

DOI: 10.11649/a.1968

Article No.: 1968

Adeptus
nr 14/2019 r. pismo humanistow

Guillem Belmar is currently a Graduate Student at the Department of Linguistics of the University of California, Santa Barbara. Former lecturer at the Department of Minorities and Multilingualism (Frisian) of the University of Groningen, he focuses his research on language revitalization strategies. He has worked on language promotion for many European languages through his project #Europeminoritylanguages, and among other research interests he looks into the role of virtual communities as breathing spaces for minority languages.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4242-8518>

e-mail: gbelmarviernes@ucsb.edu

Maggie Glass is a fourth year PhD student at the University of Limerick. Her research focuses on language promotion and language planning, and she is currently examining participation and identity in Twitter based on Irish-language television fan practices.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8029-7857>

Guillem Belmar, Maggie Glass

Virtual communities as breathing spaces for minority languages: Re-framing minority language use in social media

Introduction

Globalization has changed social activity and interaction, re-shaping sociolinguistic repertoires and the values they encode (Blommaert, 2009). Thus, the potential for cultural and linguistic exchange has become a key aspect of global citizenship (Jaffe, 2012), which in turn has led to the portrayal of multilingualism as an asset which we should all aspire to. In this new global stage, people from all over the world are interconnected, ideas are shared back and forth, and cultural expressions are exported and imported just as often as consumer products. However, social discourse around multilingualism is highly incoherent. We are constantly reminded of the need to learn a foreign language, but in fact multilingualism often gets reduced to a “state language plus English” discourse.

The study was conducted at the authors' own expense. Authors' contribution: paper idea, data collection and writing (G.B. & M.G.).

No competing interests have been declared.

Publisher: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences.

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It is precisely in this context that English-language hegemony is more visible: we use English for cross-cultural communication, and English-language media products are consumed much more commonly and by many more people. In turn, the use of English as the language of communication in global settings, such as the Internet, leads to an apparent linguistic homogenization that is increasingly at odds with the struggle of (linguistic) minorities to reclaim spaces and discourses of their own (Bornman, 2003; Eisenberg & Spinner-Halev, 2005; Kymlicka, 1995).

This fight for language maintenance and the creation of communicative spaces and domains for minority languages has recently undergone a dramatic transformation with the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013; Reershemius, 2017), which has redefined communicative interactions around the globe by de-localizing and de-temporalizing them (Blommaert, 2019, p. 2). In other words, communication does not need to take place in any given physical or temporal frame. Instead, we can communicate across spatial and temporal boundaries.

The study of computer-mediated communication in linguistic minority communities, especially on social networking sites, has had a huge impact on several fields of study. Scholars have taken different approaches and stances when researching this topic, such as the study of bi-/multilingual practices (Reershemius, 2017), discourse construction (Tagg & Seargeant, 2015), identity construction (Díaz, 2011), language activism (Teruelle, 2012), language awareness (Belmar, 2018; Warren & Jennings, 2015), language in education (Leeson & Sheikh, 2007; Reinhardt, 2017), language vitality (Jongbloed-Faber, Van de Velde, Meer, & Klinkenberg, 2016), linguistic landscape (Ivkovic & Lotherington, 2008), socialization (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2017), language revitalization (Paricio-Martín & Martínez-Cortés, 2010), language promotion (Bonsey, 2018), language ideologies (Davis-Deacon, 2018; Szczepankiewicz, 2018), language use (Belmar, in press-a; Belmar, in press-b; Belmar & Heyen, 2019; Keegan, Mato, & Ruru, 2015; Lillehaugen, 2016; McMonagle, Cunliffe, Jongbloed-Faber, & Jarvis, 2019; Pischlöger, 2016), translation (Scannell, 2012), and language policy (Jones & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2013)

In fact, many have argued that if minority languages are to survive in the long run they need to achieve a significant presence online (Soria, 2016). Among others, digital presence is said to raise awareness of linguistic diversity among the wider public, to create a more “modern” image of the minority language, to encourage language use by boosting the speaker’s confidence to use their language (Jones, 2013). Regardless of how much actual language use

the presence of a minority language online may encourage, boosting digital language presence seems to be a necessary step for the empowerment of linguistic minorities around the world, and networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, VK in Russia or Weibo in China) seem to be an appropriate tool to do so (see, for instance, Belmar, in press-c). The interactive opportunities of social media, coupled with the widespread use of these platforms, allow speakers of minority languages to create their own spaces for communication without the need for government mediation or funding. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of virtual communities as breathing spaces for minority languages.

