Promoting regional or minority languages in a global age

Key recommendations arising from the work of the Revitalise Research Network

Prepared by Dr Huw Lewis, Dr Elin Royles, Professor Wilson McLeod

April 2019
Contents

Executive summary

1. Introduction
2. Language revitalisation as a multi-level activity
3. Balancing the role of governmental and civil society actors in language revitalisation
4. Mobility, territory and daily language use
5. Intergenerational language transmission and the evolution of the family unit
6. International migration, multiculturalism and language revitalisation
7. Globalisation and the link between language and contemporary economic development models

Please reference this report as follows:
Lewis, Huw, Royles Elin and McLeod, Wilson, Promoting regional or minority languages in a global age (April 2019).
Executive summary

• This paper summarises the main findings and recommendations that arise from the Revitalise project, a research network established in 2017 with the aim of examining the implications of contemporary social, economic and political changes for our understanding of how language revitalisation efforts should be designed and implemented.

• Sub-state level actors have overseen most of the recent activity across Western Europe in support of regional or minority languages. Yet, state-level structures and continental or global level structures are also potentially significant, meaning that language revitalisation should be viewed as a multi-level activity.

• Over recent decades, governments – usually sub-state governments – have emerged as increasingly influential actors in many European language revitalisation efforts, but this trend may have implications for the relative balance between the role of governmental actors and the essential work of civil society organisations. Consequently, there is a need to reflect critically on which types of activities associated with language revitalisation that-governmental institutions are in the best position to administer, and the ones where activity by civil society is more appropriate and effective.

• Today, people live increasingly mobile lives that span ever-wider geographic areas. Such trends impact upon how people interact with each other from day-to-day, and, therefore, should influence how interventions that aim to promote greater social use of regional or minority languages are conceived and implemented. Interventions should give greater recognition to the existence of different forms of language communities – geographical communities, communities of interest, online communities etc. – and increase the emphasis on interventions that recognise the more networked nature of contemporary social life.

• Intergenerational language transmission between parents and children is viewed as a key element in language revitalisation, yet understanding of the process remains limited, and the significance of increasing diversity in the composition of family units deserves further consideration.

• In an age of international migration, a number of language revitalisation efforts are now taking place within increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts, rather than the more traditional context of majority-minority bilingualism. This is an issue that will need to be taken into account as part of discussions concerning regional or minority languages in key policy areas, such as education, over the coming years.

• Whilst there is widespread consensus regarding the centrality of economic factors for the prospects of regional or minority languages there is a lack of understanding of how structural changes in the economy and in patterns of employment impact, either positively or negatively, on the vitality of specific minority language communities.

1. Introduction

Since its establishment in 2017, the core aim of the Revitalise research network has been to examine the implications of some of the major social, economic and political changes witnessed across Western societies today for our understanding of how contemporary language revitalisation efforts should be designed and implemented. The network has been funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and it has been led by Dr Huw Lewis (Aberystwyth University), Professor Wilson McLeod (Edinburgh University) and Dr Elin Royles (Aberystwyth University).

The centrepiece of the network’s activities has been a series of four workshops held in Aberystwyth, Edinburgh and Cardiff between May 2017 and February 2019. These workshops brought together an international group of academic researchers, spanning the arts, humanities and social sciences, along with a number of prominent language policy practitioners and civil society actors that work in the field of language revitalisation.

This paper presents a series of key themes that arose during the project, with each highlighting how particular social, economic or political changes being witnessed today have important implications for discussions concerning how to approach the challenge of promoting regional or minority languages.

For further information regarding the work of the Revitalise network, including detailed reports that summarise the discussions that took place during the project’s workshops, as well as short video and audio clips where various contributors discuss their ideas, please visit the project’s website: https://revitalise.aber.ac.uk
Sub-state level actors have overseen most of the recent activity in support of regional or minority languages. Yet, state-level structures and continental or global level structures are also potentially significant, meaning that language revitalisation should be viewed as a multi-level activity.

Context: Over recent decades, it has become apparent that Europe has witnessed a process of ‘rescaling’ in which different social, economic and political functions have migrated to new territorial levels, both above and below the state. This has led to new patterns of multi-level governance where authority over decision making in various policy fields is dispersed across numerous different actors located across multiple territorial levels – international, state, regional and local.

