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Language contact and dying languages

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Résumé: *Cet article s'occupe de la mort des langues dans la perspective du contact et du plurilinguisme. Le travail explore divers aspects de la recherche sur la mort des langues en essayant de délimiter critiquement l'objet d'étude. En particulier, on distingue les langues menacées des autres cas de langues en contact, tel le développement de pidgins et de créoles. Les aspects ici décrits regardent le rôle des semi-locuteurs dans une communauté où le processus de substitution de langue se déroule. Ensuite on observe l'interaction entre aspects extérieurs et intérieurs du langage et les conséquences linguistiques auxquelles s'attendre dans une langue obsolescente lorsque le processus d'attrition se prolonge longtemps. Enfin on montre l'importance du contexte dans la compréhension des phénomènes linguistiques de contact.*

Abstract: *This article deals with language death phenomena within a wider framework of languages in contact. A few relevant issues of language death research are critically discussed in order to focus on the peculiarities of this phenomenon as opposed to other outcomes of contact, such as the development of pidgin and creole languages. In particular, the article deals with the role of imperfect native speakers in communities characterized by language shift, with the interaction between language-external and language-internal aspects, and with the kinds of structural consequences that are expected in long-lasting attrition phases. Finally, an emphasis on environmental factors to explain linguistic phenomena is advocated.*

1. Introduction

Language death is one of the possible outcomes of a very extreme situation of language contact that involves the cultural, sociolinguistic and linguistic aspects of language.

What should be meant by « death » or « dying » in the case of a language is not an easy question to answer[1]. However, I propose a common-sense interpretation of this metaphor and define language death as the process through which a language stops being used by a speech community while another language expands in all domains and is passed on to the next generation. Thus, with the exception of the rare cases of « sudden death » (Campbell, 1994), in which a language dies because an entire speech community vanishes (as a consequence of war, genocide or natural catastrophes), the most usual context of language death is one of bilingualism, or

[1] Whether a language should be considered dead when it stops being used as a communication means within an actual speech community, or whether it is definitely dead when the last two speakers or even the very last speaker die, is matter of debate. For a recent discussion see Dressler (2003).

rather, of a very unstable and asymmetrical kind of bilingualism in which two or more languages are in contact.

The phenomenon of language death is probably as old as language itself. Not differently from other cultural and social products, languages rise, develop and eventually die, following the fate of the social groups who speak them. However, the systematic study of language death as a specific domain within a more general theory of language is relatively recent. In fact, it is in the late 1970s and especially during the 1980s and the 1990s that studies on language decay and death have flourished. At the same time, the awareness in public opinion that large part of the languages of the world are doomed to rapid extinction has lately grown considerably on the spur of less scholarly publications that can arouse a more general interest on this phenomenon (see, among others, Hagège, 2000). The large amount of specific, descriptive case studies and of more general theoretical essays that have been produced in the last two or three decades offer a rather good knowledge of the linguistic and sociolinguistic phenomena involved and have aroused a few issues that have proved to be of great relevance in the study of language and of contact linguistics.

Before tackling some specific aspects of language death, such as the definition of imperfect (native) speakers, the effects on linguistic structure, the role of sociolinguistic factors, a short terminological discussion will be introduced in order to define the domain which is being dealt with here. Because of the still rather young age of language death as a field of enquire, the literature suffers from an unnecessary richness of terminology, most of which is based on anthropomorphic metaphors (such as « language death » itself) that can generate confusion and obscure the actual phenomena involved (cf. also Dressler, 2003, 13). What I propose here is a taxonomic outline in which distinct phenomena and distinct ways of approaching them will be kept apart as much as is possible (see also De Bot, 1996, for a similar typology).

Following Dorian (1989), I will use « language obsolescence » as an overall term for all kinds of reduction and loss in the competence or in the use of a language. Thus, the study of language obsolescence should include cases of first or second language loss, of immigrant or indigenous languages, of healthy or aphasic speakers, of language death within a community (as an cross-generational phenomenon) or within individuals (as a phenomenon occurring within an individual's life-span), of linguistic structures or linguistic repertoires.

