Saving Languages 2.0 – New Technologies and Social Media as a Means for Language Maintenance and Revitalization?

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The UNESCO names “response to new domains and media” as one of nine critical factors for a language’s vitality. In recent years there has been a significant shift in information technology and media consumption, the internet has drastically changed the way we communicate each other and educate ourselves – when Tim Berners-Lee first invented the World Wide Web he intended it to be “a collaborative medium, a place where we all meet and read and write”; a vision which has now come true, as the internet users are no longer limited to passiveness in viewing but are actively encouraged to contribute, interact, and collaborate with each other using social media.

Catalan language (often considered “the biggest minority language”) is a pioneer in finding creative ways of using the internet as a means of linguistic normalisation and language policy: the Catalan Viquipèdia is one of the largest Wikipedias and is considered the best existing quality-wise, the regional government offers free online language courses and language learning apps, there is a flourishing Catalan-speaking online community, etc.

The case of Judeo-Spanish is totally different: the last remaining speakers of this language on the verge of extinction (some 10,000 worldwide) have formed a “digital diaspora” and use mailing lists and news groups as the last resort of communication and remembering.

By thoroughly viewing these specific examples which are ostensibly incomparable even though the technologies they use are very similar, this case study will analyse different and highly individual aspects of the internet and social media as a means of building speakers’ and language learners’ communities for minorities and of keeping endangered languages active and popular. This relatively new process is accompanied by a highly controversial popular discourse, so we will focus on the possibilities as well as the difficulties that the internet has to offer for minority languages and their speakers.

References:

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