

# The Importance of Motivations in Language Revitalization

Presented at the 2nd International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization, and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities

Bangkok, July 1-3, 2008

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## Abstract

*The revitalization of a language involves speakers making thousands of individual language choice decisions, with the pooled choices resulting in increased use of the language. Understanding individual language choice motivations is key to understanding and having some bearing on these individual language choice decisions. This paper first addresses the importance of motivations by providing a taxonomy with which to discuss and better understand language choice motivations.*

*Back in 1985, John Edwards attributed language shift to “pragmatic decisions in which another variety is seen as more important for the future” (1985:71). Among his “pragmatic considerations” are power, social access, and material advancement. He maintains that the only way to influence language shift (revitalize a language) is to alter the entire social fabric of the language community (1985:98).t*

*This paper also addresses the importance of motivations in the sense of what leaders and members of a language community can do to modify the motivational fabric of their society in order to encourage language choice decisions that lean toward language revitalization. The key to language revitalization is motivations.*

## Introduction

Language revitalization efforts are basically attempts to modify language shift patterns. Language shift occurs when a community is using more and more of one particular language, at the expense of another language. The goal of a language stabilization process is to halt language shift. The goal of a language revitalization process is to reverse language shift. Thus the title of Fishman’s key work, *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages* (1991).

Language shift, where a community is in the process of using more and more of a particular language at the expense of another language, has been viewed at the macro-societal level and at the micro-societal level. Fasold (1984) provided an early example of a macro-societal view, where community factors such as industrialization, urbanization, migration, proletarianization, and government policies were examined in order to shed light on language shift.

Edwards (1985) provided an early example of language shift viewed from the micro-societal level. Instead of dealing with societal factors such as industrialization and urbanization, he dealt with factors that are directly related to individuals' motivations and goals.

In 1985, Edwards noting that "History shows that language shift is the rule, not the exception" (1985:96), attributed code choice, and ultimately language shift, to "pragmatic decisions in which another variety is seen as more important for the future" (1985:71). For Edwards, "pragmatic considerations" such as power, social access, and material advancement are of supreme importance in the study of language use and shift patterns. He also maintained that in any language planning activity, these pragmatic considerations are the major determinants of success (1985:94), concluding that the only way to influence language shift is to alter the entire social fabric of the language community (1985:98).

This present paper will be discussing language shift from the micro-societal view, where individual motivations are key, and where language shift is viewed as the compilation of individuals' daily decisions concerning language use. This paper is based on this concept that language revitalization, or reversing language shift, needs to examine and work with individual motivations relating to language choice.

The revitalization of a language involves speakers making thousands of individual language choice decisions, with the pooled choices resulting in increased use of the language. Understanding individual language choice motivations is key to understanding and having some bearing on these individual language choice decisions. The first section of this paper addresses the importance of motivations by providing a taxonomy with which to discuss and better understand language choice motivations.

The second section of this paper, working within the taxonomy of language choice motivations provided in the first section, addresses what leaders and members of a language community can do to modify the motivational fabric of their society in order to encourage language choice decisions that lean toward language revitalization. As the key to language revitalization is seen to be individual motivations, an understanding of the methods whereby motivations are influenced is desirable.

Karan (2000), based on the similarities between the mechanisms of language change and language shift (Labov 2001), and building on Edwards (1985) and Bourdieu (1982), introduced the Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift. In that model, individuals, in different speech situations, select from their linguistic repertoire the language variety or varieties (language and dialect) that will best serve their interests. Individuals also seek to increase their linguistic repertoire with varieties they think will serve their interests. Societal language shift is the result of many individual language choice decisions.

In this Perceived Benefit Model of Language Shift, language choice decisions (as well as language acquisition decisions) are influenced by a limited set of motivators. These motivations are classified as communicative, economic, social (solidarity or prestige), and religious. This present work expands the categorization of these motivations, and discusses what leaders and members of a language community can do to influence the motivational fabric of their society in order to encourage language choice decisions that lean toward language revitalization. The key to language revitalization is motivations. Important motivations can be profitably influenced in language revitalization efforts.

## **A Taxonomy of Language Choice Motivations**

Language choice motivations are often combined motivations, including different combinations of the different individual motivations listed below. For example, when there is financial motivation to use a specific language, often there is also social prestige motivations to use the same language. In the interest of better understanding and of being able to discuss these motivations, this taxonomy will discuss the different individual motivations with the understanding that motivations are often complex and combined.

In general concerning language choice motivations, what applies to languages applies to dialects. The same factors, considerations and motivations are active when choosing between languages as when choosing between dialects of one language. Thus “language choice” can be understood as “language code choice” or “language variety choice”.

