

Elements for a Sustainable Management of Linguistic Resources

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ABSTRACT

Sustainability is a key global issue today. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that any existing resource should be well managed to avoid its depletion. Hence, the various campaigns to sensitize everyone on the sustainable use of these resources. If we admit that language is a resource, the question is then to know if we can manage it sustainably like the other natural resources like forests, water, etc. In this work we analyse the issue of the sustainable management of linguistic resources. In fact, unlike the other resources, languages disappear when they are not used.

KEYWORDS:

- *Language Planning, Endangered Language, Minority Language, Linguistic Resource, Sustainable Development.*

RESUME

La durabilité du développement est l'un des principaux problèmes dans le monde aujourd'hui. En effet, l'on sait que les ressources existant dans le monde devraient être bien gérées afin d'éviter leur épuisement. D'où les diverses campagnes de sensibilisation sur l'utilisation durable de ces ressources. Si on admet que la langue est une ressource, la question est alors de savoir si nous pouvons la gérer de manière durable à l'instar des autres ressources naturelles comme les forêts, l'eau, etc. Dans ce travail nous analysons la question de l'utilisation des ressources linguistiques. En fait, contrairement aux autres ressources les langues disparaissent lorsqu'elles ne sont pas utilisées.

MOTS-CLÉS:

- *Aménagement linguistique, langue en danger, langue minoritaire, ressource linguistique, développement durable.*

INTRODUCTION

The languages spoken throughout the world have different fortunes. While some display unprecedented vitality, others are threatened to death. According to estimates, in average, a language dies every two weeks. To raise people's awareness about this phenomenon UNESCO (2010) has issued the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* which includes a list of languages at risk of extinction. The UNESCO's studies reveal that 50% of world languages are endangered and if nothing is done, 90% of them will disappear by the end of this century.

This paper therefore raises the issue of the conservation of languages spoken throughout the world, especially minority ones. The purpose is to know whether languages, like other natural resources, can be managed sustainably. What is the specificity of languages compared to other natural resources? In the analysis we will first present the different aspects of a language planning project. Then, we will see if languages are resources which are liable to depletion. In the last section of the work we will explain the conditions for a sustainable language planning.

1. TYPES OF PLANNING

Since the 70s (Das Gupta & Jernudd 1975), it was explained that languages can be managed for the benefit of the community which uses it for its daily interactions. The management of languages, known as 'language policy' or 'language planning', includes all the actions undertaken to act on the language. It is about all the efforts made in order to act on the language used by the members of a speech community. The purpose of the theory of language planning is highlighted by Spolsky in the following lines:

The goal of a theory of language policy is to account for the choices made by individual speakers on the basis of rule-governed patterns recognized by the speech community (or communities) of which they are members
(Spolsky 2009: 1).

Indeed, language policy is intimately bound up with 'the right to speak one's own language'" (Wright 2007)⁹. As such, when there is a concern about a language, actions can be taken in order to fix it. According to the kind of intervention we want to make, language planning will take a specific orientation. All in all, language planning has two dimensions: 'corpus planning' and 'status planning'. What are the characteristics of each?

1.1 Corpus Planning

With 'corpus planning', decisions are taken in order to bring changes to the structure of the language. Mostly, these are prescriptive interventions on the form of the language which aim at presenting or showing the right form of the language, namely, the writing system, the spelling, the lexis, etc. It is important to note that "corpus planning" concerns languages which are written like European languages. However, it may concern a language not yet equipped with a writing system like most African languages. So, as Sallabank (2011: 279) defines it:

Corpus planning is the only category directly concerned with the language itself. It includes documentation, codification, graphization,

⁹ Quoted by Sallabank (2011: 288)

standardization, modernization and orthography development, and the production of dictionaries, grammars and language-learning materials, which are a prerequisite for language – Inducation planning.

Given its nature, ‘corpus planning’ is undertaken by people who have a great expertise in language issues. Obviously, only people who possess a great deal of linguistic knowledge can venture on these kinds of actions.