Overall, when considering the development of policy interventions in support of regional or minority languages, the tendency thus far has been to focus on specific territorial levels in isolation, be that the local, regional, state or international level. Therefore, the issue of whether language policy choices in a particular location are potentially influenced by interactions between actors or institutions across multiple territorial levels is an issue that has been less explored by both academic researchers and policy practitioners. As a result, greater attention needs to be given to the move towards multi-level patterns of governance when seeking to understand how whether language policy choices in a particular location are potentially influenced by interactions between actors or institutions across multiple territorial levels.

Conclusions:
- In many European cases, sub-state level activity – particularly by regional governments – is likely to remain the main influence on the nature and extent of language revitalisation efforts.
- Yet, even when formal competence for policy relating to regional or minority languages is located at the regional level, state-level structures (e.g. in the form of constitutional or financial arrangements) are still likely to exert a significant influence on language revitalisation initiatives.
- There is some evidence to suggest that the significance of continental or global level structures for the development of initiatives in support of regional or minority languages will depend on the orientation of the state in question – where the state adheres to a more restrictive approach the international level may be more significant for actors at lower levels than where the approach is more permissive. Yet this is an issue that requires further investigation.

Over recent decades, governments – usually sub-state governments – have emerged as increasingly influential actors in many European language revitalisation efforts. But does this trend impact upon the essential work of civil society organisations?

Context: Over the past thirty years, there has been an important shift in the role that democratic governments play in the process of coordinating society. Many academic scholars have posited that, across a range of different social and economic fields, governments can no longer be seen as all-powerful decision makers. Rather, it is claimed that we have moved to a situation in which non-governmental actors, including various appointed, arms-length, bodies, private corporations and civil society organizations, play an increasingly significant role in the development and implementation of public policy.

Yet, when the focus turns to how efforts to revitalise minority languages have been organised over recent years, we see a slightly different trend. Since the late 1970s language revitalisation efforts across Western Europe, in places such as Catalonia, the Basque Country, Wales or Scotland, have been characterised by the fact that governments – usually sub-state governments – have emerged as increasingly important and influential actors. This has meant that in several European locations language revitalisation has moved away from being an activity that is based primarily on the language community itself working through different civil society organisations.

An important theme during the past was the need to recognise the tension that may arise between governments and civil society organisations when the former emerge as increasingly influential actors in language revitalisation efforts. It was questioned whether too much emphasis on the role of governmental bodies leads to a situation where the potential contribution of other non-governmental, grassroots, actors is discounted, both by officials and activists alike. Moreover, it was argued that a more direct involvement on the part of governmental bodies (e.g. through the allocation of public funding) can undermine the autonomy of grassroots actors and constrain their ability to innovate and experiment with different language promotion initiatives, as their work may become subject to greater oversight, regulation and control. In sum, while the importance of official governmental support for minority languages, whether through the creation of policy structures and mechanisms or the provision of funding was not questioned, it became apparent that those engaged in language revitalisation activities need to give greater attention to the implications of increased governmental involvement.

Conclusions:
- Active and successful language revitalisation efforts cannot be maintained solely on the basis of official governmental action – broad popular engagement through civil society remains a vital component.
- There is a pressing need to reflect critically on the relative balance between the role governmental and civil society actors in language revitalisation. Which types of activities are governmental institutions in the best position to administer, and which are ones where activity by civil society is likely to be more effective and appropriate.
- Given the recent decline witnessed in many locations in levels of civic participation (an issue discussed in section 4 of this paper), the challenge of maintaining a robust revitalisation movement within civil society is likely to be a key consideration for proponents of regional or minority languages over the coming years.
4. Mobility, territory and daily language use

Today, people live increasingly mobile lives that span ever-wider geographic areas. Such trends have implications for how people interact with one another from day-to-day, and, therefore, should influence how interventions that aim to promote minority language use are conceived and implemented.

Context: Recent decades have witnessed important changes in the spatial organisation of societies. First, in many European countries, the general trend of counter-urbanisation, observed during the 1970s and early 1980s, has reverted to one of urbanisation. Second, this trend of urbanisation has been particularly pronounced among younger age groups, leading to increasingly polarised rural-urban population profiles. Furthermore, these spatial changes, combined with technological advances, have led to fundamental changes in how people interact with each other. An increase in personal mobility, related to wider car ownership and better infrastructure, has led people to live their lives across ever-wider geographic areas. This, in turn, has consequences for how people engage with a range of core services (e.g. education and health), particularly in a context of service-rationalisation around urban centres. Mobility and technology have also prompted changes to the nature of civil society. Overall, the trend is one of declining engagement in civic life and in informal, localised social interaction, and towards thinner, more formal, and more individualistic forms of engagement, based on common communities of interest. At the same time, the spread of information communication technology (ICT) has prompted the development of novel forms of social interaction in which geographic location is less of a determining factor.

