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in: Bent Preisler, Anne Fabricius, Hartmut Haberland, Susanne Kjærbeck, and Karen Risager eds.
The Consequences of Mobility
Roskilde: Roskilde University, Department of Language and Culture
ISBN: 87-7349-651-0
227-237
<http://www.ruc.dk/isok/skriftserier/mobility/>
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Domains and domain loss

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Abstract

The domain concept, originally suggested by Schmidt-Rohr in the 1930s (as credited in Fishman's writings in the 1970s), was an attempt to sort out different areas of language use in multilingual societies, which are relevant for language choice. In Fishman's version, domains were considered as theoretical constructs that can explain language choice which were supposed to be a more powerful explanatory tool than more obvious (and observable) parameters like topic, place (setting) and interlocutor.

In the meantime, at least in Scandinavia, the term 'domain' has been taken up in the debate among politicians and in the media, especially in the discussion whether some languages undergo 'domain loss' vis-à-vis powerful international languages like English. A first objection that has been raised is that domains, as originally conceived, are parameters of language choice and not properties of languages, hence languages do not 'have' domains, and therefore cannot lose them. A second objection is that the classical domain concept is not necessarily applicable to the present Danish sociolinguistic situation, since stable multilingualism for in-group communication is absent at least for the dominant group of Danish speakers.

A further objection is concerned with the applicability of the domain concept to actual patterns of language choice in multilingual settings. Especially Pádraig Ó Riagáin has claimed that at least some multilingual situations are best *not* described in terms of domains, and recent research e.g. about the multilingual communities in the Danish-German border area seems to confirm this.

1. Introduction

The concept of 'domain' belongs to those terms in linguistics that try to encapsulate a rather complex situation in a simple word – which is not a bad thing as long as the simplicity of the term doesn't tempt us to see the complex situation as a simple one, once the term is established. Unfortunately, this is exactly what seems to have happened in this case.

About just over ten years ago, at least in Denmark the term 'domain' (or Danish *domæne*) was not known at all outside narrow sociolinguistic circles. Today, *domæne* has become a household word, and every journalist concerned with language policy is familiar with it, and by now also their readers. Strictly speaking, the term that has become popular 'domain loss', *domænetab*, rather than 'domain' in itself.

On the surface, the term has much to commend itself. Around 1990, linguists in Denmark started to get concerned about the perceived pressure from the English language on Danish; very early it was stated in several publications that this pressure did not so much involve the influx of English loans as the increased use of English in contexts within Denmark. The domain concept came in very handy to describe this process: English was taking over domains in Denmark that had previously been reserved for Danish; Danish was losing domains to English.

This has been described elsewhere (e.g. Jarvad 2001), and I will mention only two examples. In the media, about 50% of all TV programs transmitted in Denmark are produced in the USA or in Great Britain. All these programs come with Danish subtitles, but since there is no tradition for dubbing in Denmark, the dialogue or commentary in 50% of all TV programs is in English. In higher education and research, by now university programs are offered in English alongside with Danish by practical all universities and other institutions of higher education, and an increasing number of research results are primarily or only published in English. It has been claimed that especially in the natural sciences and in medicine it is difficult to find scholars that can and are willing to present their results to a Danish audience, which is said to have been a problem for the editors of the 20-volume Danish National Encyclopaedia published between 1994 and 2001.

This situation is usually described as Danish losing domains to English. Danish is being converted from ‘a full-scale language’ to a language that can only be used, and only develops, in certain limited, domestic functions. Behind this, of course, lurks the implied fear of language death – will the Danish language continue to exist, or can the Danish language survive as ‘a full-scale language’?

In this paper, I will argue

- that the theoretical status of the domain concept has not always been taken seriously,
- that the classical domain concept is not necessarily applicable to the present Danish situation, and
- that even in multilingual societies with in-group multilingualism, the domain concept is not always the best tool for describing and explaining language choice.