The dynamics and motivators of language choice, presented in this paper, extend beyond language choice and subsequent language shift. They are most probably the same dynamics and motivators that are present in many aspects of human behavior, such as language change. The same taxonomy of motivations, and the same ways of influencing societal motivations presented below for language acquisition and choice, can be profitably applied to phonological variant acquisition and choice, speech style acquisition and choice, and even extended into areas such as why people choose the clothing and automobile styles that they choose.

### **Communicative Motivations**

As language is communicative and cooperative, people will make both language use and language acquisition choices that best facilitate communication. This is exemplified by an immigrant learning the languages of his or her new location. And this is also exemplified by the use of Swahili in East Africa, where people from many different language groups use Swahili for daily inter-ethnic group communication.

People normally choose to use a language understood by their interlocutors. This pattern is a basic example of communicative motivations influencing language use decisions.

People who speak minority languages often choose to learn and use the language of wider communication. This pattern is a basic example of communicative motivations influencing language acquisition decisions.

### **Economic Motivations**

With Economic motivations, the prospects of financial advancement or profit are in focus. Economic motivations for language use and acquisition can be job related, trade related or network related.

#### **Job related**

Job related Economic Motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to obtain or maintain an employment.

### **Trade related**

Trade related Economic Motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to facilitate or improve the success of their trade.

### **Network related**

Network related Economic Motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to create or maintain networks that will be financially beneficial to them.

## **Social Identity Motivations**

Social Identity motivations are in effect when people want to be, or not to be, identified with a group or individual. Social Identity motivations for language use and acquisition can be prestige group related, solidarity related, distance related, or hero/villain related.

### **Prestige Group related**

Prestige related Social Identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to associate themselves with a prestige group who normally uses that form. They are also present when people choose to not use or to not acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to disassociate themselves with a low prestige group who normally uses that form.

### **Solidarity related**

Solidarity related Social Identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to create or maintain a solidarity bond with an individual, group, culture or sub-culture.

### **Hero/Villain related**

Hero/Villain related Social Identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to associate themselves with a well known individual who normally uses that form. They are also present when people choose to not use or not acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to disassociate themselves with a well known individual who normally uses that form.

### **Distance related**

Distance related Social Identity motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language variety (dialect or language) in order to create or maintain a distance between themselves and an individual, group, culture or sub-culture. This is connected to Goffman's (1967) concept of negative face: a person's desire to remain autonomous.

## **Language Power and Prestige Motivations**

Language Power and Prestige motivations have to do with cases where languages or dialects themselves are associated with power and prestige or lack of power and prestige.

Language Power and Prestige motivations differ from Social Identity and Prestige Group related motivations in that with Language Power and Prestige motivations, the prestige or power is perceived to be in the language variety itself. In Social Identity, Prestige Related motivations, the prestige, or lack of prestige is found in the group normally speaking the language variety.

A good argument could be made for collapsing these Language Power and Prestige Motivations with Social Identity, Prestige Group motivations, because in most cases prestigious and powerful languages or dialects are associated with prestigious and powerful groups who use those language varieties. The rationale for not collapsing these types of motivations is the conviction that certain societies do in fact attribute or associate power and prestige, or the lack of power and prestige, to certain language varieties.

### **High language forms**

Some languages, such as the High languages in diglossic situations, are accorded prestige by the societies using the languages. Language Power and Prestige motivations are evident when people choose to use or acquire a language form accorded this kind of power and prestige (dialect or language) in order to gain power or prestige.

### **Low language forms**

Language Power and Prestige motivations are also evident when people avoid using or acquiring a language form that is non-prestigious and non-powerful, in order to not be associated with that lack of power and prestige.

## **Nationalistic and Political Motivations**

When language choice is influenced by the association between a nation and a language, Nationalistic motivations are in effect. Sometimes language choice is a declaration of national affinity or pride. In some places and cases, certain language form choices are advantageous in order for the interlocutor to be perceived as being a good citizen.

In the 1990s in the Central African Republic, Sango was associated with national good, with being a good citizen and with anti-tribalism. Thus people regularly over-reported their ability in Sango in censuses and multilingualism surveys. To say, “no, I don’t speak Sango” was somewhat culturally analogous to saying, “I’m not a good citizen. I support tribalism.”

There can also be associations between language forms and political camps or parties. Thus language choice, and even language acquisition, can be motivated by political motivations.

## **Religious Motivations**

When language choice is influenced by the association between a greater being and a language, or a religion and a language, religious motivations are in effect. This can be manifested in several ways.

