

Language Endangerment in European Secondary Schools: Challenges and Perspectives

Radosław Wójtowicz

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Poland)

rwojtowi@amu.edu.pl

Abstract

The present paper offers an insight into a possible field of cooperation between educational studies and linguistics. Because it is estimated that half of the world's roughly 7,000 languages will not make it to the 22nd century, the documentation and revitalization of endangered languages and spreading knowledge about them are among the most important issues for contemporary linguistics. Crystal (2011) [2] suggests that school curricula become a scene of interaction between linguists and the general public so that awareness of language diversity and endangerment among the latter group is raised. The findings of research conducted in the scope of the Innovative Networking in Infrastructure for Endangered Languages project (INNET) are that there is both room and need for topics related to endangered languages in European secondary schools. From 2011 to 2014, the project examined secondary school curricula of four European countries: Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland and interacted with school communities to look for ways through which topics related to aspects of language endangerment could be introduced to secondary schools. Subsequently, a set of multi-media supported materials available on-line was created for school use. As it turns out, however, the prospects that these materials will become actually used by teachers and students vary considerably in these four countries. Europe is quite uniform in terms of language attitudes, but it constitutes a mosaic composition of different patterns of social organization and everyday sociolinguistic realities. While e.g. in the Netherlands classrooms rarely consist of students sharing common ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, Poland is linguistically very homogenous and contrary to Western European countries, has not witnessed multilingualism introduced by immigrants. In post-communist countries, teachers face other challenges in their day-to-day work than their colleagues in Western Europe. Finally, school systems differ considerably across European countries as EU recommendations allow for much flexibility in ways through which member states fulfil European educational objectives. All this means that achieving the common goal of raising awareness of linguistic endangerment among ordinary Europeans requires taking very different steps in individual countries. The paper at hand presents a linguists' perspective on these issues and aims at providing a concise overview of factors touching upon disciplines of linguistics and education which need to be taken into consideration if linguists are to successfully bring their message across to the general populace.

1. Introduction

Languages, whether foreign languages or mother tongues, constitute a vital part of everyday school life in Europe. Quality teaching and effective learning of foreign languages, especially English as the lingua franca of today, is of importance to students, teachers, and parents. Most languages taught at European schools (German, Russian or Spanish, to name just a few) can be found among the 20 world's biggest languages, used by dozens of millions of speakers in multiple domains and functioning as idioms of wider international currency. These languages, however, constitute only a small percentage of the total of 7,105 languages currently spoken on our planet (cf. Lewis et al. 2013 [8]). Language professionals rejoice in the linguistic diversity of the world, but estimates concerning its future range are alarming: every other language presently spoken is in danger of disappearing in less than one hundred years (Krauss 1992 [7]). Documenting dying languages and collaborating with speech communities who wish to revitalise their languages make, therefore, top tasks on the to-do lists of contemporary linguists (see e.g. Gippert et al. 2006 [4] and Grenoble & Whaley 2006 [5] for practical introductions to these topics). Crystal (2011) [2] lists school curricula among possible ways through which also non-linguists could be informed about these matters and offered the



opportunity to revise their language attitudes in the long run. The present paper reports on efforts undertaken in four European countries: Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland, to use their secondary school curricula for this purpose.

Why bother the general public with endangered languages? Because contrary to what might be expected, it is not only linguists who are losing something as languages die. Many endangered languages are spoken by small indigenous communities who practice traditional lifestyles and maintain the cultures of their ancestors. With one language dying approximately every two weeks, the cultural diversity of the world is rapidly shrinking. Perhaps more importantly, indigenous languages preserve valuable knowledge which is otherwise inaccessible. Nettle & Romaine (2000) [10] provide numerous examples of botanical wisdom locked in endangered languages which could potentially add to the state-of-the-art in medicine, but is irreversibly lost when these languages perish. The precise time Tasmania separated from the Australian continent, only established by Western scientists in the 20th century, is recorded in ancient Aboriginal legends transmitted orally through the native languages of Australia (Nettle & Romaine 2000:70 [10]; consult also Evans 2010 [3] for more examples and a thought-provoking discussion on the long-term impact the passing of languages has on our intellectual heritage and the environment). Compared to campaigns dedicated to the preservation of biodiversity, efforts to reverse the unprecedented loss of linguistic diversity we are presently witnessing receive very little support. As Nettle & Romaine (2000:15) [10] foresee, this is “a strategic error that will be regretted as time goes on”.

