

Some Reflections on the New Media and Lesser Used Languages

Dónall Ó Riagáin*

Scientific or technological inventions are neither good nor bad in themselves. It is how they are used by us that makes them either good or bad for humankind. Nuclear power immediately springs to mind as a classic example. Man's ability to fly is another. Aircraft can be used to transport people and goods from one place to another in double-quick time. Or, as we have witnessed all too often, aircraft can be used to drop bombs, kill and maim people, and destroy cities and towns.

The development of information and communication technology (ICT) is undoubtedly the biggest scientific breakthrough in our lifetime. When I started working in the pre-computer age, international telephone calls, fax messages, airmail, telex, and even telegrams were the fastest way to communicate with people in other countries. Even with airmail, it could take a letter some weeks, rather than days, to reach its destination. Last night I sent an e-mail to a friend in Kalmykia in the North Caucasus. A reply was awaiting me this morning. To make a telephone call away from home or office in the "pre-mobile age" one had to use a public telephone and insert coins in the slot. We can now turn on our televisions and, thanks to satellites, enjoy a wide range of channels, some from the other side of the world. With Skype

* Dónall Ó Riagáin is as an independent consultant on language planning. A founding member of the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, he was the organization's first president and subsequently its first secretary general. He was a member of CAHLR (*Comité Ad Hoc Langues Régionales*), which drafted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. An Honorary Fellow of Trinity College in Carmarthen, Wales, he is a member of the International Advisory Board of Linguapax (UNESCOCAT) in Barcelona and is Chairperson of Abakan Action, an informal network working for the promotion of linguistic diversity. He is also a member of European Universities Network on Multilingualism (EUNoM) and the Language Policy Research Network of the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. Finally, he is a guardian of the *Observatoire International des Droits Linguistiques* at Moncton University in Canada.

we can speak to and see our friends even if they live thousands of kilometres away on other continents.

How these new media are affecting society is an ongoing process and one which no one can accurately forecast. It is said that the recent revolutions in Egypt and Libya were impossible to stop because the revolutionaries were able to communicate with each other and plot their next moves using text messages, e-mails, mobile phones, etc. One could suspect that neither President Mubarak nor Colonel Gaddafi foresaw what was coming down the tracks because of new communications technology.

Language is an essential factor in practically all communications, be they oral, aural, or written. Modern media were developed primarily in highly developed countries in the West and in Japan. The first major “consumers” of these developments were again the more affluent developed countries, e.g. the USA, Western Europe, Canada, Australia, Japan, etc. A few languages were set to benefit from these media developments early on, especially English.

David Crystal argued in his 2001 work *Language and the Internet*¹ that, rather than “technospeak” becoming dominant on the internet, English—different varieties of it—was coming to dominate. I found evidence to support his arguments in some Russian universities. Whereas in the old Soviet period every effort was made to ensure that a wide range of foreign languages were studied, I found very striking evidence that English was becoming by far the most sought after foreign language. When I enquired about the reason for this, I was told that the internet was the answer. Many of the universities could not afford to buy a lot of books published in the West, but with the internet, students could access virtual libraries, resumes of new works, etc.—in English.

A lot has changed over the past decade. On the internet site *Internet World Stats*² we find that by 2010, English language websites had an estimated 536.6 million users, whereas Chinese websites then had 444.9 million users. A number of other languages (e.g. Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, German etc.) also had many millions of users. Thousands of languages can now be found on the internet, including many lesser used ones.

What will the long-term effect of all this have on lesser used (minority or regional) languages? Will modern media drive a series of nails into the coffins of these languages? In my opinion, this will depend almost entirely on how the users of

these languages employ modern media. As already observed, technology is neither good nor bad in itself: everything depends on how we use it. All the evidence suggests that users of lesser used languages are making use—often in very creative ways—of new communications technologies.

There are a number of different kinds of lesser used language communities. The “transfrontier minority” is one kind, i.e. a minority community that speaks a language that is in a majority position in another state. The Swedish community in Finland is a classic example of this kind of community. While the Finland Swedes are, and have been for a long time, a relatively well cared for community, new media open up all kinds of possibilities. Accessing Swedish TV and radio has become easier and participation in activities such as blogging and the use of social networks (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) with Swedes in Sweden and elsewhere has now become a reality.