### **Pleasing or Appeasing Greater Being**

Language code choice can be influenced by a belief that a greater being has certain linguistic preferences.

## **Language Designated as Sacred**

Some religions have special places for certain languages. Languages themselves are seen as special or sacred. Supporters of the religions then make language code choices based on these associations.

## **Access Sacred Writings**

People choose to acquire and use languages in which their sacred writings are available.

## **Religious Communication (Proselytizing) Purposes**

Desires or directives to communicate religious ideas can influence language use or language acquisition choices.

## **Summary of Motivations**

1. Communicative
2. Economic
  - a. Job related
  - b. Trade related
  - c. Network Related
3. Social Identity
  - a. Prestige Group related
  - b. Solidarity related
  - c. Hero/Villain related
  - d. Distance related
4. Language Power and Prestige
  - a. High language forms
  - b. Low language forms
5. Nationalistic and Political
6. Religious
  - a. Pleasing or Appeasing
  - b. Sacred Language
  - c. Access Writings
  - d. Religious Communication

## **Impacting Language Choice Motivations**

### **Concerning the Necessity of Motivational and Attitudinal Studies**

Because of the role of motivations in language choice decisions, and because of the importance of language choice decisions in reversing language shift (language revitalization), motivational and attitudinal studies need to be part of the background research for any language development, language revitalization or multilingual education program. Traditional language background and language use studies alone are not sufficient. As well as knowing what people are doing with languages, it is necessary to know why they are doing what they are doing. Motivation studies and attitude studies are crucial.

Only when language groups and their leaders are aware of their group's language use, language motivations and language attitudes are they prepared to attempt to do what they want to do with their languages. Some tools to assess language groups' motivations and attitudes are discussed in Karan and Stalder (2000).

### **Motivational Planning**

When language groups and their leaders are aware of the language motivations situation of their language group, there are things that they can do to make the motivational situation more conducive to the language shift patterns or lack of language shift patterns they would like to see.

I realize that some people get uncomfortable when talking about deliberate acts to change the motivations of others. It can feel manipulative. But we must realize that any attempt to bring about desired changes involve influencing attitudes and motivations. When we want to see girls, as well as boys, attend available primary schools, community activists, often with international help, make deliberate attempts to alter the motivational and attitudinal fabric of the society so that families will value sending their daughters to school.

Any language stabilization or revitalization program intrinsically and necessarily involves a deliberate intent to change the language related motivational fabric of the community. Because language revitalization is the reversal of language shift, and language stabilization is the halt of a language shift away from the language in question, any effective change in a language shift situation must effectuate changes in the attitudes and motivations that influence the language choices that make up the language shift situation.

Multilingual education programs, by their nature, are attempting to modify educational language use patterns. They too need to be informed by attitudinal and motivational studies. When multilingual education programs fail, it is often because of parent and community motivational misunderstandings concerning the value of multilingual education compared to the values of maximum exposure to the language of wider communication. To be successful, multilingual education programs need to influence the societal motivational (and attitudinal) fabric.

Makihara (2004), writing from a linguistic anthropology point of view, underlines the importance of *linguistic ideologies* – cultural conceptions of languages – in modifying language use. Attitudes toward languages influence the use of those languages. When the Rapa Nui population held a linguistic ideology which Makihara calls “colonial diglossia” concerning Spanish and Rapa Nui (a diglossic attitude with Spanish as the High language and Rapa Nui as the Low), this influenced them to prefer the use of Spanish in many domains. Changes away from this linguistic ideology resulted in changes in language use. A linguistic ideology is basically a set of attitudes and motivations concerning languages.

Below, I'll give some examples of some of the things that can be done to influence motivations. In no way are these examples to be seen as a comprehensive list of all that can be done. Rather, they should be seen as an encouragement toward creativity in what might be most effective to bring about desired and agreed upon changes.

### **Concerning Economic Motivations**

In the early 1980's in West Africa, when most university graduates were integrated into government jobs when they graduated, a number of West African countries decided that in

order to increase the use and status of their national languages, they would mandate that all new government employees be able to speak, read and write at least one national language. With those mandates, economic motivation was created that led to language acquisition and use choices that had an impact on what was then a language shift toward colonial languages. This is an example of influencing job related economic motivations.

When a tourist trade is introduced to an area, trade related economic motivations are often influenced. People who could profit economically from tourists have new incentives to learn and use the languages of the tourists. Similarly, where vernacular speaking populations are buying from trades people who normally use a language of wider communication, the trades people have incentives to learn and use the vernacular language(s). A way of influencing trade related economic motivations is to sensitize trade people to the advantages of vernacular language use in their trade.

