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Endangered language maintenance and social networks

Intergenerational transmission is seen by sociolinguists such as Fishman (1991) and Romaine (2002) as key to revitalising endangered languages, but relatively few studies investigate the processes of how it ceased (exceptions include Lyon, 1991; Bankston and Henry, 1998; Ferrer, 2004). Yet why some people maintain their ancestral language and transmit it to their children, while others give it up, is a major issue in language planning. In this paper I examine obstacles to intergenerational transmission, both attitudinal and physical (e.g. evacuation of children), and factors which might support language maintenance, with specific reference to Guernesiais, the endangered indigenous language of Guernsey, Channel Islands.

Systematically collected data on to what extent a language is being used and passed on are essential if revitalisation measures are to be planned in a rational, principled way, as well as data on *how* it is used: in what contexts, with whom, and how often (Fishman, 1965). In this study such baseline data was collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. Ethnographic methods enabled the above questions to be extended to *why*; responses shed light on the processes of language shift and the cessation of intergenerational transmission.

In this study individuals' responses to societal pressures to shift to the dominant language are examined. The maintenance of social networks (Milroy, 1987) emerges as a major factor in language maintenance. Availability of interlocutors correlates strongly with fluency, for both native speakers and learners, but is not always under their control. The increasing age and linguistic isolation of many native speakers contributes to both individual and societal language loss. A number of former locations for speaking and hearing Guernesiais are disappearing due to redevelopment and lifestyle changes. Several informants commented that extra-curricular school language classes are not effective if children have little opportunity to speak outside class. To date language planning efforts in Guernsey have not fully succeeded in replacing traditional networks with measures designed to provide opportunities to speak.

References

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Examples from data

Quànd j'étais mariaï ma faumme a pouvait comprende le guernesiais mais a ne pouvait pas le devisai pasqu'a ne savait pas hardi bien - comme chena nou n'a pas devisai à mes effeints en guernesiais – j'ai daoux garçons et i n'peuvent pas d'visai en guernesiais. Ch'est chena – ch'est piti mais ch'est aen langage p'tete qui s'en va mourer. (GF36)

[When I got married my wife she could understand Guernesiais but she couldn't speak it because she didn't know it very well – so we didn't speak to my children in Guernesiais – I've got two boys and they can't speak in Guernesiais. This is the thing – it's a pity but it's a language which might die out.]

After the war we were thought to be 'country bumpkins' so my parents would not let me speak it. (QGE3)

GF39 When I was little it was the first language that I learnt and my mother took a lot of stick for allowing me

Int. Why was that?

GF39 It was because – I think it was early 50s, the war was over and so on and it wasn't fashionable at the time

Int. So who was giving her the stick?

GF39 Oh a lot of the other mothers: 'oh gosh you know you're letting her speak patois and when she goes to school she won't be able to learn – she'll be a dunce' and all the rest of it.

Tables

How often do you speak Guernesiais? * How well can you speak Guernesiais? Crosstabulation

		How well can you speak Guernsey French?				Total
		Not at all	A little	Quite well	Fluently	
How often do you speak Guernsey French?	Every day	0	1	0	12	13
	More than once a week	0	1	6	6	13
	Less than once a week	0	14	13	7	34
	Never	51	7	0	0	58
Total		51	23	19	25	118

How many people do you speak Guernesiais with? * How well can you speak Guernesiais?

		How well can you speak Guernsey French?				Total
		Not at all	A little	Quite well	Fluently	
How many people do you speak Guernsey French with?	None	3	3	0	0	6
	Under 10	0	11	6	6	23
	10-20	0	0	5	3	8
	20-50	0	1	2	1	4
	51-100	0	0	1	3	4
	Over 100	0	0	0	4	4
	'Many'	0	1	2	7	10
Total		3	16	16	24	59

