

The role of MTE in language maintenance and developing multiple identities

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To respect and protect linguistic and cultural diversity is one of the core principles of UNESCO and EU. The paper argues that cultural and linguistic diversity is a heritage of the communication means of the past. Relative isolation, both in informational terms as well as mobility led to parallel cultural developments within each information field which in turn lead to linguistic diversification as well as formation of the cultural heterogeneity. The rise of information age has considerably changed the nature and width of the information space for almost all ethnic communities. Therefore, emerging information technologies hand in hand with increasing economic possibilities for dissemination of information are inevitably directed towards the decrease of cultural and linguistic diversity. However, the maintenance of cultural and linguistic diversity depends also heavily various cultural and social psychological factors. The paper outlines the main social psychological factors influencing the ethnolinguistic vitality of a culture or ethnic group and reveals their structural relationships, for example the prestige of the culture, cultural distance and utilitarianism. These factors are organised into the equation cultural gravity which could be used to calculate the ethnolinguistic vitality of a certain culture or ethnic group. Based on this equation, suggestions are made how to enhance the ethnolinguistic vitality of lesser used languages and cultures in the broad framework of mother tongue education.

UNESCO ja EL põhiprintsiipe on respektierida ja kaitsta keelelist ning kultuurilist mitmekesisust. Käesolevas artiklis esitatakse seisukoht, et keeleline mitmekesisus on pöördvõrdelises suhtes kommunikatsioonivahendite arenguga. Suhteline isolatsioon niihästi informatsioonilises kui ka logistilises mõttes on viinud erinevates infoväljades paralleelsete kultuuriliste arenguteni, mille tagajärjena kujunes välja keeleline ja kultuuriline mitmekesisus. Infoajastu saabumisega on informatsioonivälja ulatus peaaegu kõigi etniliste rühmade jaoks olulisel määral avardunud. Seetõttu on uued infotehnoloogiad koos avarduvate majanduslike võimalustega info levitamiseks on paratamatult viinud keelelise mitmekesisuse kahanemiseni. Siiski sõltub keeleline ja kultuuriline mitmekesisus paljuski ka kultuurilistest ja sotsiaalsühholoogilistest faktoritest. Artiklis tuuakse välja põhilised sotsiaalsühholoogilised faktorid, mis mõjutavad etnilise rühma või kultuuri vitaalsust (kultuuriline prestiiž, kultuuriline distants ja utilitaarsprintsiiip). Nende faktorite põhjal on koostatud kultuurilise gravitatsiooni võrrand, millega on võimalik arvutada välja etnilise rühma või kultuuri vitaalsust. Seda võrrandit aluseks võttes on esitatud ettepanekuid, kuidas ohustatud keelte etnolingvistilist vitaalsust tõsta, seda eeskätt emakeeleõpetuse raamides.

Keywords: ethnolinguistic vitality, language attitudes, mother tongue education, linguistic diversity, multiple identity, self-categorisation, information field

Introduction

One of the core principles of UNESCO, the Council of Europe and EU is to respect and protect linguistic and cultural diversity. The “UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity“, adopted by the UNESCO' s General Conference in November 2001, declares that “as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. In this sense, it is the common heritage of humanity and should be recognized and affirmed for the benefit of present and future generations“. The Article 22 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European

Union, adopted in Nice on 7 December 2000, states that the „Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity". The Council of European Union's resolution of 14 February 2002 on the promotion of linguistic diversity and language learning in the framework of the implementation of the objectives of the European Year of Languages 2001 emphasises that „all European languages are equal in value and dignity from the cultural point of view and form an integral part of European culture and civilisation“.

Yet at our time, the time of the global village, to protect cultural and linguistic diversity is not an easy task. Admittedly one language becomes extinct in each week. Although there are at present around 6000 to 7000 languages, from 50% to 90% of them could become extinct within this century (see Krauss 1992, Crystal 2000). While there is some international recognition that a few domains such as science and higher education might be threatened in national languages (Communique 2003:6), generally the endangered languages are those that have neither official status nor legal protection.

While it is important to work for legal protection of minority languages, it may not be enough: in our era of global information exchange, the fate of a language may depend less of its legal status than the attitudes of its speakers. There are a number of known cases where the linguists have been more concerned by protecting an endangered language than the speakers themselves. Thus, unless the attitudes of the speakers do not favour language maintenance, it is little what the specialists can do to protect the language.

