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Reflections on New Speaker Research and Future Trajectories

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In the introduction to this volume, it was posited that, in some cases, becoming a new speaker may be a matter of life or death: for example, in instances where economic survival or avoiding deportation hinges on learning a new language. As this volume has shown, becoming a new speaker of a minority language also lies at the heart of the metaphorical life or death of some languages. Languages like Manx, for example, owe their continued ‘life’ entirely to new speakers. As discussed in Sallabank and Marquis’ chapter, languages such as Giernesiei, in which the native speaker base is past child-bearing age, require new speakers if the language is to be used into the next generation. As seen in Lantto, Bermingham, and O’ Rourke and Ramallo’s chapters, other minority languages, such as Basque and Galician, owe much of their current vitality to policies aimed at creating and supporting new speakers. The importance of new speakers to demographically weaker languages, such

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as Scottish Gaelic, has become a focus of recent efforts to revitalise the language, as both Dunmore's and Nance's chapters illustrate. However, as Dunmore points out, and as echoed in other work in the volume (see for example, Kennard; Sallabank and Marquis), efforts to create new speakers do not always pay the expected dividends. Many individuals who are favourably disposed towards reversing language shift (RLS) efforts and who engage with revitalisation and revival initiatives do not become lifelong habitual users of the language in question nor do they necessarily play a role in the difficult and multifaceted process of RLS.

Many reasons for failing to play a role in RLS are complex and varied. As the chapters in the present volume have clearly shown, the label of 'new speaker' emanates as much from social realities as it does from linguistic realities. However, although new speakers can indeed be differentiated from native speakers on the basis of a number of social and linguistic factors, Lantto illustrates how sometimes the same linguistic practice (in her case, the use of code-switching) is evaluated differently for native and new speakers—and in the case of the new speaker, 'the glass is always half empty' as Lantto puts it. This is a familiar sentiment and is reiterated in the authors' analyses as well as in the voices of the new speakers themselves. For example, in reflecting on how 'native' and 'new' speaker dialectal differences are evaluated, one of Smith-Christmas' interviewees, Jeanie, states, 'if you've got all these people [native speakers] together, they would never correct each other [...] but of course if you're a newcomer or if you're a learner they would love to correct you.' Similarly, Sallabank recounts how one time a traditional speaker claimed not to understand her northern Giernesiei dialect when in fact Sallabank was speaking a Western variety. This northern variety, Sallabank explains, is considered a less desirable variety due to its perceived influences from French and English, and thus, embedded in this comment was a subtle critique of new speaker practices as 'half empty'.

This 'half empty' evaluation lies at the heart of the issue of authenticity, an important theme in the lifespan of new speaker research. As discussed in the introduction, ideologies of authenticity have their roots in early dialectological surveys, in which 'nonmobile older rural males' (NORMs) became 'the norm.' As seen throughout the chapters, in many cases, the idea that NORMs embody authenticity still applies; thus, for some new

speakers, the fact that they fall outside the social bounds of perceived NORMs may pose significant barriers to their increased participation in the life of the minority language. In Bermingham's chapter, for example, Cape Verdean students often preferred to use Spanish, the anonymous language, rather than Galician, which is seen as the authentic language and is described by one student as the language of 'the original Galicians, the natives'. Not aligning socially with a particular social characteristic—for example, not being 'from' a particular place—may result in the reluctance of some native speakers to use the minority language with the new speaker. For example, in Sallabank and Marquis' chapter, one respondent recalls how native speakers 'didn't want to talk to me because I'm English'. This in turn means that new speakers may have fewer opportunities to both hear and use the minority language, which, as Carty highlights, may significantly impact fluency. Even if fluency is attained, the new speaker's access to native varieties may play an important role in acquiring the finer-grained productive linguistic aspects of their speech. Nance's chapter, for example, discusses prosody, and we see here a great deal of potential reflexivity: the less a new speaker sounds like an 'authentic' speaker, the less likely 'authentic' speakers are willing to speak the minority language with him or her. The new speaker is subsequently less likely to acquire the range of linguistic features considered 'authentic', and thus, the cycle continues.

