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## The Problem of the Semi-Speaker in Language Death

The fieldworker who is investigating a dying language has by definition a limited pool of potential informants. This pool may in fact consist of only one person, or it may number a few hundred. Always it is in the process of contraction, and often the fieldworker has a sense of great urgency in his struggle to record and analyze the language. He must find the best possible informants as quickly as possible and try to exhaust them as sources.

In the language death situation, however, there may be cause to question the intactness of the material gathered. In my own fieldwork in a terminally Gaelic-speaking part of Scotland, I discovered considerable differences in the Gaelic of the oldest available fluent speakers and the youngest, the Gaelic of the latter showing reduction and loss in certain areas in comparison with the former (Dorian 1973). I would like to consider here the evaluation problem which faces the investigator in the terminal language community: how is he to gauge the completeness and intactness of the version of the language which he receives from his informants?

Oftentimes evaluation is possible by external or internal clues. If there is more than one speaker, the investigator may be able to compare one version with another (Swadesh 1948: 230-31). An isolated last speaker may betray the uncertainty of his productions by the manner of delivery ("pathetically halting", Krauss 1963-70:7). These hints are not always available, however. The most difficult case is surely a lone last speaker of some fluency, where there is neither a comparison available nor a markedly deficient manner of delivery. Faced with this situation, Haas (n.d.: 10) made a judgment based on the sociolinguistic probability that the language as represented by a last, isolated speaker was, as she put it, "a mere remnant of what the language must have been

when many speakers used it as their only means of communication. Haas' assumption here is a common one, namely, that any language which continues to be spoken by only a very few people will exhibit a much reduced form as compared with the same language in vigorous use by a rich linguistic community. Exceptions will certainly be found in those cases where a language dies with extraordinary rapidity and without replacement by some other language; this was the case with Tasmanian and with the Yahí language in California, where the last speakers were monolinguals or near-monolinguals for most or all of their lives. But on the whole the assumption that the reduced use of a language will lead also to a reduced form of that language seems realistic.

Haas' assumption can best be tested in a terminal language community where a continuum of proficiency is available, from full fluency to the barest skills necessary for communication in the dying language. Such a continuum is available in the coastal East Sutherland area of mainland Scotland where I have worked for 11 years. In a total pool of Gaelic speakers which numbered about 140 in 1972, there were at the upper end of the spectrum a few individuals who were more comfortable and proficient in Gaelic than in English,<sup>1</sup> in the middle range many who were skilled bilinguals, fluent in both languages, and at the lower end some who could make themselves understood in imperfect Gaelic but were very much more at home in English. These last I have called "semi-speakers" (Dorian 1973: 417). It is the identification of these semi-speakers which constitutes a major problem for the fieldworker dealing with a dying language, since he needs to know how representative and how reliable his data are. If even the youngest *fluent* speakers showed notable grammatical change in their Gaelic as compared with the oldest fluent speakers, then the semi-speakers would presumably show still more radical departures from the conservative norm, and data recovered from semi-speakers would need to be handled with caution in the writing of grammars or in the reconstruction techniques of historical linguistics.

One of the questions that is of interest to the investigator in the field is whether the community's own judgments of proficiency have any basis in fact: is there any significant difference between the usage of the youngest of those who have a reputation for fluency and that of the eldest of those whose skills are little thought of? Can the community itself evaluate linguistically to the extent of identifying the semi-speaker whose language is "reduced"? Bloomfield's experience with the Meno-

mini (Bloomfield 1927) shows that such judgments are made even in illiterate societies, but the question still remains as to how finely and accurately they may be made. The smallest and most strongly Gaelic-speaking of the East Sutherland villages, Embo (population ca. 275), provides an excellent test case. The oldest children of the skilled septuagenarian speaker B. R. are all considered fluent speakers, down to and including the fourth, the 45-year-old son A. R. But the two daughters who are next in line, J. R. and W. R., are considered less than fluent, even though the elder of the two, J. R., is only one year younger than A. R.<sup>2</sup> Since A. R. habitually speaks Gaelic by preference whenever circumstances permit (that is, when he has a Gaelic-speaking conversation partner), while J. R. much more often chooses to speak English, it would be quite possible that the community was responding more to A. R.'s greater language loyalty than to his greater proficiency when judging him fluent in comparison to his sister.