2. The development of the domain concept

In 1932, Gerhard Schmidt-Rohr published his book *Die Sprache als Bildnerin der Völker*, which already a year later came in a second printing under the title *Mutter Sprache* (‘Mother language’) (1933). Schmidt-Rohr’s objective was the formulation of a non-biological theory of ‘the people’ (*Volk*). For him, what defines a people was its language – and in spite of anti-Jewish remarks in the Preface to the second edition, he rejected antisemitism, as long as it rests on a biological, racial basis. Fichte and his successors Mazzini and Grundtvig represented for him the correct attitude to the concept of ‘the people’, while Darwin, Gobineau and Chamberlain were rejected due to their biological bias (1933:ix). For Schmidt-Rohr, the identity of a people was based on the unity of language and thought. In this connection he was interested in the question whether bilingualism and multilingualism (“a necessity for many, many millions of the population of the world”, 1933:178) is dangerous or not, and came to the conclusion that “There are types [of bilingualism] which are totally harmless, there are others that have a disastrous effect, murdering souls and destroying mind (“Geist”) and culture.” (1933:179). In order to identify “disastrous” bilingual situations, he distinguished at least eight types of these situations according to the distribution of several languages

(standard and dialect) across different situations of language use (see Table 1). Without coining any term, he effectively introduced the idea of domain – as acknowledged by Fishman (1972:441) – by distinguishing the following nine elements of dominance configurations in bilingual situations:

The family, the playground and street, the school (with three sub-elements: language of instruction, subject of instruction, language of breaks and conversation), the church, literature, the press, the military, the courts, and governmental administration.

Typ

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Familie	D	D(d)	d	D	d	d	d	D
Spielplatz Straße	D	d(D)	d	D	d	d	df	df
Schule	Unterrichtssprache	D	D	D	F	D	F	D
	Unterrichtsfach	D(FE)	D(FE)	D	F(D)	DF	F	FD
	Pausen und Unterhaltungssprache	D	D(d)	d	D	d	F	df
Kirche	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D
Literatur	D	D	D	DF	DF	F	FD	DF
Zeitung	D	D	D	DF	DF	F(D)	FD	DF
Heer	D	D	D	F	D	F	F	F
Gericht	D	D	D	FD	D	F	FD	FD
Verwaltung	D	D	D	F	DF	F	F	F
	Keine Ein- sprachig- keit		in der Schweiz möglich			Süd- tirol	Ungarn möglich	Cypen- Mal- medy möglich

Table 1. Types of bilingual situations according to Schmidt-Rohr (1933:179)

Different configurations of these elements constitute types of bilingualism. The basic type of bilingualism for *Auslandsdeutsche* in the *Alto Adige* region of Italy (“Südtirol”) is thus characterised by the following dominance configuration:

the family	German dialect
the playground and street	German dialect
the school	
language of instruction	Standard Italian
subject of instruction	Standard Italian
language of breaks and conversation	Standard Italian

the church	Standard German
literature	Standard Italian
the press	Standard Italian, possibly Standard German
the military	Standard Italian
the courts	Standard Italian
governmental administration	Standard Italian

Schmidt-Rohr distinguishes these nine elements of dominance configurations without much theoretical reflection or any discussion, and one could call what is implicit in his writings a ‘naive domain concept’. But already at this early stage of almost pre-theoretical development, an important problem becomes clear: how is the linguist to determine which of the relevant languages is associated with, or at least dominates within, each element of the configuration (or each ‘domain’)? Language use in some of these elements is regulated by law or practice, like in the courts or in the classroom. In other cases it can only be determined empirically, like in school outside the classroom. In other cases yet, the claim of a dominant language remains characteristically diffuse: why is standard Italian considered dominant in literature? Does this mean that there are no local writers who write in Standard German or German dialect? Or does it mean that bookshops do not sell books in German? The association of a domain with a specific language can have very different status. Moreover, these examples show that Schmidt-Rohr’s model does not take into account that the elements of dominance configurations might have to be differentiated with regard to spoken vs. written communication and productive vs. receptive language use. A German customer might well speak Italian in order to buy a German book in a bookshop.

There were a few studies in Germany that followed up Schmidt-Rohr’s ideas, but his concept was only taken up for good, and a term coined, when in the 1970s Joshua Fishman revived the idea in order to analyse multilingual settings with widespread and relatively stable multilingualism and the choices that were taken regularly by multilingual members of these groups.

Language choice, says Fishman, within such multilingual groups is far from random; rather “‘proper’ usage dictates that only *one* of the theoretically co-available languages or varieties *will* be chosen by particular classes of *interlocutors* on particular kinds of *occasions* to discuss particular *topics*.” (1972: 437) The question is now, which elements in the context determine the choices that speakers make. Topic, Place and Interlocutor seem to be relevant, but not sufficient in themselves to describe the choice patterns. Here Fishman introduces the term ‘domain’ as an analytical concept; unlike in the naïve domain concept, the elements of dominance configuration now called ‘domains’ are not considered as given beforehand, but are “defined, regardless of their number, in terms of institutional contexts and their congruent behavioural co-occurrences.” (1972: 441) That is, a domain can only be established when there is a corresponding field of congruent patterns of behaviour. The number of domains can vary between groups and has to be generalised for each multilingual group from careful observation; thus Greenfield (cf. Greenfield and Fishman 1971, originally 1968) concluded that there are five domains that govern the language choices in the New York Puerto Rican speech community: Family, Friendship, Religion, Education and Employment. One of the reasons why Greenfield found fewer domains than Schmidt-Rohr might not just be that Schmidt-Rohr assumed his domains beforehand while Greenfield constructed them carefully on the basis of observations. It might also be because Greenfield seems to have excluded written communication (writing and reading) from his investigation. This will become significant in the discussion of modern Scandinavian domain loss, where the focus is especially (but not exclusively) on writing and listening.