This formulates the problem of this article: how are the language attitudes formed, and what possibilities there are to influence these attitudes. For this I outline the informational bases of linguistic and cultural diversity and make the factors influencing language attitudes explicit; then I discuss the implications of these factors to the mother tongue education.

The notion of information space

Both language and culture are socially shared sets of norms and rules. They become to be shared by communicative processes, i.e. they are disseminated among the people who share the same communication sources. The field of influence of these sources constitutes an information space. Thus an information space is a spread area of a cultural centre just like a spread area of noise is the area where the noise, coming from its source is heard.

Similarly as the spread areas of different sources of noise can overlap, so the different information spaces can overlap, too. And just like the noise, the information coming from the closest source is heard better than information coming from the more distant ones. This, of course, is the case only when both sources are of an equal strength. If the more distant source is considerably stronger, it can overshadow its closer competitor.

The width of any given information space defines the possible limits of corresponding culture and language – the limits cannot be larger than the maximum number of people belonging to this information space. Because of fainting of the signal, the borders of an information space are never sharp, thus the actual limits of the culture and language it creates are always smaller than its actual coverage. Since the information spaces can

overlap, there are often smaller information spaces within a larger one. Those define the borders of various subcultures, dialects and minorities.

Diversity as a function of information technology

In traditional cultures without writing, the information space is formed on the basis of oral information exchange. As oral communication is limited in time and space, the groups formed on oral information exchange cannot be large. Writing extended the possible width of the information space beyond personal contacts, creating a possibility for the formation of larger communities. Further, the invention of printing technology explosively widened the possible strength of information sources. Depending on material resources (and literacy, of course), the same information could from then on be disseminated many times more effectively. The consequence of this process was the formation of modern nations.

Thus, the cultural and linguistic diversity is a heritage of the communication means of the past. Relative isolation, both in informational terms as well as mobility led to parallel cultural developments within each information field which in turn lead to linguistic diversification as well as formation of the cultural heterogeneity.

The rise of information age has considerably changed the nature and width of the information space for almost all ethnic communities. The number of communities living in an absolute isolation is decreasing as well as the number of those whose contacts with other communities are sparse. Therefore, emerging information technologies hand in hand with increasing economic possibilities for dissemination of information are inevitably directed towards the decrease of cultural and linguistic diversity. Although forceful assimilation as well as genocide has often contributed to it, most of the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity is due to informational processes.

Expansion of the information space, caused by emerging new information technologies always introduces a new system of values and a new hierarchy of social prestige for a less advanced group. Its old discourse enters into an intensive dialogue with the new discourse introduced by the new expanding information space. This dialogue may lead to a more or less substantial transformation of the old discourse, but it may lead to abandoning the old discourse together with the old language. The ultimate decision is made on the individual level, and is based on the choice between competing identity discourses (values and belief systems) the individual has access to.

The dynamics of linguistic and cultural diversity

As the advancement of informational technology and the concentration of wealth that improves information dissemination seem to be irreversible processes, there is apparently no escape from ever increasing loss of cultural and linguistic diversity. However, information technology is not the single parameter that determines the extent of diversity. I try to illustrate these complex processes with the analogy of gravitation.

Each social group could be said to have a cultural mass which applies a respective force of cultural gravity, just like do physical bodies such as planets and stars. The larger the

group and the higher its status, the larger is its force of cultural gravity. This force of cultural gravity attracts people just like the earth attracts a falling apple. The strength of the force of cultural gravity is also affected by the overall distance between the cultures. The overall distance is a sum of informational (presence in immediate communication sphere), geographic and cultural (similarity of values and practices characteristic between the groups) distances. Thus, the larger is the difference of cultural masses between two groups and the smaller the overall distance between them, the higher the gravity that attracts the people from the low status group to the prestigious group.

Although it would be extremely hard to calculate it mathematically, the growth potential P for any culture could be expressed by the following formula

$$P = (M_1 - M_2) / r$$

where M_1 is the cultural mass of the group G_1 , M_2 the cultural mass of another group G_2 and r the overall distance between them. If P is negative, the group has a tendency to assimilate to the other group, if it is positive, to attract members of the other group. The larger is the P , the stronger the tendency. In the case when P is 0 the groups are culturally balanced and diversity is maintained. Obviously, most of the cultures have multiple contacts, so that P should be calculated for each relevant pair. When all the values of P are added we obtain the total potential of that particular group which shows whether the group is assimilating, stable or expanding. As the situation of $P=0$ is at least theoretically possible, there should be a possibility for maintaining the linguistic and cultural diversity, too.