1.1 Status Planning

Unlike ‘corpus planning’, ‘status planning’ acts on the ‘status’ of the language. It does not focus on the form but rather aims at ranking a language or a variety to certain functional domains of the society. This affects the status or the position of this language within the community which uses it. But, it should be noted that the status of the language is something which is different from its prestige or its function. *Stricto sensu*, the status of the language is concerned with its position in relation with other languages within the speech community.

Status planning refers to attempts to secure official/political recognition for a language. It also includes expansion of the domains in which a language is used (e.g. legal and governmental fields and new media), and, crucially, obtaining funding for other types of language planning. The status of a linguistic variety in terms of whether it is categorized as a ‘language’ or as a ‘dialect’ may also be an issue. (Sallabank 2011: 280)

Given that ‘status planning’ does not strictly pertain to language specialists it is mostly undertaken by administration, bureaucracy and politicians. The common ground is that they are all decision-makers because ‘corpus planning’ is more about decision-making than acting technically on the language. In that vein, the decisions that are taken can be constitutional, legislative, regulatory or else. Mostly, these decisions are taken on after some studies undertaken by language specialists. But which type of planning is the most adequate?

1.2 The Choice of the Type of Planning

Only the linguistic landscape of the country or community in which the planning is going to be undertaken will determine the type to adopt. Each language has its own specific situation and no two languages can be planned the same way.

Each language has unique characteristics that can never be exactly similar with another language. This can even be considered as an identity which is unique. There may be some similarities in some areas (the fact of being written or oral, or having the same number of speakers), but there will be differences on many other points (in terms of dynamism). Just like no two individuals can have the same fingerprints, for example, no two languages can be similar. Henceforth planning decisions are made specifically for a given language. In fact, even if two languages have the same proto language or mother language, when it comes to their use they will experience different realities and the variables range from the number of speakers, the vitality of the language, the social contexts in which this language is used, etc.

Moreover, the speakers are at the heart of the project to be designed; therefore, they should be involved in the planning process even if they made no request for it. If they do not show consent and commitment the project will be stillborn. The project should be elaborated to fulfil the basic linguistic needs of the community. Most planning decisions are about corpus or status but there may be planning actions that combine both types, that is, 'corpus planning' and (then) 'status planning'.

2. LANGUAGE AS A DEPLETABLE RESOURCE

The last decades have seen a growing concern about environmental issues. Hence the different campaigns advocating the rational utilization of natural resources. In the linguistic domain, Schmid (2011: 4) put that "demographic and cultural change have exacerbated the language controversy, especially in the last three decades of the twentieth century."

It is important to bear in mind that although language loss is not a new occurrence, the accelerated rate at which it is presently happening is. The dynamics of language shift are dependent on a complex set of factors stemming from local language ecologies and factors at regional, national and global levels. (Grenoble 2011: 33)

In fact, language ecology looks at inter-relations and interactions between languages throughout the world. In fact, as Grenoble (2011) mentioned, there are factors which disturb the economics of linguistic exchanges (Bourdieu 1977). And as Hagège (1985) adds, language is a natural resource like wood, gold, and coffee, cocoa. For the latter, when we talk about the resources available to a community, we should consider that language is among them and that it should be granted a much greater attention given the role that it can play, mainly for development.

But, not all the languages in the world are in danger. It is mainly languages which are used just within their boundaries which are concerned. Naturally, some international languages like English and French are not in alarming situation and this is what is put by Rey in the following lines: « Savoir que des langues meurent, en effet, chaque année, ou vont mourir, n'incite en rien à pronostiquer la mort d'une langue écrite, ancienne, historique, parlée par des millions d'humains, tel le français. » (Rey 2007: 12). Now, what are the specificities of linguistic resources?