One should note that there are two rather important differences between the naïve domain concept and Fishman's classical domain concept. Schmidt-Rohr assumed that the relevant elements of dominance configurations are the same more or less in all types of multilingual settings and can more or less be set up beforehand; what differs are not the elements but their configuration. According to Fishman, domains are not given beforehand and cannot be observed immediately either, but are introduced as context-dependent empirically valid analytical constructs by the researcher. Their power lies in their predictive force, i.e. their ability to suggest which language a person in a given situation might choose. Second, while the naïve concept of domain is mainly based on the macro-sociolinguistic set-up of a society¹ and its potential cognitive consequences, but less so on the microanalysis of communication, the classical concept of domain is motivated (as suggested by the subtitle of Fishman 1972) by an interest in the relationship between macro- and microsociolinguistics. The guiding *Erkenntnisinteresse* for the latter is to relate concrete language choices in a given situation to the rules and standards for such a choice in a given society – and Fishman claims that such rules exist, i.e. language choice in a multilingual society is not random.

It becomes clear that the concept of domain, as it is used in the debate about domain loss in Scandinavia today, bears only scant similarity to Fishman's classical domain concept. But the term had already undergone a significant broadening with some of Fishman's collaborators in the Puerto Rican project (e.g. “an institutionalized sphere of activity in which language behaviour occurs” (Findling 1971: 337)). In the reception by others, institutionalisation of domains plays an even bigger role. While a formulation like “cluster of social situations typically constrained by a common set of behavioral rules” (Fishman 1971:599) still keeps open the possibility that a cluster of social situations is held together by the set of behavioural rules that is common for it, the later reference to the institutionalisation of language behaviour points back to the analysis of society implicit in Schmidt-Rohr, where the number and borders of relevant institutions can be determined *before* any analysis of speech behaviour.

3. Theoretical status of the domain concept

The first objection questions the methodological status of domains, if they are seen as something that languages ‘have’ rather than as elements of dominance configurations. This criticism has, to my knowledge, been raised first by Dag F. Simonsen (2002).

At first glance, it makes sense to say that languages do not have domains (they are not properties of languages), and hence, that they cannot lose domains. But does this reach further than a criticism of untidy terminology, or of a not well thought-out metaphor? If Danish is not used any more, or not used much any more, in certain areas of language use in Denmark, or in situations involving at least Danes on the one side, then this observation has to be described somehow. It may be sloppy to say that Denmark ‘lost’ a domain, like we ‘lose’ territory in a metaphorical sense. Is there more to it than to say that ‘domain loss’ is a metaphor and not to be taken literally?

The problem with metaphors is reification. If you talk about a language losing domains, you end up thinking language having domains. This claim is not simply a piece of Whorfian dogmatism on my side. I am afraid that the patterns of the *mise en discours* of domains have created the idea that domains exist and can be observed, thus falling behind the methodological sophistication achieved

¹ One could say that Schmidt-Rohr's study rather belongs to the sociology of language than to sociolinguistics.

in the classical domain concept. It is not just a methodological nicety, if we insist that theoretical constructs should be treated as such and talked about as such.

The abstractness of the domain concept is also made clear by the fact that in the classical concept, domains are only relevant as elements in dominance configurations. (This is probably why Schmidt-Rohr could dispense with a term for them altogether.) Dominance configurations are conceptually more complex, but observationally more accessible than their elements that could be termed domains; this is because they are much closer to the life world of the bilinguals who experience them. The bilingual language user doesn't ask "In which domain am I now?" but either knows, has to reflect upon, or negotiate what language to choose in the situation he or she is in – a situation which he or she may have difficulties in labelling in the first place.

4. Applicability of the classical domain concept to present-day Denmark

A further objection to talking about domains of language use in contemporary Denmark is that the type of societies that Fishman developed the domain concept for is very different from present Denmark. Denmark is not a 'stable multilingual community', at least not with stable in-group multilingualism for the majority group.

