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Rethinking Domain Theory

Part I: How Should It Be Applied?

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In its concern for Aboriginal language maintenance the Northern Territory Department of Education adopted a policy of “domain separation” between English and the Aboriginal language in bilingual education programs. This is why you find such statements as the following in such Departmental publications as the 1985 *English/Language Core Curriculum for Aboriginal Bilingual Schools T-7*:

Children need to think about the use of each language in separate domains as a means of promoting language maintenance, or even survival. It should be noted that much of this work depends on consciousness raising with Aboriginal staff—e.g. through tape recordings of classroom usage and code mixing. (Northern Territory Department of Education, 1985, p. 89)

This policy is an attempt to apply a theoretical position known as domain theory. In the present paper I present my own views on domain theory and how it might be applied more effectively to support Aboriginal language maintenance. In presenting these views I will point out problems with the Department’s emphasis on keeping domains separate, but I have left the issue of code-mixing—also referred to in the above passage—to be dealt with in a later paper.

The Problem of Language Maintenance

Many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have become concerned about the survival of Aboriginal languages. After all, outside of northern and central Australia most traditional Aboriginal languages have already been replaced by English.¹ In addition English is found in nearly all communities where Aboriginal languages are still widely spoken—in the schools, if nowhere else. How can we prevent English from taking over from the remaining Aboriginal languages?

The surest way of keeping an Aboriginal language and culture alive is to by isolating its speakers and their children from English influences.² Aboriginal movements to homeland centres do this to some extent, and they also may also encourage children to learn less widely spoken Aboriginal languages instead of the varieties that have become most common in the larger communities. However, most homeland centres have schools in which English is supposed to be taught and used as a medium of instruction, and to the extent these schools are successful, not even homeland centres are safe from English influences.

In any case, many Aboriginal people actually want their their children to master English so that they can take over jobs in their communities and participate as equals in mainstream Australian institutions. The question is, how can they do this and still retain their own Aboriginal identities and languages? As Wāli Wunungurra (1989, p. 15) put it, ‘What is needed here is an education which will help Yolngu succeed in the Balanda world without letting them forget their cultural identity.’

Some linguists and educators believe that people will continue to maintain two languages, such as English and an Aboriginal language, only if they use them for different purposes (or functions) in the community; see e.g. Fishman (1987, p. 4) and Paulston (1986, p. 501). Often the different purposes are referred to as the ‘domains’ of the two languages, and so this view is often referred to as ‘domain theory’.³

Domain Theory

The basis for domain theory goes back some thirty years, to when the linguist Charles Ferguson (1959) found that people in some parts of the world have kept up the use of two language varieties⁴ for centuries. He was able to show that each of the two varieties was used for different functions—a situation he called ‘diglossia’.

A few years later the linguist Joshua Fishman (1967) proposed that it would, in fact, be impossible for a community to keep up the use of two languages—to be completely bilingual—unless it uses the one language for some purposes (or ‘domains’) and the other language for different purposes. If one of the languages could be used for all purposes, then the community would have no reason to maintain the other language.

In most Aboriginal communities English already has important domains in which only it is used. Most importantly English is needed for speaking with English speakers who do not know a local language. English has also been the main language used in broadcast and print media and for some or all subjects in the local school.⁵ There is thus good reason and opportunity for people to learn and use English in their communities; it is not the survival of English in Aboriginal communities that we need to worry about.

Accordingly, what domain theory means for Aboriginal language maintenance is that the local languages need to have some purposes (or domains) for which they alone continue to be used—and never English—if they are to continue to survive. For example, if only the Aboriginal language is used in the home, for discussing matters of tradition, and so on, each of these uses is a domain in which the Aboriginal language is still strong. When English begins to be used as an alternative to the Aboriginal language for a given purpose we are seeing the start of English replacing the Aboriginal language in that domain. As the Aboriginal language comes to have fewer and perhaps less important domains of its own, it is less and less likely to be learned by new generations.

An Alternative Interpretation of Domain Theory

I have tried to give a simple and straightforward explanation of domain theory as I believe it should apply to Aboriginal language maintenance. To summarise my view of domain theory in one sentence, it is this:

- (1) To promote the maintenance of one of the languages in a bilingual situation, we should try to make sure that the language is the only one used for enough important purposes (or ‘in enough important domains’) to make it worthwhile for younger generations to continue to learn.

