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The Preservation of the Endangered Languages (in the Light of Respecting Linguistic Human Rights by Authorities)

Abstrakt (Ochrona języków zagrożonych w świetle przestrzegania językowych praw człowieka przez władze). W artykule przedstawiono główne założenia, metody, cele i możliwości wprowadzania dwujęzyczności zarówno w życiu prywatnym, jak i oficjalnym na obszarach zamieszkiwanych przez mniejszości. Sytuacja wielu europejskich języków mniejszościowych jest skomplikowana. Z jednej strony, międzypokoleniowa transmisja wielu z nich została przerwana, coraz mniej ludzi używa ich w codziennym życiu, bezpośredniej komunikacji z innymi przedstawicielami wspólnoty etnicznej, z rodziną, przyjaciółmi, sąsiadami. Z drugiej – wprowadzonych zostało wiele przepisów prawnych i inicjuje się działania mające na celu ochronę tych języków. Autorka omawia sytuację czterech języków mniejszościowych Europy (katalońskiego, walijskiego, łuzycyjskiego i bretońskiego), koncentrując się zwłaszcza na działaniach podejmowanych przez mniejszości w celu ich podtrzymania. Zastanawia się, do jakiego stopnia respektowanie przez państwo kultur mniejszościowych i ich praw językowych wpływa na rewitalizację poważnie zagrożonych języków i rozważa odpowiedzialność państw, które nie przestrzegają podstawowych praw człowieka w zakresie różnorodności kulturowej i językowej.

Abstract. The report presents main assumptions, methods, aims and possibilities of the introduction of bilingualism in the areas where minority cultures exist. The report is based on an analysis of a few linguistic minorities (the Welsh, the Catalans, the Bretons and the Sorbians) and of the specific activities conducted by them to uphold a minority language. It is considered to what extent respecting minority cultures and their linguistic rights by authorities is significant for the revitalization of seriously endangered languages. Furthermore, the responsibilities of states failing to respect the fundamental human right to cultural and linguistic dissimilarity are discussed.

1. Introduction

In this paper some political rights to use minority languages are presented. International laws do not always guarantee the protection of linguistic diversity. No regulations implemented by a state or other superior authority (even those most propitious to

minorities) can prove effective in maintaining minority languages, since nothing can force individuals to declare themselves members of a minority culture or make them use it and transmit it. However, it is possible to reverse the process of language shift as shows the example of many endangered languages. In order to succeed, all or at least most of the members of a minority culture should get involved. Some of the grass root actions taken to preserve the minority language are described on the examples of Catalan, Welsh, Sorbian and Breton.

2. The protection of the endangered languages in Europe

The last several years were marked by some changes in international law and in specific European regulations concerning the respect for basic linguistic human rights. In Europe, there are about 46 million people using about 60 minority languages. This constitutes 10 percent of the population of the European Union, where only national languages are given an official status. Although international agreements and declarations (such as the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, UNESCO) observe the right of all people to identify with their mother tongue, to learn it, to use it in official situations (school, work, government) and to choose between the official and minority languages. In reality, those resolutions do not have real influence on and importance for language minorities.

The European Union has also introduced international laws that regulate the linguistic rights of minorities and emphasize the fact that the cultural and linguistic diversity is the most crucial attribute of our continent. These regulations were introduced and written down in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. European countries were given an opportunity to sign it, but it should be noted that its ratification was not obligatory (although new European Union member states are required to introduce appropriate changes in their constitutions), and that the language of this document allowed for considerable latitude in fulfilling its provisions. First of all, signing the paper the countries decided which linguistic minorities they would protect. Moreover, each country chose which paragraphs or subparagraphs would be accepted (signing at least 35 points was required). From the formal point of view, the European Charter could be criticized for its imprecise language. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Robert Phillipson (1995: 91) point to the fact that

The formulations include a range of modifications like “as far as possible”, “relevant”, “appropriate”, “where necessary”, “pupils who so wish in a number of considered sufficient”, “if the number of users of a regional or minority language justified it”, and a number of alternatives as in “to allow, encourage or provide teaching in or of the regional or minority language at all the appropriate stages of education”.