European nationalism and language minorization

Despite their differences in terms of the number of speakers – from bigger languages such as Catalan or Bavarian to the severely endangered Saami languages or the revived Cornish – all linguistic minorities share a similar history which is the reason behind their minorization. Regardless of their current sociolinguistic context, the sharp decline of these languages began, overall, in the eighteenth century with the formation of the nation-state, a process the effects of which can be seen all over the world. In Europe, the processes of industrialization that followed undermined the socioeconomic basis of these languages, and many members of these communities migrated to the sprawling urban centres. In addition, universal schooling, new centralized bureaucracies and military conscription were strong factors which imposed the learning and use of the standardized state languages (Cameron, 2007; Fishman, 1991; Leerssen, 2010; Martin-Jones, 1989; Pujolar & O'Rourke, 2018).

Speakers of other languages spoken in the state were relegated to the periphery, often in more than one sense: a geographic periphery (i.e. these languages' hinterland is often found far from the state capital), an economic periphery (i.e. speakers of these languages are mostly employed in the agricultural sector), a cultural periphery (i.e. they are portrayed as backwards and uneducated in the dominant discourses), and sociopolitical periphery (i.e. the speakers of these languages are often underrepresented, if at all, in the legislative, executive and judicial powers of the state) (Grillo, 1989; Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2013). Sociolinguist Robert Lafont even referred to this "cultural subjugation" within European state borders as *colonialisme intérieur* (Lafont, 1967, p. 182).

It can be said, therefore, that linguistic minorities emerged because of the construction of nation-states (Auer, 2005; Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998; Pujolar & O'Rourke, 2018) and

the tight ideological link between nation and language. These minorities are, in a sense, consequences – and victims – of a series of processes aiming for the homogenization of a single political entity. In fact, Anderson referred to nations as ‘imagined communities’ which only became possible thanks to the emergence of print capitalism (Anderson, 1983). In other words, the centralized creation and diffusion of the written word established standard state languages that all the population had to share, which in turn gave rise to the possibility of claiming membership to a community whose members one could never get to know in its entirety.

These homogenizing processes, linked with modernization, condemned all languages other than the state language(s) to a permanent state of diglossia, and purposefully excluded them from modernity (O’Rourke, Pujolar, & Ramallo, 2015, p. 5). With little to no incentive for speakers to keep their language, these languages retreated to a “shrinking rural hinterland” (O’Rourke et al., 2015, p. 5) as many speakers switched to the state language in search for new opportunities. The switch, however, was never really voluntary. Members of these minority groups were strongly discouraged from using their language, sometimes through a “no policy” policy (Fishman, 2001, p. 454), but often through overt policies exerting shame, de-naturalization and self-hatred through stigmatization, physical punishment and, in some extreme cases, forced boarding schooling for the children of minority language speakers, incarceration, outright repression or even deportation (Pujolar & O’Rourke, 2018, p. 3).

In the nineteenth century, language revival movements emerged throughout Europe. These revitalization movements were often linked to romantic nationalist European ideals of language and identity, and the recovery of a “pure” form of language was seen as a necessary step towards the creation or reclamation of a national identity separate from that of the state (Hroch, 2000; Leerssen, 2010), a group identity, a community, to which individuals could claim membership.

Minority language policy and media

Language policy as a formal field of research – which Ricento (2000, p. 196) divides into three stages – developed, like language planning, in the 1960s in the context of decolonization and state formation efforts in post-colonial countries, and was bolstered by the emergence of structuralism in the social sciences. The Western belief that language problems can be solved through planning, especially in the public sector, drove the focus of language plan-

ners towards the implementation of a dominant Western national language, usually English or French, as demonstrated in the policies set in place in post-colonial African countries during this period (Ricento, 2000, p. 198). The prevailing ideologies dictated that successful nationhood – or statehood – was one with a “cultural/ethnic unity within a defined geographical boundary (state), and a common linguistic identity among the citizens of a polity” (Ricento, 2000, p. 198). A prestigious European language was therefore seen to be most beneficial as a national language, as it already fit the requirements of being written, standardized and was deemed appropriate to adapt to technological and social advancement. However, it became clear that language planning as a branch of resource management was unsustainable (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). The promotion of hegemonic European languages as “neutral media” to aid in national development had an obvious bias towards the economic interest of metropolises, with negative effects on marginalized minority language speakers (Ricento, 2000, p. 201). This marked a move away from perceiving languages as entities with defined societal distributions and functions, and turned the focus towards the status and relations of speech communities.