I will call this as the ‘one-way domain restriction’ position because it is would restrict only the domains of English in a bilingual situation. That is, I propose that it is enough to protect the Aboriginal language from English, since English is not really in danger of dying out, not even in Aboriginal communities. If we are concerned about maintaining English as well, however, we would have to change (1) to take both languages into account. Thus we might say:

- (2) To promote the maintenance of **both** of the languages in a bilingual situation, we should try to make sure that **each** of the languages is the only one used for enough important purposes (or ‘in enough important domains’) to make **them** worthwhile for younger generations to continue to learn.

I’ll call this the ‘two-way domain restriction’ position because its emphasis is not just on keeping English out of domains reserved for the Aboriginal language, but also in keeping the Aboriginal language out of domains reserved for English. This is, in fact, how domain theory has often been interpreted in connection with bilingual education in the Northern Territory. For example, compare (2) with the what Stephen Harris said in 1981 (p. 16) on the basis for work by Fishman:

...if there is functional overlap between two languages, one of them becomes redundant and will be relatively short-lived. In order to maintain both languages, the solution seems to be separation of function or separate language domains.

Harris (1981, p. 17) went on to express concern about how domain separation in some communities was being upset, not by the spread of English, but by the fact that the local Aboriginal language was increasing being used in such previously English domains as the store, bank, hospital and garage.

This interpretation was not new to Harris. As early as 1972 (p. 88) Fishman and Lovas (1972, p. 88) had already discussed the possibility of bilingual education based on two-way domain restriction, which they referred to as ‘partial bilingualism’, and they pointed out a problem with it:

Such programs imply that while the non-English mother tongues are serious vehicles of modern thought, they are not related to control of the technological and economic spheres. The latter are considered to be the preserve of the majority, whose language must be mastered if these spheres are to be entered. Nationalist protest movements since the mid-nineteenth century have consistently rejected any such limiting implication.

John Oller (1976, p. 69) had similarly noted that this sort of domain separation ‘entails the objectional implication that one language is more suitable than another for use in formal contexts.’ Similar objections arose

in Australia. For example, Barbara Sayers (1982) represented the two-way domain restriction position when she suggested that:

...unless there is community desire to develop vernacular terminology, as in Anindilyakwa, it would be better if English terms were used and the vernacular left for family life and traditional interest. This could lead to stable bilingualism, a much more realistic goal than having Aborigines able to talk about anything under the sun in both languages...

Patrick McConvell (1984, p. 51) challenged this view in a paper rather pointedly titled 'Domains and domination':

To maintain the vernacular it is not enough to build a wall against English and put the vernacular inside a 'reserve'. The vernacular could grow in the hands of Aboriginal people themselves, to challenge the domination of English not in everything, but in situations the people themselves feel capable... This is the way that the 'balance' between languages and cultures can be maintained.

McConvell's views seemed to have had little impact on bilingual policy in the NT Department of Education, whose publications continued to stress the importance of keeping domains separate rather than the development of the Aboriginal language domains. Perhaps this was seen as a conservative position that could cause no harm, whether or not it might be more restrictive than absolutely necessary to promote Aboriginal language maintenance.

There are, in fact, reasons to believe that it could be harmful to attempt to artificially restrict the Aboriginal language to certain domains. In describing how this was done in German-American church schools Schiffman (1987) actually takes strict domain separation to be one of the reasons for the demise of German in the United States:

In fact, these schools constituted a transitional system to aid children through a period of compartmentalized bilingualism to eventual monolingualism (or functional monolingualism) in English, while perpetuating the belief that, because religious subjects were being taught in German, both the spiritual and linguistic goals of the community were being met. (Schiffman, 1987, p. 78)

Is it doing much more than this to restrict Aboriginal languages to early childhood education and then matters of Aboriginal culture? Schiffman (1987, p. 70-71) proposes that minority children ‘seem to require a program where the mother tongue predominates and exposure to the majority language is controlled.’

