

New media for multilingualism: Practice and Research Questions

Cor van der Meer
Mercator Research Centre
Fryske Akademy, Ljouwert, Fryslân, NL

This paper has been presented at the EUNoM conference in Barcelona, May 2012.

1. Background

In the last decade, numerous developments in technology have been introduced in the community. One of the latest have been in the area of 'new media'. The way people communicate with each other has changed fundamentally. The latest developments offer many opportunities for communication across the world without practical issues like travelling or crossing borders: opportunities not only for social interaction, but also for the way we retrieve and use information, and for the way we learn.

Increasingly, new media are used for language learning, which will have its influence on the vitality of languages. Especially lesser used or minority languages can benefit from these developments. The extent to which these languages can benefit still needs to be researched in more detail.

Nowadays, we can read articles in the newspapers, such as: "Icelandic is poorly prepared for progress in information technology", or "the Galician government will promote the Galician language on the internet", or "digital communication is an enormous enrichment for language acquisition", and "kids get stressed because they 'need' to check their 'cell phone' every minute".

In this short paper these kinds of challenges and developments will be discussed using as an example the changes that are taking place in language use in the province of Fryslân, the region where the Mercator Research Centre is located as part of the Fryske Akademy. Besides, the role that social media can play in improving language vitality is also addressed.

1.1. The Mercator Research Centre

The Mercator Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning, Mercator or Mercator Research Centre for short, functions as a platform in Europe. The centre has wide experience (more than 25 years) in the field of regional and minority languages in Europe; it brings together scientists, practitioners, policymakers, and interested experts. The focus of Mercator is on research and knowledge creation, knowledge distribution, and knowledge application. Concrete activities include: research, publications, newsletters, Regional dossiers, expert databases, a Network of multilingual schools, and the organisation of conferences and seminars.

The Mercator Research Centre is very active in Europe and is a member of a number of key European networks. It is the lead partner of the Mercator European Network of Language Diversity Centres, which has five members. Besides the Mercator Centre, these are the University of Wales, Aberystwyth; Ciemen, Barcelona; the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, and Stockholm University, Sweden

1.2. The province of Fryslân and the Frisian language

Fryslân is one of twelve provinces in the Netherlands. The Netherlands is a small country with around 16 million inhabitants. The province of Fryslân has approximately 650.000 inhabitants. Around 54% of these inhabitants have the Frisian language as their mother tongue, but 94% can understand the language, 74% can speak the language, and 65% are able to read it. Only around 29% are able to write Frisian, according to the Frisian quick scan in 2011. This latter percentage is relatively low and shows that Frisian is primarily an oral language. Nevertheless, the quick scan in 2011 shows that the number of people able to write in their own language changed a lot over the last few years. At the time of the last language survey in Fryslân, 1994, the percentage was 17%. But even if the percentage 'writers' is slightly overrepresented in the quick scan, there has been an increase (from 17% in 1994, to 29% in 2011) in the number of people knowing how to write in Frisian.

Thus a gradual change is taking place in the Frisian language; from a merely oral language it slowly becomes a written oriented language. In this era of digital networks and social media, people want to write in their mother tongue. The use of social media is a rather new phenomenon and has put the world of languages and language learning upside down. The increasing presence and use of social media is a significant cause for people wanting to be able to write in their own language. During the years when email became

available, we already saw a change in writing 'norms' or 'ethics'. In email, people used language in a far more informal way than before, when they used to write letters. Now, with again more new ways for digital communication, such as social media, people indeed feel the need to write in the language closest to them and their own culture. If we look at Fryslân, the number of 29% being able to write in their mother tongue probably will increase even more because social media not only create a need, but also offer opportunities for people to learn to write in their own language.

Thus, new technologies and new media can affect the vitality of a language; they can be of crucial importance.

2. Language vitality

A number of scientists has been working on the subject of language vitality in the last decades. This started with the work of Allard and Landry on 'ethno linguistic vitality'. Later on, scientists such as Howard Giles, Richard Bourhis and Itesh Sachdev have been working on the subject for many years. They created and modified a language vitality index with more than twenty items. Later on, in 1993, the Unesco created a language vitality index with nine items. The UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, published in 2009 made use of this vitality index. The research of Miquel Strubell, Glyn Williams, and others, known as "the Euromosaic project", should also be mentioned here. This research took place in the nineties and resulted in two major publications. They measured the vitality of languages of minority or regional languages. Below, an overview of the nine-item language vitality index of the Unesco is presented.



The item 'response to new domains and media' is of major importance here.