Traditionally, both academic and policy discussions regarding how to stimulate greater social use of regional or minority languages have placed considerable emphasis on the need to promote local, neighbour-based networks, with the focus often on targeting specific territorial communities. While this type of local community-based approach should not be discounted completely, greater attention needs to be given to the need to develop robust language promotion strategies that are tailored to contemporary urban and mobile lifestyles. Everyday social practices are now being stretched across wider areas, thereby influencing where, when and how people interact with each other, and, by extension, where they use their languages. This affects children and adults alike, and impacts on issues such as engagement by children in extra-curricular activities, participation in recreational activities, use of public services and consumer behaviour.

5. Intergenerational language transmission and the evolution of the family unit

Intergenerational language transmission between parents and children is viewed as a key element in language revitalisation, yet understanding of the process remains limited, and the significance of increasing diversity in the composition of family units is an issue deserves more detailed consideration.

Context: The family, and in particular the process of intergenerational language transmission between parents and children, has been consistently emphasised as a key area of concern in both the policy and research literature relating to language revitalisation. However, during the project it was argued that intergenerational transmission has not yet been conceptualised in a satisfactory manner, with the consequence that we still know relatively little about how the process works and also what types of steps can be taken to influence it.

With a view to developing a firmer conceptualisation of intergenerational language transmission, the project highlighted a series of key principles:

- first, the need to acknowledge the inherently ‘messy’ nature of intergenerational transmission and thus the importance of not conceiving the process in simple binary terms – i.e. as either ‘on’ or ‘off’ in different family circumstances;
- second, the need to acknowledge that intergenerational transmission often stems from unplanned and unconscious behaviour, particularly within linguistically endogenous contexts, and that it is vital that it is not assumed to be a process that results from a series of rational and intentional parental decisions;
- and third, the importance of conceiving intergenerational language transmission as a process that is not influenced solely by factors internal to the family home, but rather a complex interaction between home-based factors and other external factors.

Conclusions:
- Interventions aiming to promote greater social use of regional or minority languages need to recognise the different forms of language communities that exist – geographical communities, communities of interest, online communities etc. – and increase the emphasis on interventions that recognise the more networked nature of contemporary social life by targeting specific communities of interest.
- The extent to which the local neighbourhood remains the main influence on people’s day-to-day language use practices should be reassessed. Greater consideration should be given to the potential to develop interventions that recognise the increase in personal mobility.
- Community-level and national-level approaches to language planning increasingly need to be supplemented by a regional-level approach.

A further significant factor highlighted that links directly with the project’s overarching theme of contemporary social change, was the need for discussions concerning intergenerational transmission to give greater consideration to the significance of increasing diversity in the composition of family units by also examining the distinct circumstances of single-parent families or gay-parent families, or the consequences of relationship breakups and more complex domestic arrangements. Consequently, little is known regarding the extent to which different family circumstances may influence language acquisition by children, or whether these changing patterns should influence how strategies aiming to improve levels of intergenerational transmission should be designed and implemented.

Conclusions:
- Research studying the process of intergenerational language transmission should give greater consideration to the increasing diversity in the composition of family units.
- Policy interventions that seek to improve levels of intergenerational transmission within a particular language community must take account of the fact that parental actions will seldom be based on a series of wholly rational and intentional decisions.
- As in other policy fields, practitioners in the field of language revitalisation should look to draw on recent developments in the behavioural sciences that stress the emotional and affective nature of social behaviour.
6. International migration, multiculturalism and language revitalisation

In an age of international migration, a number of language revitalisation efforts are now taking place within increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts, rather than the more traditional context of majority-minority bilingualism.

Context: Recent demographic trends have led to important changes in the population composition of many European societies. In this ‘age of migration’, societies have become more multi-ethnic and multi-cultural as international immigrants have come to represent an ever-higher proportion of the overall population.