Another kind of “transfrontier minority” (or minorities) is those who speak a language that is in a minority position in the state(s) they inhabit – and there can be a number of states involved. There are approximately 50,000 Albanian speakers in Italy, scattered over five regions in the south of the country. They usually inhabit rather remote mountainous districts. (It is believed that their ancestors came to Italy as mercenary soldiers five or six centuries ago and were rewarded for their services with parcels of land that the majority population did not want.) Developing and maintaining a sense of community and solidarity is no easy task. Albanians can also be found in Greece and a number of Balkan states, e.g. Kosovo, Macedonia. New media opens up exciting possibilities for networking on the internet, online publications, teleconferencing, online dictionaries, chat-rooms, etc. The same could equally apply to other language communities, e.g. the Sámi and the Occitans.

And then we have the linguistic community which speaks a language that is not in a majority position in any state. My own language, Irish, although an official and working language of the EU, is lesser used in the sense that only about 100,000 persons speak it daily, although probably up to 2 million people have an active ability in it. New media and technology have proven to be a godsend. There are many websites in Irish, including two online monthly magazines. We have an excellent online Irish>English/English>Irish dictionary that is accessible to all free of charge. This means that neologisms can be added to the database almost immediately. Furthermore, we have an open source grammar checking engine, called *An*

Gramadóir. Blogging in Irish has become popular. *Raidió na Gaeltachta*, the Irish-medium radio service, which broadcasts 24/7, can now be heard on the internet—a service that is much appreciated by the large Irish diaspora. All the text on my mobile phone, manufactured in Korea, is in Irish.

The new media must hold even more exciting possibilities for what are called “non-territorial linguistic minorities” e.g. users of Romany and Jewish languages, such Sinti, Roma, Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish communities. With the new media they can communicate and cooperate with each other irrespective of where they are living.

The advent of new technologies opens up new possibilities to language learners and language teachers, whether the languages in question are major or minor. At a very interesting symposium on ‘E-Learning, ICT and Languages’, which was held in Barcelona in May 2012 as part of the European Universities Network on Multilingualism (EUNoM), one of speakers, Tünde Dokus, from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Piliscsaba, Hungary, observed that while e-learning was not a panacea, his experience was that:

the web provides a lot of excellent materials for teaching all language skills e.g. reading, writing, listening and speaking. Students need to develop a whole new range of English language literacy skills, which involve emerging forms of communication, reading, and writing using online technologies. In learner-centred collaborative projects, students have the opportunity to work together with their classmates and with others around the world, using a variety of technological means. Effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration, including the effective use of information found in online networks, necessitates a high degree of critical interpretation. Teachers must help students learn to critically interpret information and communication in given social contexts.

The use of the new media in the classroom can be invaluable for schools where the medium of instruction is a lesser used language. Very often the provision of teaching materials can present a problem. The comparatively small market for such materials makes their provision unattractive for commercial publishers. I have seen the DIWAN (Breton-medium school movement) using desktop publishing to produce very attractive teaching materials. My own little grandson, who started in an Irish-medium primary school only a few months ago, will shortly be given an ipad onto which all of the essential learning materials will have been downloaded.

Another challenge for those working for lesser used languages is information-sharing, adopting common positions, and making joint proposals to central governments. For minority groups, even in the same country (there are at least 13 linguistic minorities in Italy and eight in France), this has been no easy matter and

networking has been challenging in the past. New media have changed all of that. I have the honour of being chairperson of an informal network of people working for linguistic diversity and language rights, called Abakan Action. We have members in the USA, the Russian Federation, Canada, Ireland, the UK, Slovenia, Germany, and elsewhere. Without the new media, we simply could not function.

We are living in an exciting age, but also one that can be challenging and even overawing. Like everything else on the planet, our ability to change, adopt and benefit from our new environment will decide our future. With the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, the European Union has declared that it ‘shall respect its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, and shall ensure that Europe’s cultural heritage is safeguarded and enhanced’ (2009, Article 3.3).

The new media are tools with which we can ensure that this commitment becomes a practical reality.

Notes

1. David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
2. Available at www.internetworldstats.com/stats.