Language policy in its contemporary form is largely characterized by global events shaping language transmission and spread. Factors such as global migration, the re-emergence of national ethnic identities and languages, and the media revolution have all played a part in how language policy is seen today. The centralization of the control and dissemination of culture – which was seen as a necessary byproduct of the globalization of capitalism and the domination of the media by a handful of multinationals (Said, 1993) – has been viewed by some as a greater threat to independence than colonialism. The spread of technology – and culture alongside it – has had consequences for the status and, allegedly, even the viability of “small” languages (Hale et al., 1992; Krauss, 1992).

However, as the reliance on communication technology increases, it becomes clearer that globalization may not be the death sentence for minority languages that it was once believed to be. Instead, communication technology forces us to re-contextualize languages, especially with regard to minority languages. The traditional concept of language communities as distinct, geographically-bound entities is no longer viable in the twenty-first century. Languages of all statuses have emerged into the cyber-sphere, bringing with them increased agency for speakers to participate in speech communities, regardless of physical location (Moriarty, 2015). Globalization is even felt in marginalized indigenous communities, who acknowledge the need to jump on the bandwagon and make use of these new

vehicles of expression to re-dignify not only their languages, but themselves (J. L. Johnson & Callahan, 2013; Lillehaugen, 2016). It is often falsely perceived that language policy only occurs at a national or state level. However, policies are in place at every level of decision-making regarding language use. To truly understand the policies active within any group, we must look at the actual language practices of that population (Spolsky, 2004). Spolsky (2004, expanded in Shohamy, 2006, p. 52) identified the three main components of any language policy to be the beliefs and ideologies about the language, actual practice, and the specific actions that take place to manage and manipulate language behaviour. Any combination of these factors can be used to inform an analysis of the policies that function outside of the purview of the official, national policy statements.

To that end, Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (2011) proposed a new analytical framework to characterize the emergence of minority language media practices, drawing on Ricento's (2000) three-stage taxonomy described above: the Gifting Era, the Service Era and the Performance Era. The struggle to establish media in minority languages is still ongoing and, unlike language policy research, individual cases may land at varying points on this spectrum. However, the stages identified by Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes (and further elaborated in Kelly-Holmes & Atkinson, 2017) indicate that there has been significant progress made over the last several decades.

The first stage, called the "Gifting Era", sees the State as the key agent and actor with power over the existence of minority language media. Typically, the target language communities are seen as geographically isolated, monolingual and on the peripheries of the dominant society. As the media communication in this stage is monologic and broadcast to a community within a specific geographical area, the state authorities only grant scarce media resources to the communities. It is in this stage that, for example, the Catalan and Basque radio and TV stations were founded with funds from the central Spanish government, with public institutions retaining some degree of control over the content of these media.

The second stage, or the "Service Era" (Pietikäinen & Kelly-Holmes, 2011), comes with the realization that simply being present in the media is not enough, and is brought about by a drive for "functional completeness" (Moring, 2007, p. 18). While media communication does remain monologic, communication between the audience and media creators increases, as community-based organizations gain traction and agency (Cotter, 1999), and begin to share power with the State actors. In terms of computer-mediated communication, this can be seen, for instance, in services offered to speakers of minority languages:

as well as offering interfaces in novelty languages such as “Bork, bork, bork!” and Klingon, Google Chrome may be accessed in Gaeilge, Nyanja and ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i, among many others. Similarly, Facebook allows users to set the interface and view their profiles in languages such as Frysk, Iñupiatun and SiSwati.

The final stage, the “Performance Era”, sees a significant change in the actors and a shift of agency away from the state and towards the individual. The performance era is characterized by the emergence of communities with an interest in a language or activity in it. These communities are no longer bounded by location, thereby de-territorializing the concept of language and contesting ideologies of homogeneity and monolingualism. This, in turn, allows both “transient and more long-lasting communities of practice [to] develop around minority language media projects and channels” (Kelly-Holmes & Atkinson, 2017, p. 238). By removing the agency from state actors, individuals and non-professionals have the ability to provide multilingual content across platforms, with little to no charge for consumption. It is in this era that active language policies within small communities become apparent.

Social media platforms are one of the best examples of the innovation possible in the performance era. The Internet has become an essential platform in community building for speakers of minority languages, while also allowing normalization of their use (Cunliffe, 2007). These sites also allow for production of minority languages in environments where they had been previously excluded, and have the added benefit of being attractive to young people, without whom the languages have no chance of survival.