Given the extremely high degree of differentiation in the situations and perspectives briefly sketched above, in this paper the focus will be on a single aspect of language obsolescence and in particular on what may be regarded as the prototypical case of language death, that is, the final stage of a language that has undergone a process of progressive (cross-generational) structural decay within the indigenous community where it is spoken as a native language. The use of the term « language death » as a hyponym of a more general framework of language obsolescence is represented graphically in Fig. 1.

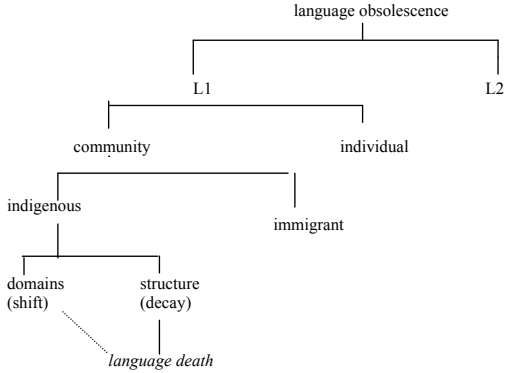

Fig. 1. *Language death as a special case of language obsolescence*

Of course language death is not only the outcome of progressive decay in structure, but also the outcome of a progressive shift from one language to another in the speech habits of a community (« language shift »). However, the perspective chosen for the present account deals primarily with the stages preceding actual language death from the point of view of structural transformations and reduction (usually labelled as « decay ») rather than reduction of the domains of language use.

2. A theory of language death

As mentioned in the preceding section, the extinction of languages is a widespread phenomenon of the past and especially of our present times. However, systematic research and the development of a theoretical framework on such a relevant topic for a theory of language is relatively recent and still rather young, a fact which has often been lamented over.

According to the perspective of study and to the emphasis put on linguistic or sociolinguistic aspects, language death can be regarded as a a special case of language change, as a special case of language contact, or as a special phenomenon *per se*.

In the first case, the mechanisms of language change that can be found in a context of language death are substantially the same as those studied in historical linguistics, all the difference being in the speed of such changes. Even a scholar such as Nancy Dorian, who devoted thirty years' research to the study of language death, has actually worked on obsolescent varieties of Gaelic from the perspective of historical linguistics, observing that the kind of changes recorded in such decaying varieties are essentially the same as those that can be found in « healthy » languages, with the difference that the amount and rate of changes are much higher in the former (Dorian, 1981, 154).

In the second case, language death is regarded as a special case of asymmetric contact resulting in the progressive incorporation of structures and lexicon from the

dominant into the receding language. An extreme view in this sense is Carol Myers-Scotton's, as for instance in Myers-Scotton (1998) and (2002). Rejecting markedness and simplicity as explanatory constructs, and loss as the only possible outcome of language attrition, Myers-Scotton unifies attrition, convergence and other phenomena connected with contact, such as code-switching, postulating that the same model and the same mechanisms underlie all of them. It is quite common, however, that models of language contact contemplate language death as an extreme, « catastrophic », non-genetic outcome of contact (among others, Thomason & Kaufman, 1988; Thomason, 2000; Berruto, forthcoming).

Finally, language death can be seen as a substantially independent kind of phenomenon, thus requiring a theoretical framework that can account for linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects related to it. Indeed, the main preoccupation of most researchers on language death so far has been that of confirming the peculiarity of language-internal changes (regarded as almost « pathologic » in nature) caused by a severe decrease in the use of language and by an interruption in language transmission to younger generations, while the role of the contact language as a source of transfer has usually been overlooked and underestimated. This point of view is characteristic, among others, of H.J. Sasse (1992, 16): « my claim is that we can and must distinguish language decay from normal language contact phenomena (including some instances of « simplification ») by identifying the reductional character of decaying varieties of obsolescent languages. »

Any theory of language death must account for the overwhelming role of external factors on language change, acknowledging that a sociolinguistic pressure is imposed on the threatened language and leads to a reduction (and a redefinition) of its domains of use. In Sasse's view (1992), external and internal factors (interfaced by linguistic behaviour) are connected through a series of diachronic and causation chains. The final question is then whether a language dies because of a dysfunctional loss of rules and structures (more emphasis on language-internal factors), or because of loss of speakers (more emphasis on language-external factors).

