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Minorities and Minority Languages in a Changing Europe

Conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages

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Digital natives

During my recent research on the language and cultural practices of young people belonging to different European linguistic minorities, I asked them about their minority language practices in the media (whether they were reading literature in their minority languages, listening to the minority language media and watching TV). The answer was often that they did not or not very much. The main reason given to me was that the offer in minority languages was less interesting to that in the state programs and dominant languages. However, when asking more in depth about their everyday language and cultural practices and observing them, I realised that young people today are also less attached to the analogue media in dominant languages. They acquire most of the information needed, entertainment, and contacts through the internet. Digital natives are using the digital media in everyday life and in many activities: to communicate, to establish friendships and communities, to construct their identity, in learning, to acquire information, to work, to create and express themselves, and so on. What is important in the context of minority languages is that young people, who know minority languages, use them in the digital world. This use may be described as translanguaging because they use different languages to express different topics and often switch from one language to another.

For young people, the digital natives, the Internet is the integral background for all their everyday practices: language, cultural, and social. Contrary to the older generations, for them, the use of the digital media is not a separate domain of practicing. There are no boundaries any longer for young people between what is online and offline as these spheres are diffused at every possible level of digital natives' lives. Digital natives live in both worlds, the real one and the virtual one, together and not separately or parallel while for analogue natives the Internet is often used as an alternative media. For non-digital natives, the central role of the media is to extend sources and contents widely. The essential components of the digital media are that they are continually remediating their predecessors (television, radio, print, and other forms). Furthermore, for that reason digitalisation opens many possibilities for minority languages: documentation, archiving, creating corpora, language courses online, Wikipedia. All these tools are crucial from the viewpoint of minority languages use. They are still a part of what exists in the analogue form but have been remediated and are now more accessible and much more user friendly.

I think that for minority languages one of the most important aspects of the digital media is that it provides the possibility of establishing contacts and hence socialising with others. It is therefore easier for young people interested in minority languages to have a group of friends who communicate among each other in a minority language also when they have to leave a territory where the speech minority lives. It is easier for learners and new speakers to find those who want to speak the language and to motivate one another; it is easier to locate where events/meetings/concerts are held in minority languages and to participate in different forms of minority language life.

The problem is that for many digital domains to work in a minority language there has to be someone to create the necessary tools and develop the technology and this is often costly: e.g. computer games, smartphone applications, Google translation, spell checkers. As for the digital domain for minority languages serving community participation, I think that young people to a certain extent are resourceful enough and they are capable of adapting them to a minority language. For example, they do not wait for a minority language Facebook. They create Facebook in minority languages just by posting and commenting in their minority language. Contrarily, in other domains – essential for minority languages – young people do not have enough resources and support today. Of course, this differs depending on the minority language, size of the community, number and proficiency of speakers of this language, and state support. However, in general, for a minority language to survive, it must be present everywhere, in every sphere and domain where people use the languages: in GPS, smartphone interfaces, Google translation, to name just a few. If there are no computer games in a minority language (as compelling as those in the dominant language), if there are few and not very interesting entries in Wikipedia in a minority language people will use the dominant language or English.

In this case, we can say that a unique minority language, without a kin state, will find itself in a more difficult situation. For minority languages which in some places are a state language, all the necessary support is already established, and it is enough to adapt it to the new context. For those languages that are used only by one small and minoritised on different levels community, the situation is much more complicated. It demands more financial support and technical support to digitalise them. We also have to remember that being a digital native does not mean that a person can create an innovative technical structure and that not every member of the minority has to be an IT specialist. Consequently, the state has to provide all the necessary technology for minority languages. We also need to take into consideration communities which still do not have well-established language standards. For some aspects of the digital world, this may pose a problem as

most of the digital services are in the written language. For minority languages to exist in the new media, they need to have a written form. Additionally, they also need technical backup such as keyboards, spell checkers.

If minority languages are to survive in our changing world, they must exist in all possible technical forms in the minority languages. Today the digital environment has become very important. It provides both numerous advantages to minority languages but also constitutes a threat to them if they are not present in the digital reality. Therefore, the European Charter for Regional or Minority languages should be extended to include the protection of these languages in the digital environment.