

European Vernacular Literacy

NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION

Series Editor: Professor Viv Edwards, *University of Reading, Reading, Great Britain*

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European Vernacular Literacy

A Sociolinguistic and Historical Introduction

Joshua A. Fishman

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עלינקען, נועמקען, שײלי רייזעלען, Elyinken, Noamken, Shai-li Reyzelen,
און סאניעלען: Un Sonyelen

פיר נשמהלעך Fir neshomelekh

וועמען איך האב צו פארדאנקען vemen ikh hob tsu fardanken
מיין צווייטע יונגשאפט! mayn tsveyte yungshaft!

הלוואי זאל יידיש ביי אייך Halevay zol yidish bay aykh lebn
לעבן און זיך רעדן, לייענען און זינגען un zikh redn, leyenen un zingen
גרינג און הנאהדיק! gring un hanoedik!

פאר אייך אלעמען א מתנהלע Far aykh alemen a mantonele
פונעם גאנצן הארצן! Funem gantsn hartsn!

(Translation of dedication)

To Elyinke, Noam, Shai-Li Reyzelele and Sonye-Elena,
Four new souls who have given me
My second childhood

May Yiddish live within them
And may speaking, reading and singing it
Flow easily and happily from within them!

A gift for all of you
With all my heart!

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Chapter 1

Why Has Interest in Languages and Literacies Increased So Much Lately?

'Language watchers', such as writers, intelligent readers, linguists, teachers, journalists and literary critics, and even ordinary educated citizens and writers of 'letters to the editor' of their local newspapers, have increasingly noted that English has been changing before their very eyes. In some circles a construction such as 'between you and I', which is heard so frequently in casual speech, is considered to be perfectly OK even in print. Others will accept it as being correct only in some contexts but not in others. Still others will not accept it at all. 'Things change' may seem to us to be an obvious observation, but few of us stop to think that just four or five centuries ago, even English as a whole was not considered appropriate for written or for printed purposes by the best educated and most literate segments of English society. Before we decide whether this latter change (namely the eminently 'print-worthy' nature of English in practically everyone's eyes) was a good or bad development, let us pause to suspend judgment and first to inquire how, where and when such changes occurred, whether they also occurred with other languages and, indeed, whether they are still occurring to certain languages today. Indeed, answering the latter questions may actually give us some better perspective on how to evaluate 'between you and I' and to understand why many (most?) of those who would employ the latter construction would never consider 'between you and we' or 'between you and they' as acceptable, whether in print or in speech. Furthermore, even if we accept that English is changing rapidly in some respects, for some 'users' (speakers/writers), and in certain functions (e.g. newspaper articles but not in State of the Nation addresses), we must also quickly admit that some features of English have remained quite change-resistant, even

obdurately so, in ways that many would characterize as self-punitive (e.g. its wide departure from regular sound–letter correspondences). Of course, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but there cannot be many ‘great’ languages out there in which the simple ‘oo’-sound (as in moo!) is also spelled ‘ue’ (as in ‘true’), ‘ough’ (as in ‘through’), ‘ew’ (as in ‘flew’) and just plain ‘o’ (as in ‘who’). It is a wonder that anyone learns how to read and write a language as orthographically inconsistent as that!

The latter issue is even more basically related to the rise of vernacular literacy, the basic topic of this brief book, than is the former one which is concerned ‘merely’ with the ‘correctness judgments’ for a particular grammatical form. Actually, however, we will ultimately see that both of these issues are strongly related to each other and to our underlying theme, because they are both aspects of ‘standardization’, without which no accomplished literacy nor enduring greatness judgments are possible. Standardization requires the acceptance of authoritative deciders in questions of language as well as disciplined acceptors of that authority. The coming into being of either of these authority-related dramatis personae may take centuries to develop and even when they both already are in place, ‘it moves nevertheless’ (i.e. the language continues to change since variability is part of the human condition per se), at least as long as the language is alive. Clearly this book is about a difficult adventure: to attempt to tame the living and yet to keep it alive, creative and truly human. Literacy is surrounded on both sides: by too little standardization on the one hand and by too much on the other. There is no way of avoiding criticism for those engaged in literacy efforts. No matter what it is that they do, they are unavoidably damned by some if they do and damned by others if they don’t.

Returning to our very first observation, namely that interest in languages and literacies has increased of late, we may also want to ask why this may be so. Several possible reasons come to mind. Perhaps it is in part attributable to the increased expansion of our capacity to identify with and be curious about peoples and cultures that were formerly out of sight and out of mind. Such increases in the ‘range of interest’ are characteristic of growth in ‘modernization of the mind’ and of the expansion of contacts between segments of our own population, its minorities included, not to mention contacts with populations all over the world. We have also become more alert to the value of biodiversity and to its fragility, due to the impact of growing industrialization and commercialization all over the world and in our own midst. This has all gone on together with (and perhaps because of) an increased awareness of our own interdependence on other peoples and other languages. We may no longer be as certain as we once were that we

are inherently better than they are, either intellectually or morally, but this also makes us more appreciative of what we truly are and value.

