

Economic ideologies of Gaelic language shift and revitalization, from Improvement to neoliberalism

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This paper proposes the concept of ‘economic ideologies of language’, outlines its fundamental features, and describes its utility in analyzing the role of beliefs and ideology in Scottish Gaelic language shift and revitalization. I define economic ideologies of language as ‘ideologies about the proper or natural relationship of language use and language varieties to economic behaviors, systems, and values.’ As linguistic anthropologists have established, ideologies about the relationship of language to cultural value systems mediate processes of language shift (Kulick 1992; Mertz 1991). Capitalist economics is a cultural value system (Dumont 1977) that has played a key role in mediating processes of Western European language shift. I take as my example the case of Scottish Gaelic in Scotland, a minority language now spoken by approximately 1% of the population. Well-known economic ideologies of Gaelic include ‘You’ll never get a job with Gaelic’ and contemporary neoliberal ideologies of Gaelic as a waste of public money or a valuable commodity. Key features of economic ideologies of language that I propose on the basis of ethnographic and textual data are: 1) that the historical phases of capitalism generate corresponding economic ideologies of language; 2) economic ideologies of language characteristic of prior phases of capitalism continue to circulate even after newer ones are generated; 3) economic ideologies are held by all participants in processes of language shift and revitalization, including speakers and non-speakers of Gaelic, language planners, government policy-makers, journalists, management consultants, and university-based researchers; and 4) participants’ language socialization, life opportunities, and repertoires of belief are shaped by these economic ideologies of language. The fact that economic factors often play an important role in language shift is widely recognized; however, I take a semiotic and ethnographically-grounded approach to the question of exactly how they do so, particularly in the age of neoliberalism.

Dumont, Louis (1977) *From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kulick, Don (1992) *Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinean Village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mertz, Elizabeth (1989) “Sociolinguistic creativity: Cape Breton Gaelic’s linguistic ‘tip’.” In *Investigating Obsolescence: Studies in Language Contraction and Death*, Nancy C. Dorian, ed. Cambridge University Press. Pp. 103-116.