Protecting the languages of Europe's cultural minorities

Dying Languages

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Despite active policies to protect minority languages and a resurgence of interest in them in many countries of Europe, the generation that spoke them as their mother tongue is now passing away – taking with them the tradition of their use in everyday life

Until the latter half of the 20th century, the language policies of many European countries remained firmly based on promoting their "national" languages at the cost of other tongues spoken in their territory. That attitude, leading to the marginalization or even elimination of minority languages, was closely linked to the 19th-century nation-state concept, involving the domination of a single cultural group that enforces a sense of national solidarity upon all other groups.

Assimilation or diversity

One characteristic example of a nation-state doing its utmost to cultivate such a unitary national and political identity is France: the Jacobin concept of the state instilled the view that a modern state must be focused around a common nationality and language, and the efforts of the French state apparatus in large part amounted to enforcing mandatory cultural assimilation and prohibiting the use of minority languages outside of the home (in churches, schools, public offices). Yet the survival of minority languages may also come into doubt in federated countries, which cultivate a common identity that accommodates the cultural diversity of various component nations and their right to full autonomy (such as in the United Kingdom or the Russian Federation). While these countries do defend

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The Kashubian language in Poland is one of Europe's regional languages that enjoy state protection under provisions of statutory law

the language rights of recognized cultural groups, they nevertheless easily forget about many tongues that are not legally recognized as ethnic minority languages. Pluralistic states, where autochthonous inhabitants, descendents of earlier immigrants, and recent newcomers all in theory enjoy equal rights (such as the United States or Australia), face a different sort of problem: taking steps to account for the multilingual nature of society does not necessarily suffice to ensure that ethnic languages will indeed survive.

Degrees of endangerment

While there are some 6000 languages in the world today, a vast majority of them (96%) are used by only 4% of the population. Most of these languages have from several to several thousand speakers. It is estimated that only a few hundred languages stand chances of surviving through the next century. The degree to which a language is endangered hinges mainly upon its actual scope of use, on the possibility of intergenerational transmission, and on the demographic breakdown of its speakers. A language is considered "potentially endangered" when it is socially and economically marginalized, "endangered" when it is no longer being learned by children or when the number of young speakers sharply drops, and "seriously endangered" when its youngest speakers are over 50 years old. "Moribund" languages, in turn, are those which are used only by a very small number of (usually elderly) speakers among the cultural community the language used to be associated with, while "extinct" languages have fallen out of use completely.

As this scale indicates, languages perish whenever the individuals who speak them die or abandon the use of their tongue. Languages only used by small numbers of speakers may come under significant threat from natural catastrophes, epidemics, droughts, or famine – such events may suddenly decimate the population of speakers or cause them to become geographically scattered.

Modernization and language

Languages can also become threatened as a consequence of the cultural and linguistic assimilation of their speakers. The reasons why speakers may shift languages include conquest, forced resettlement, and waves of emigration or internal displacement that may fragment the linguistic community and impede the use of the minority language. Such shifts may also be triggered by changes in speakers' lifestyles, when previously hermetic cultural communities open up to the influence of a dominant outside culture, frequently due to processes of industrialization and the introduction of new technologies, or by the impact of the media in the dominant language. All of these factors can be seen affecting Europe's ethnic minorities (e.g. the Bretons, Rhaeto-Romans, Sorbians, and Kashubians). Communities with traditional ways of life based on cultivating the land, herding cattle, or fishing become fragmented when many of their members leave the villages and move to the cities. Needing to adapt and to function in their new environment, they switch to the dominant language.

