

BOOK REVIEW **OPEN ACCESS**

Book review: Heritage Languages in the Digital Age: The Case of Autochthonous Minority Languages in Western Europe

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Heritage Languages in the Digital Age: The Case of Autochthonous Minority Languages in Western Europe

Edited by Birte Arendt and Gertrud Reershemius

Multilingual Matters, 2024

ISBN 978-1-80041-422-8 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-80041-424-2 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-80041-423-5 (PDF)

The book *Heritage Languages in the Digital Age* examines a selection of autochthonous heritage minority languages (henceforth AML) from across Western Europe in relation to an array of digital contexts. The book begins with an introduction by the editors, Birte Arendt and Gertrud Reershemius, in which they contextualise the topic in the current framework of trends within ‘mediatisation’ (that is, a process by which media integrates in different sectors of society), which constitutes the theoretical framework of the book, on one hand, and AML on the other hand. Likewise, provide an overview of previous research on AML and the possibilities offered by digital media and introduce the contributions to the book, whose main focus is on the performance era and individual users.

**Journal on Ethnopolitics and
Minority Issues in Europe**
Vol.24, No.3, 2025

pp.169–172

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.53779/YASA0808>

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In Chapter 1, Helen Kelly-Holmes examines 'knowledge hierarchies' in Irish in Twitter (now known as 'X') discussions; that is, how some users tend to claim hegemony for what is 'correct' or 'incorrect' Irish. Although cyberspace allows anonymous discourses, the study shows how those users contributing to the debates on Twitter have a 'biography' on the medium, which enables the analysis of their hegemonic position in discussions, as well as of their 'algorithmic identity', which determines which tweets would obtain more or less exposure than others on the platform.

In Chapter 2, Marco Tamburelli accounts for what he calls the Lombard 'unintelligibility myth', an ideology claiming that language variation within Lombard spoken in Italy is so rich that Lombard should not be considered a cohesive language but rather several languages. Tamburelli explores the discussion about this topic on social media and demonstrates how communication on online platforms contributes to answering claims about the Lombard language's lack of cohesiveness. Moreover, the study shows how measures have been taken to enhance mutual intelligibility between Lombard speakers throughout the large Lombard-speaking territory by means of open access online resources.

Faroese in digital media is the topic of Laura Zieseler's chapter. Faroese has reportedly long had a 'high', purist-oriented variety (often used in writing, and sometimes considered alienating by ordinary people) and a 'low' one, which is partially characterised by including more interference from Danish. According to this study, digital media contribute to mediatisation in the form of bottom-up development of the written language, by which 'low' variety spellings and inflections are becoming more frequent.

Breton in the online context is examined by Merryn Davies-Deacon in Chapter 4. The study challenges prejudices about the digital habits of traditional speakers of Breton, as the language is used on digital media in standard, non-standard, as well as dialectal forms of the language. Moreover, Breton data show that recommended puristic neologisms are not always the preferred ones in digital contexts, which may further allude that the Breton digital community does not merely consist of new speakers.

In Chapter 5, Rhian Hodges and Cynog Prys report and discuss a study where they placed themselves in the meso-level as the initiators and developers of two digital teaching and language revitalisation projects for the Welsh language. The first one consisted of a toolkit for promoting Welsh in the community by facilitating knowledge transfer from academic research to practical activities through the medium of Welsh, whereas the second one consisted of the creation of Welsh-language digital resources for secondary school students with the aim of maintaining and further developing their Welsh language skills in the field of sociology before they join the labour market. Both projects have reached their goals successfully, thus contributing to the Welsh government's macro-level ambition to raise the number of micro-level Welsh speakers to one million by 2050.

Chapter 6, written by Birte Arendt and Ulrike Stern, discusses the connection between mediatisation, teaching, and learning. The authors argue that online teaching from a learner-oriented perspective can be rendered functional in a way similar to the interactivity of face-to-

face teacher-student and student-to-student learning. Arendt and Stern examine the teaching of Low German through online courses with focus on agency, practices, and evaluation. One of their findings is that implementing a monolingual norm for teaching Low German (similarly to the one used for teaching High German) does not reflect the linguistic reality of Low German, where bilingual Low and High German practices such as code-switching and translanguaging are commonplace.

