

Language Visibility and Wymysorys

Carlo J.W Ritchie

Conference Proceedings, Wymysöü, June 2014

Language Visibility

Unlike endangered animals or heritage buildings, the lack of a physical form presents an initial challenge to broadening community awareness of minority languages. It is an obvious point that spoken language cannot be seen, however it is important to consider the impact of a lack of physical forms on those unofficial languages. While official languages may be observed in numerous public domains, such as on signs, menus, public monuments and so on, this is not the case for all but a few minority or endangered languages. For the majority of these languages, the language found in public domains will be the same as the official national language, even in those communities where the majority speak a language other than the official; in majority Warlpiri communities in northern Australia, public notices and government signage are exclusively signed in English. In Europe, even those languages officially recognised by the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages rarely have this right extended beyond bilingual signage for town-names; Sorbian (Saxony) and Low German (northern Germany) while common in bilingual town-signs are rarely found in other public written domains, even in those areas where they are spoken by a large portion of the community, while German representation is universal (Wiggers 2006, Thaler 2009, Elle 2014). The extent to which a language is visible in the public domain may be equated with the extent to which a community is aware of the language (Schröder 2011). Increased language visibility therefore may be correlated with the chance of a language's survival. This is not to argue that language visibility is the singular factor in determining the continued vitality of a language, rather to stress the significance of language visibility in the process of language revitalisation. The reasons for the significance of language visibility can be attributed to the flow on effects of improved community awareness, public influence, linguistic tourism and economic benefits.

Improved community awareness as a consequence of improved language visibility is discussed in more detail with relation to specific revitalisation strategies later in this paper. Community involvement of both speakers and non-speakers of the language should be a paramount concern of any revitalisation strategy and can have a direct impact in improving the situation of a minority language. Efforts to increase the physical presence of the Latgalian in Latgale (Eastern Latvia) have shown positive effects both in language attitudes of native and non-native speakers but also economic benefits for visibly pro-Latgalian businesses (Ladzina et al. 2013). Language visibility projects such as public signage, menus, etc. have both a symbolic outcome through acknowledging local traditional languages but also place the language within the context of non-speakers daily activities. For endangered languages in the minority, such as Wymysorys,

the use of the language in the public sphere removes the language from the idiomatic context of individual speakers and into the public domain. As a consequence, the potential for public influence is also increased, however this assumes that awareness of the language is generally positively inclined.

It is important to note that positive attitudes towards increased visibility of a minority language cannot be assumed. The case of Latgalian in Latvia demonstrates the potential for positive public influence as a result of increased language visibility however this should be contrasted with significant public backlash in the Sorbian community as a result of the “*A Serbsce?*” campaign. This campaign was designed to broaden public awareness of the Sorbian language in Saxony, Germany, through language activism. Speakers and supporters of the Sorbian language placed stickers reading “*A Serbsce?*” (“And in Sorbian?”) beneath monolingual (German) government and public signage, prompting a significant negative backlash in social and local media as well as from members of the Sorbian community itself (Ladzina et al. 2013). Despite this, with respect to the argument of this paper, the public debate generated by the increased profile of the Sorbian language through language activism is evidence for the impact of language visibility in stimulating community awareness.

As noted in the case of Latgalian, increased linguistic visibility has the potential effect of economic benefits through linguistic tourism. Physical language, that is, signs, monuments and those institutions that promote the use of the language (museums, galleries) have the obvious advantage in that they be transported through photographs and in the case of digital media, shared through social networks. Linguistic tourism is particularly important for the latter point, as it is through this activity that awareness is also increased. The Manx language has become an important marketing tool for distinguishing the Isle of Man from other tourist destinations. The need to distinguish itself from the perspective of cultural heritage within the United Kingdom is important, given that it accounts for 4.5 billion pounds of revenue across the United Kingdom annually (Rheynn Lhiasaghey Tarmynagh 2013) and tourism itself amounting to 2% of the island nation’s annual income. Indeed, the prominence of Manx in the Isle of Man’s “Island of Culture 2014” campaign may be seen as evidence of this fact. The relationship between language visibility and linguistic tourism may be viewed as a self-sustaining cycle; language awareness increases, linguistic tourism increases, language awareness increases. The economic advantages of language visibility are not restricted to tourism, the creation of any bi-lingual signage would require translation and production, which if local jobs, while obvious, constitute important flow on effects for the community and create the demand for minority language speakers in a professional capacity.