2.1- Characteristics of Linguistic Resources

Moriarty (2011: 457) stated that "if a language is used in increasingly fewer domains it is a sign of lessening vitality." So, the survival of the language depends on the way it is exploited. However, unlike the other resources languages die when they are not used by speakers in their daily interactions, that is, when they are not spoken or written. The problem that most minority languages of the world are facing is generally linked with the fact that they are not used. Many factors could account for this situation:

The variables which can affect the status and trajectory of minority languages are numerous, internally complex and liable to intricate interactions. They include attitudes of speakers toward their languages, geographic/social/cultural cohesiveness and separateness of the linguistic community, demographic factors such as age of the fluent speakers, modes of transmission, domains of use, official status, governmental attitudes and policies, and attitudes of the speakers of the dominant language, to name just a few. (Harbert 2011: 403)

In the same vein, Holmes (2013: 58) points out that “in 2011, British newspapers reported that Ayapaneco, an indigenous language of Mexico, was in danger of dying out as the only two remaining fluent speakers (aged 75 and 69) refused to talk to each other.” She went on by saying that “it is generally true that when all the people who speak a language die, the language dies with them” (Holmes 2013: 59). The idea is that the existence of languages is closely bound up with the one of the speakers who use it. Indeed, it is only through speakers that we can know the existence of a language. Only native speakers can claim the possession of a language. We can see that unlike other resources, language should be used, even overused to remain vital! So, why should one care for our languages?

2.2 The Utility of Languages

Since recent years, “linguists are becoming increasingly alarmed at the rate at which languages are going out of use.” Austin & Salabank (2011: 2). Of course, no one can deny the fact that languages are the vehicles for the transmission of ideas, belief, cultures, etc. But there should be a real change of paradigm in order to stress the utilitarian function of languages within the communities in which they are used. Indeed, languages should be perceived as real tools for social and economic development. Indeed, we should entrust languages the role that they deserve if we want to achieve development.

There is an emerging awareness, however, that development, poverty alleviation and health improvement efforts can be fully successful only if they take into account the linguistic situation of the locales in which they are implemented, build on an understanding of what languages are used by whom, and in what situations, and make use of local languages as a resource. That is, minority languages do have a role in successful economic development. (Harbert 2011: 413)

Developed nations are the ones which use their own languages for the daily interactions. In fact, historically no people has achieved development in any area of life by using the language of others. The reason is that no language is better than any other to conceptualise and conduct development since they are all mediums of communication and they allow speakers to convey their ideas, emotions, feelings. So, we should recognize the major role that languages play in the development process for all the communities since it is the language which bears development project. However, many linguistic resources are involved in a dying process:

it is generally agreed by linguists that today there are about 7,000 languages spoken across the world; and that at least half of these may no longer continue to exist after a few more generations as they are not being learnt by children as first languages. Such languages are said to be endangered languages. (Austin & Salabank 2011: 1).

Since we know now that languages are resources, care should be taken for their preservation in order to benefit from the opportunities they can offer when it comes to development. We therefore agree with Austin & Salabank (2011: 8) who said that “languages are often seen as symbols of ethnic and national identity. Many endangered language campaigners claim that when a language dies out, a unique way of looking at the world also disappears”. They warn about the loss or death of some languages which could be, in fact, a great loss for humankind:

Subtractive bilingualism, where one language is replaced by another, can lead to loss of self-confidence and lower achievement. If we really want children from minority backgrounds to fulfil their full educational and economic potential, their home languages should be supported; the majority population would also benefit from multilingual and cross-cultural education. (Austin & Salabank 2011: 10)

The idea is that we should not let minority languages die for the benefit of majority ones since when it comes to ideas everyone deserves the right to contribute. Sometimes those who are among minority groups may develop very good ideas that could serve all the countries and foster development. In that vein, there are real advantages for majority languages speakers to help minority languages survive as way to capitalize all the energies of the same country. What are the paths for the sustainability of languages?

3 ELEMENTS FOR A SUSTAINABILITY OF LINGUISTIC RESOURCES

Knowing that the survival of a language depends on its use (through speaking or writing) we should look for actions likely to favour its use in the different layers of the community.