To test the Gaelic skills of A. R. and J. R. and other speakers in the proficiency continuum, the same 115 English sentences were presented for translation into Gaelic to 16 speakers of varying ages. The sentences were chosen to contain a fair sampling of the grammatical signals of East Sutherland Gaelic and of the obligatory morphophonemic phenomena of the dialect. The speakers questioned included one octogenarian, 3 septuagenarians (including B. R.), 3 speakers in their 50's, and the 45-year-old A. R., among those generally adjudged fluent speakers. The 7 supposedly less-than-fluent speakers were all women.<sup>3</sup> They ranged in age from their early 60's to their early 30's, according to the stage the language has reached in their village on its passage to extinction: in Embo an individual in his 40's can still be a fluent speaker, whereas in Brora, the other village surveyed, the fluent speakers are all in their 70's and 80's. One speaker who was an unknown quantity was also included. On the theory that originally fluent speakers who have been away from the home community for many years without opportunity to practice may lose considerable proficiency, a 58-year-old Embo exile was questioned in her home in the Lowlands;<sup>4</sup> she left Embo 40 years ago and has returned only for brief holidays since. Her husband was an English monolingual, and she has had very little chance to use Gaelic during her 40-year exile.

The results of immediate interest here are those of B. R. and her son and daughter, A. R. and J. R. There are 30 years separating the children from the mother, only one year separating the children from each other. If the community judgment of A. R. as a fluent speaker is accur-

ate, then in some significant respects his performance must be either more like his mother's than like his sister's, or at least more like his mother's than his sister's is. This is certainly not the case in *every* test. Neither of the children has retained the vocative plural inflection of the mother, for example; and where the mother showed 100% of the obligatory morphophonemic changes in the vocative, A. R. showed only 17% as compared with J. R.'s 57%.

But the overall results do indicate a pronounced difference between the Gaelic of A. R. and that of his sister J. R. Although neither A. R. nor J. R. used the most conservative form of the passive, A. R.'s passives were superior to his sister's in that he knew and used both of the available finite verbs with which the passive can be formed and in that there were no constituent elements of the passive missing. J. R. used only one of the finite verbs and was twice missing a necessary preposition in the formation of the passive. A. R.'s choice of word order for pronoun objects agreed with the conservative choice of older speakers like his mother in 6 out of 7 instances; J. R.'s in only 3 out of 7. A. R. controlled two less common conjunctions either not supplied or incorrectly supplied by his sister. A. R. used two of the three available forms of the negative imperative, J. R. only one. In one test A. R. outperformed *both* his mother and his sister: each of the women twice (out of 8 opportunities) substituted analytically-formed phrases for the usual synthetic forms of the conjugated preposition *do* "to",<sup>5</sup> whereas A. R. used synthetic forms in all 8 instances. J. R. failed in 3 instances out of 13 to produce an obligatory morphophonemic change in the initial consonant of an adjective, A. R. in only 1 instance (and B. R. in none). Where there was a choice of prepositions, A. R.'s choice coincided with the choice of conservative speakers like his mother 6 out of 7 times, J. R.'s only 3 out of 7 times.

The greatest difference between the Gaelic of A. R. and that of J. R., however, comes when the retention of irregularities is considered. Of the 17 irregular noun plurals tested, B. R. retained them all (although she offered one regularized alternative in addition), A. R. 15, and J. R. only 9. Of the 16 irregular verb stems tested, B. R. and A. R. retained them all, J. R. 13. A highly irregular first person singular conditional inflection is missing in the speech of J. R. (and replaced by an analytic construction), but it appears without fail in that of B. R. and A. R. Similarly J. R. regularizes the future by carrying the predominant inflection into the first person singular; neither her mother nor her brother ever does so.

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If we attempt to analyze the respects in which J. R.'s Gaelic differs from her brother's, we find the following phenomena each represented more than once:

- 1) absence of a stylistic option (negative imperative; passive)
- 2) substitution of an analytic construction for a synthetic one (conjugating preposition; 1st person conditional)
- 3) analogical leveling (noun plurals; verb stems; conditional; future)

While I suspect that all of these phenomena are in fact characteristic of languages in decline, only one of them here seems to have significance for the community judgment of proficiency. The first two were displayed not only by the putative semi-speaker J. R., but also by her mother. If we plot the performances of B. R., A. R., and J. R., we find the following:

