

Missionaries and language maintenance and shift: Language policy, social forces or historical accident? (Ferguson quote)

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This paper attempts a descriptive framework for identifying and understanding the role and function of missionaries in situations of language maintenance and shift. The question then is which circumstances can be identified as historical accidents, isolated events of no significance beyond their own, and which can be identified as theoretical variables, likely to repeat a similar influence on language maintenance or shift (LMS) in similar situations. An understanding of LMS in their particular circumstances is of course of crucial importance to missionaries for deciding in which language to translate the Holy Writ as well as to school administrators for deciding on medium of instruction.

Our approach is basically historical, descriptive and comparative with illustrative case studies in an attempt at identification and analysis of causal and contextual variables; the dependent variables in all cases are maintenance or shift. Some of the data are gleaned from secondary sources; some originate from personal fieldwork and experience.

The paper consists of four parts.

Part I consists of a very brief outline of LMS theory with representative examples: Italians and Greeks in Pittsburgh demonstrate shift albeit with a different rate of shift. The Russians in Latvia today represent maintenance or exceedingly slow shift as an extrinsic minority (PAULSTON, 1994, 2004). All three are exemplars, archetypes of behaviour according to LMS theory and act in a predictive fashion.

Part II deals with LMS as a result of language policy. The exemplar for shift is Mexico and colonial Latin America. (Maybe a brief discussion of the Incas and mitimay).

A much more unusual case is maintenance as a result of policy; we discuss here the case of Swahili under the Germans in Tanganyika. Part III also deals with language policy but policy with unintended and unexpected outcomes such as Leopold II's declaration that the official language of Belgian Congo be French and so also the language of the army. With mainly Flemish officers, African multilingualism, and the need for a common tongue, the pidgin Lingala flourished; today it has ten million speakers and is standardized as *Lingala littéraire* by the Catholic missionaries. Unintended outcomes are obviously difficult if not impossible to predict; we can state that when language policies fail, in the majority of situations it is a case of social forces at work. Some of these social forces are still at work in Belgium.

(Maybe we will discuss here occasional private conflict between missionaries with different ideologies such as the rather heated strife over the spelling of Quiche vs. K'iche (Guatemala).

The actual conflict is whether to compromise linguistic principles in order to accept cultural custom.)

In **Part IV** we close with an account of a historical accident influencing LMS –

Such accounts are hard to find, and it is not an exaggeration to say that most cases of LMS which are not theoretically predictable are due to unexpected effects of social forces. The account deals with the explanation for the Jewish shift from Hebrew to Aramaic, beginning with the Babylonian exile 587 BCE. The account is written by an African missionary, the only connection with missionaries – they did not really exist in a way to influence national LMS before the advent of Christianity and Islam. But it is a delightful story, and our tip of the hat to the excellent scholarship one occasionally finds by missionaries.