Translanguaging and social media

Based on the view that different communication systems form a single integrated system where languages are fluid codes framed within social practices, translanguaging is the process of experiencing and expressing through the use of two or more languages (Baker, 2011, p. 288; Poza, 2017). It deals with the language practices of multilinguals, rather than monolinguals, and understands these as the norm. The focus is on the speakers’ strategies to achieve effective communication, especially the meaningful ways in which they select features in their linguistic repertoire (Lewis, Jones & Baker, 2012; Velasco & García, 2014, p. 7). Most importantly, translanguaging is concerned with the erasure of language hierarchies and boundaries (García & Leiva, 2014): language varieties are all conceived of as equal, and hybrid language use – as the norm.

These characteristics of translanguaging, namely the blurring of boundaries across languages and hybrid language use, are also commonly attributed to the language use found online. The Belgian sociolinguist and anthropologist Jan Blommaert actually states that “in considering contemporary forms of translanguaging [translanguaging] one can[not] avoid online sites of scripted interaction as loci of research” (Blommaert, 2019, p. 1), an observation widely shared by other researchers (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2013; Schreiber, 2015).

In fact, there are some characteristics of online interactions that facilitate the ubiquitousness of translanguaging practices on the Internet. Interactions with people from different language backgrounds, for instance, may trigger mixed language use, and the availability of automatic translation – even if only for a relatively small number of languages – makes it possible for a conversation to take place in several different languages with which not all the interlocutors have to be familiar. Sometimes, an Internet user whose language is “not digitally ready” (Díaz, 2011, p. 75) may need to borrow terminology from another language to refer to recent advances in technology. Most notably, the lack of officially enforced policing in online settings,¹ coupled with the possibility of anonymity, make it the perfect context for transgression across linguistic boundaries: “it is evident that online communication must be the locus of intense translanguaging” (Blommaert, 2019, p. 1), owing to the translocal, transtemporal and multimodal nature of online communication (Tagg, Seargeant, & Brown, 2017).

It has been argued that translanguaging can be used as a “mechanism for social justice, especially when teaching students from language minoritized communities” (García & Leiva, 2014, p. 200) with the aim of preserving a “cultural-linguistic complex of multiple idiolects and translanguaging practices that the community finds valuable” (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015, p. 299). However, speakers of minoritized languages often see it as a threat, a practice that would ultimately foster the use of the majority language, since legitimizing hybrid language use is often seen as a step towards the disappearance of the minoritized language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2017).

In their attempt to implement translanguaging practices in the Basque education system, Cenoz and Gorter (2017) came up with five steps towards achieving sustainability for the minority language in a translanguaging context. This implies a difficult balance between using resources from the multilingual learner’s whole repertoire and shaping

¹ However, different policing strategies are found on social media, ranging from peer-to-peer language regulation, to specific language policies in particular settings (such as Facebook groups).

contexts to use the minority language on its own, along with contexts where two or more languages are used:

Table 1: Cenoz and Gorter's Guiding principles for sustainable translanguaging for regional minority languages (reproduced from Cenoz & Gorter, 2017, p. 909)

- (1) Design functional 'breathing spaces' for using the minority language
- (2) Develop the need to use the minority language through translanguaging
- (3) Use emergent multilinguals' resources to reinforce all languages by developing metalinguistic awareness
- (4) Enhance language awareness
- (5) Link spontaneous translanguaging to pedagogical activities

The first of these steps also seems to be a need in social media, where minority language speakers reportedly prefer using "bigger languages" (Belmar, 2019 and in press-c; Cunliffe, Morris, & Prys, 2013; Jongbloed-Faber et al., 2016; McMonagle et al., 2019). This has been explained as a result of audience design strategies (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2011), a choice by the individual to use the dominant language as 'unmarked' and the minority language as a means to target a very specific audience, rather than the whole range of possible visitors to one's profile (Cunliffe et al., 2013; I. Johnson, 2013; Jongbloed-Faber, van Loo, & Cornips, 2017).

The term "breathing spaces" was already mentioned by Fishman (1991), and described as a place where the minority language can be used freely, without the threat of the majority language. It is, therefore, a sort of "safe space", a domain (physical or otherwise) where the minority language does not have to compete with the majority language (García, 2009), a domain where the minority language *is* the "unmarked" language. The creation and maintenance of such spaces is deemed reasonable, even necessary, so that minority language speakers have a chance to use their language "normally".

Minority Language Revitalization and social media: re-thinking GIDS

Renowned sociolinguist Joshua Fishman allegedly held negative views on media that have shaped researchers' opinions, making researchers largely suspicious of the role of media for language revitalization. However, almost twenty years have passed, and media is not what it used to be.

