

Linguistics

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In his keynote address to a conference of linguistics, Joel Sherzer argues that language is changing and disappearing in some regions of the world because of the social and linguistic changes that are occurring. Sherzer titled his speech " Tradition and Change in Language and Discourse: Three Cases Studies", but he could well have called in the disappearing dialects and languages of the world. He chronicles the death knell of these languages and the efforts of linguistics such as himself to keep them from disappearing, but acknowledges that he might be fighting a losing battle.

Sherzer first compares his studies and the languages he is discussing as a sort of linguistic gumbo, a mixture of several distinctive parts that becomes an entity all its own. The problem, as he first outlines when discussing the Francoprovençal dialects of Italy, France and Switzerland is that the speakers of the language are moving away, changing their use of the language and dying off (16). The problems facing these dialects have been that they represent such a diverse political and geographical area that they have been in decline for more than 200 years. The French have worked to eliminate their version of the dialect since the French Revolution(16). In addition, Francoprovençal was largely the dialect of peasants and those raised by peasants. As the world became more educated, the dialect was abandoned for more widely accepted languages.

France wanted the French spoken to be the same throughout the country and even Switzerland " is not as tolerant of language diversity as its popular, postcard-like image of a tri- or even quadrilingual country suggests (17). In short, Sherzer points out; the countries that are home to these languages do not promote them, largely because they do not convey a modern image of a

unified, intelligent country. The languages are being disposed of as the world overcomes the geographical barriers that installed them in the first place.

Sherzer stops short of saying that the countries are actively trying to eliminate Francoprovençal dialects because they are the languages of the poor and working class, but he quietly leads the listener and reader to that conclusion. These dialects were once so different that even neighboring villages might not use the same exact dialect and their language was extremely precise, describing things in a manner that was specific to their region or possibly even their community.

Even the type of snow was described by different words and intonations in various regions (18). This sort of hillbilly-speak was always one of multiple languages the group spoke and as international commerce and trade became more and more common, the dialects gave way to the sort of supra-languages of the country. Indeed, Sherzer points out that as the way of life became more industrialized and traditional farming methods began to die away, so did the language (17).

Furthermore, in a modern age, English, as the language of mass communication, held more interest than the traditional languages of their fathers. When coupled with the idea that dialect varied greatly between the three countries and even between regions within the countries, its usefulness as a form of communication faded. Thus, only scholars and the elderly seemed to still have any deep ties to the dialects and they began to fade from existence. If it has any hope for survival, it will be when bilingual programs are initiated to preserve the culture and heritage that the languages

represent and when parents insist on their children learning both their Francoprovençal dialect and the language of the nation.

The case of Central Mexican sociolinguistics is much more bright and happy with a better future it would appear. Sherzer concludes his remark about the saints' day festivals of Central Mexico saying that they are alive and well and spreading to areas such as New Mexico in the United States (20). Like the Francoprovençal dialects of Europe, the fiestas of Central Mexico represent a bygone era of language and sociology. The fiestas have their roots in the indigenous populations of the region, mixed with the Catholic heritage that consumed them as the European conquerors mixed with the local populace. The difference between them and the Francoprovençal dialects is that the sociology of Mexico is different. While no one can quite define what makes one an Indian or indigenous (19), Sherzer argues that the native language is preserved partially as a function of these local fiestas. Each celebration, usually tied to a specific saint and the community named for that saint, has a distinctive communication structure which incorporates the native languages.

In San Luis de la Paz, for example, the native Chichimec language plays an integral role in the fiesta (18). Each aspect of the festival ties into the heritage of the indigenous and of the conquerors. Many parts of the fiesta are conducted in Chichimec and only the actual mass for the saint is conducted by a Spanish-speaking priest. The remainder of events is both formal and changing, structured and impromptu, allowing the sociolinguist structure of the event to be preserved and to march forward with the times.

“ These fiestas and communicative events should not be viewed as

antiquated traces of indigenous practices, charming to observe," (21) he argues, saying that they persists and thrive because they are adaptive and able to change with the times.

In his final case study, Sherzer talks of his 30-year attachment to and study of the Kuna people of Panama. Sherzer laments that things that were common knowledge when he began his studies with the Kuna are now virtually unknown, such as the "myth of the White Prophet." (22) At the time he first began studying the people of Kuna, the myth was still performed in the old ways, with one chieftain chanting the story and another chieftain, or the people, responding to the storytelling. Now, that portion of the community is virtually gone as the Kuna become more and more absorbed into the Spanish-speaking culture of modern Panama. Sherzer expresses his gratitude that Kuna leadership has noticed the loss of the old ways and sought to preserve their heritage and language in modern ways, via recordings and written words, to attempt to preserve what was, but laments that it fails to adequately reproduce the methods and sociology of the language, the way that storytelling is performed (22).