This is not to say that Denmark is not multilingual.² Apart from Danish, at least three other languages have, if not official, at least recognised status: German as the language of the German minority in Southern Jutland, and Faroese and Greenlandic as the languages of the former Danish North Atlantic colonies. Members of the German minority are usually bilingual in German and Danish (very often with a Southern Jutish dialect as the dominant variety). Faroese and Greenlandic speakers are usually bilingual as well, certainly if they have lived in Denmark for some time. For these multilingual groups, a description of their language choices through the domain concept would make sense, since they use both Danish and their primary language for intra-group communication.

There is also a large number of immigrant languages spoken in Denmark, especially in Copenhagen, but also in smaller towns. These groups are very often bilingual in themselves (like the widespread Punjabi–Urdu bilingualism of Pakistanis), but apart from some older members of these communities, their members are bi- or multilingual with Danish as one of their languages. Again, here is room for the application of the classical domain concept.

But when it comes to the majority population, multilingualism takes on a different character. This is *not* a multilingual setting in which "a single population makes use of two (or more) 'languages' [...] for internal communicative purposes." (Fishman 1972: 437)³. Many Danes speak, or at least understand, other languages than Danish, and English is the preferred choice for many. But there are only small subcultural pockets that use other languages than Danish for certain purposes, like the Hip-hop subculture, as described by Preisler (1999). Apart from this, we encounter classic elite multilingualism for inter-group communication, and a widespread, but functionally restricted receptive multilingualism which makes it possible to use English (and, to a lesser extent, other languages) in advertisements.

² Societies can be bi- or multilingual in different ways. One of the most important distinctions must be one between multilingual societies without and with in-group multilingualism.

³ What I have left out is Fishman's addition "or varieties of the 'same language'". It would make the discussion too complicated if I included the choice of (regional, social or prestige) variants within Danish in this paper.

Only if we subscribe to an attenuated domain concept that ties languages and institutionalised contexts together, and does not require that the language choices we are describing are made *within* a community, we can talk about domains in this context.

There is, by the way, nothing new in this situation. Denmark has always, or at least for a long time, been multilingual in this sense: various elites have always used other languages than Danish for inter-group communication. If this system has a dynamic, it is rather characterised by three facts:

- since the middle of C19, there have been no elite groups in Denmark that use other languages than Danish for intra-group communication (as it had been the case up to that point with High German, Low German and to a much lesser extent French),
- since the middle of C20, English has become the preferred language for inter-group and international elite communication, and
- due to an egalitarian educational policy, the scope of elites that are functional in more languages than Danish has widened somewhat.

	Danish	English	French	German
1944		•	••	
1949			•	•
1951			•	•
1954		•		•
1957		•	•	
1959			•	
1960			•	
1972	•			
1973			•	
1975		•		
1976		•		
1979		•		
1980		••		
1986		•		
1989		•	•	
1993	•	•	•	
1995		•		
1996		••		
1999		•		
2001		•		
2002		•		

1944–1960		•••	••••••••	•••
1961–1994	••	••••••••	••••	
1995–2002		••••••••		

Table 2. Publications in the *Travaux* series 1944–2002, by language

The second point is illustrated by a breakdown of languages used in publications by the *Linguistic Circle of Copenhagen*. In 1944 the Circle began publication of a book series with the French title *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Copenhague*. In the beginning of the period, volumes were

KIKUYU: Ati — nini?

KIKUYU SWAHILI

What what?

LUO: Ya nini kusema lugha ambao huelewi mama?

SWAHILI

Why (try) to speak a language you don't know, mum?

KIKUYU: I know — kijaluo — very well

ENGLISH HYBRID ENGLISH

I know Luo very well!

LUO: Wapi! — You do not know it at all. — Wacha haya, nipe mayai mbili.

SWAHILI ENGLISH

SWAHILI

Go on! You don't know it at all. Anyway, let's leave the matter, and give me a couple of eggs.

KIKUYU: Unataka mayai — ariyo, omera — haya ni — tongolo — tatu.

SWAHILI

LUO

SWAHILI

LUO

SWAHILI

Two eggs, brother? O.K., that will be thirty cents.

In a situation like this here, there is a negotiation going on about which language is appropriate to choose in the context; the Kikuyu stallholder seems to want to impress her customer with her Luo, which he comments on as non-existent. Still, she uses Kikuyu, Swahili and English, while her customer uses Luo, Swahili and English. And the rejection to take up her Luo by the customer is obviously not based on his sense of inappropriateness of Luo, but on his assessment of her receptive fluency: the customer shifts to Swahili only after her lack of uptake of *his* reply in Luo. The choice of languages does not seem to be random, but there is no one language that can be considered to be the obvious shared choice in this type of situation.