Current Revitalisation Activities

The importance of engaging the broader community in initial states of reversing language shift is critical for the success of revitalisation efforts in Wymysoü (Fishman

1991). Also of importance is cooperation between language activists and the significant community of linguists, anthropologists, economists and historians who have been working with Wymysorys over the past two decades. For this reason, in 2013 the *Wymysiöeryśy Akademij - Accademia Wilamowicziana* (Wymysorys Academy, henceforth WA-AW) was formed, with the purpose of;

...the continued restoration, rejuvenation and preservation of the language Wymysiöeryś and to provide a community through which these aims may be achieved.

(Founding Declaration WA-AW, 2013)

The WA-AW for the first time brings together native speakers, academics and community members in an international partnership of co-operation and understanding. The purpose of this body is to allow academics and community members to share information and to work towards common goals, rather than in isolation. The first act of the WA-AW was to formally standardise the English name of *Wymysiöeryś*, variously recorded as Wilamowicean, Vilamovian, Wymysorys, Vilamovicean and Wymysojer (Mosely 2010, Andrason 2010, 2011, Wicherkiewicz 2003, Neels 2012). From the 7th of November, 2013, the official English nomenclature is *Wymysorys* and has since been accepted as such by UNESCO, Ethnologue and Wikipedia. Members of the WA-AW have also been responsible for the introduction of Wymysorys in local schools. At the time of writing this is scheduled to be in place by October 2014. In addition, members of the WA-AW are currently engaged in the continued documentation of Wymysorys, the collation and transcription of previous documentation work and also the creation of new learning materials and literature. This includes the publication of first children's book ever written in Wymysorys, published in June 2014; *Ynzer Boümmüter*.

A priority of the WA-AW is to ensure that projects “of restoration, rejuvenation and preservation” (cf. above) adhere to the principal of Universal Simultaneous Co-Operation; the notion that initial projects by the WA-AW engage multiple spheres of influence (Figure 1.) and therefore multiple people within the community. Projects must aim to engage the community in multiple spheres so as to be maximally effective. This is shown in detail with regards to the “Language Billboard” project discussed below.