The index of utilitarianism

Each culture functions as interplay of innovation and tradition. The first one is grounded in what could be called the utilitarian discourse in the sense of Scollon and Scollon (1995), the second in the identity discourse.

The most important principles in the utilitarian discourse for our discussion are the following: 1) humans are defined as rational economic entities, 2) 'good' is defined as what will give the greatest happiness for the greatest number, and 3) values are established by statistical (i.e. quantitative) means. (Scollon and Scollon 1995).

The principles of the identity discourse are: 1) the essence of humanity is emotional; 2) the notion of "good" is set by the moral authority; 3) values are defined by tradition. The success of the identity discourse relies on emotional attachment of a person to his important others and the heritage as well as to his immediate surroundings – the cultural landscape. This attachment is created by one's upbringing and education and thus it is dependent on the structure of family and nature of educational system in this communication space.

It must be noted that in a self-sufficient communication space the utilitarian discourse and the identity discourse are in a modest conflict of innovation and tradition, characteristic to many well-functioning societies. The two discourses clash in the situation of intensive cultural contact between two communities of unequal technological development and wealth. In this contact two languages and two identity discourses come into competition in a new information space.

The principles of the utilitarian discourse work for economy in a communication space, unifying linguistic and cultural practices. In the case of intense cultural contact, a low gravity culture is immersed into the information space of an expanding high gravity culture creating diversity within the larger information space. For the members of the dominant group the change is not large as they do not acquire the dominated language nor their cultural practices. The changes are large for the members of the low status group as they need to know the new language and new cultural practices for pure utilitarian purposes.

As all diversity, including the cultural and linguistic diversity, has a plain economic cost, the utilitarian discourse starts to work for abandoning marginal cultural practices within its limits. Often it means discarding education, TV-programmes or literature in one's own language. Also, given the utilitarian principles there would be no need for more than one language in one's immediate space of communication. The more the new language overtakes the functions of the old one the stronger becomes the urge to discard the old language altogether. Thus the utilitarian principles favour larger cultural communities and work for consolidation of values within the single communication space. At the same time these principles also work for reducing cultural and ultimately linguistic diversity.

As the utilitarian principles are symbolic, different groups may differ in respect to the salience of the utilitarian discourse in their information space. The less salient these principles are the more conservative is the culture. As this influences the growth potential P , the index U , designating the salience of utilitarianism, should be included to the formula for calculating P :

$$P = U (M_1 - M_2) / r$$

In the extreme case where U is 0, i.e. the utilitarian principles are not present at all in a given communication space, indicating a totally conservative culture, P becomes equal to 0 for all values of M and r . This means that the group is stable irrespective of its relative gravity: in the case of a low status group, the members are too conservative to assimilate; in the case of a high status group, it is too conservative to accept any new members from outside.

The interesting feature is that P is culture specific. There is no objective value for P ; it can only be calculated from the point of view of G_1 to have some predictive force for this group's behaviour. The reason is that assimilative processes are made on an individual level by the people who belong to the same group G_1 . This means that all the values of the variables in this formula are also culture specific, not objective. As the parameters are subjective, their values are to some extent variable.

This means that although the objective processes of advancement of information technology and concentration of wealth constantly reduce the value of P for smaller cultures, the change could be balanced by symbolically changing the values of U , M_1 or r .

All these variables are partly dependent on the particulars of cultural discourse in G_1 . By gradually changing the discourse, it is possible to increase the perceived status of the group (i.e. M_1) or to reduce the value of U . Similarly, by increasing the cultural distance between groups, it is possible to increase r , the overall distance between the cultures. For this, it is important to know the discursive processes that govern this process.

Optimally positive distinctiveness

According to the hypothesis, presented above, the main tool for protecting linguistic and cultural diversity is ultimately discursive: constructing a positive group identity, (increasing M_1), enhancing its cultural distinctiveness (increasing r) and rising in-group loyalty and solidarity (reducing U). Of course, some would at this point certainly see here a ghost of xenophobia, intolerance and violence that attempts have generated.