The English language is one of the greatest and most prized possessions of the anglophone world, so those of us who are members of this world, directly or indirectly, should want to know more about it and not take it for granted, even though only a few centuries ago it was no more widely considered worthy of regard (or for cultivation) than are Macedonian or Rusyn today. Knowing that, we are becoming more aware of the ample evidence that other peoples are really concerned about their own languages too, and do not want to lose them or take them for granted. All in all, our greater interest in and concern for languages all over the world leads us directly to an awareness of the importance of literacy, in all of its varieties and individual and also societal functions. Thus, although this book focuses on the processes, problems and heroes of European vernacular literacy, it also has direct relevance for all those who are also interested in other languages and in other parts of the world. Literacy holds out great promises everywhere. Can it fulfill these promises everywhere or will it do so only partially and differentially? At any rate, like democracy (which is still far from being fully fulfilled anywhere), it is such an important human ideal and attainment that it behooves us to become better familiar with it. This book attempts to help the reader move in that direction, so that they can help move the literacy process along within their own life space.

We are about to embark on an important, interesting and at times even entertaining adventure. Our guide or vade mecum on this adventure, this book is not based upon extensive primary sources such as those that specialists employ, nor even upon extensive secondary sources that may be useful primarily to advanced students. Nevertheless, it will not only hope to supply some necessary information but also some stimulating theories, interpretations, suggestions and questions about the spread of literacy that even such students and advanced scholars may also find novel and interesting.

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The type of Gutenberg's 42-line Bible (Man, 2002)

Chapter 2

What is a 'Language' of Vernacular Literacy?

Many crucial terms used in the social sciences are also used in everyday speech. The only problem is that in everyday usage terms are rarely precisely defined in advance. As a result, many a conversation that has gone on for hours may grind to a halt because one participant or another exclaims 'But that is not what I mean when I say "freedom" (or "democracy", or "peace", or whatever)!' In order for us not to be faced by any such problem after many pages, or even chapters, of our discussion, let us start by immediately defining the terms 'language'. Does 'slang' qualify to be called a language? Does 'Southern English', like the kind that is spoken informally by many native residents of rural Mississippi, qualify? Does the native speech of recent Japanese immigrants from Okinawa, or that of newcomers to the US mainland from the coffee plantations near the southern coast of Puerto Rico or does the Spanish from 'South of the border, down Mexico way', qualify, because 'almost everyone's parents were native-speakers of either Spanish or one or another Amerindian language, all of which arrived here even before English did'? Does a spoken variety qualify even if it has no written counterpart at all, or even if it has no writing system? It would be good to get some of these questions clarified from the very beginning (not that full agreement may necessarily be reached even after ample discussion), so that we can all at least know if we are 'on the same page', even if we are not all on the same line of that page.

A Dictionary Definition

A commonly used unabridged dictionary suggests a typical beginning definition of language as: 'the way human beings communicate using words, whether written or spoken. It is also used for the particular system of communication used by a specific country, nation or community'

(Encarta, 1999: 1013). This particular dictionary then goes on to explain that 'language' is not the only way that individuals communicate and that it includes such subsidiary varieties as idiolects, dialects, slang, jargon, parlance, lingo, etc. The above overall definition could easily be 'filled out' by mentioning various further varieties of language, for example, occupational varieties, levels of formality in language, levels of seriousness in language, use of metaphor in language, related and unrelated languages, child language, animal languages, disturbed language, international and classical languages and so on. Gradually, what we originally took to be a simple, popular term, with a common meaning easily available to one and all, manifests itself to be full of unexpected complexities related to its widely differentiated users and uses. Obviously, only a modicum of reflection has revealed that there is nothing at all inherently simple about words such as 'language' and 'languages', since they reflect and convey all of the motivational and behavioral differences of the species that employ them, both to reveal and to disguise their goals, values and characteristics.

Indeed, the dictionary's approach quickly becomes unwieldy, as soon as we seriously try to make it apply to all of the widely known uses and users of language varieties. This type of recitation of 'varieties of varieties' also suffers from its laundry list character. There is no rhyme nor reason to the order in which we have listed them, nor any seeming relationship between these varieties, nor any attempt to cope with the obvious ephemerality and peripherality of some and the eternality and centrality of others to the human condition. There must be another way, hopefully a better one, to view language and languages, one that takes us closer to our main goal, namely, an explication of what may be a constantly ongoing saga: the birth and death of languages throughout the centuries of dramatically unequal human societies living in both internal and external interaction.