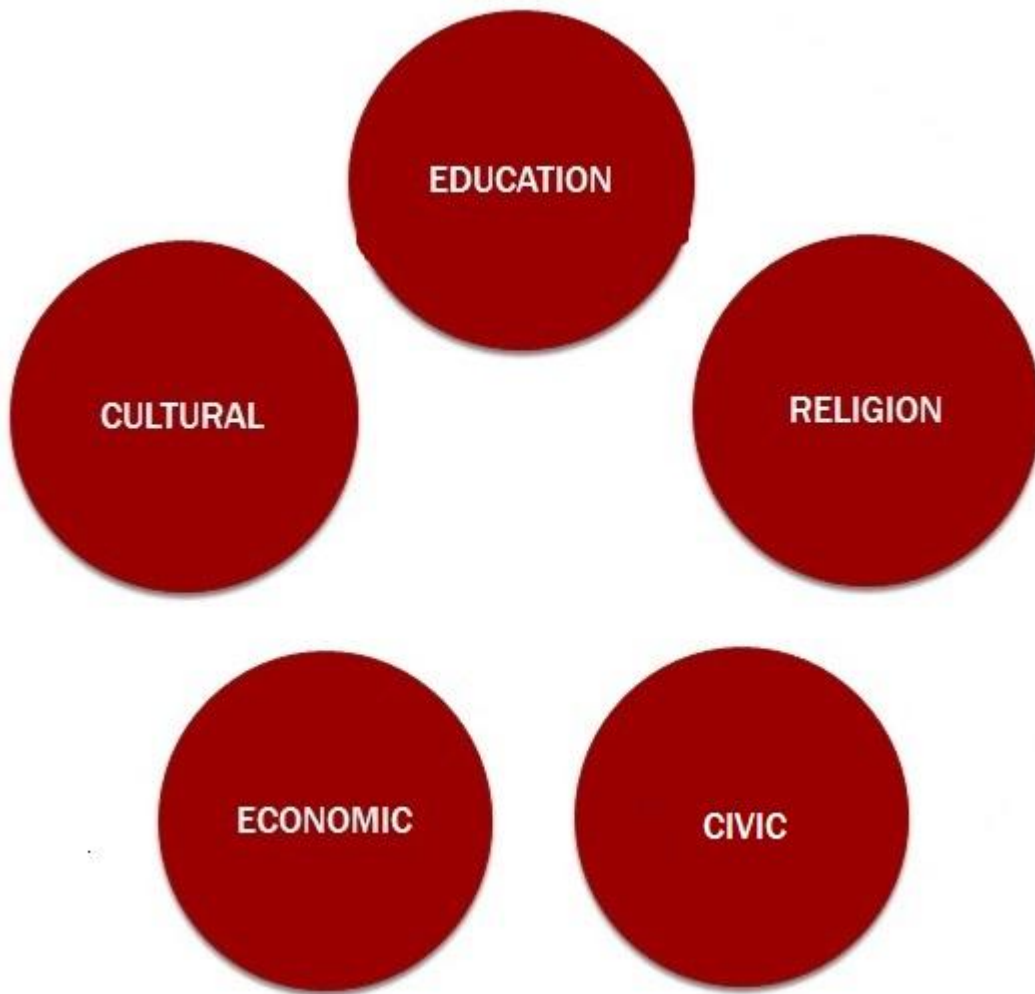


Figure 1. *The Community Spheres of Influence*

It is important to note that the revitalisation of Wymysorys is already viewed positively by the community of Wymysoü with a majority of community members believing it important to preserve the language in some form (Neels 2012). Dense community networks have been shown to inhibit both language change and language death (Milroy 1987, Melancon 2000), as such it is critical that existing community support for Wymysorys be incorporated in efforts to reverse language shift.

Functional Multilingualism

Functional Multilingualism is the notion of universal language competency functioning across communities through code switching. Within this framework, speakers of the dominant language are encouraged not to shift in entirety to speaking a minority language rather they change the way they use their own language within their speech community. The level of competency is limited to “lonely-planet competency”: a small group of basic phrases, similar to those learned by foreign tourists from a guidebook. In this way, Functional Multilingualism allows for the broader community to engage directly with the language with relative speed and in a manner that is easy to

maintain. The focus is on speaking, rather than on writing with learners encouraged to speak from the very beginning of instruction and across multiple contexts and so allows for rapid integration of the minority language across the community. Unlike immersion programmes designed to create language fluency in a short period of time, such as Sami Language nests (Pasanen 2013), the focus of Functional Multilingualism is rather on the incorporation of a second, here, minority language, within the framework of the learner's own language. Such a situation additionally provides an initial framework for future diglossia, in the eventual hope that the minority language returns to a larger, stable community of practice. Functional Multilingualism may also be thought of as "symbolic multilingualism" as it provides for the continued acknowledgement of traditional language practice within the non-native speaking community and facilitates in this way a continued function of the minority language outside the idiomatic context of native speakers.

With regards to knowledge of the minority language, a community may be divided into three groups, as shown below (Figure 2.). The "Native" group refers to those members of the community for whom the minority language is the first language and so the group that is most likely to continue to use the language in some capacity. "Non-Native, Community" refers to both new speakers of the language and those members of the community who do not speak the language but who are members of the broader community, either through direct engagement with traditional cultural practices or simply by living in the same area in which the language is or was once spoken. The final grouping, "non-native, non-community" is those people living within the speaking-area who are from outside the traditional community and who have no knowledge of the language: those people that have moved to the area or tourists, for example.