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The Bretons in France have fought a long struggle for the right to use their language. Their culture has been flourishing since the 1970s, although the Breton language is still not an official language of France

Linguicide

Languages may also die when their speakers no longer desire to use them. Such a changeover may be triggered by concerted state efforts to undermine a language community, encouraging the group's cultural and linguistic assimilation via mandatory schooling in the dominant language, imposing penalties for the use of the minority language in public places (in Brittany, for instance, there used to be signs in public places saying "No spitting or speaking Breton"), and excluding the language from public life. Children who

used a minority language in school might suffer castigation, such as in Brittany and Wales, or ridicule and corporal punishment, such as in Kashubia and Lusatia. Efforts may also seek to lower the prestige of a minority language by marginalizing the minority group, associating it in public discourse with an inferior, rural culture out of touch with the modern world. The discourse of the dominant group typically tries to "label" the minority (e.g. "a Breton" = "a pig"). Publicly circulated jokes (e.g. *A herring is not much of a fish, nor a Kashubian much of a man*) or sayings that ascribe negative traits to members of minority groups (*Bretons are always drunk*) may precipitate the degradation of their cultures and languages. Associations of this sort may instill a sense of shame in representatives of minority groups, encouraging a desire to abandon their language and culture in favor of the dominant culture. The minority language begins to be perceived as a burden, its use as an obstacle to achieving success in life. The minority language is slowly excluded from all spheres of life outside the home, ceases to be used in activities related to modern life (the media, industry, the law), and therefore stops generating appropriate vocabulary. The language and culture of the minority gradually become "folklorized," treated as a relict of the past and an ethnographic phenomenon rather than a fully fledged culture in its own right.

Rights for small groups

Recent decades, however, have brought huge changes in the way Europe's minority languages are approached, in how they function, and in the awareness of minority representatives themselves. The factors contributing to this have included the ethnic revival of the 1970s (when many minorities began to demand special rights), legislative changes made in many countries of Western Europe, the different approach encouraged by international organizations and bodies (the Council of Europe, the EU, UNESCO), as well as diametrical changes occurring in the lifestyles of ethnic or linguistic minority groups.

The intergenerational transmission of many of Europe's ethnic languages (such as Breton, Welsh, Sorbian, and Kashubian) was strongly weakened around the mid-20th century, causing them to occupy less space in home, family, and private life. They are more and more rarely the languages of socialization for children, who now gain their knowledge of these languages not at home but rather by being taught them at school. However, these languages often do have a consolidated place in the media. The attitude of the language communities themselves about the need to preserve their languages is also changing. Minority organizations like the Kashubian-Pomeranian Association, the Office of the Breton Language, the Welsh Language Board, and the *Witaj* Language Center in Lusatia work to protect endangered languages and to promote their development and dissemination. In 2007, for example, the Office of the Breton Language launched a badge campaign entitled *Spilhening* ("little brooch" in Breton). These pin-on badges, meant to be worn by everyone who knows Breton, are available and identical throughout Brittany and are intended to help speakers more easily identify situations when they can switch from French to Breton. There are also emerging enclaves, groups, and communities where speaking the minority language enjoys heightened rather than diminished prestige. Representatives of the minority can now demonstrate their cultural identity, attend demonstrations and concerts, frequent ethnic restaurants, and also wear and display various types of pins and symbols (CSB in Kashubia, BZH - Breizh in Brittany, Ł in Lustasia). Above all, however, many cultural minority members are striving