2. Exploring possibilities

Between November 2011 and January 2014, school curricula in Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and Poland were examined and possibilities of introducing topics connected with language endangerment sought for. Parallely to conducting the curriculum investigation, linguists met 16-17-year-old students and their teachers at secondary schools and assessed their needs and awareness of linguistic issues by conducting semi-structured interviews. Following the assessment stage, multimedia-supported educational materials were created and tested in classrooms. In the course of the research, over twenty schools in the four partner countries were visited.

Not surprisingly, endangered languages as such are not a topic of focus in secondary school curricula. However, in each country certain school subjects include topics which could be covered with the use of materials on language endangerment. The findings of the curriculum research are summarised in Table 1. The results for Germany apply to the state of Nordrhein-Westfalen.

Table 1. School curricula in INNET partner countries and topics possibly related to language endangerment as of March 2012 (source: INNET Awareness Report [6]).

	Germany	the Netherlands	Hungary	Poland
Duration of education in years (including separate secondary education)	12-13	12-14 (4-6)	12	12-13 (3-4)
School subjects	German language; Geography; Social sciences	Social science; Geography;	Man and society; Hungarian language and literature; Foreign languages	Polish language; Foreign language; Social Studies; History; Cultural Studies; Geography; National or ethnic minority language

Possibilities of extra-curricular activities	Individual projects in the course of German language at the end of the school year	Room for extra-curricular topics in the course of individual subjects	Project work on topics of particular interest to students	School-external activities
--	--	---	---	----------------------------

The results of the curriculum research entitled to optimism as to prospects of endangered language entering secondary schools. The awareness-assessing school visits were likewise fruitful and inspiring: both teachers and students saw the topic generally very interesting, albeit the latter group varied in enthusiasm and it became obvious that the future educational product on language endangerment should be diversified to meet the needs of both students who will become inspired by a lesson on language endangerment at school and of those who will remain indifferent. The whole of the product created subsequently is available at <http://languagesindanger.eu/> [9].



Figure 1. The Languagesindanger-website

Especially the development of teaching materials to be actually used at schools posed a challenge as possibilities offered by school curricula had to be weighed out against the need to design the materials in the way that school lessons would set language endangerment in familiar contexts rather than cite exotic examples. In Poland, for instance, the subject of geography offers room for language endangerment only in combination with the topic of reasons behind certain languages spreading in use on a global scale. Generally, the most important differences across the curricula are in their flexibility: while in Germany teachers have many hours for extra-curricular activities at their disposal, in Poland such opportunities are extremely limited. In fact, although Poland seemingly offers the widest possibilities regarding the number of school subjects, lesson outlines on endangered languages will only become used if they strictly fit into the curriculum. This surfaced during the testing phase as one of the major challenges.



3. Facing reality

After having eagerly participated in the assessment phase, teachers in Poland showed strikingly little interest in the testing of the lesson outlines in school environment. This hampered the progress of the project, but led to an important discovery about teachers' working conditions. Since their career prospects and pay rises depend on professional self-development, Polish teachers are supposed to participate in various trainings which often happen outside working hours. On the other hand, teachers are interested in properly preparing their students to school final examinations whose results determine university admissions. This, however, is supposed to be completed in very little time: due to the bureaucracy connected with the organisation and supervision of these exams, education in Polish general secondary schools practically lasts two and a half years. Secondary school teachers in Poland operate under severe time pressure and are less likely to participate in enterprises which require much prior preparation to teaching unfamiliar topics than in e.g. those concerned with developing sets of final examination-like tests (Wójtowicz, in preparation [12] contains a more detailed account of the situation of secondary school teachers in Poland).

The necessity to provide teachers with proper assistance emerged as an important finding of the testing: despite their enthusiasm to inform students about endangered languages, teachers lack linguistic expertise and first need to become educated themselves. One of the lesson outlines employed during the testing featured a task in which students were supposed to take stance on the statement "A language is something completely different from a dialect". Trying to stimulate the discussion during the lesson, the teacher put much emphasis on differences between language and dialect as she viewed them as opposite concepts. While non-linguists see 'language' and 'dialect' as different because of varying domains of usage and levels of prestige ascribed to language varieties, from a purely linguistic viewpoint, there is no difference.

