RAMA & FRANCOPROVENCAL revitalization of postvernacular languages

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This paper will take the definition of “postvernacular languages” proposed for Yiddish by Shandler (2004, 2006) and extend it to other sociolinguistic situations. It considers specifically the case of very endangered languages in the midst of discourse and actions of so-called revitalization, where users seek to “enhance language and practices” while language policies seek “to promote language and practices.” In both cases, a new awareness of language uses is incorporated within a trajectory of loss which tends to the staging or the celebration of a collective identity which is in fact not experienced in the same way whether one is in a “speaker” or a “political” position. However, seen from either position, what characterizes a language as “postvernacular” is the fact that simply saying something in this particular language is more important than what is actually being said.

The demonstration of this postulate will be based on case studies of the present sociolinguistic situations of two very endangered languages, Rama, an indigenous language of Nicaragua and Francoprovençal, one of France’s “regional languages”. Beyond obvious differences between the situations of those languages from the North and the South, we will argue that they share a status of postvernacular languages, marked by discontinued transmission and loss of usual functions. We will then ask how considering them postvernacular could help respond more adequately to social demands for so-called revitalization through formal language instruction, by suggesting to start considering what could be realistically the most appropriate kind of teaching in such circumstances.

In doing so, we will raise the issue of what the role of «academic experts » could be in terms of ideological clarifications as to the realities of language revitalization, aimed at the same time at officials and policy makers, the members of the linguistic communities concerned, and the general public.

Keywords: social demand, revitalization, Postvernacular languages.