2.1 Social media

To study language vitality and the role of new media and people's language choice, the following questions should be addressed:

- When? The frequency of use of social media.
- How? Which specific kind of technology is used.
- With whom? With whom is the contact made.
- Why? Why does an individual choose to use a particular means of communication in a particular language (individual attitude).

The effects of the use of social media should be studied. An effect could be, for instance, that language awareness is raised in younger age groups than the age groups reached by traditional methods, or that communication takes place outside the peer group. One might expect that writing skills increase or that the (minority) language itself gains a better image or higher status.

In Fryslân the Frisian language is used a lot on social media. Frisian can be found used on all forms of social media. Some interesting specific projects that focus on Frisian and Frisian language use are: "word of the day", in which the public chooses the word of the month on Facebook, Twitter, or a website. Another interesting event was the "Frisian twitter day", on April 19, 2012: people were encouraged to write tweets only in Frisian. This initiative

was picked up by the traditional media and a great number of people followed the initiative by sending Frisian tweets. Often the text was not correctly spelled and written phonetically, but it was still a great success for the language. By the way, after and during this event, the number of downloads of the Frisian dictionary app increased a lot, which suggests that people missed being able to write in their own language correctly.

2.2 E-learning - the example of Edufrysk

Another application of new technology is e-learning. A good example of that is a programme designed to teach Frisian, called Edufrysk. This programme was developed a few years ago in Fryslân. It was developed and is still updated by AFUK, an institute that provides Frisian language courses and develops teaching materials. Edufrysk is a good example of how new technology opens up a whole range of new possibilities in language learning and teaching.

Edufrysk is available on the Internet; there is a free trial-period of three months, after that a subscription fee needs to be paid. It was originally aimed at people of 16 years old or older, but in practice most users are between thirty and forty years old. Students with different levels of proficiency are catered for and the programme combines language learning with learning about Frisian culture. This is accomplished, for example, through the type of texts that are used. Users can use the programme in a flexible way: they can choose which texts they want to use; if they do not like a specific topic, they can skip the text or choose a different topic. Furthermore, music and songs are part of the educational materials, as well as podcasts and games, which is especially appreciated by the younger users: they can learn Frisian in a playful and informal way.

Other features of this programme are personalised profiles and virtual communities, which enable users to chat with each other and use the language in a very friendly and relaxed way. Furthermore, special learning packages are developed for special target groups, such as people working in law or medicine. At the moment the software developers are working on the development of a framework which allows conversion of the programme to other languages so that its set-up can be used for e-language learning in other minority language groups, too.

Different groups of students make use of Edufrysk. Both people who never took a Frisian course before, and, of course, students that are already following Frisian language courses. Teachers use it, too. Of course expert

groups and language fanatics use Edufryk, too. Moreover, “root seekers”, in the past many people emigrated from Fryslân to, e.g., Canada or New Zealand and now their children and their children’s children find that their grandfather or grandmother (when they are getting older) is suddenly talking in a language they do not understand. There is quite a number of these people with Frisian roots who want to know more about where they (grand)parents came from, and about the Frisian language. Edufrysk creates an easily accessible way to do so.

So far, the experience has been very successful. Edufrysk has been running for a few years now and it is developing into a fully-grown programme. Students can learn Frisian quite quickly, and people use the system in a very intuitive way. It seems that by giving them freedom in this programme, they become quick learners. In general, there is a low demand for exams or certificates from Edufrysk-users. People just want to learn and they do not mind they do not have a degree or certificate to show for it.

3. Prospects

Above I have tried to outline the ways in which new media are changing the landscape of language learning and how this might affect language vitality, using the province of Fryslân and the Frisian language as an example.

Those issues can be and need to be studied in more depth. More and comparative data are needed. In the future I would like to address these research questions in an international project. I very much welcome any suggestions for partnerships and expressions of interest.

Biography

Cor van der Meer is project manager at the Fryske Akademy and in charge of the Mercator European Research Centre. His main fields of interest and research are multilingualism, minority languages, language learning, language vitality, education systems, and new developments in language learning in a European context.

Drs. Cor van der Meer

Mercator Research Centre on Multilingualism and Language Learning

Fryske Akademy

Doelestrjitte 8



European Universities' Network on Multilingualism
<http://eunom.uoc.edu>



P.O. box 54
8900 AB Ljouwert / Leeuwarden
Netherlands
T: +31 (0)58 2343063
M: +31 (0)6 41788622
E: cvdmeer@fryske-akademy.nl
W: www.mercator-research.eu