These include the domains of grammar, lexicon, and phonology, but it would be rather inaccurate to claim that Arvanitika has changed beyond recognition. Such outcomes argue for both the innovative and the conservative status of Arvanitika. Conversely, in the Gapun community of New Guinea, the Taiap language gives way to the national language, Tok Pisin, being minimally affected in its structure. Still further, in Mexico, the condition of the Mexicano (Nahuatl) indigenous language in long contact with Mexican Spanish, has given rise to a complex syncretic project. And there are communities in which the straightforward notion of shift constitutes a poor conceptual apparatus to grasp the mechanism of change. In the case of the Javanese language of Indonesia, which is characterized by a complex honorific-indexical system, it is hard to argue that a structural reduction is occurring. Instead, one notices phenomena such as syncretic moments like ‘language salad’, or subtle changes in the pronominal, or kinship-terms systems. The Javanese case is cited here since it exemplifies a particular instance in which, in the struggle between two linguistic codes, Javanese and the national language, Indonesian, we do not witness a smooth shift process. Efforts by planners as well as by linguists who adopt the nationalistic principles, are not matched by the ways the two languages are perceived and used locally. In daily interactions resources from both languages are recruited to subtle communicative goals, and when speakers code-switch from one language to the other they are often not in a position to offer an explanation of why they do that.

A focus on structure in sociolinguistic situations diagnosed as exemplifying linguistic shift shows both methodological and theoretical strengths and weaknesses. For both, the communities and the researcher, it is a gain to be able to discover which exactly is the fate of linguistic structure and how the latter is being remodeled in various directions under the impact of shifting conditions. Furthermore, questions concerning the complexity or non-complexity of language structure and its functional adequacy as well as language universals are issues that fall within the area of interests of those engaged in the study of language shift, in a parallel manner to the research being conducted by students of pidgin and creole languages who raise similar queries. But a focus on structure can preempt in an empirically impermissible way the study of language shift since it frequently serves as a criterion the satisfaction of which influences the final interpretation of the situation. For example, on the island of Sumba, Indonesia, if language shift were to be diagnosed on the basis of the traditional domains of syntax-grammar or phonology the dynamic of shift would be invisible to the sociolinguistic

student of this particular community. That is, no shift could be attested as occurring there. However, as we shall see later in this article, shift does occur. The lesson from the description and analysis above is that praxis and function aspects of linguistic shift and maintenance are indispensable to a complete study of such dynamic phenomena, the more so, since the study of linguistic shift can both make contributions to and be influenced by broader considerations in anthropology and sociology. A narrow focus on structure, particularly if examined in relative isolation from the praxis trajectory of the communities, can erase from view the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon, and become detrimental to any attempt to embed language shift and maintenance in the matrix of the political economy of language. In order therefore to give a more thorough picture of this specific kind of sociolinguistic change and to turn to its recent understanding as a form of sociocultural praxis, one has to discuss its functional aspects too.

## 2.2. A Focus on Function

Crucially related to the discovery of reduced structural resources that a language undergoing shift is provided with, is the so-called functional adequacy of the restricted code. Even though speakers of a shifting language turn to the dominant one when it comes to their referential needs, such an observation by no means exhausts the problems of function. The receding language retains various degrees of its former symbolic capital, and is used in a variety of specialized social contexts, becoming primarily the code for the expression of solidarity. But it is wrong not to see both the dominant and the receding language(s) as involved in the processes of communicative activities and as being linked to each other in complex symbolic formations that transcend referential requirements and extend to the indexical (socio-symbolic) grounding of the codes of the communities' repertoires.

Judging the socio-pragmatic adequacy of a code by extrapolating from its structural impoverishment can lead the researcher astray and negatively affect speakers' emotional and ideological sensitivities and sensibilities. In the Arvanitika-Greek bilingual communities of modern Greece low-proficiency speakers of the minority language, equipped with a very restricted version of Albanian, make an extremely creative and innovative use of the limited resources they can tap for the satisfaction of complex communicative goals in their interactions with fluent speakers and with outsiders. Actually such uses, emerging out of framed activities such as ironic, humorous, critical, subversive ones etc., constitute important metacommunicative and metalinguistic commentaries by certain social groups serving as examples of implicit linguistic ideologies (on which more below). On the island of Sumba, ritual speech, one of the key cultural symbols of the society, has been undergoing transformation in use and function as a complex outcome of the parameters of the post-colonial regime, the Indonesian nation state, and the active response by community members in a process of restructuring the self and society.

From this information it becomes clear that allocating languages and language varieties to various functional domains on a one-to-one basis, neglecting more complex relations obtaining in the sociolinguistic landscape, reestablishes a theoretical reductionism at the center of our research agenda. This reductionism or positivism takes linguistic function

as a more or less static phenomenon, or, worse, as determined as to its nature by the researcher even before the community agents themselves get a chance to speak, and views structure as having an autonomous existence. A possible consequence is to take these two aspects of linguistic cum social processes and relate them in a way that makes sense to only some, particularly western, cognitive preferences. It is hard, for instance, to attempt to carry out a functional analysis of Javanese use in its relation to Indonesian use along the lines of a traditional approach such as the one highlighted and criticized above without seriously distorting the realities of interactional dynamics emerging among various categories of speakers. Speakers monitor their speech and their identities in moment-by-moment face-to-face interactions within a phenomenology of communicative praxis in which even well established rubrics for the study of bi- or multilingual situations such as code-switching require extensive revising.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Lukas D. Tsitsipis** is professor of anthropology and linguistics at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. His research interests include areas of linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics such as language shift, narrative performance, the political economy of language, language and political theory, linguistic ideologies and praxis. He has authored two books, one in Greek titled "Introduction to the Anthropology of Language" (1995, Athens, Gutenberg), and the other in English titled "A Linguistic Anthropology of Praxis and Language Shift: Arvanitika (Albanian) and Greek in Contact" (1998, Oxford: Clarendon Press). A third book in Greek titled "From Language as Object to Language as Praxis" is in press to be published by Nissos publications. He has articles published in the following journals: *Language in Society*, *Word*, *Semiotica*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *Anthropological Linguistics*, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, and reviews in various journals.