In this volume, we have seen that the social category of 'age' is also an important social factor in new speaker dynamics. As shown in both Nance's and Kennard's chapters, for example, the realities of language shift mean that younger speakers are less likely to have been socialised in the minority language at home. At the same time, however, efforts to revitalise the language mean that younger speakers often have access to the language through education, whereas older speakers usually did not. Thus, on an abstract level, whether someone is a 'new' speaker or a 'traditional' speaker is, in some cases, predicated on when a particular speaker was born. In examining the age dimension in new speaker research, Moal et al. show how Irish radio presenters orient towards a 'youth culture' in their choice of particular linguistic features characteristic of new speakers. Again, we see a reflexive process and the underpinnings of language change in a revitalisation situation. As new speaker speech becomes associated with youth culture and youth culture in turn tends to be 'cool',

more speakers, regardless of their language socialisation background, may use these new speaker features as a linguistic resource. Thus, although many discourses around minority languages centre around stasis and/or decline, in many instances, what we see is a vibrant, dynamic sociocultural space where language norms are re-negotiated and where ways of using language evolve. As Ó hIfearnáin puts it, new speakers ‘may adopt minoritised languages as their own and take them on new journeys, rather than returning to a hypothesised abstract “state of being” before the language shift took place.’

Not all aspects of these ‘new journeys’ will be necessarily accepted in the communities in which the language is spoken, however, either by the traditional speakers or the new speakers. As Lantto as well as Sallabank and Marquis show, purist ideologies often prevail. This means that some new speakers may adopt more conservative ways of speaking, avoiding, for example, the use of lexical borrowings. Again, as Lantto demonstrates, ‘the glass is half empty’ view is often in operation in terms of these conservative ways of speaking, and in some communities, particular neologisms may be perceived as shibboleths in determining whether one aligns with traditional ‘native’ speaker or post-traditional ‘new’ speaker norms. However, as Moal et al. show in their chapter, the uptake of neologisms may also be a useful way in which a traditional speaker may successfully navigate an audience composed of both native and new speakers. Thus, the authors argue, can be achieved by using elements associated with both types of speech in appealing to, and in many ways reifying, a cohesive ‘whole’ rather than a community that is conceptualised in terms of ‘new’ or ‘traditional’ speakers.

Indeed, the idea of a cohesive ‘whole’ is generally what new speakers strive to create and to be a part of. The emergence of the term ‘new speaker’, or the recognition of the existence of new speakers, is not meant to create schisms within minority language communities nor is it intended to privilege new speakers’ issues over other pressing matters in minority language communities. Rather, it is a means to uncovering how certain realities affect language revitalisation. As emphasised throughout the volume, the existence of the new speaker is as much a social reality as it is a linguistic one. By understanding more about which social realities have salience in terms of new/native speaker dynamics, we gain a deeper

understanding of the minority language community as a whole. For example, Smith-Christmas posited in her chapter that the importance of place is not simply a geographic mapping of language onto land but rather an understanding of language as bound up in a particular sociohistorical trajectory of disenfranchisement and the reality that many new speakers have little first-hand experience of this particular trajectory. Understanding more about this particular dynamic may help to inform language planning efforts in taking approaches which centre on the actual speakers and communities where the language is spoken rather than, as highlighted in Dunmore's chapter, a numerical approach, where the success of language revitalisation efforts is gauged by the number of pupils entering minority language immersion education, for example. It is not to say that establishing opportunities to create new speakers of the minority language is not an important part of the language revitalisation process but rather, as it echoed in other work (e.g., Urla 1993; Costa 2013), that numerical approaches have the tendency to treat language as an object and to lose sight of the fact that language planning is a wider social project, one which needs to take into account how inequalities are created and replicated and how language fits into these processes. Taking a more speaker-based rather than language-based approach may in turn be more likely to engender success as, ultimately, any language's 'success', or lack of it, is inextricably entwined with the fate of its speakers, both past, present, and looking forward to the future.

Although in some cases we have seen seemingly 'closed borders,' such as for example, in Selleck's chapter, in which being 'fully Welsh' versus 'English' was contingent on what school one attended, in many of the chapters, becoming a new speaker of a minority language often involves a 'migration' of some type. In two of these chapters (Birmingham, Smith-Christmas), the migration has been literal and physical; in the other chapters, however, the migration has been more figurative. These migrations represent, as Ó hÍfearnáin puts it, 'porous boundaries,' a concept echoed, for example, in Carty's chapter, in which one of her informants viewed themselves as moving in and out of the 'learner box'. Becoming a new speaker not only involves movement in terms of language proficiency but often in terms of demarcations such as age and social class. Thus, we see new speakerness as not fixed in time and space but a dynamic

movement consisting of colliding social categories and their constant renegotiation.

As emphasised in both Atkinson's chapter and the introduction, new speakers are far from a 'new' phenomenon; however, in the case of indigenous minority languages, such as the ones discussed within this volume, the new speaker is indeed a novel addition. In this volume, we have interrogated the roles that these new speakers may play in arresting language shift and the barriers they face in doing so. We hope for more research to continue in this vein so that minority languages and their speaker communities may continue to exist, and perhaps even thrive, in the years to come.

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