3.1- Language, as a Resource for Development

According to Hagège (1985 : 261), « *si la langue est conçue comme une ressource naturelle, (...) elle doit s'ouvrir aux efforts de réglage et d'exploitation. [...] Dans une telle perspective, la planification des langues n'est plus une œuvre annexe, inscrite en codicille de la linguistique* »¹⁰. In that vein, language planning should be undertaken as part of the regular management of life within the community. Developing countries, more than other countries, should adopt this posture.

The role of language planning as a component of more general educational planning and policy analysis is, in short, an important facet of understanding educational development in many developing societies. Language planning as an element of national development strategy can best be understood as the deliberate attempt to change or in some way alter existing language usage, and thus to resolve various types of language problems and controversies. (Reagan & Schreffler 2005: 119)

There is a need to go beyond the common trend which consists in considering languages as mere cultural vehicles instead of real tool for development, and to take measures for the preservation. When people understand one another, they can develop and share ideas, and reflect together on their situation, analyse it, and plan common actions. It all starts with language, even the indigenous ones! Any development project should be considered in the language that everyone understands. To help pool energies and all the other resources as Harbert (2011: 413) explains,

Aside from such matters of access, enfranchisement and participation, there is another respect in which indigenous languages can play a role in development. It has been proposed that such languages often embody systems of knowledge about local environments and traditional technologies which can serve as the basis for alternative modes of exploiting local resources, modes which are less ecologically and

¹⁰ “If language is conceived as a natural resource, (...) it should be opened to regulation and exploitation efforts (...) In such prospects, language planning is no longer an additional action taken as a codicil to linguistics.”

culturally disruptive and more sustainable than are industries and technologies imported from outside.

3.2- Language Planning Actions

Early development strategies were conceived and designed by experts who had had a great deal of knowledge in their domain. They were in charge of identifying the needs of population in order to meet them. In this “top-down approach”, they developed ideas and strategies for the well-being of populations who unfortunately did not put into practice all the good ideas intended to help them overcome their difficulties.

The problem stems from the fact that the beneficiary communities were not involved in the process because of their lack of knowledge in development issues. They just had to follow what was presented to them by the pool of experts. But experience has proved that most of these projects failed simply because they lacked one crucial element which is the involvement of local communities.

Speakers may not be experts, linguists or the like but they are the ones who should be at the heart of any language planning project. They should first express the need for a help in the management of their language, and as the end-users of the achievement, they should be present at the beginning of the project, during its implementation and at the end for its evaluation. Anyway, who, if not the speakers of the language, is going to put this project into practice?

Looking at language policy and language management in a social context provides a useful framework for analysing the nature of language endangerment, looking at the forces involved, and considering the possible ways that the speakers of these languages can be supported in their efforts to preserve and maintain their strength. (Spolsky 2011: 155)

The best scenario is when the linguistic needs are expressed by speakers but in most cases speakers seem not to be concerned with what is happening to their languages. They just make some armchair criticisms about the fact that people are less and less using their own language. When it is the case, the linguist has the responsibility to raise awareness and let them know about the advantages in using one’s language. This aims at involving speakers in any action to be undertaken. Indeed, it is much more convincing when the speakers of a language explained the situation to their co-speakers because ownership rates will be much higher. The impact will then be more important. It should also be noted that

there are three primary considerations in planning a project: what the community (and the linguist) want; what the linguist and community are capable of doing; what is feasible given the time and money available. The success of a project also depends not only on the skill of participants, but also the enthusiasm, commitment and emotional investment of the project staff. (Bowern 2011: 459)

Naturally, the different participants to the planning project should be first and foremost the speakers of the language. Then, we have the linguistic community in which the project is being implemented. Of course, they should be put at the front side and it is just after that comes the linguistic community. Then, we should add the media the role of which will consist in sensitizing the population and the general public on the advantages related to

the project. In addition to them, NGOs and language activists should be included to the project.

