

CHAPTER 27

LANGUAGE SPREAD AND ITS STUDY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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LANGUAGE spread is, according to Cooper, “an increase, over time, in the proportion of a communication network that adopts a given language or language variety for a given communicative function” (1982a: 6). It is generally taken for granted that language, as a concomitant of culture, can spread.

Schoolchildren learn of the spread of Greek culture and language throughout the Mediterranean world, of the spread of Roman influence and Latin throughout the Roman Empire, and of the spread of Islam as a new world religion that accompanied the spread of the language of the Koran, Arabic. As the children’s world expands in historical and geographical dimensions, they begin to perceive how most historical change has been accompanied by the spread of a culture, and consequently of a language, usually that of the more powerful or high-status group. In some cases, the language of the more powerful has been forcefully imposed; in others, participation in the new sociocultural context has simply demanded the adoption of the new language or of new language features. Sometimes there is a social need for the new language or language variety in order to enjoy socioeconomic benefits or to achieve political integration; at other times, the need is communicative because the new messages that the new cultural context creates cannot simply be transmitted in the old way, and a new way of communicating is needed (García and Otheguy, 1989; Otheguy, 1993, 1995).

As children in the Americas grow up, they begin to understand that English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French were powerful languages that spread quickly and