For example Mikael Hjerm (1998) argues, relying on the Swedish and Norwegian data from the 1995 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) “Aspects of national identity”, that nationalist sentiments are in a strong correlation with xenophobic attitudes. Based on these findings, he calls into question any possibilities of constructing ‘good’ nationalism. He states that “first, even if nationalism is based on national independence the reason for this independence often boils down to that the people of one nation imagine that there is a difference between themselves and some other people and that in the long run they are better off with their own nation-state. Therefore, they in some sense are superior to other peoples and nations.” (Hjerm 1998: 5.2)

Thus, it is likely that ideological attempts to protect linguistic and cultural diversity would necessarily increase xenophobia and out-group discrimination. The question is then is there a possibility to avoid it.

Social psychological research on minimal groups (i.e arbitrary groups, created for the experiment only, groups that have no history, no shared beliefs etc) has shown that even *ad hoc* group categorisation leads to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination (Tajfel 1970). The same results were obtained even when the assignment to the groups was made explicitly random (Billig and Tajfel 1973). This indicates that out-group discrimination is a phenomenon that is inherent in the intergroup situation itself (Tajfel and Turner 1979). If the in-group bias is indeed so universal, the behaviour may well have biological roots. Be as it may, so long as humans have social groups of any type, there will always be in-group bias. This may not necessarily be a bad thing.

As Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue, individuals strive to sustain or enhance their self-respect. Social groups however may have either high or low prestige, and thus, by comparing one’s own group with reference to other relevant groups, one tries to maintain a positive social identity. Accordingly, the in-group bias is a natural result of a person’s positive self-esteem. There is little hope to get rid of it, there can only be possibilities to find an optimal balance between the respect towards one’s own social identity and the respect towards others. I call this optimally positive distinctiveness (OPD). The hypothesis is that groups with OPD will maintain healthy and stable intergroup relations in contact settings.

Although the in-group bias is a natural phenomenon, it is possibly also dangerous as it is hard to determine at which point the OPD is exceeded and the group is constructing a conflictual identity discourse, particularly as the in-group favouritism is often employed by politicians to mobilise the masses for social change. This is especially evident when the identity discourse is constructed on a single feature, be it ethnicity, religion, social class or gender. Identities constructed on one feature are inherently more conflictual, as

they do not allow overlapping of group membership. In reality individuals belong simultaneously into different social groups and have potentially multiple social identities.

Multiple identities

According to Barvosa-Carter (1999:113) multiple identity is „a concept in which the self is made up of a number of different but integrated identities. Each identity is a frame of reference that includes a scheme of values and a set of meanings and practices. These identity frames of reference (or identity frames) are related to a nearly endless array of possible social identities“ Thus, a person is familiar with a number of distinct identity discourses which are possibly overlapping and may even be partly contradictory.

An important feature is that people use their partial identities situationally and relationally, i.e they foreground the identity that best serves their immediate needs in that particular situation and the one which is shared with others in this context. This phenomenon is called identity adaptiveness and the empirical social psychological research has shown that people tacitly make good use of the positive stereotypes that are associated with some of their multiple identities, depending on situation (Pittinski, Shih and Ambady 1999). Of course, if negative stereotypes of one's social identity is made salient in a situation where these stereotypes are relevant, this debilitates performance. For example Steele and Anderson (1995) found that African American students underperformed in a verbal test when the stereotypes about black people were made salient.

Thus, multiple identity is beneficial in two respects, first, it reduces the possibility of confrontational social distinctiveness and it enables individuals to optimally perform in different social contexts and situations. Constructing multiple identities is a communicative process by which shared social beliefs are generated over various social categories. For some categories the identity construction is more intense, for some other categories less so. Consequently, the corresponding identities have different salience within the totality of one's multiple identity.

As the extent of current loss of linguistic diversity shows, the multiple ethnic or national identities tend not to be stable, but lead constantly to abandoning the disfavoured identities. The solution would be to find the balance between the facets of ones' multiple identity. This is a real challenge for social engineering, but knowing the parameters that influence the growth potential P, there is at least some indication how, by using social creativity, the issue could be tackled. This is where the educational system, and particularly also mother tongue education (MTE) gains its importance in maintaining the linguistic and cultural diversity.

MTE in constructing optimally positive distinctiveness

The central for the social identity are the shared beliefs, values and practices (see Bar-Tal 2000 for an extensive analysis). Together they form what I have called the identity discourse. In the case of ethnic groups it is formed on the basis of the myths, history, religion and the conception of homeland of the group (see Smith 1999 for a detailed discussion). The identity discourse is stable and conservative. New features could be

added, but to change the identity discourse in large extent would be almost impossible. For example in the Soviet Union, an extensive attempt was made to design the national identities and to construct a new supranational identity of soviet people. Although the experiment lasted around 70 years (in Estonia nearly 50 years), the regime could not replace the old national identities, only minor changes, some unintentional, took place.

