Discussion questions for ‘Where’ and ‘why’ does language shift occur …?

This is a chapter from a very important book by Joshua Fishman, called *Reversing Language Shift*. Fishman was trained as a sociologist and became interested early on in how and why communities give up one language in favor of another. This is called **LANGUAGE SHIFT**, in contrast to **LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE**. We just talked about how languages change during contact, but this is a bigger picture, about not just particular changes within a language but of people switching entirely from speaking one language to speaking another, with some period of transitional bilingualism.

I’d like to focus especially on questions **1, 5 and 6** in class.

**Note:** Fishman uses ‘X’ as a kind of variable for languages and group names, so he talks about ‘Xish’ (some language X) and ‘Xmen’ (some group X, identified with language X). These then contrast with Yish and Ymen.

1. **Background question:** Fishman is focused, as the title shows, on reversing language shift, stopping languages from going extinct. MOST of the world’s languages are dying very quickly. Some predict that **90%** of the languages spoken today will be dead by the end of this century. (As we'll discuss, all of the Native languages of Wisconsin are all endangered and work is going on to keep them alive — pretty amazing efforts.) German in Wisconsin is spoken now only by older people (among people born here) and so it’s in a late stage of language shift. Is this a situation of endangerment? German is, after all, spoken by upwards of 100 million people in the world, just not many now in Wisconsin. Should people be working to reverse this case of language shift? Why or why not?

2. pp. 40-55: How do we tell that shift has occurred? What roles do these play in shift?
   a. reading, writing, speaking, understanding
   b. wanting to be able to use a language vs. being able to vs. actually using it
   c. domains of use

3. What can we learn from the data on p. 47 about changes in numbers of speakers over time? What difficulties are there with interpreting such numbers? How important is the data on media from p. 48? What limitations are there on such data?

4. Fishman goes through various kinds of surveys about use and attitudes toward languages and language use. Which might be valuable to use here in Wisconsin? How could we improve the surveys if we wanted to use them?

5. pp. **55-65:** Why does language shift occur, according to Fishman? Which kinds of ‘dislocations’ have taken place with languages in Wisconsin and the US generally?
   a. physical and demographic
   b. social
   c. cultural

6. pp. **66-67:** What does Fishman mean by ‘boundary maintenance’ and why is it important in language shift / language maintenance?