

Developing Minority Language Media Studies

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The purpose of this paper is to argue that minority language media studies should be seen as a distinct area of study, overlapping with, but separate from both minority language studies more generally, and media studies. Seeing the field in this way will bring advantages to the study of minority language media which are lacking at present. However, before looking at these possibilities, I want to consider a preliminary question as to what the importance of media in this area might be.

This question is prompted by Fishman's scepticism concerning the role of the media in reversing language shift. In his original account of intergenerational language loss and the ways in which this might be reversed, the usefulness of the media is not only well behind the use of language in the home and community, but is also put behind such elements as education and the work sphere (Fishman 1991, p.395). In his more recent writing he has noted that the media are more likely to interfere with mother-tongue transmission than support it, simply because of the greater quantity of media output in the dominant, majority language (Fishman 2001, p.473). He has even referred critically to "the mass-media 'fetish' of some minority language activists" (Fishman 2001, p.482), noting how unrealistic their expectations of the media can be. I do not want to argue with this view. Indeed, anyone working in the area of minority language media will very quickly come up against the "fetishisation" of which Fishman speaks, particularly amongst those employed within the media. The gap between this assumption of the media's role and the lack of firm evidence concerning the media's effectiveness in reversing language shift will be obvious to anyone who reads the relevant literature (see, for example, the doubts about

the media's role in Browne 1996, p.169, Cormack 1999, pp.308-309, and several contributors to Kelly-Holmes 2001, such as the editor, p.3, Moal, p.57 and Day, p.73).

We should not, however, conclude from this that the media have no role to play whatsoever. To list just four important aspects (which have been commented on by various writers): (1) the electronic media can have an important symbolic role for language communities, a signal that the language and the community are able to cope fully with the contemporary world, rather than being simply part of an outdated heritage; (2) they can provide a real economic boost, including attractive career prospects for young people who want to work in the minority language; (3) they are important in developing a public sphere within a language community which allows a political community to develop and indeed allows the community to develop its own news agenda; (4) they are important in relation to how the community is represented both within itself and to outsiders (both aspects can have significant political and economic consequences). In addition to these points, it is worth reminding ourselves that these days the media are key conveyors of culture (however that complex word is defined) and are important producers of cultural products in their own right. Media in minority languages cannot take the place of language transmission within the family and community, but neither can they be dispensed with, at least not in the kinds of society we have now in Europe.

Accepting the importance of the media for minority languages, however, does not in itself answer the question as to why minority language media studies should be considered as a distinct area of study, rather than seeing it as part of language studies, cultural studies, sociology or media studies. The answer, however, is implied by that list of subject areas. At the moment researchers working in this field are located in very different institutional settings. This can impede communication and collaboration, making a comprehensive debate difficult. In addition to this, mainstream media studies (and cultural studies for that matter) has not so far shown much interest in minority languages. This is partly, perhaps, because of its bias towards urban society, linked to the perception of indigenous minority languages as being somehow linked to the past rather than the future, partly also because of the linguistic requirements, the need to understand the languages in question (see Riggins 1992, p.3). Although, having said this, additional specific reasons do not need to be looked

for if we remember Fishman's comments on how mainstream social science has neglected threatened minority language cultures (Fishman 1991, pp.381ff). By enhancing the awareness of this as a legitimate area of study in its own right, it is possible to set the conditions which will allow minority language media studies to contribute fully to debates about minority languages.

The distinctiveness of this area of study can be demonstrated by noting its main concerns. Two of the central issues of minority language media studies are, firstly, the question of what role the media play in supporting a language and its culture (along with the related question of how media content is best organised to do this), and, secondly, the question of how media are best financed and organised for a community which may be too small and too flooded by media in the neighbouring, majority language(s) to be able to support their own media on either a commercial or a fiscal basis. The first of these questions - that of the role of the media in language maintenance - does have a counterpart in mainstream media studies, but it is at a much higher level of generalisation. It is the issue of cultural imperialism and how that relates to a globalised media system. Debates of this kind are very different from the much more specific question of how media can support an endangered language. As far as the second question is concerned - the question of finance and organisation - it is certainly true that media studies has spent much time debating issues of media finance, ownership and organisation, frequently focused on the opposition between public service and private commercial media. But once again this is very distinct from the minority language point of view which begins with the realisation that for expensive media, such as television, film and daily newspapers, there simply is no commercial basis within small language communities. The particular way in which these questions appear for minority language communities justifies the consideration of minority language media studies as a distinctive field of study.