In this way, the countries could apply the signed commitments in a minimal way by claiming that a provision was not “possible” or “appropriate”, numbers were not “suf-

ficient” or did not “justify” a provision, and that it “allowed” the minority to organize teaching of their language, on their own.

So the European countries still bear responsibility for the minority and ethnic languages on their territory but in fact they do not report to anyone and may not respect these languages (the best examples are the attitudes of France and Greece and the lack of reaction on the part of the rest of the European Union with regard to their failure to respect cultural and language minority rights).

Despite the lack of accurate regulations, the situation of many minority languages in Europe has changed. Linguistic and ethnic revival initiated in the 1960s has resulted not only in the increase of self-awareness of many cultural minority representatives but also in the more or less effective activities they have undertaken.

It would be hard to work out a universal system for preventing the fall of the minority languages, even when one limits it to the territory of Europe. Each of those languages operates in a different context, and each faces a danger of a different caliber. Every case of a falling language should be studied separately. There are many factors to be considered, such as the minority’s history, the level of divergence from the language, the loss of prestige of the language and all that results from the above: the sense of a negative identity experienced by the members of minority cultures and the assimilation into the major culture. On the other hand, we deal with changes in lifestyles, with inner and outer migration of the members of minority cultures. The economic situation of the regions varies as well. The involvement of the state in which the cultural minorities are located has a great significance and provides financial and institutional support (or it does not).

The researchers who deal with the Reversing Language Shift (RLS) insist that in the process of preserving a language the most important issue is the intergenerational transmission and the creation of appropriate conditions to support this process. It is much more important than making the language official, which in the case of the European minority languages is still utopian. Those two factors are often complementary, because if a state observes the people’s right to use their language in various situations, both in private and in public, then that language’s status is acknowledged and the conditions for its development are secured.

Making a language official is not always the best solution to the problem. The situation of minority languages that are the subjects of the existing intergenerational transmission (even if it is far from perfect) is totally different than the situation of the languages that are not transmitted from generation to generation and are used in everyday life only by the oldest generation. Moreover, it is hard to define the territory where the minority language users live, especially when we take into consideration interstate migration. That is why in some cases it can be hard even to determine the community that the specific language laws could refer to. Not all members of the minority cultures identify with their language or consider it their mother tongue. We often deal with situations in which the natural transmission of a minority language was broken a few generations ago and for the new generation the first language (and frequently the only language) is the official one.

It seems that the first step that should be taken is to make people aware that minority languages are not only valuable but also worth speaking, and that their death would be a great loss for our cultural heritage. We should not compare (as some do) the process of saving a disappearing language to saving some species of plants or animals. Languages are not objects that could be saved but processes of social interaction that characterize a given group. If this way of communication does not fulfill its tasks, the persuasions made by linguists, educators and politicians will not change people's attitudes toward such a language and if the community ceases to use it, it will not be saved. However, it is possible to reverse this process as could be shown by the example of many endangered languages. In order to succeed, all or at least most of the members of the minority culture should get involved, which means making sacrifices and commitments. It is obvious that not everyone would concede to it. In a situation where the responsibility for saving a language is thrust upon a community by some people (like activists or teachers) or where the use of that language is artificially resuscitated by the law, that language is condemned to extinction.

Grass-root actions initiated by citizens, and not governments, are also needed to draw people's attention not only to the importance of saving their language but most of all to the possibility of using it which, in turn, would make them identify themselves with the language and the community. Countless examples show that making a language official or imposing regulations upon people will not change the position of a language within a community. Many countries rely on national or international regulations more than on local actions. Far too much emphasis is often placed on the official policy, which, if accompanied with the lack of precise actions on the lower level, can have a reversed effect. Although the control over the language used at work, by the government and in the sector of education may be the means to revive the language, it should not be a priority (Nettle & Romaine 2000: 178).