1)	Neg. Imper.			Passive	
	<i>option 1</i>	<i>option 2</i>	<i>option 3</i>	<i>finite verb 1</i>	<i>finite verb 2</i>
	—	B. R. 3	—	—	B. R. 6
	—	A. R. 1	A. R. 2	A. R. 3	A. R. 3
	—	—	J. R. 3	—	J. R. 6
2)	Conjugating Prep. do		1st Pers. Conditional		
	<i>synth. constr.</i>	<i>anal. constr.</i>	<i>synth. constr.</i>	<i>anal. constr.</i>	
	B. R. 6	2	B. R. 5	—	
	A. R. 8	—	A. R. 5	—	
	J. R. 6	2	J. R. —	5	

It is only in the last case, the case of the analytic treatment of the first person conditional, that we find B. R. and A. R. clearly lined up on the one side of the statistics versus J. R. on the other. As it happens, the use of an analytical construction for the first person singular conditional also constitutes a case of analogical leveling, because all of the other persons of the conditional, both singular and plural, are likewise formed analytically in East Sutherland Gaelic.

If we now look at the difference in performance among the three speakers on the measure of analogical leveling as such, the pattern which emerges is striking:

- 3) *Analogically leveled noun plurals* (opportunities: 17)
  - B. R. 1 (offered in addition to the irregular form)
  - A. R. 2
  - J. R. 8

*Analogically leveled verb stems* (opportunities: 16)

B. R. —

A. R. —

J. R. 3

*Analogically leveled 1 sg. conditional* (opportunities: 5)

B. R. —

A. R. —

J. R. 5

*Analogically leveled 1 sg. future* (opportunities: 5)

B. R. —

A. R. —

J. R. 5

It should be noted that analogical leveling is not confined in East Sutherland Gaelic to those whom the community designates as less-than-fluent speakers. Analogical leveling in the passive can in fact be shown to be a change in progress throughout the entire Embo community (Dorian 1973). But the sudden dramatic upsurge of analogical leveling in J. R.'s speech, as compared with that of her brother a year older, seems actually to be a defining characteristic of her status as a semi-speaker. This supposition receives confirmation from the fact that it was her excessive analogical leveling in gerund formation (a measure not included in the tests) which was first commented on by the fluent speakers who called my attention to her as an imperfect speaker.

A high incidence of analogical leveling is most useful as a criterion for semi-speaker status at the upper range of semi-speaker proficiency, it clearly emerges as the single most prominent difference between the Gaelic of A. R. and that of J. R., who is actually quite a *good* imperfect speaker in comparison to some of the others. But while some degree of analogical leveling is characteristic of all the semi-speakers in my sample (and also of the exile speaker J. F.), there is simply less left to level in the speech of the more extreme semi-speakers. The Brora semi-speaker J. M., for example, levels 7 irregular noun plurals, but in addition she has no marked plural form at all for two others; she levels 4 irregular verb stems, but was unable to provide *any* form for 5 others. And there is no use looking for leveling in the first person of her conditional, because she has lost the grammatical category "conditional" altogether. The future is vestigial in her speech. This is clearly a much more drastic kind of reduction.

If J. M. were the last surviving "speaker" of East Sutherland Gaelic,

she would, I think pose little problem in identification as a semi-speaker for the fieldworker. That is, there would be no difficulty in evaluating the intactness of her Gaelic. There is simply too much missing in her speech, and the investigator would be inclined to be suspicious about a speaker who could not distinguish between "I sell", "I will sell", and "I would sell".<sup>6</sup> Other losses, however, representing phenomena less common in the world's languages, might be harder to spot. The young Embo semispeaker I. F., for example, has all but lost one entire initial mutation, that is, one of the omnipresent morphophonemic changes common to the languages of the Celtic language family. Were there no other speakers, no other extant Celtic languages, and no written records, the only evidence in I. F.'s speech that the morphophonological system of 'nasalization' had ever existed would be the occurrence of one seemingly irregular (but consistent) alternation between the citation form [t<sup>h</sup>ε] "house" and its counterpart [dε] after the definite article. Considering the tendency toward analogical leveling which we have already noted in the performance of semi-speakers, the utterly consistent appearance of such an apparent irregularity ought probably to be given great weight in the analysis of a language where the only informants are probable semi-speakers.