In a recent paper, in fact, Fishman (1987) clearly adopts a one-way domain restriction position as he points out how important it is for the minority language to spread to new domains in a gradual and considered way:

Language policy on behalf of endangered languages must assure the intimate vernacular functions first, and, if possible, go on from there, slowly building outward from the primary to the secondary institutions of intergenerational mother tongue continuity. The entry-level work sphere is a must; the more advanced work sphere is a maybe. Diglossia is a must (with safely stabilized spheres exclusively for the endangered language); monolingual economic autonomy and political independence are maybes. Widespread reconquest of the vernacular intimacy functions is a must; language spread into the higher reaches of power and modernity is a maybe. (Fishman, 1987, p. 14-15)

To the extent that the NT Department of Education has simply attempted to follow Fishman’s theoretical lead, hopefully the notion that Aboriginal languages must be artificially restricted in domain can now be laid to rest.⁶

How Can Domain Theory Best Be Applied?

There have been various suggestions about how domain theory might be applied in bilingual schools. Perhaps the most common suggestion has been that the domains of English and the Aboriginal language should be distinguished in terms of topic, even though this fed the controversy described in the preceding section. Other possible ways of distinguishing domains were also noted, sometime in a way that leaves the impression that the mere fact of domain separation is more important than how it is accomplished. Thus even in the context of recommending which topics were best treated in each language in a bilingual school Beth Graham (1983, p. 28) could provide advice as general as the following:

Help keep their languages separate by establishing domains.

EXAMPLE: Use people, place, time and where appropriate the topic to signal language use.

Stephen Harris (in press, Chapter 4) proposes that ‘some rules for language usage can usefully be adopted in schools which might be naive outside the classroom.’ This suggests that language domains established within bilingual schools do not need to be the same as those in the community as a whole, and it is true to the extent that the distinction between classroom and community can itself be one of the factors that help distinguish domains. Even so, one would think that it would make a far stronger combination for the language domains in school to be similar to those in or being promoted for the general community. The desperate situation of language maintenance calls for the most effective solutions we can muster.

How, then, should we try to identify domains that should be reserved for the local language alone in the school and the community? Fishman (1987, p. 9) lists the most important domains for language maintenance as ‘not only the hearth and home but neighborhood (i.e. residential concentration), elementary schooling, work sphere, and, often, the religious sphere as well.’ This list may not seem very helpful because it could cover most daily activities outside of school in non-urban Aboriginal communities—where local languages may indeed be used in connection with many of these activities.

The exceptions are interesting, however. In those communities where local languages survive most strongly, the main use of English is for communication with people who can’t speak a local language, such as non-Aboriginal staff in the school, clinic, church, and other institutions as well as Aboriginal people visiting from other communities. It would also include much communication through broadcast and print media.

This suggests trying to limit the domain of English to just the purpose of communicating with people who do not speak the local language. This would be ideal because it would also promote the widest use of the Aboriginal language one can expect to achieve—the only way the language could be used more would be to employ interpreters and translators, which is not likely to become the norm for such communication no matter how desirable it may be. Because of this it would also be equivalent to a two-way domain restriction, although the restriction on the Aboriginal domain would be natural rather than imposed.

Stephen Harris (in press, Chapter 4) notes that two other linguists consider domain theory to be more acceptable ‘if the Topic dimension is left flexible because there are so many important topics that Aboriginal people need to discuss in both languages.’ To distinguish domain in terms of person alone leaves topic fully flexible, of course. Furthermore even though the domains would not actually be defined in terms of topic, they would end up ‘roughly separated on the basis of what Aborigines want to talk about among themselves and what they want to talk about with Anglo people, with some overlap’, as Harris (in press, Chapter 4) suggests might be best.