Joshua Fishman (2001: 466) places the "officialisation" of a language on the last (no 1) position in his Stages of Reversing Language Shift Scale (The Gradem Inter-generational Dislocation Scale). He claims that we would reverse the process of losing a language if we provided it with a place in society. Setting up unrealistic goals and ignoring small-scale success will bear no fruit. Fishman (1989: 401) says:

Language policy on behalf of endangered languages must assure the intimate vernacular functions first, and, if possible, to go on from there, slowly building outward from the primary to the secondary institutions of inter-generational mother-tongue continuity. The entry-level work sphere is a must; the more advanced work-sphere is a maybe. Diglossia is a must (with safely stabilized spheres exclusively for the endangered language); monolingual economic autonomy or political independence are maybes. Widespread quest of the vernacular intimacy functions is a must; language spread into the higher reaches of power and modernity is a maybe.

Fishman does not deny the importance of officialising a language and its legal equality with an official language. Nevertheless "officialisation" is the last step in preventing the language from vanishing as it gives the language a much better position in the country (minority languages and the work put into their revival do not end in the moment of officialisation).

Joshua Fishman (1989) mentions Catalan as an example of a minority language that fulfills all the eight points on his scale. It is the only minority language in Europe that is not recognized as an endangered one, its position on the international arena is rather powerful and intergenerational continuity is effectively provided. Catalan is used not only by home-family-neighborhood communities, but also on all levels of public and official life as it is recognized in Catalonia in Spain as a co-official language. The Catalan language can be used in official written documents, in printed matter of the administration, in oral contact between the officials and the public, in contractual documents, in magazines, sign boards and publications, in opinions, public announcements, institutional publicity etc. Furthermore, the use of Catalan is promoted in society. It becomes more and more important to know the language if one lives on its historic territory. But still the work is not finished.

Welsh is an example of a language that has successfully managed to achieve the reversing language shift. Its position in Wales is powerful and the rapid drop of intergenerational transmission has been slowed down. Let me now present the undertaken actions and their meaning for the Welsh community.

In Wales the official languages are English and Welsh. English is used by all people and is the major linguistic means of communication. However, Wales is officially bilingual with about 21 percent of people speaking Welsh and an appreciable percentage of people (especially young) who know the basis of the Welsh language. Welsh is an excellent example to show that strong attachment of the linguistic community to its own language and culture could be appreciated by the country despite the earlier unfavorable regulations.

After the World War II, Welsh was recognized but its use in the official life (courts, administration), even after the Welsh Language Act of 1967, was limited. Activists in Wales quickly realized that that language would never be alive if the people did not start speaking it and if it was not connected to all areas of life. People were afraid to execute their right to use Welsh, because they were not sure if their language competence allowed them to use it in official situations or if they could be understood and socially accepted. Often, they did not realize that that was possible. Moreover, as they were bilingual they thought that it would be quicker and easier to settle matters in English. Three acts (the Education Act of 1988, the Welsh Language Act of 1993 and the Government of Wales Act of 1998) concerning education, language rights and governance provided an important starting point to make people realize their right to use Welsh. The departments and organizations that were to introduce a precise plan of teaching Welsh were established. It started from beginners level – to show ordinary people the possibilities of using Welsh in everyday life.

The Welsh Language Board was responsible for increasing the number of Welsh-speakers, providing more opportunities to use the language, changing the habits of language use, encouraging people to take advantage of the provided opportunities and strengthening Welsh as a community language. The main emphasis was placed on active cooperation between local organizations and individual activists. With the help of *Mentrau Iaith* (language enterprise agencies) the Welsh-speaking people were encour-

aged and convinced to use their language in everyday life. The purpose of that was to create places where people could use the language; to promote Welsh in communities with the cooperation of the local authorities, organizations and individual people; to introduce Welsh in business areas; to promote bilingualism at work; to encourage people to continue learning Welsh; to give practical help to adults; to assimilate Welsh speakers and help them define their needs, to work on additional materials for learning and using Welsh; to give information about the local opportunities to learn the language and to support the local economy (Williams 2000: 45).

