

The intended workshop: B – Case studies of language revitalization and standardization.

DYSFUNCTIONAL ATTRITION AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE IN THE ARBRESH
OF PIANA DEGLI ALBANESI

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1. Main issues of this paper:

This paper discusses the importance of holistic sociolinguistic research on the nature of linguistic attrition for the construction of a sustainable language policy. It analyzes the case of the Arbresh dialect of Piana degli Albanesi (Piana), Sicily. The main goals of this study are:

First, to show that existent taxonomies of endangered languages are not complete and are challenged by new facts and analyses. A realistic assessment of the nature and the features of the endangered language is important not only for its theoretical implication, but also as a practical tool to be used if change of the state of the language is desirable.

Second, to bring evidence that a comprehensive sociolinguistic study is needed before any kind of planning or intervention for linguistic revitalization, using an approach that analyzes different aspects of the language in their socio-historical development. The case of Piana Arbresh shows that the damage in the functional abilities and structural basis of the language is much deeper than in its social status. Therefore any social interventions that aim to restore the language, should target first of all the most “injured” parts of the endangered language.

Andersen (1982: 85) distinguishes two types of linguistic attrition: “dysfunctional attrition” versus “cosmetic attrition”. The first is the type of attrition that consists of these two features: 1.

gradual loss of linguistic competence that causes reduction in communication and in transfer of information; 2. stigmatization of the language, which produces negative evaluation or attitudes, feelings of insecurity, inadequacy or rejection. The second type of attrition, cosmetic attrition, includes all other types of attrition that can be noticed but do not interfere with communication or have negative socio-affective attributes.

This paper shows that the attrition of the Arbresh dialect of Piana degli Albanesi does not fit either of the two categories proposed by Andersen. It demonstrates that the first features, the reduction in functions, loss of linguistic competence and loss of informative capacity, all characterize Arbresh at this stage. But the second feature, stigmatization of the language, is not a characteristic of this community. There is a feeling of insecurity in carrying on communication in Arbresh because of its advanced stage of endangerment, but there are no negative attitudes towards Arbresh, like reluctance and shame in using the language, stigmatization and rejection of the original ethnicity, or jealousy towards the majority groups. Sometimes Piana speakers prefer to see the attrition as an injury to the language, but without looking down upon it.

But, as shown in the analysis of language use and structural decay in the paper, the state of Arbresh does not correspond to cosmetic attrition either. The paper investigates the state of language use and structural decay, and assesses the linguistic attitude of Arbresh speakers. It concludes that Arbresh attrition consists of a progressive shrinkage of linguistic domains and functions, a decrease of the number of speakers, and a decline of linguistic competence as the speakers' age diminishes. There is strong evidence of decay in the functional scope Arbresh has in the community of Piana (functional load)¹, and of the diminishing control it has over the other languages of Piana's repertoire in a given domain or in a given communicative function (functional transparency). There is also an advanced structural deterioration in all grammatical levels, which further limits the ability of Arbresh to fulfill the functional needs of the speech community today. The analysis shows that Arbresh attrition is a "dysfunctional attrition", which, unlike the attrition described by Andersen, does not involve negative attitude and lack of linguistic loyalty.

The paper also stresses that positive attitude of the speakers towards the language is not a guarantee of linguistic survival and that other aspects of attrition should not be neglected in the process of linguistic revitalization. The steps of institutional and community efforts in Piana degli Albanesi are critically analyzed in the second part of the paper. An emphasis by the community

leaders on the status issues of language planning, neglecting its need for corpus planning has endangered the good results of the long hard work of this community. In the process of linguistic “reconstruction” of the deteriorated parts and levels of the language, the connections between Arbresh and its historical ancestor, Albanian, or the languages of the same repertoire used today in the community, Italian and Sicilian, have been misjudged. The possible contribution of each of these languages has not been realistically evaluated. Therefore there is confusion about how to use Arbresh in Piana’s schools today, what methods to implement, what kind of texts to use, what student age to target etc. The way to answer all these questions is to start the planning from a comprehensive sociolinguistic study of the language. The paper demonstrates that only through a holistic approach (Sasse. 1992; Grinevald Craig. 1997), which brings together research on extralinguistic, behavioral and structural linguistic processes, will the efforts and costs of linguistic revitalization and of educational policies be meaningful.

2. Contributions of this paper to the sociolinguistic theory of language death and maintenance:

This study on Piana Arbresh challenges the definition of “dysfunctional attrition” and opens a dialogue for a new conceptualization of the principal features of language endangerment and death. Based on the features of Arbresh attrition, the paper calls for more attention from activists in communities of endangered minority languages to issues other than speakers attitude, issues that might be neglected in the name of a stronger focus on status planning. Using a large set of data, the paper demonstrates the vital role of two processes for the revitalization of Arbresh: a) the increase in its functional scope, and b) the reversal of structural and lexical deterioration. The paper also underlines the importance of a realistic and careful investigation of different aspects of the endangered languages, like functional, structural and behavioral characteristics, for a sustainable language policy (Romaine. 2002), and for language maintenance.

ⁱ For more on the concepts “functional load” and “functional transparency”, see Pandharipande (2002).

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About the author:

Eda Derhemi is a Research Associate in Multilingual and Multicultural Communication at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She did her undergraduate work in language and literature at the University of Tirana, in Albania, and was a member of the faculty at the same university from 1985 to 1990. From 1990 to 1995 she lived in Sicily, and worked as a journalist for Deutsche Welle. In Fall 1995 she entered the graduate program in linguistics at the University of Illinois, receiving her Master's degree in linguistics in 1997 and her PhD in communications last year. During the years of her graduate studies she taught Italian for the Italian department at the University of Illinois. In 2000 she worked as an intern for the MOST programme at Unesco in Paris. In 2001 she did extensive fieldwork in Sicily, on the endangered Arbresh language. Her interests are in issues of endangered languages and cultures, education policies as means of linguistic maintenance and revitalization, political consequences of linguistic and cultural contact in multiethnic and multilingual societies.