The native/non-native dichotomy and questions of language ownership: findings from studies on new speakers of Francoprovençal and Belarusian

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This paper addresses the issue of language ownership and authenticity in language revitalization, by presenting findings from studies undertaken in two very different socio-cultural contexts, but where a number of important parallels can be observed.

The first study focuses on Francoprovençal. These endangered varieties are reported to have < 1% of native speakers remaining across France, Switzerland and Italy. However, ongoing research into speech communities in Lyon and Valais reveals that, not only are new speakers emerging from embryonic revitalisation projects, but also that they cluster, and form competing communities of practice. A complex picture emerges, whereby new speakers not only find themselves incompatible with L1 speakers, who often show little appetite for their varieties to be acquired by learners, but also with each other, and that this distanciation can be marked by a complicated pattern of social and linguistic correlates.

The second study focuses on Belarusian. Unlike Francoprovençal, Belarusian has been the object of significant state-managed corpus/status planning since the 1920s. However, changing Soviet language policies post-WWII led to extensive language attrition in favour of Russian, a trend that has continued following Belarusian independence. Language revitalisation strategies have nonetheless known some success, as young people from urban Russophone backgrounds have begun using Belarusian in their peer groups, and, in some cases, abandoning Russian altogether.

By comparing how new speakers of Francoprovençal and Belarusian evaluate and describe their own language use and that of others, as well as data on actual spoken and written language use, we find evidence for a number of possible new speaker universals. In particular, we argue that new speakers are likely to employ divergent linguistic variants, not only through hypercorrection, but more consciously as indices of stance (Jaffe, 2009), and that these divergent forms can correlate with speakers’ involvement in distinct communities of practice.

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