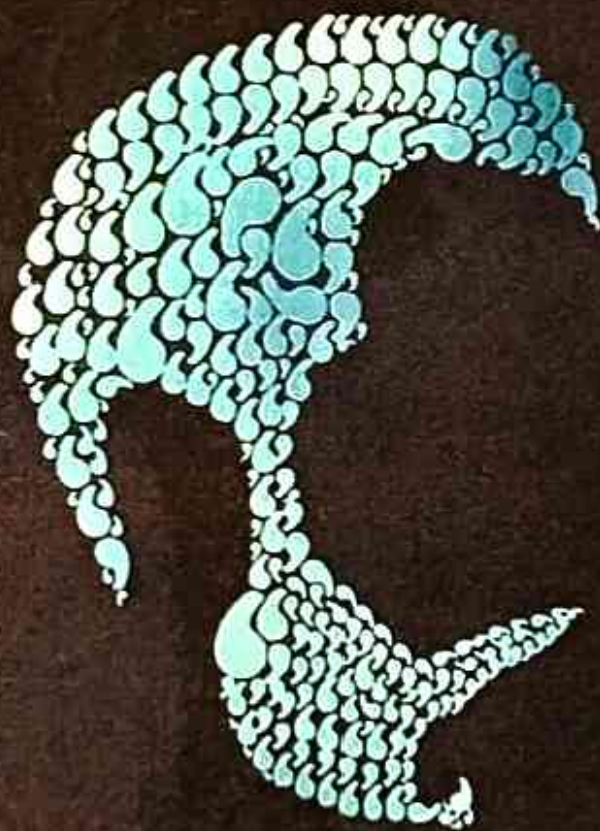


Sociolinguistics



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REVITALIZING LANGUAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract:

As quantified by *Ethnologue*, the most extensive and authoritative catalogue of the world's languages, published by the SIL International, listed 6,909 distinct languages in its latest (2009) edition. But many are facing massive extinction which is a stark reality. Many of the languages will not be available for future generations. These are the times which demand a universal upsurge for professional linguistic concern. We should be concerned, because it is our loss. Language death is a terrible loss, where one experiences the grief in the process of death and dying. Language enthusiasts, linguists, community groups and support organizations are actively engaged in recovering, resurrecting and conserving endangered languages. Preventive linguistics and clinical linguistics are actively involved towards achieving this goal. Summits, declarations, conventions, debates and societies have been emerging to handle this crisis. Experts have propounded effective and productive measure in order to maintain the linguistic diversity. The Linguistic Society of America stated that recognizing the collection and analysis of such data is a fundamental and permanent contribution to the foundation of linguistics. This paper studies the discrete ways by which language death can be prevented and endangered languages reconstructed.

Key Words: Endangered language, Language death, Preventive linguistics, Revitalization

Language in its broadest and most general sense is the means of expressing and communicating emotional or mental concepts by any living being. In another sense, human beings have devised a threefold method of communication; gesture, speech and written or pictorial characters. A scientific definition of language according to linguistics describes it as the process of exchanging ideas between human beings by means of words. The Greeks called language and thought by one name, "logos" as they are so connected. Sir Wilhelm Leibniz believes that languages are the best mirror of the human mind, and that an exact analysis of the signification of words would make us better acquainted than anything else with the operations of the understanding. Modern philologists like Sir Alan Gardiner opine that speech expresses not only thoughts but also emotions.

Linguistics is the general or comparative science or study of Languages. The term as such, emerged from the study of the Romance and Germanic languages. It takes for its data, all manifestations of human language, both in its general principles and in its particular realizations. According to Saussure, it aims to describe all known languages and record their history (by reconstructing the parent languages), determine the forces operating permanently and universally in all languages and to formulate general laws based on it, delimit and define linguistics itself.

The language domain and its logical problems are parallel to corresponding puzzles that arises in biology. This similarity was noted by Darwin in *The Descent of Man*, where he observed that the formation of different languages and of distinct species and the proof that both have been developed through a gradual process are curiously the same. Language is also subject to evolution. Initial efforts on understanding the number of languages in the world estimated to somewhere around a 1000 in the 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1911). Much pioneering work in documenting the languages of the world by missionary

organization, Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL International) was interested in translating the Christian Bible. At least a portion of Bible had been translated into at least 2,508 different languages, as of 2009. The most extensive and authoritative catalogue of the world's languages, *Ethnologue*, published by the SIL International, listed 6,909 distinct languages in its latest (2009) edition.

However, there is rapid endangerment and death of many minority languages across the world. Linguists and anthropologists are in quite general agreement that the language diversity is declining at a precipitous rate. Only 600 of the 6,000 languages are estimated to be 'safe' from the threat of extinction. Some reckon that by the end of the twenty-first century, the world will be dominated by a small number of major languages. Like in biological case, the pivotal point for a language's survival is the extent to which new generations are learning it. A language whose only speakers are middle-aged or older is on the path to extinction unless revived among younger generations. It has no existence without people. Languages really do die when they cease to be spoken. The denouement would be "language death". "If you are the last speaker of a language, your language, viewed as a tool of communication, is already dead". (Crystal 2). The languages like Achumawi, Clallam, Tenino, Yurok, Makah and so on of the northwest coast of North America is one such. An interactive atlas of endangered languages maintained by UNESCO identified 2,473 languages in the categories from 'vulnerable' through 'extinct', as of April 2011. This means that at least 35% of the world's languages are in danger. Other factors contributing to its vitality include the absolute number of its speakers and their proportion within the community, the domains in which it is used, explicit government policies and the attitude of the community members towards its use.

