Minority Languages in New Media: Towards language revitalisation in Europe and Africa

27-28 April 2017

Aston University, Birmingham
Keynotes

Contexts of claiming digital space for African community languages

*Lutz Marten*

The talk develops an analysis of the use of African community languages in digital space against the historical and contemporary contexts of the use of African languages in public spaces. It draws a broad historical background of processes of, on the one hand, marginalisation and devalorisation of African languages, and, on the other hand, the celebration and promotion of linguistic and cultural diversity. It then develops a set of parameters of language development (such as geographical scope, social scope, agency, organisation, management, identity, and corpus) and based on this distinguishes three contexts of language development and agency:

1. institution-driven language development, which is typically a large-scale, official, planned activity driven by government, state, or major official institutions
2. community-driven language development, which typically includes planned or semi-spontaneous, grass-roots activities by advocacy and interest groups
3. crowd-driven language development, which is typically unplanned, individual and spontaneous, but which can also be co-ordinated, and indeed manipulated, in particular through social media

Based on examples from different African contexts – although focussing on Eastern and Southern Africa – the talk then shows that the use of African community languages in digital space is rarely institution-driven, although on occasion enabling legislation supports community languages, and, importantly, there are several digital archives for endangered languages. There is considerably more community-driven activity, for example through radio or video, although the work of, for example, community language committees is also often focused on non-digital space and outputs, such as printed material, workshops, or school activities. Probably the strongest claims on digital space for community languages are made by crowd-driven activity, through mobile phones and social media, the use of which has increased over the last decade.

Against this background, the talk proposes that a challenge for language revitalisation of community languages in many African contexts is to connect the various agents involved in the process, and the different resources they can draw on. In particular with respect to the domain of digital space and new media, the talk will highlight the work of digital language repositories and how these can be harnessed better by communities and activists, thereby combining the strengths of institution, community, and crowd-driven language agency.
This paper examines the factors which affect Welsh-language use among teenage Welsh-English bilinguals and asks to what extent new media can facilitate Welsh-language socialisation. I begin with an outline of the sociolinguistics of Welsh-English bilingualism in general. This is followed by an overview of the current Welsh new media landscape and previous research on the use of Welsh in new media and technology (e.g. Cunliffe et al. 2013; Evas & Cunliffe 2016). I then present the results of a thematic analysis of 63 interviews conducted with Welsh-English bilinguals aged 16-18 in four areas of North Wales. In particular, this study aimed to ascertain the extent to which speakers’ linguistic background and community influence their orientation toward the Welsh language and their use of Welsh outside of the classroom. The results indicate that while the use of Welsh is normalised among those from Welsh-speaking homes, particularly in areas where the majority of the local population speak Welsh, the language reamins confined to the classroom and plays a marginal role in the lives of many ‘new speakers’ (e.g. O’Rourke et al. 2015). I discuss the extent to which new media, along with other efforts, might influence the use of Welsh both during speakers’ teenage years and, perhaps more crucially, after they have moved on from Welsh-medium education.

References


Studies of the sociolinguistic situation of Breton tend to polarise its speakers into two groups: traditional speakers, who speak Breton as a result of uninterrupted intergenerational transmission and are characterised as elderly, working-class and rurally located; and new speakers, who have in most cases acquired the language through formal education, and are considered younger, more educated, literate in Breton, and more motivated to use it. Breton use on the internet is accordingly associated with the category of new speakers, whose language is usually depicted in academic work as conforming to the standard, non-dialectal form of Breton prescribed by the Breton language office.

This paper examines whether these claims are borne out by the data. If the Breton found online is the preserve of new speakers, and if their language is highly standardised and lacks overt French influence, we should expect to find such a variety on Facebook. Examining “Facebook e brezhoneg”, the most active Breton-language Facebook group, we can test whether this is the case. Focusing on the lexicon, this paper uses a corpus-based methodology to examine a sample of posts, determining whether new lexical items conform to or reject the standard Breton proposed by language planning authorities. Orthographic and discursive features are also examined in order to construct a fuller picture of how standard and non-standard Breton are presented and viewed in this context.