The hypothesis that has prevailed so far in the literature is that there is a strong correlation between form and function and in particular that « the reduced use of a language will lead also to a reduced form of that language » (Dorian, 1977, 24), or, more synthetically, « forms follow functions » (Dressler, 1996). The researcher is then left with the (as yet) unsolved question about what should be regarded as reduction of linguistic forms[2].

A survey of the better known literature on this topic reveals a great variety of phenomena that are regarded as linguistic outcomes of language death. To quote some of the most common ones: marked structures give way to unmarked ones; grammatical oppositions are levelled and rules are simplified or disappear completely; levelling within and between paradigms increases; periphrastic, analytic structures substitute synthetic forms; functional reduction leads to stylistic shrinkage and to reduction of elaborate syntactic structures; allomorphic variation is simplified, although an apparently opposite phenomenon is observed, too, i.e. the increase of a seemingly non-motivated variation. Incidentally, it is quite surprising that of the ten kinds of structural consequences discussed by Campbell (1994) in a

[2] For a first discussion of concepts such as « reduction » and « simplification » driven from creole studies in the context of language death, cf. Trudgill (1977). The issue is further developed by Andersen (1982) in his « universalistic » approach.

survey of language death studies, no mention is made to interference phenomena. Then, we can add to this list the gain of new rules imported from the contact language (Denison, 1977), and the positive influence of parallel structures in the dominant language upon the decaying system (Dorian, 1993).

More recently, researchers have pointed to the greater variety of outcomes apart from reduction and simplification. This is due to a better knowledge of sociolinguistic contexts and to deeper studies on linguistic phenomena. In particular, it becomes more and more apparent that language death is an extremely multifaceted phenomenon and that alternative explicative models are possible according to the situation on which the research is focused. See for instance Wolfram (2002) or Thomason (2000), each of them proposing a range of language death models, in which « dissipation » (Wolfram, 2002) or « attrition » (Thomason, 2000), both gradual processes of loss, coexist with other possible routes, all leading to language death. Therefore, also linguistic consequences are necessarily varied.

Nancy Dorian, too, has recently hinted at the complexity of the (linguistic) phenomena involved, observing that loss and simplification are just one aspect of a more elaborate picture (Dorian, 1999). For instance, the development of morphology through grammaticalization has been recorded in contexts of language obsolescence, although such processes involving the increase in grammatical complexity and the change from analytic to synthetic structures were initially regarded as impossible or highly unlikely in language death contexts. A couple of examples may illustrate this phenomenon. One is the development of new verbal categories in Tariana, an Amazon language (Aikhenvald, 1999), through the grammaticalization of serial verbs via cliticization: as a result, the system has become more complex and the verb has acquired new synthetic categories. The other is the grammaticalization of subject clitics as agreement markers on verbs in German-speaking enclaves in the North of Italy (Dal Negro, 2004). It is especially in the speech of young fluent speakers who use this minority German dialect mainly as a humorous we-code within the peer-group that phenomena of reanalysis and grammaticalization within the Verb-Subject group can be found more frequently and systematically. The result is an increase in the morphological complexity of the verb and of the grammatical categories that are marked on it. In the case of the third person of the singular, in fact, verbal forms present gender marking, too (Dal Negro, 2004, 170-171):

(1) chan-*der* no nit heirate
can-3SG:M yet not marry
'He cannot get married yet'

(2) d möter set-*sch*
the:F mother says-3SG:F
'The mother says'

As can be easily imagined, then, most of the difficulties found in working on language death probably depends on the fact that very different entities are being compared with each other and that the sole reference to linguistic phenomena is not sufficient to define the domain of language death. Therefore, in proposing a theory of language death one should first ensure that the same kind of objects are being dealt with. Reduction of functions (and relative reduction of forms) can include a wide range of phenomena, different in quantity and quality. This also means to understand what is « dying » in the case of a language and what has to be ruled out instead. For instance, whether decreolization (progressive incorporation of a creole

within the system of its lexifier language), dialect death[3] or complete grammatical replacement do or do not represent substantially different phenomena from language death proper.