Figure 2. *Language competency across the speech community within a minority context*

The use of language between and within these groups will obviously change based on the contexts of particular languages. The situation of Wymysoö provides some insight into the complexities of the minority speech community. These observations are made on the basis of my own field work in Wymysoö between 2012-present. The "Native" group in Wymysoö consists of 41 speakers, who in almost all cases do not live with another Wymysorys speaker. As such, the extent to which Wymysorys is used,

even within this group, is limited. Between the Native and Non-Native, Community groups the principal language used is Polish, the exception being the small number of new-speakers who will occasionally code-switch with Wymysorys. Within the Non-Native, Community group there is limited use of Wymysorys between New Speakers with the predominant language of discourse being Polish. The language used between the Native speakers and the Non-Native, Community when communicating with Non-Native, Non-Community speakers, is exclusively Polish (or an appropriate foreign language, such as English or German). Within this paradigm the expected dominance of Polish with respect to the minority language Wymysorys can be seen.

The implementation of functional linguistics extends the use of Wymysorys, albeit in basic form, to all three groups by incorporating “lonely-planet competency” within Polish. A proposed 12 basic phrases (Figure 3.) can be taught in a relatively small time frame and maintained through implementation across school levels, in adult learning, through community organisations and through activities such as a calendar mail-out. The obvious difficulty is providing a means of learning these phrases to “Non-Speaking, Non-Community” members who would otherwise be outside the communities influence, particularly tourists. This is discussed in the next section.

<i>welcome (hello)</i>	<i>skiökumt</i>
<i>thank you</i>	<i>dank séjn</i>
<i>how are you?</i>	<i>wi hōsty dih?</i>
<i>sorry</i>	<i>fercaj</i>
<i>good</i>	<i>güt</i>
<i>good morning</i>	<i>güter mūgja</i>
<i>good afternoon</i>	<i>güter nömytag</i>
<i>good evening</i>	<i>güter öwyt</i>
<i>yes</i>	<i>ju</i>
<i>no</i>	<i>na</i>
<i>cheers</i>	<i>hylf göt</i>
<i>what is (this)</i>	<i>wās ej (dās)</i>

Figure 3. *Basic Phrases in Wymysorys*

Language Billboard

One of the first proposals outlined in the *Red Paper* is a “Language Billboard”: a minority language focused community noticeboard that gives physical form to the language and thereby increases language visibility. The existence of Wymysorys in a permanent physical form also provides for linguistic tourism if only as a fixed location for a photo opportunity. As with all projects outlined in the Wymysorys *Red Paper* the Language Billboard is designed to target multiple spheres of influence and facilitates Functional Multilingualism. The language billboard additionally serves to provide “Non-Speaking, Non-Community” individuals with access to Functional Multilingualism.

The Billboard is divided into four panels. The first panel serves as a community noticeboard with a focus on those community activities that incorporate Wymysorys in

some way, dance groups, choirs, exhibitions and so forth. The community noticeboard is bilingual, including those community notices which hitherto have been exclusively in Polish, such as civic notices, religious activities and community events. The second panel provides the 12 basic phrases discussed with regards to Functional Multilingualism translated into Polish, English, German and Yiddish. The third panel displays pictures, songs, stories, painting and other creative products of Wymysorys learners of all ages and levels. For early schooling this may consist of a “learner of the month”, while for adult learners this may be published poetry etc. This panel is regular changed and serves as a means of positive reinforcement for language learners as well as a sense of community acknowledgment. The final panel displays the number of speakers of the language. The final panel has dual significance, allowing both community and non-community members to see the critical endangerment of the language and also, providing observable proof of language revitalisation: new speakers are positively reinforced in attaining language fluency by being included in this number; similarly, the community can be aware of the impact of their undertaking in reversing language shift.

