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"Cinderella" languages in Europe: minoritised, invisibilised, contested

When I started studying the history of Scots, I did not question its “linguageness”. I approached it as a historical artefact, with its own set of linguistic features, similar to English as they may have been, and yet different enough not to undermine my perception of Scots as a “thing of its own”. Even though I was very familiar with the concept of a Broad Scots-to-Scottish Standard English continuum in present-day Scotland (Corbett et al. 2003), when I first moved there I was perplexed by the fact that so many people, including fellow linguists, did not see Scots as a language.

Similar debates and perceptions are typical of many locations in Europe, where a local variety has a clear genetic link to a universally recognised powerful language, which had completed the standardisation process, undergone *Ausbau* (Kloss 1967; Fishman 2008), and gained prestige, while the geo-political entity - which contains the speakers of both - bears the name cognate to the language of power. Think about Scots and English, Occitan and French, Asturian and Spanish, Sardinian and Italian, Silesian and Polish, and so on. In popular perception, these varieties are often labelled as dialects of the more powerful language. In linguistic research, they have recently been described as “contested languages” (Nic Craith 2006; Wells 2011, 2019; McDermott 2017; Tamburelli and Tosco (eds.) 2021), or simply “closely-related linguistic varieties” or “near-relatives” (Millar 2016). However, under “closely-related languages” one often encounters research on established standard languages which developed from the same roots, for example Polish and Czech, Spanish and Portuguese, Dutch, English and German (Gooskens et al. 2018, Kyjánek and Haviger 2019). The work on contested languages has been focussed on present-day issues surrounding language policy and planning, as well as self-perception and *Abstand*-based assessments of “linguageness” (Tamburelli and Tosco (eds.) 2021). From a historical perspective, the volume edited by Havinga and Langer (eds. 2015; also Havinga 2018) opened a discussion around discourses surrounding invisibilised languages, albeit not all languages discussed under that umbrella were closely related to high-prestige standards.

In this talk, I want to concentrate on European languages related to powerful siblings, and on their stories, hence I have chosen to call such varieties “Cinderella” languages. I will draw out common themes from a macro historical sociolinguistic perspective across a number of different locations, from the British Isles, through the Mediterranean, to Central Europe, drawing on studies of attitudes, metalinguistic perspectives, and lexicographic information. I will bring together socio-political and cultural scenarios which are shared by the histories of Cinderella languages and ask the following questions: How have the stories of these languages been told? Is it important to create new narratives, or remind people of the narratives of the past (Rutten and Horner (eds.) 2016; Rutten 2019)? A bigger question addressed here is about the relevance and value of historical sociolinguistic research for current debates about language rights and revitalisation.

Selected references

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