Regardless of its desirability it may be unrealistic to hope that the domain of English can be restricted to just those occasions involving non-speakers of Aboriginal languages. Even so I propose this policy in its purest form as an ideal. The following could be done to implement the policy:

- a) Firstly, any community that is serious about local language maintenance should have a school in which speakers of the local language(s) teach a wide variety of classes in that/those languages.
- b) If the school is a bilingual one, as one might expect, it should employ people who do not speak a local language to teach English and any other school subjects that need to be taught in English. The bulk of the English instruction is best delayed until higher grades.
- c) The decision of whether to teach particular topics in the local language or in English or both should ideally be based on the extent to which the language speakers are likely to need to communicate about these topics with each other or with English speakers or with both. Many everyday topics could ultimately be covered in both languages in one way or another.
- d) The school should have an literacy centre for preparing resources in the local language. The centre should also be prepared to actively help teachers and others in the community develop the vocabulary of their language so it is better able to cope with all topics that the speakers care to discuss with each other. Speakers of the language can guide this work by reporting the occasions when find that they are forced into English to

discuss a topic with each other because it is too difficult to discuss in their own languages.

- e) Concerned members of community should help keep the rest of the community aware of the possible dangers of using English when the local language would serve just as well instead.⁷

Of the above, (b) would be unacceptable to communities who want their schools to be staffed largely or entirely by local teachers. Perhaps it would not be too damaging language to maintenance to have local teachers teaching in English if it were clear that they were doing this only because of the school situation. That is, perhaps the teaching and learning of certain subjects in school could represent one of the few domains in which speakers of the local language would use English with each other.

The remaining points seem reasonably easy to implement and desirable for language maintenance purposes regardless of any policy on language domains. Note how point (e) goes against such some established school practices, however, such having times or places, such as an ‘English-only’ mat, when Aboriginal children are expected to speak English regardless of who they are talking to. This is an example of how artificial school rules can work against factors that can support language maintenance in the community.

Conclusion

I hope I have convinced you that the most effective way to apply domain theory to Aboriginal language maintenance would be by limiting the domain of English in the community to communication with people who do not speak the local language. I myself am a bit troubled by the unusual nature of the situation this would seem to produce—a community of bilinguals, perhaps, but ones who behave like monolinguals amongst themselves. Perhaps the unusual is to be expected in any successful attempt to maintain very small minority languages. Alternatively one may wonder if the bilingual behaviour might not manifest itself among the speakers anyway, through code-mixing if not through the use of English amongst themselves. I will take up the question of code-mixing in a sequel to the present paper.

Notes

¹Many Aboriginal people in these areas actually speak an Aboriginal variety of English, of course, and this may be as important factor in their feelings of Aboriginal identity as speaking a traditional Aboriginal language is to people in other parts of Australia; see e.g. Hampton (1989).

²Paulston (1986, p. 501) calls this ‘self-imposed boundary maintenance’ and describes it as unusual. As an example she tells how the Jewish Hassidim or ‘Lubovitchers’ send their children to schools conducted entirely in Yiddish, and with no English at all. This makes it very hard for the children to succeed in normal mainstream society, but that’s not thought to be important. ‘All Lubovitchers are aware of the potential usefulness of secular skills and an English curriculum, but few... families elect the bilingual school for their children’ (Levy *apud* Paulston, 1986, p. 501).

³For some alternatives to domain theory see McConvell (forthcoming).

⁴The reason I say ‘language varieties’ is because all of Ferguson’s examples involved dialects or very closely related languages, such as Swiss German and standard German. Scotton (1986, p. 408-410) notes that the strict complementary distribution in function that Ferguson observed, which she calls ‘narrow diglossia’, is actually quite rare, and that Fishman (1967) essentially extended the term ‘diglossia’ to include situations involving distinct languages whose functional distribution is not normally so strictly complementary.

⁵In theory English could conceivably be replaced by local languages for all of these purposes: even for communicating with English speakers in general the community could rely on a few interpreters instead of widespread bilingualism. This seems unlikely to happen, however.

⁶The issue could not yet be laid to rest if it should turn out to conflict with Harris’ (in press, Chapter 5) view that language engineering should not ‘become such extensive mental engineering that Aboriginal world view is damaged beyond culturally reproductive capacity. Judging from the preservation of distinctively Aboriginal world views among Aboriginal groups who are now monolingual speakers of (Aboriginal) English I doubt wonder if such extensive mental engineering is possible. At the same time, lesser but still noticeable effects on world view may simply be

unavoidable in cross-cultural situations regardless of any restrictions placed on language engineering; cf. e.g. Paulston (1978).

⁷Here I am not referring to the odd occasion when English is used to signal some special, “metaphorical” meaning, since the local language could not serve the same purpose.

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