Assessing Digital Vitality: Analytical and Activist Approaches

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Or..
Expanding Kornai's (2013) Scale of Digital Vitality?

- For mass comparison and web crawling? (Analysis)
  - NO

- For working towards sustainable digital use? (Activism)
  - YES

Kornai's Scale

- In some ways incidental to his main message, which is that the scale is a means to:
  "...present evidence of a massive die-off caused by the digital divide"

- It is based on web crawling, using automatic language recognition software, and categorises the languages found there.

Kornai's Scale of Digital Presence

Digitally thriving   **T**

Vital   **V**

Heritage   **H**

Still   **S**

Our area of primary concern:

V: Digital language use by community

H: Language documentation (normally by outsiders)

S: No usage

Kornai's Scale of Digital Presence

Digitally thriving **T**

Vital **V**

Heritage **H**

Still **S**

My question is whether it is too early to decide that 95% of languages "are digitally still, that is, no longer capable of digital ascent" (2013:1).

If so, what are the distinguishing characteristics, and how can we work to effectively reverse this for a number of languages?

An Expanded Scale of Digital Presence

Digitally thriving	**T**
Vital	**V**
Heritage	**H**
Emergent	**E**
Latent	**L**
Still	**S**

The "Still" zone is divided into three: Emergent, Latent and Still. Or would it be better to give another name to this different definition of Still?

Heritage: "language is not used by native speakers (L1) for communication in the digital world" (Kornai 2013:2)

Towards a Model for Sustainable Digital Use

- Inspired by Lewis & Simon's work on EGIDS and language vitality (2010) and the Sustainable Use Model (2016), which have a focus on intergenerational transmission/ home language use as the key factor in overall language vitality.
- Is there a necessary condition for sustainable digital language use?
- Hypothesis that texting/messaging is necessary for sustained digital use. Therefore efforts in this area are the most likely to lead to sustained use. More empirical evidence needed!

Texting and Messaging: Written Conversation

"Writing is a device developed for recording prose, not conversation."
 (Abercrombie 1963:14)

In Ferguson's (1959) original paper on Diglossia, almost all written domains are places to use the higher prestige variety.

But texting and messaging (to a greater extent than email) are conversational domains, and are much friendlier places to write language varieties which do not have formal prestige. (Lexander 2011, Lüpke & Storch 2013, McLaughlin 2009)

Texting and Messaging: Emergent Level

There are many language varieties where the main use of digital writing is restricted to messaging, and texting, which are not accessed by web crawling. Status updates are more accessible, and used to some extent, but less.

Texting often uses non-standard forms, as part of its conversational nature (including fully standardised languages) - following formal conventions in texting can communicate social distance. (Crair 2013, Gunraj et al, 2016)

This is **Emergent** level. Some use, but probably missed by web crawling. Also little standardisation, making language identification harder. And can we match usage to ISO language codes?

Writing a blog in the language is a different kind of activity – it is no longer conversational.

Necessary Conditions 4 Txting? Latent Stage

1) Stable intergenerational transmission of the language

2) An available model of writing the language

3) The availability of appropriate technology and infrastructure (internet, mobile phone coverage)

4) Fonts in which to write the language in the desired script.

5) Communal desire to see the language used digitally.

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Heritage has been removed from this scale, as the model assumes that there is need for a body of speakers who use the language in everyday life – for whom it is the vernacular. A change from Gibson (2015).

A Scale for Heritage Languages?

Heritage   **H**

Emergent   **E**

Latent   **L**

Still   **S**

This alternative scale shows **Heritage** as being a valid goal in itself, rather than a step on the way to **Vital**, which depends on a community of speakers where the speech is the essential support for the digital use.

The Ultimate Goal

To assist in a conversation where we (and others) consider the most crucial steps - in different sociolinguistic environments - to enable greater digital use of languages which would benefit the communities.

Central hypothesis is that using a language for "digital chatting" (texting, messaging) can/should be a key step in establishing digital language practices which may then impact other domains.

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