Susan Gal's (1979) classic study of a language shift situation in Oberwart, on the Hungarian, Austrian border, showed that women were shifting from Hungarian toward German in order to develop networks that led to them marrying (richer) German-speaking factory workers instead of (poorer) Hungarian-speaking agricultural workers. This is an example of economic, network related motivations. If there are profitable networks that people are unaware of, sensitizing them to the value of those networks is a way of influencing network related economic motivations.

Earlier I mentioned that motivations are often combined motivations. This case in Oberwart reported by Gal is also an example of social identity, prestige group related motivations, as more prestige was attributed to the German-speaking industrial workers than to Hungarian-speaking people.

### **Concerning Social Identity Motivations**

Advertising companies sell products by associating them with different favorable images. Volvo ads target people who see themselves as good parents. SUV ads target people who see themselves as sporty. Mercedes ads target people who see themselves as rich. People have motivations to be and act like people they see themselves as, or would like to see themselves as, or would like to associate with.

Many people like to see themselves as good people and good citizens. "Advertisements", associating good people and good citizens with changes in the desired direction can have the effect of creating or encouraging motivations. For example, a sort of "advertising" campaign associating being a good ethnic group person and citizen with speaking the ethnic language can positively influence motivations to use the ethnic group language. People want to see themselves as good people and citizens, and they learn from the "advertising" that one way to do that is to use the ethnic group language. Associating being a good parent with speaking the L1 with one's children can be effective. Simply by telling people what good people, parents, and citizens do can influence them to want to do the same.

People acquire and use the language, mannerisms, habits, clothes styles, interaction patterns, etc. of the people they would like to associate with or be associated with. Setting up associations between desired, agreed upon changes and individuals or groups that people like to associate with or be associated with can be very motivational. This is true for Prestige Group related, Solidarity related, and Hero/Villain related Social Identity Motivations, but

not true for Distance related Social Identity Motivations, because of the nature of those motivations.

Imagine what would happen if a highly popular national football or cricket team modeled new patterns of language choice behavior during television and radio interviews. Many people throughout the nation could be motivated to emulate the language choice behavior of their sports heroes.

### **Concerning Language Power and Prestige Motivations**

As there appears to be somewhat of a universal motivation for people to use languages that are associated with power and prestige, any action that increases the power and prestige of a language can have an effect on motivations to use that language. If a language gains prestige from having a literature, or from having a nationally prominent figure who uses it, the language form becomes more attractive for others to use.

Languages gain power and prestige, and thus motivation for others to use them, when they are used by powerful, or well respected people. Arranging for powerful and popular people to be showcase champions of a language will result in that language having more power and prestige, and will create more motivation for others to use it.

Languages gain power and prestige, and thus motivation for others to use them, when they are viewed with pride. Languages gain power and prestige when they are developed, have a literature, and are used regularly through different media such as the written form, radio, TV, and internet.

### **Concerning Nationalistic, Political and Religious Motivations**

The desire to be or be seen as a good citizen, party member, or religious group member can be a very strong motivator. As discussed in the above paragraph, people often will be motivated to make choices consistent with those they think would be made by people they see themselves as, would like to associate with, or be associated with.

In addition to this, there is often a loyalty and sense of gratitude or obligation to the nation, party or religion for what the nation, party or religion has done for the individual. When an association is communicated between being a good citizen, party member or religious group member and a certain agreed upon and desired change, this will often create motivations in the direction of that change.

Again, these examples are not intended to be comprehensive, but rather to foster creativity in considering, in view of the prerequisite language attitude and motivation background studies, what might be done to make the motivational situation more conducive to the agreed upon and desired language shift patterns or lack of language shift patterns.

## **Conclusions**

Language revitalization, language stabilization, language development and multilingual education programs need to be aware of and consider language motivations and attitudes. The provided categorization of motivations can be helpful to this awareness and consideration.

Language revitalization, language stabilization, language development and multilingual education programs need to influence and modify the motivational and attitudinal fabric of

society to be effective. To be effective, behaviors have to change. For behaviors to change, changes in the motivational fabric of society are needed.

There appear to be universal motivational patterns of people seeking their own communicative, economic, social, and religious good. There appear to be universal motivational patterns of people desiring to act like the people they would like to be seen as or associate with. There appear to be universal motivational patterns of responsibility and obligation toward fostering agencies such as nations, political parties and religions. Individual cultural outworkings of these patterns need to be understood in order to creatively influence changes in the motivational framework of the society so that it is more conducive to the agreed upon and desired language shift patterns or lack of language shift patterns.

If the motivational fabric doesn't change, behaviors won't change. If behaviors don't change, the program fails. Motivations are key.

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