Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College

German Faculty Research and Scholarship German

1979

Review of *Welsh and the Other Dying Languages in Europe: A Sociolinguistic Study*, by Max K. Adler

Nancy C. Dorian
Bryn Mawr College

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs

Part of the Linguistics Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation
Dorian, Nancy C. Review of *Welsh and the Other Dying Languages in Europe: A Sociolinguistic Study*, by Max K. Adler. *Language in Society* 8, no. 1 (1979): 69-71.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College.
https://repository.brynmawr.edu/german_pubs/1

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Lang. Soc. **8**, 69–139. Printed in Great Britain

REVIEWS

LANGUAGE SITUATIONS

MAX K. ADLER, *Welsh and the other dying languages in Europe: a sociolinguistic study*. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1977. Pp. v+113.

Adler's book is, as the title suggests, disproportionately devoted to Welsh. Although 13 languages are treated in the space of 103 pages of text, nearly half of that bulk (48 pp.) treats of Welsh. The other Celtic languages, all of which Adler regards as dying, are granted 26 pages, and eight Continental European languages are dealt with in a mere 18 pages. Clearly this is not the book to read if one is deeply interested in Lappish (one and a half pages), Frisian (three pages), or Basque (two and a half pages).

Nonetheless, and in spite of a treatment which runs somewhat to the anecdotal even in the fuller Welsh chapter, Adler's book represents a useful compendium of information on beleaguered European languages. As such it is a good corrective to the notion that it is primarily Amerindian or Australian aboriginal languages which are today faced with extinction.

Especially in the chapter on Welsh, but also in the final summary chapter, Adler isolates some of the factors which have typically worked against the survival of a language in the European setting: a linguistic reassignment of the population in formerly monolingual areas such that the lower classes become bilingual and the middle and upper classes monolingual in some wider-currency language, and likewise the rural population becomes bilingual while the urban population becomes largely monolingual in the wider-currency language; immigration associated with industrialization, and resultant linguistically mixed marriages which produce children lost to the indigenous language; divisive dialect differences within the indigenous language; education largely in the language of wider currency, along with a lack of teaching materials and of adequately trained bilingual personnel for the indigenous language. Unfortunately the author does not build these factors into a tight, coherent argument, and he successively and confusingly identifies one or another of them as 'the' most important factor in the survival or death of a language (11, 96). Fishman (1971: 312–24) shows convincingly that the search for a single cause which inevitably leads to language death is futile; there are always instances of languages surviving handily in what would seem hopelessly adverse conditions. Surely it is the confluence of a number of unfavorable circumstances which proves fatal in most cases.

In particular Adler's *predictive* notions are in error. He asserts (103):

> We can foretell the death of a language when its vocabulary becomes impoverished. Many of the languages in this study...fulfil their part as means of

> communication perfectly in the rural society. However, when it comes to the work and leisure experienced in the towns, when technical terms have to be created artificially, when legal terms are lacking, – in brief when what is becoming increasingly more important in present-day society cannot be expressed any longer in the minority language it is bound to die. Whenever intellectuals try to enrich the language with newly created or adapted terms, this is a certain sign that its end is near.

By these criteria a good many of the languages of present-day Europe should have died rather than surged forward during the past century – Finnish, Faroese, Czech, and a number of others. One need only consult the little book authored by Ellis & mac a' Ghobhainn (1971), alas only in popular style and without bibliographic references, for a long list of success stories under the circumstances Adler regards as invariably fatal.

A good deal of emphasis is given to the history of intelligence testing in the Celtic languages, and Adler records the general conclusion that on the whole no difference is found between the monolinguals and the bilinguals on non-verbal tests, while verbal testing of the two groups has come to be considered a 'mistake' (101). However, he offers critiques of the testing only where the literature on the tests includes such criticism; this leads to glaring omissions. For example, although Adler notes the problem caused by the unavailability of adequately trained, adequately bilingual teachers for Welsh (45) and Rhaeto-Romance (86), he makes no comment – since the literature doesn't – on the possible effect of inadequately bilingual teachers on the results of Macnamara's testing in Ireland (1966), despite the fact that Macnamara's results are acknowledged as anomalous (101). The bilingual skills of the teachers are an undiscussed factor, the possible effect of which calls all of Macnamara's results in that study into question, Ireland being a country in which many non-native speakers teach in part through the medium of Irish.

Adler takes the view that the bilingual is an unfortunate who straddles two cultures and belongs to neither (14, 100). This and other folk-linguistic notions distort his presentation at a number of points. Imperfect English, unfortunately uncontrolled by the publisher, adds further difficulties for the reader. As a guide to the literature the Adler volume offers a starting point, but only that: the section on Breton, for example, has no references to the work of Dressler & Leodolter (1973) or Timm (1973), nor has the Friulian section any reference to Denison's work (1968, 1971). For materials prior to 1969, one would do better to consult Glanville Price's excellent bibliography (1969).

REFERENCES

Denison, N. (1968). Sauris: a trilingual community in diatypic perspective. *Man* **3**. 578–592.

—— (1971). Some observations on language variety and plurilingualism. In E. Ardener (ed.), *Social anthropology and language*. London: Tavistock Publications. 157–83.
Dressler, W. & Leodolter, R. (1973). Sprachbewahrung und Sprachtod in der Bretagne. *Wiener linguistische Gazette* **3**. 45–58.
Ellis, P. B. & mac a' Ghobhainn, S. (1971). *The problem of language revival*. Inverness: Club Leabhar.
Fishman, J. A. (1971). The sociology of language. In J. A. Fishman (ed.), *Advances in the sociology of language*, I. The Hague: Mouton. 217–404.
Macnamara, J. (1966). *Bilingualism and primary education: a study of Irish experience*. Edinburgh University Press.
Price, G. (1969). *The present position of minority languages in Western Europe: a selective bibliography*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
Timm, L. A. (1973). Modernization and language shift: the case of Brittany. *Anthropological linguistics* **15**. 281–98.

Reviewed by NANCY C. DORIAN
German and Anthropology Departments
Bryn Mawr College
Bryn Mawr, Penna., 19010, U.S.A.

Received 7 March 1978

EDGAR A. GREGERSEN, *Language in Africa: an introductory survey*. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1977. Pp. xvii+237.

This book inscribes itself within a most interesting class – it is a book written about the unwritten. In this case, the subject matter written up is the spoken languages of Africa; for, as the author puts it, 'The one thing African languages have in common...is that they are *spoken* in Africa' (2, emphasis added).

There are several strategies which an author might adopt for writing about unwriting, the most obvious of which is precisely the one prescribed by Gregersen. It might be termed the 'reductionist' strategy, which means that spoken languages exist to be reduced to writing, or that the choices associated with linguistic behavior are reduced to only those which are graphic. On the other hand he does situate this strategy in its most meaningful context: '...non-linguistic considerations prove to be the ultimate justification for any work of the present kind', (2), by which he means to prove that he is working solidly within the tradition of what *has* been written and published on the history, classification, typology and emerging orthography of spoken languages.

Gregersen's strategy of tracing out what has been written leads him by both logical and sociological passages to an expanded treatment of writing systems themselves: '...the present chapter [on "African Writing Systems"] deals with the subject somewhat more fully than might be expected' (174). And, indeed, his discussion of indigenous uses of writing is both full and fascinating; which serves to emphasize the skimpiness of his treatment of such unyieldingly 'vernacular' topics as pidgin or trade languages. Perhaps the most telling evidence of this emphasis is the fact that 'Pidgins' rates only one entry in the Index, whereas