North Frisian on social media is the topic of Hauke Heyen's Chapter 7. North Frisian, (*nota bene*, a language spoken in Germany, as opposed to 'Frisian', also known as 'West Frisian', which is mostly spoken in the Netherlands - see the next paragraph). Heyen's first case study exemplifies how the concept of virtual 'breathing spaces' (contexts where minorities can use their languages without having to take majority languages into consideration) can also be applied to virtual Frisian communities. Heyen's second study examines how Frisian identities can be expressed in a multilingual online setting through playful use of hashtags. The study confirms the positive effects of virtual breathing spaces on language use, especially thanks to the 'community-building' factor. Hashtags on social media give users low-key opportunities to include at least a few elements of their North Frisian language and identity in their posts, alongside German or English.

Chapter 8, written by Lysbeth Jongbloed-Faber, investigates Frisian (also known as 'West Frisian' - see the previous paragraph) language use and language choice among bilingual Frisian-Dutch teenagers in the Netherlands on several social media platforms. Among the many findings of this study, we learn that Frisian is more frequently used in more private contexts on social media (such as WhatsApp and Snapchat), especially among L1 Frisian-speaking teenagers. Moreover, offline language habits appear to also influence teenagers' online language habits, for example by linguistic accommodation according to the potential audience. Jongbloed-Faber's study confirms previous research, namely that language choice is often an unconscious process for speakers of minority languages.

Gertrud Reershemius explores digital practices in Low German on Instagram in Chapter 9, focusing on the following questions: Why users do it in Low German, how they use Low German and how they visualise posts relating to Low German. The study shows that Low German is often used on Instagram in order to market cultural events taking place in northern Germany. Visual posts relating to Low German often use northern German landscapes and landmarks, coastal icons, or Low German words or mottos, which are expressed in pictorial form. The appearance of the written form of Low German on digital media form also appears to harmonise with the overall increase in Low German signage in the northern German linguistic landscape.

In Yaron Matras's epilogue, he analyses the Academy of the Hebrew Language's Twitter (now known as 'X') account, which often includes humorous and appealing original illustrations, and where interesting discussions with the audience can be observed. Public discourse about Hebrew, a language revitalised in the 20th century, bears similarities to those about MLA in Europe within such contexts as agency and the authority to propose or modify

norms, as well the authenticity of new speakers. However, differently to usual engagement with these languages in the digital context, Matras identifies the Academy's social media engagement as an example of top-down standardisation. This is an interesting contrast to MLA regarding what appear to be commonplace digital practices, as Hebrew is the official and majority language in Israel, where authorities are the ones maintaining and promoting the language without having to take a 'high' variety into consideration. Further, Matras interprets the online engagement patterns of Western European language users as a phenomenon that is a reminder of the act of 'choosing heritage', where users' repertoires of cultural practices are seen as broader and more fluid than language systems with close boundaries.

'Heritage Languages in the Digital Age' is a highly interesting reading, taking the audience to the current mediatised MLA in Western Europe. In spite of many shared features, these MLA simultaneously demonstrate a variety of attitudes towards what is 'correct' and 'incorrect', how these are manifested by discourses about these languages, and likewise how they are used for other forms of communication, learning, and teaching. The book fills an important knowledge gap within the context of MLA mediatisation. Mediatisation is here to stay, and more research is necessary about the subject. I am hopeful that this book will be a source of inspiration for editors and researchers who wish to study MLA mediatisation from further angles and in other parts of the world, not least in lesser-known MLA in Europe, namely those of Russia, where these languages attract little or no state support and where online resources may play a crucial role for their survival.

Reference

Arendt, B. & Reershemius, G. (eds.) (2024). *Heritage languages in the digital age: The case of autochthonous minority languages in Western Europe*. Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781800414235>