

Social Change and Language Revitalization in the Isle of Man

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During the past several decades, a noticeable shift has taken place in the norms and values that underpin western societies. Post-materialist interpretations of this shift argue that conditions of economic stability and growth have allowed the citizens of developed countries to focus less on what Abraham Maslow (1943) labeled safety and physiological needs and more on so-called higher needs of love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Inglehart, 1990; 1977). Such trends have also been noted by language scholars (Cooper, 1996), who have observed the connection between the social changes that have occurred in the post-war period and a renewed interest in language issues, including an awareness of and concern about the future of minority and endangered languages.

My research on the revitalization of Manx Gaelic (Wilson, 2009; 2008) and on the political development of the Isle of Man (Wilson, 2005) suggests that efforts to revive Manx, a language which was until recently considered extinct by UNESCO, have been driven in part by conditions of social change and economic development on the island. Whereas economic change and modernization in the 19th and early 20th centuries contributed to the decline of Manx as a working vernacular, economic growth and stability in the latter part of the 20th century provided the conditions for linguistic revitalization. Most importantly, there has been a definite shift in popular attitudes towards Manx and its value as a language. This shift in attitudes has been noted both within society and in government.

This paper will explore the economic and social foundations of linguistic revitalization in the Isle of Man. Part one will examine the economic circumstances that have given rise to the type of social changes necessary for linguistic revitalization. Part two will look at changing societal attitudes toward the language and its place on the island.

References

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