As is indicated by its very title, the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale is based on the assumption that the best way to revitalize a language is through intergenerational transmission, and that any attempts to promote language use in an atmosphere where intergenerational transmission is either impractical or impossible are doomed to failure.

In the case of many – if not most – minority languages, intergenerational transmission is severely threatened. In an attempt to better the lives of their children, parents may have to give up their own language, which is not passed on to the younger generations, and transmit instead the dominant language required to access upwards mobility. These societally mandated registers are consistent with what psychology professor John Edwards calls “domains of necessity” (Edwards, 2010, p. 27). These are the linguistic domains that are associated with the most central points in people’s lives, such as language used in the workplace, at home or in education. These are, in fact, the languages associated with Stage 1 of Fishman’s scale.

Table 2: Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) (adapted from: Fishman, 1991, pp. 87–109)

<i>Stage 8:</i> most vestigial users of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults
<i>Stage 7:</i> most users of Xish are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age
<i>Stage 6:</i> the attainment of intergenerational informal oralcy and its demographic concentration and institutional reinforcement
<i>Stage 5:</i> Xish literacy in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement of such literacy
<i>Stage 4:</i> Xish in lower education (types a and b) that meets the requirements of compulsory education laws
<i>Stage 3:</i> use of Xish in the lower work sphere (outside of the Xish neighbourhood/community involving interaction between Xmen and Ymen)
<i>Stage 2:</i> Xish in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either
<i>Stage 1:</i> some use of Xish in higher level education, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence)

Different psychological significance of different domains, as well as contact between different strata of social power and prestige, “means that an enduring bilingualism, or diglossia, is unlikely for most members of most immigrant and indigenous groups” (Edwards, 2010, p. 26). This becomes a challenge when applied to the sort of language maintenance for which Fishman advocates. It requires the continuity of speech, which highlights the importance of uninterrupted language transmission from one generation to the next. If transmission is sustained,

then language maintenance is mostly stable, but should it falter, language maintenance – and, by that logic, language itself – becomes threatened (Fishman, 1990, 1991).

Much of Fishman's proposed rhetoric regarding language revitalization is steeped with the implication that the ideal language is that of older generations, leaving no room for the language of an innovative youth. This mentality is not exclusive to Fishman, as Romaine (2006) noted:

Many language activists do hark back to an imagined glorious past where their language was vibrant and they may long for the restoration of a society uninterrupted by another language and culture. [...] the posited authenticity of the past serves to denounce an inauthentic present (Romaine, 2006, p. 446).

The prevailing mentality of the inauthentic present is incredibly damaging to living minority languages that are already struggling to maintain relevance in an increasingly homogenous linguistic atmosphere.² Fishman himself was outspoken in his resistance against widespread minority language media until steady intergenerational transmission had been achieved. However, in doing so, minority languages were sentenced to remain cut off from many of the resources of modernity, ultimately leaving them increasingly ill-equipped to deal with contemporary vocabulary needs. It would, ultimately, be more realistic to focus not on bringing back former patterns of use but on bringing "language forward to new users and uses" (Romaine, 2006, p. 464).

Professor Elin Haf Gruffydd Jones, the director of the Mercator Institute for Media, Languages and Culture, critiques Fishman's negative view of the role which media may play in the promotion of language revitalization (Jones, 2013). However, she suggests that upon a re-reading of Fishman's conditions of media in the GIDS framework, he might be more inclined to advocate for the benefits of mediated communications under the conditions of "new" and converged media. In a footnote, Fishman commented that "the mass-media 'fetish' of some minority language activists appears in its true unrealistic light" (Fishman, 2001, p. 482). In her chapter on linguistic vitality and minority language media, Jones discusses Fishman's observations and points out as follows:

His unwillingness to recognise a positive tool for the media was largely rooted in the organisational power structures that control the media, which he (rightly) states

² Cf. Soria, 2016 on the need to boost linguistic diversity online.

are usually located beyond the minority language community and outside its influence and control (Jones, 2013, p. 66).

The development of media, particularly social media, since Fishman first proposed GIDS, allows people to be connected in ways that were impossible in the late twentieth century. The lines between the “physical” and “virtual” are becoming hazy in a world where it is possible to have strong connections and daily conversations with people all over the globe. To that extent, Jones argues that “social” and “participatory media” – i.e. networking platforms that allow users to actively participate in the creation, as well as the consumption, of media – “should be features that relate to Stage 5 of Fishman’s GIDS, that is [...] the stage of the development of literacy outside formal and official contexts, rather than Stage 3 or above” (Jones, 2013, p. 68). Fishman’s claim that “neighbourhood and community events and activities are real neighbourhood life and they feed back to one’s family immediately. Media, at best, creates only a *virtual* community” (Fishman, 2001, p. 474) stems from a time when Internet-based communication was not yet the norm in society. In the almost twenty years since, the concept of a virtual community has become normalized to the point that it is notable when someone does not have a social media presence.