3. Imperfect native speakers

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of language death research is the theorization of so-called semi-speakers, that is, imperfect native speakers in a context of gradual language decay and death. Casting doubts on the apparently self-evident concept of native speaker, the notion of semi-speaker acquires great relevance to linguistic and sociolinguistic theory. One of the most exhaustive definitions of semi-speakers can be found in Dorian (1981, 107):

> *Unlike the older Gaelic-dominant bilinguals, the semi-speakers are not fully proficient in Gaelic. They speak it with varying degrees of less than full fluency, and their grammar (and usually their phonology) is markedly aberrant in terms of the fluent-speaker norm. S[emi]-s[peakers] may be distinguished from fully fluent speakers of any age by the presence of deviations in their Gaelic which are explicitly labelled « mistakes » by the fully fluent speakers. [...] At the lower end of speaker skill, s[emi]-s[peakers] are distinguished from near-passive bilinguals by their ability to manipulate words in sentences.*

However, the notion of imperfect native speaker varies greatly according to the context studied and to what the researcher decides to focus on, in particular whether the perspective is the individual or the community. If the point of reference is the individual, it is usually loss during one's life-time to be considered and the idea is that proficiency in one's first language decreases with time. If the point of reference is the community, the accent is on the age-grading continuum: progressively younger age corresponds to progressively lower proficiency. In this case the idea is that a community's first language is being acquired incompletely by increasingly more children, either because their acquisition process has been interrupted too early, or because it has been too casual and discontinuous. In the long run, a group of imperfect native speakers coexists with proficient speakers. In turn, the latter might undergo language loss as time passes and language use decreases. From the point of view of a theory of language, and especially of a theory of language death, we are dealing here with two different kinds of phenomena, but only in the case of language loss within an individual's life-time it seems possible to speak of actual language loss. In the other case (interruption in language transmission), a radical restructuring of the language is expected, with the possibility that a substantially different code (almost non-genetic in its outcome) emerges[4]. In the end, such a severely restricted code is not transmitted to the young because it is perceived as too poor and to corrupted to be of any use, thus activating a sort of vicious circle (Dressler, 2003, 18).

Linguists and other observers usually predict the end of a language on the basis of the so called apparent-time hypothesis. Accordingly, an age-graded continuum of imperfect speakers predicts the fate of language. Indeed, the basic idea of attrition research is that younger age correlates positively with an increased reduction in

[3] The « capture » of a dialect by its *Dachsprache* (*einfangen*: Berruto, forthcoming).

[4] According to Thomason (2000, 227) the relationship of a restructured dying language with its pre-decline state should be regarded as similar to that of, for example, Tok Pisin with English.

grammar and lexicon and that young imperfect speakers will not improve their knowledge of the language with time, thus leading to its eventual disappearance.

However, things do not necessarily go this way in actual contexts of language obsolescence and researchers have to account for the fact that local minority languages that have been declared moribund for decades or even for a couple of centuries are still viable nowadays, or, in any case, that moribund languages survive much longer than the apparent-time construct would lead one to think. What diachronic data in linguistically endangered enclaves actually seem to prove is the development of irregular patterns of language acquisition and use, with speakers extending the domains of language use and increasing their fluency as they grow older and proficiency in a local language variety is endowed with positive values at community level. Therefore, today's very young semi-speakers or non-speakers of the endangered language might well become tomorrow's fluent speakers of the same language variety, thus delaying the process of language death[5].