Of course until recently it would not have been possible to even suggest that there might be anything that could be described as minority language media studies. However, the publication of a number of books and articles during the last ten years, has shown that there is increasing interest in this area. At the same time, there has been a gradually increasing number of media studies courses taught through such languages. I want now to

survey some of this material, but looking just at English-language writings on European media, as a sample of what is currently being done, before going on to suggest ways in which minority language media studies might be developed.

Recent writing on minority language media

Although there had been some academic writing on minority language media in the 1980s (for example, Howell 1982; Bevan 1984; Gifreu 1986; Corbella 1988), it was not until the 1990s that this area began to expand. In 1991, of course, Fishman's *Reversing Language Shift* was published and so it is not surprising that in the following years different aspects of minority language studies appeared more firmly on the research agenda, particularly following the appearance of the *European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages* in 1992. As far as minority language media are concerned, the key book must be *Ethnic Minority Media*, a collection of essays edited by a North American academic, Stephen Riggins, and published in 1992. Despite the title, much of the book was concerned with minority languages and the editor's introduction and conclusion laid down a number of key issues. From a European point of view, however, one notable feature was the lack of material concerning European minority languages. The only essay by a European (Cheval 1992) dealt with Basque and Occitan radio stations on Southwest France. Another essay looked at Welsh and Irish broadcasting, but it was written by a North American (Howell 1992) and perhaps suffered a little from that perspective. In the early nineties a number of other articles appeared with more direct European relevance (Browne 1992; Cormack 1993), along with some that were relevant by virtue of being concerned with issues such as regionalism and small countries, without being focused centrally on minority language issues (for example, Biltereyst 1992 & 1995; Sampredo Blanco & Van den Bulcke 1995; Gifreu 1996; Van den Bulck & Van Poeke 1996). Then in 1996 Donald Browne's book *Electronic Media and Indigenous Peoples* was published and which, although not directly focused on questions of endangered languages, included an important chapter on language (Browne 1996, pp.165-190) as well as frequently referring to language issues in passing. These publications laid a foundation, and although neither of the two books was centred on the European experience, their relevance is undoubted. Also,

of course, neither was focused directly on minority languages, resulting in a less secure, because less recognised, foundation being laid for studies of minority language media.

Since the mid 1990s, however, there has been a steadily increasing amount of writing on Western European minority language media. An important addition was the first appearance of the *Mercator Media Forum* in 1995. This started with an emphasis on articles by media practitioners, but has since moved to having a majority written by academics and researchers. This change was in the later 1990s and it matched the increasing interest in minority language media that can be seen at this time. Since the mid 1990s there have been a number of articles, particularly on Celtic language media (e.g. Cormack 1995a and 1995b; Watson 1996, 1997 & 2002; Hourigan 1998, 2001a & 2001b), a book of conference proceedings (Kelly-Holmes 2001), and books by Watson and Hourigan are about to appear (Hourigan 2003, Watson 2003). There is also the beginnings of a debate about the use of the internet by minority languages, particularly in recent issues of *Mercator Media Forum* (see Fernandez 2001, Falkena 2001, Thomas et al. 2001, Lopez 2002, Brisaboa et al. 2002).