Virtual communities as breathing spaces

The Web can be a virtual Speech community, a constructed immersion setting where members of the speech community meet, interact, and communicate in the native language (Buszard-Welcher, 2000, p. 342).

As globalization transforms temporal and spatial limitations, it pushes towards “homogeneity, synchronisation, integration, unity and universalism” all the while, however, strengthening a tendency for “localisation, heterogeneity, differentiation, diversity and particularism” (Bornman, 2003, p. 24). New large-scale migration has increased diversity present within geographical boundaries that used to serve as the basis for group identities. Along with this “super-diversity” (Vertovec, 2007) come different cultures, different languages, different ethnicities and identities which shape everyday life in areas previously perceived as rather “mono-ethnic” – at least officially – and focus shifts from “monolingualism” and “homogeneity” to “hybrid” identity and language use (Cooke & Simpson, 2012). At the same time, ideologies around language, identity and nation have become highly contested and

increasingly de-territorialized. Plurilingual practices are becoming more common around the world, particularly in urban contexts (see Yağmur & Extra, 2011), although not exclusively (Jiménez-Salcedo, Hélot, & Camilleri-Grima, (in press)); multilingualism has become a goal to aspire to in education (De Mejía, 2012; Jaffe, 2012; López-Gopar, Jiménez Morales, & Delgado Jiménez, 2014), and the development of communication technologies has drastically changed the ways in which we interact with each other and, in consequence, the ways in which we negotiate and perform our identities (Hsu, Chih, & Liou, 2015).

The immediateness and readiness of global communication brings about a practical sense of world citizenship, but it also triggers the need to strengthen the local identity (Bornman, 2003). Identities, therefore, become more fluid, and are constantly negotiated not only at a local level, but a global scale. With globalization, the link between identity – and language – and territory is rapidly fading.³ Just like the rise of print capitalism gave place to the rise of broader group identities and nationalism (Anderson, 1983), the rise of computer-mediated communication seems to have given rise to a new concept of group identity (e.g. Kavoura, 2014), based no longer on geographical borders (Moriarty, 2015) but on shared experiences or interests (e.g. Norman, 2014) and on increasing individual agency in group membership performance (Kelly-Holmes & Atkinson, 2017). And among these interests, a common minority language has become a distinct marker of group affiliation (Díaz, 2011; Eisenlohr, 2004; J. L. Johnson & Callahan, 2013; Zappavinga, 2012).

For minority languages, the rise of virtual communities gives a solution to the decreasing opportunities to practise the language in a geographically bound area, a criterion often found at the basis of the concept of the “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998). In many cases, the minorization has reached a stage where speakers are dispersed, and communication among them in the physical world rarely happens outside the family (as is the case in the Karelian or Ladino communities). In other cases, a great number of speakers have migrated in search for better opportunities and are therefore not in an area where they can speak their language on a daily basis (e.g. a considerable number of Icelandic speakers are living in Denmark; a growing number of Kiribati speakers are emigrating to New Zealand escaping the rising sea levels). Others are undergoing processes of reclamation and need to set up spaces to learn the language with little to no funding (e.g. Mapudungun, Garifuna or Calabrian Greko). Virtual communities also seem

³ See, for instance, Trenchs-Parera & Newman, 2015, on the de-ethnicization of Catalan.

to help transnational communication within reasonably stronger language communities (such as Catalan, Irish, Welsh or Basque).

It is our understanding that virtual communities are the perfect candidates to function as “breathing spaces” for minority languages in such a “locus of intense translanguaging” (Blommaert, 2019, p. 1) as online communication, particularly social media. Therefore, and contrary to Fishman’s criticism of media (Fishman, 1991, 2001), (social) media can become an ally for minority languages across the world (Jones, 2013; Soria, 2016). However, one must understand that what constitutes a “breathing space” varies depending on the sociolinguistic situation of the language and on the profile of the speaker. For a fluent speaker of a language with relative vitality such as Welsh, for instance, a Facebook group discussing grammatical features of Welsh through the medium of English may not be a breathing space at all, whereas a group with a Welsh-only policy may. And yet, an Italian-language group discussing Calabrian Greko – such as the Facebook group called *To ddomadi greko – La settimana greka* – may well serve the function of a breathing space for young speakers acquiring the language.