Certainly the performance of all the semi-speakers in my sample indicates the accuracy of Haas' assumption that reduction in the use of a language will be matched by reduction in its structure. Some of the kinds of reduction noted for East Sutherland Gaelic may prove to be universally characteristic of dying languages when more evidence is in; I am thinking particularly of loss of entire grammatical categories and of reduction of stylistic options. The latter has already been documented by Hill for Luiseño and Cupeño (Hill 1973). Substitution of analytic for synthetic structures, on the other hand, can of course only occur in languages with polymorphemic word structure. Analogical leveling is again potentially universal, since it may be either morphological or syntactic.

#### CONCLUSION

Evaluation procedures for terminal speakers are commonly possible. Often there will be earlier accounts of the same language to compare with the productions of the terminal speaker (and probable semi-speaker), as there were for Biloxi (Haas 1968: 77) and Luiseño (Hill

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1973: 35); or there will be several speakers to compare with each other (Krauss 1963-70; Swadesh 1948: 230-31). Failing that, there is the possibility of the tell-tale irregularity, as with I. F.'s fossilized nasalization; or, on the other hand, the suspicious absence of *any* irregularity, which suggests vast analogical leveling; or the puzzling absence of an expected grammatical category, such as *some* provision for expressing the sense of the conditional in contrast with the future.

On the basis of my work with terminal East Sutherland Gaelic, I would give a positive answer to the following three questions:

1. Is reduced use of a language accompanied by a reduction in form? (i.e., are there semi-speakers?)
2. Can the more proficient members of the language community realistically pinpoint the onset of that reduction? (i.e., can the community accurately identify the semi-speakers?)
3. Can the investigator hope to evaluate the intactness of the version of a language which he derives from a last few speakers? (i.e., can the investigator spot semi-speaker performance?)

Data from other terminal language communities will be required before we can judge the general validity of these answers. I have already mentioned above that rapidity of extinction can produce a negative answer to the first question.<sup>7</sup> This suggests that "reduced use" applies essentially to the individual speaker, not to the community. If the language is used less and less by the community as a whole, yet certain speakers continue to use it almost exclusively, those loyalists will not become semi-speakers. The semi-speakers among whom the language will appear in reduced form are the individuals who themselves use the language less, whether because they have moved out of the community (exiles like J. F.) or because they are the pivotal figures in a local language shift.

Answers to the second question may vary in response to the precise kinds of change which are involved in the reduction process. Some may be more "visible" than others; that is, they become linguistic *stereotypes* (Labov 1970: 73). Analogical leveling proved to be a stereotypical form of reduction in East Sutherland Gaelic, whereas morphophonemic confusions, which are rife in the speech of semi-speakers, seem to produce no comment. In general here we need much more detailed accounts of the reductive features of language death and their salience to the native community.<sup>8</sup>

Fuller accounts from fieldworkers of their experiences in elicitation from terminal speakers can throw light on the third question. Can we



realistically look for clues from the informants' manner or from the coherence of the data to provide the means for evaluating a corpus?

In sum, much more work needs to be done on the incidence of the semi-speaker phenomenon, on the social and linguistic circumstances which give rise to it, and on the linguistic features typical of semi-speaker performance.

## SUMMARY

Data elicited from a last few speakers of a dying language may be of dubious reliability, since a language in the process of extinction is likely to suffer reduction and loss. Can the investigator determine whether reduction has in fact taken place and identify the performance of "semi-speakers", imperfect terminal speakers? Does the community affected recognize the onset of reduction and identify the semi-speakers accurately? Evidence is offered from a dying dialect of Scottish Gaelic for reduction in structure accompanying reduction in use, and for the community's identification of semi-speaker performance in terms of stereotypical linguistic features (in this case massive analogical leveling). Recognition of distortion through unavoidable reliance on semi-speaker informants would seem to be possible on the basis of either internal or external evidence, but the universality of the semi-speaker phenomenon and of the types of reduction evidenced in semi-speaker performance remains to be established.

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## NOTES

1. There were no Gaelic monolinguals, however, and had been none for perhaps 40 or 50 years.
2. All three of these children are unmarried and live in the mother's household.
3. This is fortuitous. I heard about possible male counterparts, but they were either unwilling or unable to serve as informants during the limited time available for the study.
4. One of the fluent speakers in his 50's is also an exile, but his wife is a Gaelic speaker, too, and Gaelic is the normal language of the home. Their daughter, likewise living in exile, served as one of the imperfect-speaker informants.
5. B. R. was the only fluent speaker to do this, but four of the semi-speakers other than J. R. also did so at least once.
6. This sort of inference is risky, but combined with other evidence (halting manner of