Because everyone in Wales is bilingual and can speak English at any moment, linguistic Animators were appointed. They actively supported bilingualism on the local level by being active as social workers, nurses/health visitors/mid-wives, working in police services, local authorities or health trusts, and ambulance or fire services. Their role was to establish a new bilingual framework in order to improve a good practice or to prepare the ground for an implementation of work-place language plans by adopting the best case examples from other sectors (Williams 2000: 48–49). They created programs to support parents who wanted to raise bilingual children by providing them with access to advice and different materials including CDs of Welsh nursery rhymes for the parents to sing with their children, bilingual activity books and newsletters containing information on how different families had gone about the task of bringing their children up bilingually (Edwards 2004: 89).

Obviously, one cannot overvalue the bilingual education that was introduced to Wales by the Education Reform Act of 1988. It gave every inhabitant in Wales the chance to study in Welsh and put others under an obligation to learn Welsh as a foreign language.

Thanks to all those activities focusing on the introduction and promotion of the Welsh language, it was possible to stop the fall of Welsh or even spread it on a monolingual (English only) territory.

Sorbian is an example of a language that is bilingually almost absent despite the fact that it is protected by laws adopted in Saxony and Brandenburg and by the ratification of the European Charter by Germans. Although Sorbs officially have the right to study in their language (and to learn it) and use it officially in public, it is still impossible to use Sorbian in those fields due to the lack of personnel who would speak the language, and because of the notion that important business matters cannot be settled in the Sorbian language. Though a few programs have been introduced to rescue this vanishing language (like the Witaj-project, immersion education etc.), not many grass root initiatives have been set up to encourage minorities to use it in public. As a result the language was pushed totally into the non-official in-house area and thus has started to disappear. Unfortunately, the lack of strong impulses and the people's unwillingness to use their mother tongue have caused a steady decrease in the number of people using this language. Sorbian is often considered useless. Thus, while state support and a prominent role in the education system are important factors in language revival, they cannot be expected to reverse an already changed linguistic demography (May 2001: 141).

In the case of the minority languages used in the countries that do not recognize (or recognize in a limited way) people's right to use unofficial languages, all the RLSe's activities are shifted to local campaigns, which encourage the members of a minority culture to use their language. Breton in France could serve as a good example. France does not recognize the existence of cultural and linguistic minorities in its territory. Nevertheless, Bretons initiated an ethnical revival movement and since the 1970s a significant change in Bretons' self-awareness has occurred. This change is a result of a desire to learn their language and to show people that it could still be saved. The taken steps were mainly artistic and spare time activities (the very popular *fest-noz*, Celtic circles, etc). Bilingual and immersive education was introduced but with no official financial support, and due to an unfavorable public policy it has not been widespread. However, while observing small initiatives that showed the liveliness of the language and culture more and more people felt the need to save the language and to get involved in those activities. But there are still too few active people and no opportunities to use the Breton language in everyday life. Without the people's knowledge of the real value and utility of the language it is hard to convince them to invest their free time and money in learning it.

The power of the Breton movement and the involvement of more and more people could cause only a partial change in the official policy of the state. A similar situation occurred at the end of the 1970s, when *Charte culturelle bretonne* (*Charter of Breton Culture*) was signed and the official organizations that supported the Breton culture were created.¹ Nowadays, the activists count on bigger and much more radical changes in the French policy toward linguistic minorities.

3. Conclusions

These few examples show that a state's linguistic policy toward the minorities co-existing in its territory is of great importance to the Reversing Language Shift process, even if it is not sufficient. Legislation is significant as it does not only sanction the basic language rules but also creates appropriate infrastructure where laws could be executed. The minorities' rights are often purely theoretical, they remain only in a form of a formal record and are not respected because its potential users stay unaware of their right to choose the language. Therefore, introducing bilingualism requires not only adequate legal regulations but, above all, the involvement of all the people who those regulations regard.

¹ Le Conseil Culturel de Bretagne (*Kuzul Sevenadurel Breizh*), L'Institut Culturel de Bretagne (*Skol Uhel ar Vro*), L'Office de la langue bretonne (*Ofis ar brezhoneg*) and L'Agence technique culturelle régionale de Bretagne.

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