In examining the use of Breton in the non-regulated space provided by a Facebook group, this paper investigates the potential properties of minority languages in such spaces, revealing both what new media can tell us about the under-researched context of informal writing in minority languages, and how it may enable the perpetuation of diverse linguistic variation in the face of potentially restrictive standardisation from above.
The Status of the Breton Language in France and in the World

Polina Fomina

The present research aims to identify the current status of the Breton language in France and in the world in the context of new media. The theoretical framework of the study reflects the field of minority languages researches, with special reference to the works on minority languages rights [May, S. 2000], multilingualism [Edwards, J. 2012] and national identity [Blommaert, J. 2006].

The Breton language is a Celtic language close to Welsh and Cornish spoken in the United Kingdom. It was brought to France by Britons in the Early Middle Ages. Breton is spoken mainly in western Brittany and in the department of Loire-Atlantique in France [Breton. The Breton Language in Education in France. 2003]. Breton is in the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, because there are only about 206 000 native Breton speakers [Data from the site of the Public Office for the Breton Language].

Breton has no legal status, however, its speakers do a lot to preserve their language in the globalized world. Thus, native Breton speakers create blogs, various posts on Twitter, Instagram and some news sites, groups on Facebook. Breton is also added to the list of languages on Facebook. Moreover, there is a discussion forum on proposing Breton words instead of the French ones for nominating new phenomena. Breton-speaking bloggers do not limit themselves to writing in their native language, but also post pictures of national Breton dishes and upload Breton folk music.

The current study shows that, while the French language undoubtedly has a strong influence on Breton speakers, it has not totally replaced their native language in all communication spheres. Consequently, Breton culture, history and traditions that are reflected in the language are still alive.

References


Breton. The Breton Language in Education in France. 2003. The Netherlands, Mercator-Education.
Towards a community media achieving Multilingualism: NubaTube Channel

Mohamed Azmy Mohamed

Nubian is one of the oldest languages spoken in Africa and the world and represent the knowledge base of many peoples of Africa (Egypt-Sudan-Ethiopia-Kenya-Uganda-Ethiopia...). Its low usage rates in modern times can be seen as a result of foreign colonialism in these states, a process which forced citizens to speak the colonial language and reducing the value of the Nubian language, preventing its wide circulation and its development. The media and the new community of Nubian speakers has become a major pillar in the exchange of knowledge of these peoples and has become necessary to utilize to resist the cultures and languages which threaten the Nubian language with extinction. It is necessary to utilize new media to maintain the Nubian language. This was the impetus behind the creation of the NubaTube media platform which allows individuals to view social, cultural content in the Nubian language while also translating it into Arabic and English to assist new Nubian speakers to learn.

The first challenge in creating this platform was to evaluate which platform would be most suitable. The second challenge was to urge the Nubian minority to speak in their mother tongue before the cameras. NubaTube represents a community channel for first-language minorities which provides varied content on a daily basis on the Internet (entirely in video format) in the Middle East and North Africa.

Through the follow-up and evaluation of the NubaTube the participation rates are good and gradually increasing however, a challenge is that it needed to develop the content continuously to compete with TV and also that universal access to high-speed internet access would be required for viewing.

The NubaTube community channel suggests that use of the electronic media is the optimum solution to maintain the minority languages.

The Welsh language within the digital age

Shân Miriam Pritchard & Natalie Lloyd Jones

The dramatic changes in the development and use of technology in the twenty first century has completely transformed the way in which we communicate and socialize together. The introduction of new media and changes in the way in which we access information and utilise online content in general bring new opportunities and challenges for minority languages around the world. This paper gives an insight into the current situation of the Welsh language within the digital age in Wales.

Within a minority language context, Welsh is a relatively well-resourced language following government investment over the last few years. Although the influence of technology in the
promotion of language revitalization has been increasingly recognised by many academics over recent years, research into the use of the Welsh language within a digital context remains relatively unseen within academic research. This paper will present preliminary research findings of two current research projects, funded by the European Social Fund, which analyses the use of Welsh on digital platforms. Both research projects use mixed methods research approach in regards to data collection, utilising questionnaires and focus group interview.