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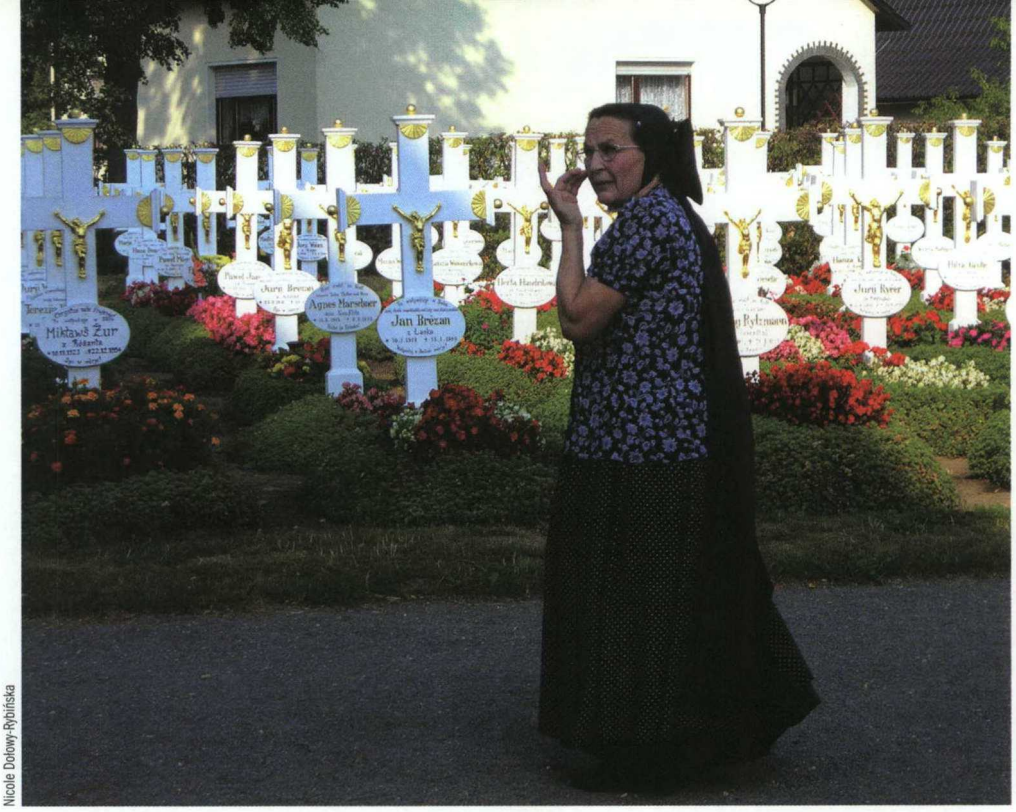
The Sorbians in Germany, like representatives of other minorities, demonstrate their cultural identity by taking part in meetings, celebrations, and concerts



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Many of Europe's minority languages face a very tough situation because the last generation of people who used them as their first language of contact with family, neighbors, and friends is passing away

to learn the language of their group at least to a basic extent, so as to stress their affiliation with the minority.

The "battle" for Brittany

These processes are illustrated very well by the case of the Breton language. In the course of a century, its number of users had decreased at least sixfold. At present there are still some 240,000 speakers (most over 60 years old), yet the level of their knowledge of the language varies. The middle-aged and youngest generations did not learn Breton at home. But in the 1970s, the Bretons began to recognize and stand up for their own culture. They chose various ways to do so, some using bombs, but many expressed their sentiments through the popularity of Breton music – which transformed from a traditional art form for closed societies into a kind of music listened to by millions. The singing of Breton-language songs at festivals was accompanied by the waving of black-and-white Brittany flags and the voicing of demands for linguistic rights for Breton. A desire to defend their identity came to be rekindled in Bretons. Despite the existing bans, they began to erect Breton-language signs and eventually set up the *Diwan* federation of Breton-language schools. Faced with this movement, the French authorities capitulated and enacted a Breton Culture Charter in 1977, under which official organizations cultivating Breton culture were established. There are some 20,000 individuals now learning Breton, bilingual signs are present nearly everywhere in Brittany, Breton culture is flourishing, and various festivals and rallies are held. Bretons are still fighting for official recognition of Breton as a language of France, and although there has so far been no indication that state officials will yield on this point Breton is still enjoying ever-greater leeway.

Many minority languages therefore face a very tough situation. On the one hand their natural intergenerational transmission has been severed, and the last generation of people who acquired the minority language as their mother tongue, their language of socialization, and who still use the language for most of their contacts with family, friends, and neighbors is now passing away. On the other hand, minority languages are nowadays often being taught in schools and have an established presence in the media and public life. Nevertheless, experience has shown that knowledge of a language acquired by such means rarely translates into its being spoken outside of specially delineated spheres, its use having more symbolic than practical significance. Minority languages are used more frequently to manifest speakers' attitudes, to stress that they belong to or identify with a specific group, rather than as a basic channel of communication.

Without a doubt, most of the world's languages should be recognized as endangered. However, it is up to the language communities themselves whether they manage to survive, and in what form. ■

Further reading:

Crystal D. (2005). *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fishman J.A. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.