The identity discourse is disseminated and maintained through shared information channels, mostly by mass media and educational system. In contemporary open world, people are influenced by several, often competitive information spaces. Large and powerful cultures disseminate their values often internationally; small and less powerful groups have fewer channels with local coverage.

Educational system, being centrally administrated and non-commercial has a good potential to shape the identity discourse within its domain. As the identity discourse is to a large extent verbal, expressed by the literary works, MTE is in a special position amongst the school subjects in constructing and maintaining it. Based on the social psychological analysis of group dynamics and intergroup relations, summarized in this paper, I outline a few general principles that should be taken into account in developing the MTE curriculum and content. How these principles are manifested in each particular case is culture-specific and needs to be tailor-made for each ethnic group.

1) Self-categorisation.

The main features of a given group's identity discourse should be analysed and assessed about the content, whether positive or negative symbols prevail, what is their meaning and possible impact on group behaviour. Based on this analysis the curriculum and its content should be modified for OPD. This means for large and high status groups, having dominantly a positive self-esteem, the content of the curriculum should be constructed so that to reduce in-group bias if evident in the discourse. Occasionally even high status groups feel threatened even there are insufficient reason for this. Cultural material should be found that could help to reduce the perceived threat.

For small low status groups, the content should be made so as to enhance group's self-esteem. This could be done by giving a meaning to the existence of this group and hope for the future. First, the *raison d'être* of this group should be specified on the basis of available cultural material (myths, literature, customs, beliefs etc). If necessary, it should be invented. Second, the concept of salvation, the turn of the status should be provided. Hope should be given that there is something by which the group could become great and enhance its status. Either task is not an easy one, as the small low status groups usually have a shortage of suitable cultural material.

2) Relations to outgroups

Two principles need to be followed: generosity and respect. The first is more relevant for high status groups whose identity is not threatened. The lower the status of the group the less it is possible to appeal to generosity, as it may be felt threatening to the group's distinctiveness. The goal for finding cultural material for promoting generosity is to reduce the outgroup bias of the dominant group towards minorities. Its main features are

willingness to accept minority members as members of the dominant group, and their cultural contribution to the dominant culture.

Respect is important to both the high and low status groups. It means understanding the values and practices of the outgroup that may be different from that of the ingroup. Respect also means being greater than the history. In the past, there has often been intergroup conflict and violence. For this reason the understanding of the historical events can be different. Respect means accepting the different value assignments to these events. For smaller nations, respect towards others could easily be perceived as an important contribution to the group's self esteem. Having been dominated by more powerful groups in history provides a good start not to pay back its own suffering to other. Respectfulness could be a feature in which smaller nations could stand out amongst the larger and more prestigious groups.

3) Multiple identity

The goal here is to bring out the richness of the different sides of the set of multiple identities. Often the MTE stresses only one, major facet of the multiple identity. More attention is needed to other possible identities, particularly in their symbiosis with the main ethnic or national identity. Particularly important is to concentrate on these sides that enable to cross the boundaries of the main ethnic identity. Also the levels of supra-identities need to be addressed, such as the larger regional (Baltic, Nordic etc) or the European one.

In addressing the multiple identities, the adaptive value of this phenomenon should be foregrounded in appropriate context. For example, the European identity in the context of American or Arabic identity, regional identities in the context of larger units etc. Also the adaptive benefits of the local identity in the context of the national identity are worth considering.

Conclusion

Engineering the identity discourse is not an easy task, as there are multiple societal forces that are in a constant work in maintaining or modifying it. These forces may have partly different views about the identity of the group, its position and future development. Also, the cultural patterns are not easily changed. Thus, it is not at all guaranteed that such attempts through the MTE would be successful.

One that must be taken into account is that the process should be very subtle and long-lasting. As said, societal beliefs do not change easily, and every attempt to force a change is most likely to have the opposite effect. Yet it is certainly worth trying, for the sake of improved intergroup relations.

This article outlined some basic processes that have effect on intergroup relations. By knowing and using these processes, it is in principle possible to design the identity discourse disseminated through the MTE. How this is to be done, and how much intervention is needed, could only be decided on each particular case separately, taking into account the cultural and historical circumstances. This is a vast task, demanding extensive work on analysing the particular identity discourse and also a fair amount of

creativity to find the best symbolic expression for the features to be introduced or changed.

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