Ultimately, Sherzer refused to draw any distinctive conclusions regarding the similarities and differences between the three case studies, arguing that like a good gumbo, each has distinctive flavors to contribute to the study of linguistics and sociology and should be tasted, or interpreted, individually as well as in part of the larger stew. In essence, this work seems incomplete. It feels as though he began to draw parallels between the three case studies and then, either do to time constraints in presenting his research or for other

unknown reason, failed to provide the analysis of the hows and wherefores of the material.

Each region faced a similar issue: the native or indigenous languages were overshadowed by a national language that people needed to use for commerce and communication on a large scale. Each region dealt with the problem differently and as such each culture is fading in a different way. Though it requires value judgments and assessments on the part of the researcher, it seems that these issues should have been more thoroughly discussed.

For example, what role does intellectualism and elitism play in each of the methods of preservation, or lack thereof, of the historical sociolinguistic identities? It is easily argued that even now the territories that once spoke the Francoprovençal languages are the most modern and technologically advanced of the three. Yet, that region has done the least to preserve its heritage, even going so far as to make it a virtually state-sponsored program to eliminate the dialects. Is this related to the perception that the Francoprovençal language, as the language of the peasants, was the language of the uneducated and modern, elitist people's desire not to be affiliated with the hillbilly speak?

Is it not somewhat like the effort of many Southerners in the United States to minimize their accents or reliance on local dialects in an effort to appear more educated and intelligent? It appears from everything that Sherzer said and some things he did not say that this effort has been an attempt to be politically unifying of the various countries, but also an attempt to prove their modernization and place in a technological world. Because there has

been no systemic effort to preserve this heritage, to document individual dialects with the Francoprovençal language, one can only assume that the scholars in these regions are attempting to let the language die out and forego that history to be a part of the modern world.

Furthermore, what is the role of modern technology in preserving the language and communication patterns of the Kuna? Though it appears that they have given much thought to the preservation of the stories and oral tradition of storytelling, they seem to have also given up their culture in favor of the modern Spanish-speaking one. In addition, their methods of preservation seem lacking in that they do not fully represent the traditions, the way that the stories would have been told.

The efforts of Sherzer and the Kuna to record their chants and document as much of their history as possible, seems to be exactly that, an effort to document it rather than an effort to preserve it. Ultimately, describing an Apache sun ritual is not the same as seeing it performed in the traditional manner. Even having someone who once participated in the rite describe it in detail does not preserve the history in the same manner as a videotape of the rite or recording of a Kuna chant, as traditionally performed, would do. Eventually, those who understand the meanings of the words die off and a new generation is left to interpret the tradition with words only. As words morph over time, the lasting impression can be very different from the original action.

Finally, there are the fiestas of the saints in central Mexico. This is the only one of Sherzer's case studies which seems to legitimately preserve the traditions of the past. Though the festivals mutate and change as time

passes, this is the most true to the study of linguistics and sociology of the three studies. Languages and societies change with the passage of time. Rather than trying to eliminate their history or record it, but still let it die, the indigenous people of central Mexico are working to maintain their heritage and their future.

There is an interesting corollary here that it is the least developed of the three regions that is doing the most to preserve its past. It begs the question of whether the world is becoming so homogenized linguistically that it seeks to eliminate any historical differences. Are we so interested in becoming one world, so enamored with modern communication that our heritages are disposable? The question that Sherzer failed to raise was whether the events in Europe and among the Kuna in Panama are changing the area from a linguistic gumbo into an unpalatable mush that is all the same everywhere.

Sherzer's description of his case studies as a linguistic gumbo (16) was a colorful analogy, but probably not appropriate for the reality of what the studies revealed. They were instead evidence that the melting pot mentality of the United States has extended to the remainder of the world and people are no longer making an effort to maintain their heritage or culture, with the singular exception of Central Mexico. There alone are people allowing their culture to adapt and change with the modern world instead of trying to forget where they have come from. No longer is the world allowing its regions to have their own distinctive flavor, even as part of an international gumbo. Instead, the spices are all being melded to speak the same boring languages in the same boring manners. Recording the heritage for posterity

seems to be a noble ambition, but not necessarily one that seems to be endorsed by the local populaces.

Sherzer's case studies are interesting and make good points regarding the loss of linguistic heritages around the world. It is good that efforts are being made to preserve the memories of these heritages, but a terrible shame that little is being done to keep those heritages from becoming a thing of the past. His suggestion that within the nations the Francoprovençal speaking areas adopt a bilingual approach and preserve this folk language is well meant and probably the best thing that could happen, but unless people in Italy, France and Switzerland take up the banner and support their nations' histories, his idea is little more than empty rhetoric. The world is clearly progressing to international homogeneity and the shame is that no one seems to care.

Works Cited

Sherzer, Joel. "Tradition and Change in Language and Discourse: Three Case Studies". *Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, Vol. 25, June 2006. pp. 16-24.