With roughly seven autochthonous languages per country, Europe is the least linguistically diverse continent on Earth (Lewis et al. 2013 [8]). In recent decades however, many Western European countries have been experiencing an influx of immigrants which has introduced new cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity to Western Europe. Awareness of these phenomena has become the focus of research (e.g. Aukrust & Rydland 2009 [1]). Odé (2009:148 [11]) points out that in the Netherlands "classrooms do not consist of students from one nationality, religion or race". The situation is clearly different in Poland and Hungary: e.g. for 92,6% of the population of Poland, Polish is the only language spoken at home (Wójtowicz, in preparation [12]). Thus, contrary to countries like the Netherlands, setting the stage for raising awareness of linguistic diversity in Eastern Europe does not come down to invoking consciousness of what is everyday reality. Instead, it translates to introducing students to a situation which is commonplace in many parts of the world – both in other regions of Europe and in hotbeds of linguistic diversity they are about to learn more on – but happens to be different in theirs.

Contrary to what might be inferred from a first impression, the realities of the two Eastern European countries examined here are not identical. For example, attitudes towards minorities in Hungarian and Polish secondary schools are different: for Hungarian students, problems experienced by Hungarians living abroad turned out to be a sensitive topic and the situation of the Romani minority fostered both interest and controversy. This was not the case in Poland where such questions are not controversial and the lesson outline dealing with linguistic minority rights in Poland was met with great enthusiasm. The general conclusion after the research is that each local situation is unique, which is very similar to what field linguists encounter when working with endangered languages and their speakers (cf. Grenoble & Whaley 2006 [5]).

4. Summary

European secondary school curricula create multiple perspectives for introducing topics related to endangered languages, but individual countries differ quite considerably in how easy it is for linguists and school communities to take advantage of these possibilities. The combination of regulations concerning education and factors such as attitudes towards minorities, opportunities of interacting with speakers of other languages, etc. draws the general picture in which it is easier for countries such as Germany and the Netherlands to benefit from educational materials on language endangerment, while Eastern European countries generally face more challenges. The results of the present research offer no ready-to-use solutions and urge for paying attention to the fact that achieving the common goal of raising awareness of linguistic

endangerment among ordinary Europeans requires proper assessment and addressing of relevant issues at a local level. From the point of view of a linguist, this is another piece of diversity to be enjoyed.

Acknowledgements

The present paper is informed by research conducted in the scope of the Innovative Networking in Infrastructure for Endangered Languages project (INNET), which received funding from the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission under grant agreement no. 284415. I cite the results of school visits and curriculum research completed by myself and by my colleagues from the partner institutions of INNET: Marianne Bakró-Nagy, Zsuzsa Duray, Michael Hornsby, Dagmar Jung, Katarzyna Klessa, Nicole Nau, Beatrix Oszkó, Mária Sipos, Sándor Szeverényi, Paul Trilsbeek, Zsuzsa Várnai and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz.

References

- [1] Aukrust, Vibeke Grøver, and Veslemøy Rydland. 2009. 'Does it matter?' Talking about ethnic diversity in preschool and first grade classrooms. *Journal of Pragmatics* 41. 1538–1556.
- [2] Crystal, David. 2011. Language diversity, endangerment, and public awareness. *British Academy Review* 18. 12–20.
- [3] Evans, Nicholas. 2010. *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have to Tell Us*. Malden - Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- [4] Gippert, Jost, Nikolaus P. Himmelmann, and Ulrike Mosel (eds). 2006. *Essentials of Language Documentation*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [5] Grenoble, Lenore A., and Lindsay J. Whaley. 2006. *Saving languages: An introduction to language revitalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] INNET Awareness Report = http://innet-project.eu/sites/default/files/D4.1_Awareness.pdf
- [7] Krauss, Michael. 1992. The World's Languages in Crisis. *Language* 68. 4–10.
- [8] Lewis, M. Paul, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds). 2013. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Seventeenth edition*. Dallas: SIL International.
- [9] *Languagesindanger*-website = <http://languagesindanger.eu/>
- [10] Nettle, David, and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing voices: The extinction of the world's languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [11] Odé, Cecilia. 2009. Teaching Materials on Language Endangerment. An Interactive E-learning Module on the Internet. In *Endangered Languages and Language Learning: Proceedings of the Conference FEL XII: 24–27 September 2008, Ljouvert/Leeuwarden*, ed. Tjeerd de Graaf et al., 147–150. Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy.
- [12] Wójtowicz, Radosław. In preparation. *Trying to cross the great divide*.