International migration and the move towards increasingly diverse societies are trends that clearly have implications for efforts to promote the prospects of regional or minority languages. In several instances across Europe, language revitalisation efforts are now taking place within increasingly multilingual and multi-ethnic contexts, rather than the more traditional context of majority-minority bilingualism. During the project, the case of Catalonia was highlighted on several occasions as being one where such demographic change has led to innovative responses by those working to maintain and normalise the position of the Catalan language, with the Barcelona region being particularly relevant. Yet, significantly, it became apparent that the implications of international migration extend well beyond the most obvious and well-recognised cases such as this. In particular, it became evident that this contemporary phenomenon is relevant not only to language revitalisation efforts in large urban locations, but also to rural and remote rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and north-west Wales.

The implications of international migration give rise to several kinds of challenges for proponents of minority languages. At the most general level, it is necessary to consider the need to allow plural linguistic identities to be maintained, while at the same time ensuring that there are sufficient spaces where the minority language can be normalised as a medium of interaction. More specifically, consideration needs to be given to the degree to which the goals of official language revitalisation strategies are reinforced or undermined by citizenship and integration policies.

International migration is an issue that will need to be taken into account as part of discussions concerning regional or minority languages in a series of key policy areas over the coming years. For instance, in the field of education there a possible implications for issues such as pedagogical approaches, the teaching resources required and staff training.

Civil society organisations will have a responsibility to ensure that immigrant communities are able to identify with and view the language revitalisation effort as one to which they can also contribute and help to shape.

Conclusions:

• Greater consideration should be given to the degree to which the goals of official language revitalisation strategies are reinforced or undermined by citizenship and integration policies.

• International migration is an issue that will need to be taken into account as part of discussions concerning regional or minority languages in a series of key policy areas over the coming years. For instance, in the field of education there are possible implications for issues such as pedagogical approaches, the teaching resources required and staff training.

7. Globalisation and the link between language and contemporary economic development models

Whilst there is widespread consensus regarding the centrality of economic factors for the prospects of regional or minority languages, there is a lack of understanding of how structural changes in the economy and in patterns of employment impact, either positively or negatively, on the vitality of specific minority language communities.

Context: In contrast to the growing influence of governments, particularly sub-state governments, over initiatives aiming to promote regional or minority languages (discussed in section 2 of this paper), there has been a substantial decline in the ability of governments to intervene in the economy. Economic globalisation has had a significant impact upon Western societies. It has heralded a shift from distinct national economies towards an increasingly interconnected and interdependent global economy and this has prompted major changes in patterns of work and resulted in strengthening the position of transnational actors, particularly multinational corporations.

While these structural economic changes have unfolded, proponents of regional or minority languages have regularly stressed the significance of the language-economy link. Yet, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the different types of economic concerns that can impact upon the prospects regional or minority languages, and this is hampering policy activity in this area.

On the one hand, there have been many efforts by academic researchers and policy practitioners over recent years to explore the extent to which regional or minority languages can influence economic performance (i.e. the language > economy link). In this context, the focus tends to be on issues such as whether the ability to speak a particular language influences people’s employment prospects and their potential earnings, or whether the use of a particular language by individual companies or within specific sectors influences their economic performance, e.g. in terms of market profile or annual turnover.

Yet, it became evident during the project that, to date, a lack of consideration has been given to the question of how economic processes influence language vitality (i.e. the economy > language link). For example, how economic developments within a particular area, or general initiatives linked to regional economic development strategies, impact upon a regional or minority language, either in terms of the numbers of speakers, their geographical concentration or their propensity to use the language. In addition, it is unclear whether the objectives and practices of governmental strategies that aim to promote economic development interconnect with official strategies seeking to promote regional and minority languages, or indeed whether economic development strategies give any consideration to their potential impact (either positively or negatively) on ongoing language revitalisation efforts. Moreover, as economic development strategies seem to be increasingly less sensitive to the situation of regional or minority languages, little consideration is given to the implications of factors such as peripherality, rurality and economic weakness that are often associated with regional or minority language communities. Furthermore, overlooked is the possibility that some initiatives to promote minority language revitalisation, most notably in relation to the government and media sectors, tend to generate employment in urban areas in a way that arguably undermines the economic basis of traditional rural communities.

Conclusions:

• There is a need for greater analytical clarity concerning the different ways in which economic activity can influence the vitality of regional or minority languages.

• More attention should be given to the implications of regional or minority languages of structural changes in the economy and in patterns of employment, and the need for appropriate methods for assessing their linguistic impact.

• Better alignment is needed between official strategies seeking to promote regional and minority languages and other governmental policies seeking to promote economic development.