

Caught Unawares? Language Shift and Internalised Ideologies

Pia Lane

University of Oslo

Language shift is a process that takes place on the societal level as a group of people start using a new language in all societal domains, including communication within the family (Haugen 1953, Fishman 1965). In order to shed light on societal and individual aspects of language shift, I will analyse data from a longitudinal study of language shift in Bugøynes-Pykejä, my home village in Northern Norway, where the language shift from Kven (a Finnic language) to Norwegian now is almost completed.

Studies of language shift often are retrospective - due to the lack of longitudinal data speakers are interviewed about choices made in the past. In this lecture I will compare and contrast longitudinal interview data from two key time periods, namely from the early stages of language shift in 1975 and the period 2005 to 2008 when Kven recently had been accepted as a national minority language in Norway. I will address two related paradoxes of language shift: 1) Families and communities may start speaking a new language with children without questioning their language choices and 2) In spite of such a profound change in communicative practices, speakers themselves are often unaware of the unfolding language shift. Such an unawareness has been described in other contexts as well, see for instance (Kulick 1997) and (Gafaranga 2010).

In Bugøynes-Pykejä language choices were conditioned by deep social, cultural and political historical processes, and a chain of individual choices lead to collective outcome, namely that the entire village during a short period changed language of interaction with children. The Kven went through a period of cultural and linguistic oppression, and the official Norwegian goal was to Norwegianise the northern minorities as the Norwegian nation state was perceived and constructed as a monolingual nation. This led to a devaluation of Kven language and culture and shaped both beliefs about language and discursive practices in Kven communities (Lane 2010). When a dominant discourse is taken up and internalised in this manner, it becomes a part of who people are and how they see themselves, and therefore social practices and ideologies may become internalised to such an extent that we are no longer aware of them. I will discuss how such internalisation came about and investigate how language choices of the past are presented when speakers reflect on the language choices they made in the past. This analysis illustrates that while ideologies may become internalised and unquestioned, such ideologies are not fixed and may change over time.