In summary, the language billboard incorporates the Civic, Education, Religion, Economic and Cultural spheres through the following;

- Civic Sphere
 - Associates civic sphere with language
 - Promotes language use by local council
- Education Sphere
 - Reinforces functional multilingualism
 - Engages non-native, non-speaking community
 - „Lonely planet competency”
 - Reinforcement of language learning
 - Community acknowledgement of language learning
- Economic Sphere
 - Job creation for translation
 - Physical Language
 - Linguistic Tourism
- Cultural Sphere
 - Promotes local cultural practices associated with use of Wymysorys
 - Reinforces relationship of cultural groups and Wymysorys

The concept of the “Language Billboard” may also be adapted to digital technologies, with smart phone technology able to link the private and public domains of use. Mobile applications, such as games or picture dictionaries, could potentially provide wider access to basic phrases in Wymysorys and could be made available through QR code scans and social media extensions, such as twitter or facebook handles

included on the billboard itself. This would allow people to link in with the language online and thereby increase the digital presence of Wymysorys.

Conclusion

Increased visibility equals increased chance of survival. Without broader public use of the language the process of reversing language shift is limited to the reduced context in which the language can operate. By incorporating minority languages across the physical space of the communities in which they exist, not only is awareness of the minority language improved but so is the opportunity for the use of minority languages outside of the idiomatic context of individuals. To facilitate this, revitalisation efforts should attempt to engage communities across multiple spheres of influence and so ensure that any project concerned with reversing language shift attracts the greatest number of possible community members. By approaching revitalisation strategies in this way, linguists and community activists also ensure that projects provide the greatest number of positive outcomes for the community in which the language exists in the minority. As in the case of Wymysorys, the best strategy for revitalisation should be one that encourages and fosters simultaneous, universal co-operation and ensures that the benefits created through these strategies affect not only the minority language communities but the entire community.

Bibliography

- Rheynn Lhiasaghey Tarmynagh (Department of Economic Development). (2013). *Isle of Man Tourism Visitor Economy Strategy*. Douglas: Isle of Man Tourism.
- Andrason, A. (2010). Expressions of futurity in the Vilamovicean language. *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics, 40*, 1-10.
- Andrason, A. (2011). Vilamovicean verbal system – Do the Preterite and the Perfect mean the same? *Lingusitica Copernica, 1(5)*, 271-285.
- Bergier, A., & Ritchie, C. J. (2014). *Language revitalization in Wilamowice- a new approach*. Warsaw: Artes Liberales.
- Elle, L. (2014). The Situation of the Sorbian Language in the states of Saxony and Bradenburg in Germany. In A. Camilleri, K. King, & L. Huss (Eds.), *Transcending Monolingualism: Linguistic Revitalization in Education* (pp. 89-102). New York: Routledge.
- Fishman, J. (1991). *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

- Lazdiņa, S., Marten, H. F., & Saagpakk, M. (2013). The absence of minority languages in the public space of ideologically monolingual nations: A contrastive study of Latgalian (Latvia) and Sorbian (Germany) (Conference Presentation). *Language revitalization in a Russian and European context: Exploring solutions for minority language maintenance*. Helsinki.
- Melancon, M. E. (2000). *The sociolinguistic situation of Creoles in South Louisiana: Identity, Characteristics, Attitudes (Doctoral dissertation)*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University.
- Milroy, L. (1987). *Language and Social Networks*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Moseley, C. (Ed.). (2010). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 3rd edn*. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Neels, R. (Forthcoming). *De nakende taaldood van het Wymysojer in Wilamowice*.
- Pasanen, A. (2013). Changing functions, domains and speech community of Inari Saami language (Conference Presentation). *Language revitalization in a Russian and European context: Exploring solutions for minority language maintenance*. Helsinki.
- Schröder, I. (2011). Zue Lage des Niederdeutschen. In *Mit den Regional- und Minderheitensprachen auf dem Weg nach Europa* (pp. 15-18). Leer: Schuster.
- Thaler, P. (2009). *Of Mind and Matter: The Duality of National Identity in the German-Danish Borderlands*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press.
- Wicherkiewicz, T. (2003). *The Making of a Language: The Case of the Idiom of Wilamowice*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Wiggers, H. (2006). Reevaluating Diglossia: Data from Low German. *ProQuest LCC*. Ann Arbor.