The first project will focus on evaluating the success of Welsh and bilingual digital applications (apps) placing particular emphasis on factors that influence consumers’ experiences of using Welsh apps such as language skills and attitudes towards the language within a digital context. The second part of the paper will focus on how Welsh speakers and learners consume Welsh language media content with the help of digital platforms. The focus will be on television viewing habits and the impact digital services have on the viewers’ choices.

The paper will conclude by drawing themes on the future impacts on Welsh within the digital age.

Autochthonous Heritage Languages and Social Media: Writing and Bilingual Practices in Low German on Facebook

Gertrud Reershemius

This paper analyses how speakers of an autochthonous heritage language (AHL) make use of digital media, through the example of Low German, a regional language used by a decreasing number of speakers mainly in northern Germany. The focus of the analysis is on Web 2.0 and its interactive potential for individual speakers. The study therefore examines linguistic practices on the social network site Facebook, with special emphasis on language choice, bilingual practices and writing in the autochthonous heritage language. The findings suggest that social network sites such as Facebook have the potential to provide new mediatized spaces for speakers of an AHL that can instigate sociolinguistic change.

Digital Language Diversity on New Media: the DLDP Survey about European Minority Languages Speakers

Irene Russo & Claudia Soria

How does the linguistic diversity of Europe reflect in the New Media? Do regional and minority languages contribute to EU digital language diversity? In this paper we will present the results of the first survey about actual needs of European minority languages speakers regarding digital opportunities. The survey is part of the work carried out by the Digital Language Diversity
Project (DLDP), a three-year Erasmus+ project started in September 2015. The goal of DLDP is helping minority languages speakers in the acquisition of intellectual and practical skills to create, share, and reuse online digital content, at the same time defining general guidelines and best practices for the promotion of minority languages with poor digital representation, a fact that further prevents their usability on digital media and devices. The focus of the project is on four European minority languages at different stages of digital developments (Basque, Breton, Karelian and Sardinian), and this will enable a comparison about the role of the availability of digital content for promotion of digital usage of these languages and development of language-based digital applications. With the aim of understanding the specific needs and the peculiar behaviours of speakers of these languages, during Spring 2016 we conducted a survey focused on gathering information about their personal digital use of the language and about any known digital resource and services that make use of the language. We received feedback from almost 2000 speakers and we are now in the position of analysing results for future actions. In particular, taking into account media user typology elaborated by Brandtzæg (2010) (e.g. entertainment, instrumental and advanced users) we aim to profile speakers’ answers according to these different classes, in order to better understand how to make speakers aware of the opportunities new media offer for preservation and revitalisation of minority languages.

**WhatsApp Poetics: The Structure & Style of Chichewa Poetry Groups on WhatsApp.**

*Susanna Sacks*

My presentation examines the appearance and circulation of poetry in Chichewa on the mobile messaging platform WhatsApp to argue that WhatsApp is a key site for the production and circulation of Chichewa poetry in Malawi. Although several papers to date have considered the role of WhatsApp groups in English language proficiency, relatively few have taken seriously the aesthetics of WhatsApp in the production of non-Anglophone poetry. WhatsApp groups provide a central platform linking individual users with shared interests: unlike other social media platforms, WhatsApp does not support advertising, so groups spread only person-to-person. Users in poetry-focused WhatsApp groups advertise events to facilitate community formation, but they also share poems – their own and others’ – for critical responses, along with news, jokes, and Bible verses. I look at two WhatsApp groups – one based around a weekly open mic in Blantyre and one around a poetry website – to analyze how Chichewa and English language use structures poetry-focused interactions. The population that makes up both groups is roughly similar, and both groups move between English and Chichewa in similar ways, with primary content (news articles, jokes, etc.) in English and responses in Chichewa. However, one group’s communications are punctuated by regular, weekly get-togethers, while the other’s are focused on producing content for regular online posting. I argue that, in both cases, the structured conversations around individual poems not only reflect individual users’ attitudes toward acceptable ranges of poetic production but also shape a Chichewaphone community formed around bilingual poetry. My presentation uses quantitative analyses of the types of poetry and responses in each group alongside careful readings of individual poems as case studies, arguing ultimately for attention to the aesthetics of new media in minority language studies.