Field-work in German and Croatian obsolescent minority dialects in Italy has revealed irregular patterns of language acquisition and use in young speakers and interesting linguistic implications. In a research carried out with Antonietta Marra[6], we observed that there were young speakers who had acquired the local (southern Italian) variety of Croatian at a later age than Italian. However, they presented a fully functional system (albeit divergent from the traditional one) and in particular very interesting phenomena of overgeneralization of case marking in the domain of noun morphology were recorded. See (3) for a case of overgeneralization of the accusative marking instead of the expected unmarked nominative form:

(3)	niev-*u*	mater-*u*	mu	daje	na	bač
	his-ACC:SG.F	mother-ACC:SG.F	him	gives	a	kiss:ACC.SG.M
	'His mother gives him a kiss'					

Similarly, young speakers of a German dialect in the North of Italy who started speaking dialect as a we-code mainly in interactions with friends present overmarked verb forms (see 4 and 1-2 above), characterized by subject-clitic grammaticalization, whereas some of the same speakers produced non grammatical, unmarked verb stems at a younger age (5):

(4)	*hat-s*	ga	ga	chöifă	(G.V., aged 16)
	has-it	go	go	buy	
	'She has to go shopping'				
(5)	un	atte	*sägä*		(G.V., aged 12)
	and	daddy	say		
	'And daddy says'				

From the point of view of linguistic forms, the question regards what is really lost in the speech of imperfect speakers and whether there is a progressive loss over time (individually and at community level). This raises methodological issues, such as the definition of points of reference and the testing of language loss itself. In fact, loss implies that a preceding full form of the same language is available and can be used for comparison. As regards testing, in studies on first or second language attrition, testing on lexicon and other eliciting techniques are common (see De Bot, 1996) whereas in language death studies it is mainly translation tests and interview

[5] See also Gal (1979, 154) for similar (and other) interpretations of her synchronic data in the Hungarian-speaking community of Oberwart (Austria).
[6] Results presented at the Sociolinguistic Symposium (Bristol, 27-29 April 2000).

recordings that are preferred. It should be clear, however, that different techniques can produce very different data sets. Moreover, any type of direct testing (such as translation) emphasizes phenomena of loss (and overt interference from the language in contact), whereas free speech data are more likely to generate either an apparently formal integrity (usually accompanied by a very scarce speech production) or more extreme cases of language restructuring in which loss is not necessarily the only or the main issue at stake.

The discussion that has been briefly introduced here shows the difficulty of comparing results of different studies dealing with imperfect native speakers. Elsewhere (Dal Negro, 2004) I have suggested to distinguish between imperfect speakers in a broad and in a narrow sense. In the first case imperfect speakers encompass the whole range of diversions from a fully fledged language variety (accompanied by a reduction in use), whereas in a second, narrow, sense it only applies to those individuals whose competence in the receding language is dysfunctional and diverges radically from the inherited language. These individuals, however, do not usually speak the shifted-from language in their daily interactions[7].

Thus, an analysis of well documented case studies from the literature and from field-work has produced a two-fold result. On one side we saw that the apparent-time construct does not necessarily hold in the case of language death because the local (and symbolic) functions performed by obsolescent languages allow them to survive longer than age-graded continua might lead one to think. On the other, very extreme cases of language reduction and/or restructuring accounted for in the literature may be (at least partial) distortions of eliciting techniques[8].

5. Language death within multilingual speech repertoires

The emphasis that the literature has put on phenomena of dysfunctional reduction in linguistic forms has somewhat blurred the fact that language death is mainly and primarily a sociolinguistic phenomenon that has to do with the disappearance of a language because of substantial changes in the repertoire of a speech community or, under extreme circumstances, because of the loss of the speech community in all. In contrast, all linguistic features that are recorded in the literature are neither necessary nor sufficient to the actual process of language death. Contact linguistics, too, often plays a minor role in studies on language death, in spite of the self-evident fact that languages always start their decaying phase in a context of bi- or multilingualism, without implying, however, that language death takes place *because of* bilingualism[9].