We suggest describing a virtual community as a breathing space when:

- a) the minority language is the only language used in the community;
- b) the minority language is the preferred language of the community, although the use of other languages is accepted; this is often the case in communities of learners where the dominant language and/or English are sometimes used;
- c) the minority language (its sociolinguistic context, grammar, lexicon, etc.) is the subject of discussion, especially if these discussions take place *in* the minority language;
- d) the status of the minority language as *language* (rather than dialect) is not contested.

There seem to be very few virtual communities where the minority language is the only language used. There are, however, virtual communities with explicit language policies stating that the minority language is the only language allowed in the group posts – which is the case, for instance, of the Facebook groups called *Gaeilge Amhain* (Irish), *Fryslân en de Fryske taal* (West Frisian), *Aragonés: charrar ragonar parlar fablar tafalar chilar mormostiar recontar* (Aragonese), and *Aicí parlam en Lengua d’Òc e aquò dins tota sa diversitat...!* (Occitan) (see Table 3). Others state a preference for the use of the minority language, but do allow the use of other languages in the group posts – for instance, the Facebook groups *Teach me Diné – by Ryan Mike* (Navajo), *Euskara lantzen* (Basque) and *Cadèmia Siciliana* (Sicilian), with the latter even encouraging

multilingual posts with Sicilian when possible (see Table 3). This seems to be quite typical of communities of advanced learners – or even new speakers – setting up a community where they can practise the language and keep on learning it. Finally, other communities simply do not have an explicit language policy, and these may present very different characteristics. In many of these groups, however, one can see a preference for language topics, ranging from vocabulary to sociolinguistics and language politics (Belmar, in press-a; Belmar & Heyen, 2019). Nevertheless, even among the groups with the strictest language policies the use of other languages is quite common, and seems to be a by-product of the multilingual nature of online communication and seems to be a byproduct of the multilingual nature of online communication as well as the fact that all the members of these virtual communities are multilingual themselves.⁴

In conclusion, virtual communities can be seen as breathing spaces for minority languages when they encourage language use (be it overtly or covertly) by teaching it (such as the Facebook group *Hawaiian Language Learning Network*) or by normalizing its use for metalinguistic discussions (such as the Facebook group *Dialectes*) and discussions on topics not directly related to language (such as the Facebook group *Noi i parloma piemontèis*). These virtual communities seem to be, therefore, the perfect tool for minority languages to reclaim their own space on the “survival-of-the-fittest” market that is the Internet, and the perfect way to bypass audience design strategies (Androutsopoulos, 2014) that tend to favour the use of major world languages.

Table 3: Some examples of virtual communities on Facebook which function as breathing spaces for a minority language

Group / Page name	Members / Followers (as of 29/10/2019)	Explicit Language Policy Yes / No	Language	Main language Yes / No	Other languages¹
<i>Kimeltuwe, materiales de Mapudungun</i> ¹¹	193,111	N	Mapudungun	Y	Spanish
<i>Teach me Diné – by Ryan Mike</i>	24,037	N	Navajo	N	English
<i>Dialectes</i>	15,898	N	Catalan	Y	Occitan

⁴ See, for instance, Belmar & Heyen, 2019, on the language use in some North and West Frisian virtual communities; Belmar, in press-b, on the language use in Catalan virtual communities; and Belmar, in press-a, on the language use in an Aragonese virtual community.

Group / Page name	Members / Followers (as of 29/10/2019)	Explicit Language Policy Yes / No	Language	Main language Yes / No	Other languages ¹
<i>Te Reo Māori Memes</i>	12,597	Y Reo Pākehā (=English) memes will be deleted	Maori	Y	English
<i>Gaeilge Amhain</i> ^{III}	12,330	Y Irish only	Irish	Y	–
<i>Noi i parloma piemontèis</i> ^{IV}	10,770	N	Piedmontese	Y	Italian
<i>To ddomadi greko – La settimana greka</i> ^V	6,250	N	Calabrian Greko	N	Italian
<i>Mohawk Language Kanien'kéha</i>	2,708	Y Use English mainly to ask for Mohawk equivalents	Mohawk	N	English
<i>Res'Oc Réseaux Occitans</i> ^{VI}	2,494	N	Occitan	N	French
<i>Euskara lantzen</i> ^{VII}	2,419	Y Basque only. Others only to ask "how do you say...?"	Basque	Y	Spanish
<i>Fryslân en de Fryske taal</i> ^{VIII}	2,408	Y Fryslân has only one language and that is Frisian	West Frisian	Y	East Frisian Low Saxon, Dutch, English, German, Bildts, etc. ^{IX}
<i>Aragonés: charrar ragonar parlar fablar tafalar chilar mormostiar reontar</i> ^X	1,949	Y Aragonese only	Aragonese	Y	Spanish, English, Asturian ^{XI}
<i>Cadèmia Siciliana</i> ^{XII}	1,224	Y Multilingual posts are preferred. When possible, add Sicilian	Sicilian	N	Italian, English, French, German
<i>Hawaiian Language Learning Network</i>	1,053	N	Hawaiian	N	English
<i>Aicí parlam en Occitan, en Lengua d'Òc e aquò dins tota sa diversitat...!</i> ^{XIII}	923	Y Occitan only	Occitan	Y	–
<i>Frysk Ynternasjonaal Kontakt (FYK)</i> ^{XIV}	458	N	West Frisian	Y	Dutch, English