Looking at these writings generally, they have shown several characteristics. Firstly, they have tended to look at single language situations, rather than more general comparative work. They have been concerned with very specific circumstances and so there has not been much since Riggins and Browne which has taken an overall view of minority language media (although I have attempted to do this in several articles, see Cormack 1998, 1999 and 2000). Secondly, as already noted, a number of these writings have come from researchers based in sociology and language departments, rather than academics situated in media studies or cultural studies departments. This is not, of course, noted as a complaint but rather as a comment about the institutional fragmentation of this area at the moment. The input of different perspectives and different skills is important and useful, but this has tended to detach, to some extent, such debates from mainstream media studies, and to militate against a fully comprehensive debate. This leads to the third point, that there has not been a major engagement with the central issues of media studies (issues such as problems of media representation, cultural imperialism, the media and the political process, audience impact). Fourthly, little has so far been written about what the aims of

minority language media are, and in particular in relation to issues of language and culture (although note Riggins 1992, p.287, Browne 1996, p.166, and Cormack 1999, pp.306-308). A final point to make is that there has also been a lack of dialogue with non-indigenous minority languages. Although some of the issues facing non-indigenous languages are different (in particular, of course, they do not tend to be threatened languages), yet equally clearly some issues are very similar, particularly those to do with the economics and organisation of minority media, and those to do with issues of representation and culture. There is room here for a fruitful dialogue.

The contribution of minority language media studies

Part of the rationale of seeing minority language media studies as a distinct field of study, is what it can contribute to areas of knowledge. Quite apart from the obvious point of the importance of the media in relation to language shift and the need to investigate that more thoroughly, there are four other areas to which it can contribute.

The first is minority language media practice. Since the aim of media studies is not just to understand how the media function and to provide a critique of that, but also to contribute to better media practice, this has the potential of being a crucial role for minority language media studies. It is not unusual to find that minority language media practitioners are often very strongly focused people but who tend not to think too far outside of their own specific realm of work. They also tend to take a lot for granted, in particular the efficaciousness of the media in minority language situations.

The second area is related to this, but distinct from it. It is the question of media policy, particularly at the regulatory and institutional levels. Much work written so far has had a historical focus (even if it has looked at the fairly recent past) and there is a need to use this and other comparative work to contribute directly to policy development. European minority language media are at various stages of institutional development and there is a clear opportunity for an exchange of experience and information, not just from the point of view of the media practitioner, but also from the point of view of the policy researcher.

The third area is teaching about minority language media, both within minority

language institutions and in the media studies curriculum more generally. Although in some areas (notably in Catalonia, the Basque Country and, of course, here in Wales) there is a well-established tradition of teaching media in the local language, in other areas this is still developing. The issue of how a media studies curriculum should be developed to take account of the situation of a minority language is an interesting one but there does not seem to be too much guidance at the moment. There must be a useful exchange possible here, between research and teaching, and between different language communities. The central issue here is whether a media studies curriculum in a minority language simply replicates the usual curriculum, or whether there are specific issues which should be worked into this teaching, and not simply at the level of adding on a few lectures on the local situation to each module, but rather working through the entire curriculum. This raises the issue of how much the viewpoint from within a minority language changes the general outlook.

The fourth area is media studies in general. The study of minority language media can make a distinctive contribution to this. For example, issues of cultural conflict, language in the media, the contrast between public and private financing of the media, the media and identity, the media and politics, the internet - these are all areas where minority language media can contribute something of use. Despite the lack of interest in indigenous minorities that is evident within mainstream media studies, there is a distinctive outlook which can give a new viewpoint on familiar problems. If this comes from a recognised area of study, rather than from a lone voice, then it is more likely to be noticed and to carry weight.

Conclusion

Even if minority language media studies cannot be seen as a completely separate area of study, either from media studies, or from minority language study, there is the possibility here of a distinctive agenda which can be productive. It is time for minority language media studies to make clear its distinctive contributions, both to media studies and, more importantly, to minority language studies - all the more so given the continuing importance within Europe of issues of language and regionality (particularly with the

continuing expansion of the EU and the concomitant increase in officially recognised languages). But ultimately, of course, it is the fact that many of these languages are endangered that is the main justification for this work.

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