The level on which language death can be most effectively explained is probably that of speech practices, or speech behaviour (in the sense of Sasse, 1992). More explicitly, Milroy (2001) points to social network analysis as the level on which language shift can actually be observed as it gains ground within a community.

[7] The main risk of testing as the sole eliciting technique in such researches is that the speech produced may not correspond to the usual linguistic habits of those speakers that are tested and data may resemble more experimental products than examples of actual language use.
[8] See also Dorian (1999, 117-118) and her veiled suspicion of the fact that Sasse's « weakest semi-speakers of Arvanitika do seem to speak remarkably imperfectly, and remarkably willingly, too, considering how meager their control of the language appears to be. »
[9] When a language eventually dies, however, the community becomes monolingual.

Other social and cultural aspects, such as ethnic or local identity, covert and overt prestige of languages and language varieties, community values, can be added to refine the definition of a shifting repertoire (see Gal, 1979, for a thorough analysis).

As Gal (1996) remarks, considering language shift from the perspective of the whole community, viewing its whole repertoire as it is progressively restructured, one gains a very different and less organicistic view (see metaphors such as « language death ») on the same phenomenon. Indeed, from a community point of view there is rarely an actual linguistic and communicative deprivation, as domains and functions shift from one code to the other, from one variety to the other, with the shifted-from language is usually circumscribed to very specialized and emblematic functions marking local or ethnic identity[10]. As Dimmendaal (1998, 71, 101) puts it, language shift represents a normal historical process of adaptation to a changing environment; in this respect language is but « an active dynamic aspect of human adaptation in complex environmental systems. »

A few examples can illuminate these issues by showing the main role played by societal, communicative and symbolic factors in determining the fate of a language within a bilingual repertoire.

Comparing different Pennsylvania German (PG) communities and their protracted use of German in an English-dominant context, Huffines (1989) observes that most members of sectarian religious groups (Mennonites and Old Order Amish) present a very simplified system in the domain of nominal morphology. Their case system appears to be very much influenced by English and characterized by syncretism (one-case system for nouns and two-case system for pronouns) and by the incipient extension of the English genitive marker *-s*. In contrast, fluent non-sectarian speakers display a more conservative case system, with the survival of dative forms on nouns and of a three-case opposition on pronouns. While sectarians' case system appears uniform and coherent in its simplicity and its structural similarity with English, non-sectarians fluctuate more between conservative paradigms and aberrant forms produced by semi-speakers. What is relevant here, however, is that Mennonites and Amish exhibit a very uniform speech behaviour, with German meeting all communicative needs within their communities. Thus, a decisive convergence towards English has provided them with an established, albeit not particularly distinctive, norm which is viable in all community-internal (social) activities. Non-sectarians display much less loyal speech behaviours, with older and fluent speakers still using a traditional system, while the number of semi-speakers increases together with a progressively generalized abandonment of German in favour of English.

Another example that can be taken is that of minority German (« Walser ») dialects spoken in the north-west of Italy. Various alpine communities characterized by different historical and environmental circumstances offer a wide range of outcomes as regards language maintenance and death. To recall the most paradigmatic cases, the traditional Walser dialect disappeared almost intact in its form from the community of Salecchio as the scarce population abandoned this remote settlement in the late 1960s. Neighbouring Formazza has been witnessing a long phase of progressive language shift and incipient obsolescence, but

[10] Of course local or ethnic identity may be marked in many other ways. Besides, local or ethnic identity might blur (lessening the necessity to be marked) as the minority group progressively assimilates to the dominant one.

convergence towards and borrowing from the contact language (Italian) is scarce. At Rimella the inherited Walser dialect is giving way to a Piedmontese variety which serves all local communicative and symbolic functions and which is also gaining ground within the system of the traditional German dialect, probably leading to the formation of a fused lect (in the sense of Auer, 1999); at Issime (Aosta Valley) the German dialect is used alternatively with various other codes in a surprisingly rich multilingual setting characterized by structural convergence but also by stubborn maintenance in use. Finally, in the community of Bosco Gurin, the only German-speaking enclave in the otherwise Italian-speaking Swiss region of Ticino, language death resembles more dialect death, in the sense that the local rustic dialect is now undergoing severe interference from German dialects spoken in the northern regions of Switzerland, together with a more predictable shift to Italian.

