Promoting language through the economy: competing paradigms

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Finally, Hanze argues that Scots can be used as a means of underpinning Scotland’s unique identity – in the global market place a distinctive cultural identity can help establish a country as a desirable brand. As far as Scotland is concerned the Scots language and culture are, to some extent, already widely recognised. The present, or future, Scottish governments may want to consider how the Scots language and culture might be employed in marketing Scotland, but first this would require a change of attitude on behalf of the country’s decision makers. Until the language and culture are valued for themselves, it is unlikely that they will be exploited to the greater economic benefit of the nation. It is often claimed that if governments do not take language seriously, they don’t take people seriously, and this is certainly the case in Scotland regarding Scots speakers.

In the context of Grin’s paradigms, Robert Millar also puts the case for Scots. Millar picks up on Grin’s third paradigm (the language sector and multipliers paradigm) and the suggestion that financial support for the minority language sector would create ‘successive waves of economic stimulation’ which would produce ‘knock on effects which benefit the economy as a whole’ and responds with the observation that ‘what proponents of any activity have to ask is to what extent is there a demand for the minority language sector’ economic stimulation activities envisaged?’ Millar concedes that ‘an attempt to answer this question for Scots in Scotland is not straightforward’. The difficulty is, for Millar, ‘not that Scots or its speakers are invisible – for Scots speakers make up the majority of the population of the country – but rather, their connection with their native dialects is to a considerable extent discredited’, with considerable loss of pride.

In conclusion, after this brief summary, that there appears to be little conviction of – or support for – Grin’s first two paradigms (the firm, market and management paradigm and the development paradigm) regarding their application to Irish, Scottish Gaelic or Scots. Grin’s third paradigm (the language sector and multipliers paradigm) accounts for much of the support for Irish and Gaelic authorities. Perhaps the strongest case in the long run is for Grin’s fourth paradigm (the welfare paradigm), which is characteristic of Finland’s approach to minority and regional languages. Finland’s language academy has long been the model for an institute for the languages of Scotland. However, to implement the fourth paradigm would require nothing less than very considerable seismic shifts on language policy by national and devolved governments.

We are most grateful to François Grin for his contribution to an earlier language and politics symposium (see Grin 2003) but especially for the leadership which he brought to the 2006 symposium and now these edited proceedings. We look forward to the growing debate about the value of government support for Irish, Scottish Gaelic and Scots as generators of economic growth, and to observing whether and how Grin’s important paradigms become adopted and adapted by the major stakeholders – not least the national and devolved governments.

Reference


Promoting Language through the Economy: Competing Paradigms

François Grin

1. Introductory Remarks

The basic concepts used in the economics of minority languages have not changed markedly in recent years. New developments have certainly taken place in language economics but, for the most part, they do not address the case of minority languages (the hot topics over the past three to four years have mostly been related to multilingual language dynamics, language choices for the European Union, and related issues).

Two changes, however, have occurred, and the first part of this paper is accordingly devoted to a brief account of what I see as significant evolutions over the past fifteen years (Section 2). I will then recall the distinction between ‘economics’ and ‘the economy’ (Section 3), before moving on to an account and assessment of four paradigms in terms of which the language-economy link can be addressed (confining myself, however, to issues that are relevant to the narrower problem of the rationale for minority language promotion); this is covered in Sections 4–7. The concluding section of this paper provides a summary comparative assessment.

2. The Language-Economy Dialogue: Recent Trends

One first change is that, within the economics profession, an interest in language issues is no longer considered as bizarre as it was in the late eighties or early nineties. More economists are now working on language matters, and they don’t feel quite so lonely any more. To wit, there are several economists at the present symposium, and this gives me an opportunity and a reason to highlight certain points which are not necessarily new as such, but which have remained unexplored and deserve closer investigation. At one level, therefore, this chapter is a call to fellow economists, suggesting avenues for further research. Even if the basic intuitions that lie beneath the four ‘paradigms’ discussed in this paper are much the same as they were a few years ago, many of the questions they raise (implicitly or explicitly) have never been studied in detail. There are, in fact, numerous research projects to be undertaken, both theoretically and empirically.

The second change which has occurred in the past 15 years is that the notion that there is a link between economic activity, on the one hand, and minority language protection and promotion, on the other hand, has to some extent ‘mainstreamed’ into scientific discourse about minority languages. This certainly does not mean that economic perspectives have become central in the analyses proposed by scholars from the language disciplines – applied linguistics and sociolinguistics in particular – but that there is an increasingly widespread awareness of the relevance of economic factors as determinants of the dynamics affecting small languages, and of the fact that economic activity and minority language vitality are not necessarily antagonistic. This is, in fact, the issue already addressed at the fourth Language and Politics Symposium (Grin, 2003b). This means that it is increasingly possible, even desirable, to speak about language economics in a different way.

Contrast this observation with those made by several contributors in Haugen et al. (1981).