In fact, these entities sometimes conduct some actions in isolation. So, it is good to learn from them. By including them it will be an opportunity to make a collection of all the contribution available. Linguists and other experts in linguistic issues will then be sure that all the human resources are mobilized for the success of the project. They could therefore make some sound proposals to communal, regional and state authorities to take decisions.

The new trend is to get speaking communities fully involved. In fact, “linguists working with endangered languages increasingly work closely with the communities to involve themselves in language teaching and learning programmes” Hinton (2011: 307). This way, linguists become major developers of materials for language learning and reference, and many community-language activists may undergo linguistic training to help them in their efforts (Hinton 2011). Advantages in using the human resources of the community to help improve the linguistic resources will be twofold: firstly, speakers have the feeling that they can help solve their problems and they feel themselves duty-bound for the success of the project. Both arguments will ensure the sustainability of the project. But how can we identify endangered languages?

It is not simple to determine what is an endangered variety of language: for the linguist, it might be enough to focus on changes in the status and form of named languages; for the sociolinguist and for the speakers, it is likely to be changes in sociolinguistic ecology; that is, in the complex patterning of variations and their dynamic allocation to domains, functions and other ecological niches.

(Spolsky 2011: 144)

In some countries where most languages are not written, a sustainable language policy may consist in working on the corpus of the language by adopting a writing system. In fact, it is important and even necessary for a language to be equipped with a writing system. Studies should be carried out as to know which writing system should be adopted. Indeed, throughout the world, most endangered languages are the ones which are not written. In such a context, the planning project will be mainly focused on writing:

Many endangered languages are not written; therefore, researchers and speech communities often wish for their graphization. The existence of a written code is seen as an essential prerequisite for many activities in favour of their maintenance and revitalization, such as dictionary writing, curriculum development and the design of language-teaching courses. (Lüpke 2011: 312)

However, the fact is that some planning projects do not put writing systems at the centre of their actions whereas this is fundamental in some cases. It is important to conduct a deep analysis of the linguistic makeup in order to identify the needs and suggest adequate measures. All the participants to the project should work to make the process flow smoothly. Among other actions, they should give a great importance to writing systems.

The place of writing systems in the study of language planning and language policies is often seen as secondary. The various questions related to writing, such as the choice of writing systems, the type of

orthography, etc., are often understood as being obvious, based on two main assumptions: first, that the Latin script is the most suitable to form the base of a new writing system; and second, that a writing system should be phonemic. However, these answers are mainly based on linguistic observations, without much concern for the place and role of a writing system in society. (Grivelet 2001: 1) ¹¹

For languages which are already written actions should be built around standardising the vocabulary through the establishment of harmonized vocabularies and lexicons. Then planners should adopt grammatical and orthographic rules that will govern the functioning of the language. After this stage, word creating processes should be made available within the language to foster terminological creation in order to reduce borrowing from foreign languages. When all the above actions are taken, next step is to make languages be adapted to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).

But we are aware that “a much greater danger is that IT resources will not be equally available to all language learners, particularly those lacking access to computers, the internet and other technology platforms. It is true that endangered languages tend to be spoken by those with less access to IT” (Holton 2011: 373). But “given the scale of language endangerment, within a few years’ digital language archives are likely to become the repositories of much of the world’s linguistic and cultural heritage, and the major sources for research on and the revival of moribund or extinct languages”. (Nathan 2011: 265).

CONCLUSION

This analysis helped go through the issue related to endangered languages. Languages are perceived as resources that could help foster development. However, their management cannot be conducted like other natural resources. Languages dies when they are not used. Indeed, while other natural resources should be used moderately, languages should be massively used to keep their vitality. That is why actions should be taken in order to preserve languages throughout the world, especially minority ones. To that end, inclusive language planning projects should be designed and implemented for the benefit of speakers but mainly with their involvement. Among all the stakeholders, speakers should be at the beginning, during the implementation and the evaluation phases of the project. In so doing, sustainability becomes obvious with the increased use of the language by the speaking community. This way, it will be possible to achieve development viewed as a process involving all the actors of the community.

¹¹ Quoted by Lüpke (2011: 322)

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