Market forces, language spread and linguistic diversity

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Language: A Right and a Resource
Approaching Linguistic Human Rights

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FRANÇOIS GRIN

The Issue

The spread, maintenance and decline of languages is usually seen not as a purely linguistic process, but as the result of the interplay of complex social, political and economic forces. However, despite the fact that much has been written about language dynamics—particularly language decline—our understanding of how macro-level forces influence them remains fairly imprecise.

Ten years ago, the sociolinguists Helt, Appel and Peter Muysken pointed out that we still had no full-fledged theory of language shift (Appel and Muysken 1987). In my opinion, this remains true today, and our understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships involved, particularly when it comes to language spread (as opposed to language decline), is incomplete. Much of the work available is descriptive, and most theoretical approaches retain a clearly inductive or hermeneutic orientation; hence, we still do not have a deductive theory with general, testable propositions, although notable progress has been made on some aspects, particularly with the publication of Fishman’s Reversing Language Shift (Fishman 1991).

In particular, we do not know very much about the influence of economic processes (particularly at the macro level) on linguistic ones. There certainly is, in the economics of language, a growing literature that investigates how economic variables or processes affect language spread, decline and use. In the case of minority languages, the economic effects of state-sponsored maintenance efforts have been studied by Ó Cinnéide and Keane (1988) and Sproull (1996); some more theoretical papers explore changes in patterns of minority-language use over time (Grin 1992 and 1993) or second-language learning and its implications for language spread (Church and King 1993; John and Yi 1995). In these papers,