Another Approach

One of the most salient features of the manifold languages of human societies is the varying and changeable attitudes or beliefs that these societies have about them, even be they positive ones. In a very real sense, 'languages' are those whose respective speech communities want and believe them to be full-fledged verbal media in order to be able to engage in the kinds of interactions that these communities consider important for the realization of their goals. Such a definition makes us dependent on within-community attitudes in order to decide 'what is a language'. Only four such attitudinal dimensions or belief systems are required in order to

generate, order and contrast a substantial 'variety of (language) varieties', as follows.

Vitality

Vitality deals with the conviction that any variety under consideration has a 'large' number of speakers, readers, writers and understanders. It forms the attitude toward languages, one's own as well as those of others, which reflects the amour propre of most speech communities (i.e. it is very perspectival in nature). In the world at large it is commonly considered more auspicious, more honorable, more noteworthy, more robust, more powerful and longevity predictive for a variety to have more speakers rather than fewer ones. However, this intuitive and commonsensical view that 'more' speakers is better than 'fewer' speakers, also flies in the face of the incontrovertible evidence that at any particular time in human history, as well as throughout human history as a whole, there have been many more numerically tiny varieties than there have been numerically 'hefty' ones. Presumably, God must have liked tiny languages, just as [s]he must have liked poor people, because [s]he made so many of them! Of course, it is also the case that there are several very persistent small languages (e.g. Basque, Letzeburgish and Montagasque, just to mention a few in tiny corners of Western Europe alone), as well as several deceased larger languages (e.g. Sumerian, Egyptian and Khazar, to mention a few Afro-Asian ones), which leads us to the realization that the brute size of a speech community per se, at one point in time, is no sure guarantee of its vitality at another.

But, all things considered, most of those who care for the health and well-being of specific languages, or for the safeguarding of a 'many-languaged-world' as a whole, easily realize that a steadily shrinking demographic base for a community of speakers tends to spell 'trouble ahead' for the speech community under discussion. Or, to put it another way, all things considered, it may be better to have the headaches of larger languages than the fevers of smaller ones. On the other hand, the advent of the computer has made small languages much more easily 'maintainable' (via websites, blogs, desktop publishing and email) and distributable (via newsletters, recipient lists and self-accessible via voluntary virtual communities) than was ever the case before, particularly since the appearance of the printing press, mass mailings, commercial advertising and massive mailing lists. But, even so, 'more' may still be better than 'less' and this leaves us with the problem of where should one draw the boundary between 'large' and 'small'? Vitality may well turn out to be

another 'perspectival' issue which has no objective empirical solution; there are many such in the social sciences precisely because they so closely mirror society, even though the real world acts on the basis of intuitive understandings of where that boundary presumably lies. Varieties that are viewed as lacking vitality are more likely to die out without leaving a record, or to remain unknown to outsiders even when they are alive and intergenerationally continuous. The obvious importance of literacy functions and vitality characteristics considered together (i.e. in interaction with each other) should also not be overlooked, since either one may intensify the extent to which the other raises any variety out of perspectival invisibility. Vitality is a descriptor of languages per se while literacy is a function of languages. These two characterizations lie on two different dimensions, they are independent of each other and must be checked out independently, when investigating when and why varieties get to be recognized or utilized either by their own users or by outsiders.

Historicity

Historicity deals with the view that any given variety under discussion has a long and distinguished history. Older varieties are considered somehow 'better' than younger ones that have only just come into being. Let us define the boundary between 'older' and 'younger' as three complete generations, so that hardly anyone alive at any particular time can say that they are themselves older than a variety whose age is under discussion. Of course, a more noteworthy attribute of historicity is that it also tends to increase the opportunity that a particular variety will be associated with great writers, famous leaders and noteworthy rallying periods in its speech community's history. An even more noteworthy characteristic, for our purposes, is that historicity is widely considered to be 'a good thing' (a desirable attribute) in interlanguage comparisons and that it is commonly associated with higher prestige and greater visibility in the 'world of languages'. 'My language is older than yours is' is a claim to fame that may come in handy in struggling to maintain one's language and marshal the resources and supporters needed to protect and preserve it from a competitor variety.

Of course, any claim as to 'historicity' is a highly perspectival claim, that is, it is subjective and highly dependent on the viewer's perspective (i.e. it is self-serving in accord with and predictable from his or her prior opinions and attitudes and can only be roughly inferred from larger historical circumstances). Accurate data on the age of languages are, therefore, rare or totally absent in most cases, but the view that older is better persists nevertheless. Any estimates as to the age of one language or