

Language vitality

The term *language vitality* could be defined as the state of a language with regard to its general acceptance and adoption for everyday communication and usage amongst people. Needless to say, therefore, languages vary with regard to the *extent* to which this term can be applied since linguistic vitality encompasses, among others, a huge range of social, political and demographic variables which have already been mentioned in terms of the driving and restraining forces related to Lewin's (1951) 'force-field theory'. Reference has already been made to the way various academics have categorised languages according to their potential survival. Since languages are continually susceptible to the varying strengths of these variables at different times, *any* change can represent a shift in language vitality. 'Language shift', despite its theoretical and literal meaning of representing a change in a language's linguistic vitality in *either* direction has, nevertheless, semantically developed a negative rather than a positive connotation in the field of sociolinguistics, the terms 'reversing language shift' (RLS) and 'language revitalisation' being usually associated with positive change. We shall, therefore, in the course of this module use the term 'language shift' only in relation to *negative* changes in language vitality.

However, since such changes can happen in either direction, *language shift* and *language revitalisation* are, theoretically, two sides of the same coin. It is for this reason that it is often difficult to separate the discussion of one from the other. Lack of linguistic vitality results in lack of stability which, in turn, causes language shift. Whilst every effort will, therefore, be made to discuss these aspects separately, analysing any factors surrounding one will, inevitably, assist in strengthening and enriching one's understanding of the other.

As mentioned earlier, one should be mindful of a common tendency to mistakenly equate the vitality of a language with the *number* of its speakers, since there are many factors which contribute to language vitality apart from (or even despite) this criterion. Is there a number which can validly represent a language's vitality? To consider a population of speakers without giving equal weight to the linguistic context is both erroneous and misleading. For example, 500 speakers within a confined rural area is obviously different from having 500 within a large city.

Crystal (2000) refers to the work of Yamamoto (1997) who shows that the population of speakers is not an accurate indicator of vitality, mentioning Karitiana in Brasil for instance where there are only 185

speakers but in a community of 191 and where intergenerational transmission still seems to be evident. On the other hand, Crystal (2000) also draws our attention to the threat English presents generally to languages in South Africa, including Afrikaans despite the presence of six million speakers. A conversation with a South African driver who was conversant with all eleven of the country's official languages reflected a lack of esteem for all apart from English which he was ambitious for his children to learn.

In relation to numbers, it is the *percentage* of speakers in relation to non-speakers which is usually considered to be crucial, that is, the critical mass, which is often seen as approximately 70% (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2007). Percentages below this figure usually lead to a dilution in the dynamics of everyday use and communication where even a non-indigenous linguistic *minority*, for example, using a *major* language can have greater influence in promoting the adoption of an alternative 'lingua franca'.

Theoretical frameworks

There are a number of theoretical frameworks which we can adopt to discuss language vitality. Reference has already been made to the UNESCO Language Vitality and Endangerment tool which adopts nine criteria for evaluation (see Reading 1). However, we shall also refer to two other frameworks which will provide the student with a range of variables to consider, namely those of:

- Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977)
- Conklin & Lourie (1983)

Furthermore, Fishman's (1990) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) will be adopted at a later stage in relation to the process of language *revitalisation* or reversing language shift (RLS).

Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) maintain that the following play an essential role in determining the vitality of a language:

1. **Status factors:** which sub-divide into:

- economic status
- social status
- symbolic status

2. Demographic factors including, for example:

- the number of speakers
- the geographical distribution of a minority language group (critical mass)
- the effects of interlanguage marriages or otherwise (endogamy and exogamy)

3. Institutional support factors including:

- mass media
- religion
- administrative services
- education systems

Students are now referred to additional details of this framework of vitality factors which are provided on Moodle.

Baker (2017: 69) illustrates an alternative framework of linguistic vitality devised by Conklin & Lourie (1983) which students are also advised to read. As stated, the list of vitality factors applies to immigrants rather than indigenous minorities although many are common to both.

However, this framework presents factors underpinning language vitality in terms of two sides of the same coin, namely, language maintenance and language loss, but which (unlike Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977) are presented as:

- political, social and demographic factors
- cultural factors
- linguistic factors

The student will observe, therefore, that factors referred to in the Giles, Bourhis & Taylor (1977) framework are also included in that of Conklin & Lourie (1983), although they may be presented differently. This is because academics often approach the same issues from a different perspective. Crystal (2000) acknowledges the various ways of “cutting the cake”. A further indication of this is the fact that Hyltenstam & Stroud (1996) categorise factors that affect languages (that is, which can maintain vitality as well as cause language shift) on three broad levels which are described in Baker (2011: 58), namely:

- societal
- speech community
- individual

Crystal (2000) provides a further list of criteria related to ensuring linguistic vitality but which, evidently, should only be treated as *individual aspects* of the frameworks previously discussed rather than rationalised *categories* in their own right. Crystal (2000) lists the following, stating that an endangered language will progress if its speakers:

1. increase their prestige within the dominant community
2. increase their wealth relative to the dominant community
3. increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community
4. have a strong presence in the educational system
5. can write their language down
6. can make use of electronic technology

Language Shift

Language shift is usually caused by the contact of languages representing unequal socio-political systems, resulting in economic and social changes which, in turn, affect linguistic behaviour.