Ó Riagáins supposed two alternative analyses might catch certain aspects of the patterning of the situation: The stallholder and the customer obviously disagree about the status of the stallholder in a Luo speaking network, and the stallholder considers Luo to be part of her linguistic capital, but her investment (to stay within the metaphor) turns out to be a failure.

The second example is from Tsitsipis (1991). An old woman comments on tv programs. The languages used are Arvanite (a dialect of Albanian, autochthonous to certain parts of Greece, especially around Athens), and Greek. Only the oldest members of the community are balanced bilinguals, but even the younger ones are receptively bilingual.

chë shómë në telëórasi të bïe prosopía re pedjiá.

ARVANITE

'things we watch on TV make you feel ashamed, guys. What they say.

Naní sa cjë thúa. όλα τα πράματα

GREEK

Everything

διαλέγονται, και ο άνθρωπος δεν διαλέγεται. είναι στο κουτί.

can be chosen, and human beings are not chosen. [Man] is in the box.'

Again, the shift from Arvanite to Greek is not conditioned by a change in topic, interlocutor or place. The whole exchange takes place in the same domain – Tsitsipis' analysis is that the language shift marks that the Greek part of the conversation is on a higher level of abstraction.⁵

⁵ I do not know if it would mean to overstretch my data to venture the hypothesis that the language of highest prestige (Greek, English) is used for reflexive comments (metatransactional or interactional remarks in Parkin's example, generalizations in Tsitsipis'), while the language of lower prestige (Swahili, Arvanite) is used for transaction (buying

Finally I want to present an example from Southern Jutland, a bilingual area (German–Danish) south of the German-Danish border (cf. Pedersen 2000a, b). Karen Margrethe Pedersen describes an annual meeting of a Danish sports association, where both languages play a role. This starts with an invitation written in both languages. During the meeting itself, both languages are used, but following an established pattern. The more ritual or pre-set and symbolic the utterances are, the higher is the likelihood that they are made in Danish. On the other hand, the more spontaneous and content-oriented the utterances are, the higher is the likelihood that they are made in German. There is also a functional distribution between participants: the chairperson of the meeting is more likely to speak Danish than the participants. (Pedersen 2000b:67-74)

Again, a meeting of this kind should be within *one* domain. Still, both languages are used, but again not randomly.⁶ Danish is used for identification, German for content communication. This is part of the acknowledged setting for a meeting of this kind, and all the participants know what “‘proper’ usage” requires of them.

6. Conclusion

I hope to have shown that the concept of domain should be used with a certain precaution. If one distinguishes three domain concepts: the naïve domain concept (Schmidt-Rohr), the classical domain concept (Fishman) and the extended domain concept (later Fishman and successors), it should be clear that only the extended domain concept can deal with the kind of domains usually assumed in an analysis of modern societies with a dominant majority language but widespread elite multilingualism for out-of-group interaction. On the other hand, even the classical domain concept cannot explain all kinds of language choices within a multilingual group of speakers, if these choices are not of an either–or type for a whole conversation or interaction.

The latter problem could be solved by allowing that in certain domains code-switching is considered ‘proper usage’. This would be in line with an attitude to code-switching which has gained ground lately and which considers code-switching as a legitimate expressive resource of bilinguals. This would also avoid the strict coupling of languages to domains, but we would still have to explain the non-randomness of code-switching.

There is no doubt that the phenomenon often described today by the term ‘domain loss’ exists, but the question is how to describe and analyse it, and whether any of the different concepts of domain are really helpful here. Obviously, what we are dealing with here is language choice in linguistic communities as a way of making best use of linguistic resources. With a view to language policy, the dynamics of these communities is probably best captured by not thinking in terms of ‘either–or’ choices, but by considering the possibility of enhancing individual and societal choices to the largest degree possible. In this way we do not end up with a win–lose situation, but hopefully with a win–win situation.

eggs) or descriptive statements. Languages of doubtful sharedness (Luo) can be used as impressive markers by one speaker and dismissed as noise by the other. Isolated examples are, of course, not sufficient to establish *patterns* here.

⁶ One might doubt the fully bilingual status of the group, since there are usually people present who are not bilingual. It seems that this fact can influence language choices locally (if only for the trivial reason that a monolingual speaker has no languages to choose between when speaking), but they do not seem to influence the overall pattern of language distribution.

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