



PRAGREV

Pragmatics.Reviews

Online Publication of the
European University VIADRINA

Volume 6, Number 1

July 2018

What is a minority language?

by Heinz Kretzenbacher

dx.doi.org/10.11584/pragrev.2018.6.1.1

www.pragmatics-reviews.org

What is a minority language?

Johanna Laakso, Anneli Sarhima, Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark, Reetta Toivanen. 2016. *Towards Openly Multilingual Policies and Practices: Assessing Minority Language Maintenance Across Europe*. (Linguistic Diversity and Language Rights 11). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

This book reports on the large-scale international and interdisciplinary project *European Language Diversity for All (ELDIA)*, funded by the European Commission from 2010-2013. ELDIA studied the social and legal context of the maintenance of twelve minority languages (all of them part of the Finno-Ugric language family) ranging from Slovenia in the south, to Norway in the north, and from Germany in the west to Russia in the east. The book involves the interdisciplinary cooperation of academics from disciplines as diverse as law, IT and linguistics, and hailing from six countries (Austria, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Slovenia and Sweden). These authors profited from a strong theoretical basis, on which a comprehensive methodology for the twelve case studies of varied minority languages was built.

The introduction describes the monolingual bias in traditional views of European multilingualism, and explains the strategies to overcome this in the ELDIA research. Both the survey questionnaires and the interviews were offered in the respective minority and majority languages. The respondents were not only free to choose either, but also allowed to name more than one first language. Generally, the survey emphasised an interest “in the respondents’ multilingual life and language choices” (p. 16). The introduction also shows how the monolingual bias influences language policies, language education, media contents and laws.

The second chapter presents the tool developed by and for the ELDIA project: the European Language Vitality Barometer (EuLaViBar), an instrument integrating data collection, analysis and representation. EuLaViBar consists graphically of a diagram measuring four focus areas; namely, *capacity*, *opportunity*, *desire* and *language products*. Each focus area, in turn, is analysed according to four different dimensions: *language use and interaction*, *legislation*, *media* and *education*. The quantitative result of the survey for each dimension is indicated as a value on the language maintenance scale, from 0 (“severely and critically endangered”) to 4 (“maintained at the moment”). While the EuLaViBar charts might seem complex and difficult to read at first glance, after an initial learning phase and with the help of the textual

explanations, the charts for the different minority languages become easier to understand with every new case study. They therefore end up providing the reader with a useful tool for the comparison of the individual maintenance status of very diverse minority languages. I do not doubt that EuLaViBar will become – if not the standard model for measuring maintenance of minority languages – at least the standard basis for future models adapted to specific languages or groups of languages. Small flaws in the design of EuLaViBar, virtually unavoidable in a pioneering large-scale study such as ELDIA (and honestly admitted, cf. p. 38), can easily be amended in future research designs based on this model. The EuLaViBar charts for each individual language are then contextualised with qualitative data in the fourth chapter, “Analysis”.

Before that, however, the massive third chapter (more than 100 pages, i.e., a third of the volume’s length) presents twelve case studies. The chapter’s title, “Apples, Oranges and Cranberries: Finno-Ugric Minorities in Europe and the Diversity of Diversities”, leads to the crucial question of what actually constitutes a minority language. The authors are not following the politically determined narrow definition of the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML), which only recognises “traditional” languages (excluding what an individual state legislation chooses to define as an “immigrant” language) and “languages” (excluding what an individual state legislation chooses to define as a “mere” dialect). The case studies present instead what the authors rightly call a “diversity of diversities”, from languages perfectly fitting the ECRML model of “traditional” minority languages, such as Hungarian in Austria and Slovenia (pp. 52-65), to more recently established “immigrant” languages, such as Estonian in Germany and Finland (pp. 65-72 and 115-121); from languages clearly distinct from the majority variety, such as North Sámi in Norway (pp. 137-145) or Veps in Russia (pp. 85-96), to languages with a precarious status between being dialectal varieties of the majority variety and being languages in their own right, such as Karelian in Finland (pp. 194-115) and Seto or Võro in Estonia (pp. 72-85). Each case study consists of descriptions of the history and the present situation of the respective language in the media, legally and socially, and the corresponding EuLaViBar results. The quotes of respondents in every case study are just as illustrative as the quantitative EuLaViBar charts here.

The “Analysis” chapter compares the EuLaViBar results of all case studies and puts them in a wider context. It also discusses the overall legal context of minority languages and language policy in Europe, as well as sociological, ethnographic and media discourse aspects. While the first part of this chapter, focused on comparing the case studies, is

valuable and highly readable, the rest of it is quite a mixed bag. In particular, the section on the legal context lacks the immediate relation to the case studies presented. This might have to do with the fact that these legal analyses were published separately (p. 173; a hint as to where they actually were published would certainly have been helpful here; it is unnecessarily difficult to pick the legal texts out of the list of references or online publications from the project at Phaidra, the University of Vienna repository, cf. www.eldia-project.org/index.php/news-events-ac). In any case, it robs the joint analysis of the case studies of an important aspect.

An outlook chapter on implications and recommendations, and an afterword (not by the volume's authors, but by Miklós Kontra, M. Paul Lewis and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas) conclude the book. Given that the afterword is so general that it is not immediately clear why it should be part of this particular volume, it represents, together with the second half of the "Analysis" chapter, the few content elements of the book that are slightly less fascinating and instructive than the rest of it. In form, the volume is as well-produced and edited as books by this publisher generally are. The only little thing that the reader must get accustomed to is the alphabetical order of the list of references. Umlauts seem generally sorted after all other letters, which explains why T. Hämynen appears after T. Herdina, A. Räsänen after E.J. Ruiz Veytez and H. Öst after D. Zwitter. Where exactly double vowels immediately following the initial letter of the surname are to be sorted, however, seems rather mysterious. Is it at the end of all surnames with the respective initial letter (H. Haarmann is listed after T. Herdina and T. Hämynen)? Or at the beginning of surnames with the respective initial letter (J. Laakso is sorted before W.E. Lambert)? A small fault that makes the list of references – otherwise very comprehensive and up to date at the time of publishing (2016) – a bit cumbersome to navigate.

I'm of two minds about the fact that neither the title nor the subtitle actually mention that all the languages studied belong exclusively to the Finno-Ugric family. This was probably done at the request of the publishers, who might have feared losing potential readers. On the one hand, the tendency of publishers to choose the most generic title possible to widen the appeal of books has a somewhat sneaky aftertaste. On the other, any linguist interested in multilingualism and minority languages who would neglect to read this book by reason of it being based on a language family he or she might not be familiar with would miss out on the opportunity to become acquainted with a study which, by virtue of its incomparably wide scope and sound theoretical basis, certainly deserves a wide readership. The European Language Vitality Barometer should also be mentioned, which is a valuable instrument for

measuring language maintenance within groups and has the potential to become a standard tool in language maintenance studies.

With refreshing Nordic directness, the advance organiser of the foreword “To the Reader” (p. xv) asks about general ideas in regard to the role minority languages play in the political and research landscapes in Europe, and thus concludes: “Don’t be naïve. Don’t believe everything you are told. Read this book”. I second that.

Heinz KRETZENBACHER

His research interests include: pragmatics, terms of address.

Heinz Kretzenbacher: Review on *Towards Openly Multilingual Policies and Practices*. 2016.

In PRAGMATICS.REVIEWS 2018.6.1