The ‘moral’ nature of such a political relationship can vary from outright political oppression to more indirect (some would say devious) means of political control, expressed by Fishman (2005) as “the soft smile and the iron fist” and by Stubbs (1991) as “multicultural rhetoric and assimilationist assumptions.” When more than one language exists within a geographical area, language shift can be precipitated by the need of a ‘lingua franca’ for communicative expediency; sometimes a ‘neutral’ non-ethnic language to avoid political disagreements, but often a major language with historical colonial connections.

As previously mentioned, language shift reflects the loss of linguistic vitality in various domains of language use which can be gradual or even dramatic. In the context of lesser-used or minority languages in contact with majority languages and in terms of Lewin’s (1951) ‘force-field theory’, a shift can be explained as the inability of restraining forces to maintain equilibrium against opposing driving forces. In the previous section we were introduced to some *academic* frameworks which provided some useful analysis of factors considered crucial to maintain language vitality. It needs to be emphasised, however, that sociolinguistics is such a highly complicated and unpredictable field of study that the outcome of the interaction and balance of the innumerable variables involved cannot be accurately foreseen. D.P. Moran (1900) in referring to the efforts to revive Irish, once made the following cynical observation:

Without scholars [the revival] cannot succeed; with scholars as leaders it is bound to fail.

We are, after all, ultimately at the mercy of *human behaviour* and human frailty.

Loss of language is not the loss of a concept, an abstraction, but rather it is what happens when people change their behaviour and stop transmitting their language intergenerationally. *It is intimately connected with people and it cannot be treated simply as an intellectual puzzle to be solved.*
(Rhydwen, 1998: 101, emphasis added)

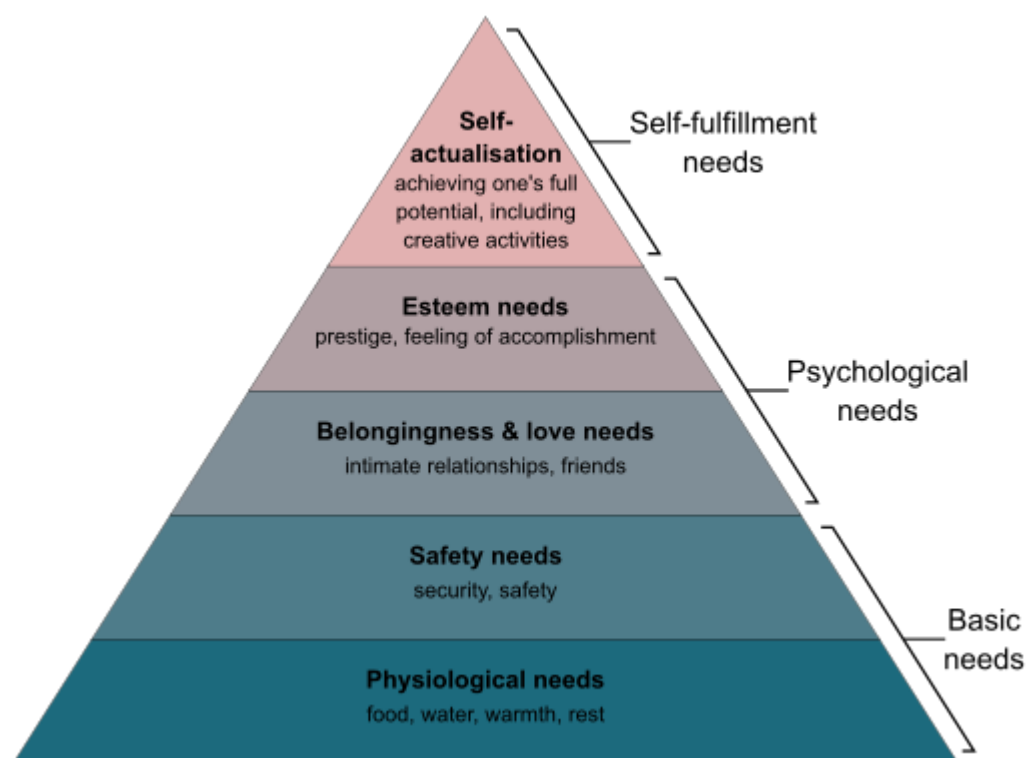
Lewis (2020) has argued that much of what influences human *linguistic* behaviour and practice can be related to Maslow's "hierarchy of human needs" (Figure 5). Maslow, who argues that the human being is a *wanting* animal whose needs have to be satisfied, places these in a series of hierarchical levels:

- physiological needs
- safety needs (instrumental motivation)
- social needs (integrational motivation)
- ego/ esteem needs
- self-fulfillment/ self-actualization needs

The progressive nature of such needs (in the sense that satisfaction on one level only leads to a further need on the next level) has led academics to relate Maslow's theory to human motivation.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Figure 5



Language and linguistic proficiency, arguably, plays an important role at all levels including the highest levels of esteem and self-actualization. However, it is, obviously, at the level of ensuring physiological *survival* and *safety* that language is most crucial, the latter also relating to physical security and health by means of material resources and, in turn, *employment*. In most cases, such survival and safety can be sufficiently ensured by proficiency in only *one* language as long as it has relevance and use in the circumstances in which one finds oneself. In terms of motivation and behaviour, therefore, it can be argued that most do not usually *deliberately* seek *bilingual* proficiency but often find it ‘accidentally’ by virtue of being in a bilingual linguistic context, referred to as *circumstantial bilingualism*.

It would be misleading, however, to present this argument in such stark ‘black and white’ terms. Whereas learning or acquiring a second or third language can obviously be seen as a characteristic of self-esteem and self-actualization, nevertheless, it can often also meet a more basic need such as the securing of employment. A context in which an individual would consider it *necessary* to learn a language for his own personal material advantage would, therefore, be an *additive* linguistic context, and this would be referred to as *instrumental motivation* (Gardner, 1991).

However, linguistic motivation can also be categorised as being *integrational*, which is usually described as a desire to integrate with a particular linguistic community and to share its culture. In relation to Maslow’s ‘hierarchy of needs’, this seems to answer those aspects which

are of a more social or *esteem* nature, as characterised in terms such as ‘friendship, respect of others, respect by others’.

It is argued, therefore, that one needs to be mindful of the fact that achieving *bilingual* proficiency, as opposed to unilingual or monoglot proficiency, is not a concern which can be generally considered a particularly high priority or a strong motivator amongst humans or in relation to human *behaviour*; the former satisfying mainly the higher level needs of a minority and the latter the more *essential* needs of the vast majority. It cannot come as a surprise, therefore, if the linguistic behaviour of humans often veers towards the line of least resistance and adopts a language which is socially more prevalent or materially more beneficial.

The relevance of Maslow’s theory to our discussion of language vitality and language shift can, arguably, be clearly illustrated by the following. As representing the perception of ordinary people who are continually at the mercy of life’s economic forces, the following quotation may be said to reflect everyday reality for some:

A Navajo student of mine once put the problem quite starkly: if I have to choose, she said, between living in a hogan a mile from the nearest water where my son will grow up speaking Navajo or moving to a house in the city with indoor plumbing where he will speak English with the neighbors, I’ll pick English and a bathroom !
(Spolsky, 1989: 451)

As if having Maslow in mind, Rhydwen (1998: 101, emphasis added) states:

When *basic needs for shelter, food, safety and health* are unmet, even thinking about language or revival seems like an irrelevant luxury.

The point being argued here is that, for the vast majority of ordinary people, economic and pragmatic considerations outweigh linguistic-cultural issues. Williams (1979: 58) states this rather succinctly:

Language allegiance is firmly rooted in the economic order rather than in any independent cultural order.

as does Dorian (1982:47):

"language loyalty persists as long as the economic and social circumstances are conducive to it, but if some other language proves to have greater value, a shift to that language begins."

Many languages have experienced language shift during the last century, one of the most notable being Irish which, despite its official status both in Ireland and more recently in the European Union, has suffered substantial levels of attrition. Research which contributed to the current '20 Year Strategy' adopted by the Irish government to revitalise the language identified the importance of the following key factors:

- Capacity
- Opportunity
- Positive attitude in terms of public desire

Whereas *capacity* referred to the need to improve the levels of Irish speakers and *opportunity* to the domains in which Irish was being generally used, *attitude* was a factor which one hoped would reflect the *desire* of the Irish to see the language thrive. However, if we relate 'desire' to Maslow's 'hierarchy of needs', we can see that it corresponds more to the 'higher order' needs on the 'self-fulfilment' level. One could argue that, in order to motivate people to adopt Irish as an everyday means of communication, such language planning should focus on domains directly related to more 'lower-order', *economic* needs, including, for example, domains of employment.

However, one should add that there are also groups where economic considerations do not have a role in their allegiance to language. These include:

- religious groups where faith issues are considered to be above any others, such as the Amish in Pennsylvania
- groups who show linguistic and cultural allegiance to a language for its own sake but who often, according to sociologists, enjoy favourable circumstances or status within their society.

Of course, saying that language shift is fundamentally the effect of human behaviour can, arguably, be construed as a truism. However, humans do not behave in a particular way without reason, so that such behaviour in itself is often an *effect* rather than a cause. It is, therefore, necessary to examine the wider linguistic context with regard to *why* individuals may behave in certain ways in their use (or non-use) of languages.