These examples show that language maintenance or language shift can follow very different paths and attain very different outcomes according to « environmental » factors. Besides, fieldwork evidence in various parts of the world has showed that formal and speech loyalty do not necessarily match: drastic reduction in use and in speech domains does not imply structural decay; language loyalty does not necessarily entail the preservation of the inherited system; formal resistance does not prevent language shift to take place.

Further evidence of this wide range of outcomes and especially of the least expected ones can be found in the literature. Reference can be made, for instance, to Dimmendaal's description of one of the last speakers of Kore, a language of Kenya, producing fairly elaborate speech forms in this dying language (Dimmendaal, 1992), or to Thomason's mention of Montana Salish (Thomason, 2000, 237), where borrowing and attrition seem to be lacking in a context of use reduction protracted over a long period of time. On the other hand, « stubborn and persistent resistance to total cultural assimilation » makes it possible to maintain a language ideally distinct from the one(s) in contact while large part of its grammar and parts of its lexicon are borrowed (Thomason & Kaufman, 1988, 48, and Thomason, 2000, 232): it is the case of mixed languages such as Anglo Romani or Ma'a[11], where, however, the link to the traditional language remains doubtful.

The hypothesis that formal aspects of a code correlate with, or depend on, the functions fulfilled by the same code (cf. for instance Dressler, 1996) has given way to the research of some sort of « universals of reduction », i.e. formal features that always emerge in the case of functionally reduced linguistic systems such as pidgins, creoles, L1 or L2 learners' varieties and dying languages (Andersen, 1982). Seen as the reverse process of language acquisition or of the nativization phase of creolization, language death is often regarded from the point of view of natural and universal developments that are therefore independent from the specific language contact situation in which the obsolescent language is living its final stages.

However, the increasing interest aroused by these themes in linguistic research, while allowing for a better knowledge of a large amount of cases in the world, is more and more promoting a relativistic approach to language death. On one side researchers underlie the peculiarities of language death as opposed to other

[11] Ma'a, an originally Cushitic language spoken in a Bantu environment in Tanzania is a very questionable case in the literature on contact language. Beside Thomason (2000) and Thomason & Kaufman (1988), see at least Myers-Scotton (2002, 265-270) for a different interpretation of this case.

« reduction » contexts, on the other specific sociolinguistic features are analysed focusing on the various environments in which shift takes place. In particular, early accounts that regarded language death as similar to pidginization (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter, 1977) or as the reverse process of creolization (Trudgill, 1977) have now been rejected, both because of counter-evidence on the formal level (on the whole dying languages do not display such a degree of simplification as pidgins) and because of the substantially sociolinguistic contexts environments. Finally, the role of the dominant language in shifting repertoires and in shifting-from languages cannot be underestimated and, as Thomason (2000) remarks, attrition phenomena are inherently contact-induced changes, as they would not occur outside a particular contact situation.

More complex and multifaceted approaches are increasingly wanted for. The only way apt to face the world-wide phenomenon of language death seems to be a better knowledge of the mechanisms involved. Differently from other reduced contact varieties, such as pidgins, dying languages usually survive to mark group loyalty and identity and to perform symbolic and interactional functions rather than to respond to informational and communicative needs. The decrease in functions and domains that characterizes a dying language is very different from the basic, communicative functions that are typical of the rise of a pidgin, of a creole language, of an interlanguage in L2 environment and, accordingly, the path to extinction is completely different in nature from paths leading to a new (linguistic) life.

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