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Reflections on the personal and political dimensions of bilingualism

Abstract:

The political dimensions of language, particularly in contexts and situations where more than one language share the same social space, have a direct impact on individuals' lives. Political battles around which languages should be promoted and how different languages should be accommodated in educational systems have been recurrent in territories where languages co-exist and compete for usage in different domains.

A case in point is Catalonia, now an officially bilingual region within the officially monolingual Kingdom of Spain. The languages competing for public space are Catalan and Spanish, but English is nonetheless getting increased attention and is becoming a third party in that environment as the global lingua franca. Language policy is decided at the level of education but also at the level of public use by agents who are often unaware of applied linguistic research. Moreover, language policy from the bottom-up is enacted by individuals who take decisions on their use of languages based on attitudes towards language, language use, and the roles of each language in any given context. Such attitudes are mediated and greatly affected by a socially predominant monolingual bias and standard language ideology.

Another linguistically political issue is the massive acquisition of English as an additional language and its role as the global lingua franca. The last twenty years have seen tremendous interest in the impact and consequences of English as a lingua franca in communication and in English language teaching, and the consequential challenge to native speaker models. A further question from this body of research appeals to the use and teaching of other languages. A majority of voices in applied linguistics accept the legitimacy of non-native English because of its lingua franca status. Yet, does this status apply to other languages even when no lingua franca status is accorded to them? Take the case of Catalan, for instance, a language that is threatened by Spanish, a powerful international language that is constantly pushing Catalan towards an increasing convergence with Spanish at all levels: phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactical. Is an attitude of resistance necessary in the Catalan community of speakers? Or should a pragmatic approach to language as an evolving entity flowing with the flux of new speakers be incorporated? This has been a persistent debate in Catalan linguistic fora: resistance vs. evolution. And this debate has different possible answers depending on whether we put on a political or a purely linguistic hat. Can we, linguists, look down on political ideology when our political selves are at stake? To what extent can we claim neutral analytical skills when we are all totally immersed in our own political environments?

I will reflect on these issues and will discuss my research on nativeness in second language learning and teaching, the challenge of English as a lingua franca to pre-existing models of language teaching, and the attitudes towards Catalan, Spanish and English in the context of Catalonia.