"You talk like a book!": The social consequences of language standardisation amongst ”new speakers” of minority languages

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While traditional communities of minority languages speakers are being eroded as a result of urbanization and economic modernization, ”new speakers” are emerging in the context of community efforts and more supportive language policies. These ”new speakers” are often the product of revitalization agendas in which language politics have tended to be oriented towards normalization, expanding literacy and standardization, as well as an underlying concern with boundary drawing and purifying (Urla 1995). This paper examines the way in which ”new speakers” both reproduce and resist these ideologies.

As Milroy (2001) highlights, an important effect of standardization has been the development of a consciousness among speakers of a ”correct”, or canonical form of language. As such the standard variety represents a powerful filter for social mobility and positions ”new speakers” as legitimate speakers of the ”langue autorisée” (Bourdieu 1991). This presents a challenge to the authority of traditional native speakers, whose language variety is doubly stigmatized, firstly, by its historically subordinate position in socioeconomic and political terms alongside the dominant contact language and secondly, by its contemporary status alongside the newly formed Standard.

However, ”new speakers” search for authenticity and the desire ”to be from somewhere” often overrides the value of linguistic correctness and the value of anonymity associated with the Standard (Woolard 2008). In their eyes, their own ”new speaker” varieties often seem inauthentic and artificial because they are seen to be geographically and linguistically removed from the ”traditional” dialectal varieties to which they often aspire. At the same time, their perceived inability to emulate traditional forms can prompt them to construct more hybridized and anti-normative language practices. In doing so, there is an attempt to shed themselves of ”book-like” formulations often associated with the standard and to authenticate ”new speakerness” through more creative use of language.

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