Group / Page name	Members / Followers (as of 29/10/2019)	Explicit Language Policy Yes / No	Language	Main language Yes / No	Other languages ¹
<i>Ch'a a kayaa áyá gaxh-tootée – We will only imitate our ancestors</i>	315	N	Tlingít	N	English
<i>Catalans al Brasil</i>	229	N	Catalan	Y	Portuguese
<i>Llengua de signes catalana (LSC)^{xv}</i>	210	N	Catalan Sign Language	N	Catalan, Spanish, English, LSE, ASL, other Sign Languages

¹ The list of other languages is not exhaustive, and it is based on research conducted about some of these groups by the authors themselves (see Belmar & Heyen, 2019; Belmar, in press-a)

ⁱⁱ 'Kimeltuwe, Mapudungun materials'

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Only Irish'

^{iv} 'We speak Piedmontese'

^v 'The Greko week'

^{vi} 'Res'Oc Occitan Resources'

^{vii} 'Work on Basque'

^{viii} 'Fryslân and the Frisian language'

^{ix} See Belmar and Heyen, 2019

^x 'Aragonese: speak, talk, discuss, tell, narrate'

^{xi} See Belmar, in press-a

^{xii} 'Sicilian Academy'

^{xiii} 'Here we speak Occitan, in the Oc language, and we do so in all its diversity!'

^{xiv} Frisian International Contact

^{xv} Catalan Sign Language

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Społeczności wirtualne jako przestrzeń życiowa dla języków mniejszościowych. Nowe spojrzenie na używanie języków mniejszościowych w mediach społecznościowych

Ponieważ media społecznościowe są coraz bardziej obecne w codziennej komunikacji, obecność języków mniejszościowych w świecie cyfrowym jest niezbędnym elementem dla ich zachowania i rewitalizacji. Komunikacja online przyniosła zmiany wielu aspektów użycia języka. Używanie języka w Internecie często określa się jako hybrydowe, a granice między językami często się zacierają. Te zjawiska cechuje również transjęzyczność (*translanguaging*), podejście które postrzega język jako płynne kody komunikacji. W przypadku języków mniejszościowych osiągnięcie „zrównoważonej transjęzyczności” (*sustainable translanguaging*) wymaga „przestrzeni życiowej” do ich używania. Tworzenie wirtualnych społeczności posługujących się językami mniejszościowymi w świecie cyfrowym rodzi pytanie, czy mogą one pełnić rolę takiej przestrzeni.

Słowa kluczowe:

język mniejszościowy; promocja języka; polityka językowa; media społecznościowe; społeczności wirtualne; rewitalizacja języka; przestrzeń życiowa; transjęzyczność

Virtual communities as breathing spaces for minority languages: Re-framing minority language use in social media

Considering that social media is increasingly present in our daily communicative exchanges, digital presence is an essential component of language revitalization and maintenance. Online communication has modified our language use in various ways. In fact, language use online is often described as hybrid, and boundaries across languages tend to blur. These are also characteristics of translanguaging approaches, which see language as fluid codes of communication. “Breathing spaces” are needed in order to achieve “sustainable translanguaging” practices for minority languages. The establishment of communities of performing minority language speakers in a digital environment raises the question whether these emerging virtual communities can take up the role of breathing spaces for minority languages.

Keywords:

minority language; language promotion; language policy; social media; virtual communities; language revitalization; breathing space; translanguaging

Citation:

Belmar, G., & Glass, M. (2019). Virtual communities as breathing spaces for minority languages: Re-framing minority language use in social media. *Adeptus*, 2019(14). <https://doi.org/10.11649/a.1968>