If English continues to grow as it has, it will be the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known. The

International Linguistics Congress held in Quebec in 1992 resolved the UNESCO to undertake the responsibility to promote linguistic diversity, retrieve and document endangered and dying languages. In 1993, the General Assembly adopted the 'Endangered Languages Project' – including the 'Red Book of Endangered Languages'. It observed extinction of languages progressing rapidly. It was followed by an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages in 1995, an event inaugurated at the University of Tokyo. The same year, Endangered Language Fund was instituted in the USA. In 1995, the Foundation for Endangered Languages was established in the UK.

Language loss cannot be afforded at any cost. The most important is the economic aspect. It exercises a strong role in trade, tourism, arts and local manufacturing industries. Local languages foster pride in a community and instills self-confidence in their culture. It enhances diversity, expresses identity, acts as the repositories of history, contributes to the sum of human knowledge and stands themselves interesting. There are cultural, political, ethical and scientific reasons (too). The growth in linguistic awareness and related activism was one of the most exciting developments of the 1990s. The theory of language revitalization is a pre-requisite towards the goal of language as a tool of inter-generational communication. Six such factors are discussed below:

1. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community.

An endangered community needs to raise its visibility or profile. It needs to obtain access to the media with a regular column in a daily newspaper, radio or television. This has to begin from grass-root levels such as community settings like town halls and religious and social centres. Activities like story-telling or religious rituals can be selected as mediums. Traditional religious links and practices provide motivation for language revival, as are the arts. In the next step, public domains like

business, law and public administration are targets. Attention can be obtained through letter headings and company symbols until it becomes co-equal with dominant language in areas as advertising, public-service leaflets and minute-taking. Associated growth can be obtained in translation and interpreting services. Political support can find them a place in place names, road signs and on public signs in general. This would demonstrate the presence of a community dynamism that expresses corporate linguistic identity. When a social group achieves sufficient cohesion and independence, language cannot be stopped using for identity purposes.

II. Speakers of the subordinate community increase their wealth relative to the dominant community.

This theory was put forth by Lenore Grenoble and Lindsay Whaley. Economy has a positive impact on the self-esteem of a community and uplifts its power and prestige. The strengthened economy of Catalonia has been influential in encouraging the use of Catalan there. Service industries and light manufacturing industries can most benefit from economic growth. Tourism brings considerable benefits to an endangered language as can be seen in parts of Switzerland and northern Italy. Languages like Grisons, Franco-Provencale, Wasler and Friulian are examples.

III. Speakers of the endangered community increase their legitimate power before the dominant community.

Several landmark events happened across Europe to exhort language rights and promote multilingualism. In 1981, a Community charter was proposed by Gaetano Arfe in the European Parliament, to deal with regional languages, cultures and the rights of ethnic minorities. The Council of Europe adopted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages as a convention on 1 March 1998, which offers protection for minority languages. The USA passed two Native American Languages Acts in 1990 and 1992. The 1991 Law on languages of the Russian Federation gave all languages the status of a national

property under the state protection. On a wider spectrum, UNESCO and UN have produced various statements. The Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights was produced in Barcelona in 1996. Heart-warming results have been noted in Paraguay, Greenland and Eritrea. Avid attention is required to interpret these declarations and resolutions in real social settings and to put into practice.

IV. Speakers of the endangered community obtain a strong presence in the educational system.

The school setting provides wide range of opportunities for the children to listen and speak with the demands of the curriculum that opens the doors to new worlds. Careful planning must be taken to place indigenous languages, a formal pace alongside the dominant language. The knowledge and awareness from the process of education enables them to cope with the difficulties in language maintenance. Opportunities should be provided to know about a language's history, folklore and literature. Extra-curricular activities like language playgroups, summer immersion camps, master-apprentice programs, bilingual holidays, community-based programs or in-service courses can be organized to develop awareness. Teacher training and good materials are also essential pre-requisites. This will raise the pupil's self-confidence in tremendous ways.

V. Speakers of the endangered community learning to write in their own language.

Literacy programs have been successfully implemented in hundreds of endangered languages and it is a priority in most revitalization programs. When the younger generation is provided with the texts of older generation, the result is a more dynamic linguistic interaction. Writing down a language involves an intellectual step. Analyzing the sound system of that language helps in devising efficient spelling system, preparation of learning materials, in forming dictionaries, grammars and other manuals. But it can adversely affect if there is resistance from the native

community, when they see it as a loss of ownership. Some people think of their language being destroyed, when written down. The dynamic nature of the oral tradition cannot be captured.

VI. Speakers of the endangered community making use of electronic technology.

By making use of a web page, the indigenous language garners a public profile alongside the dominant languages. There are over 500 languages with an Internet presence now. The digital platform provides an identity no longer linked to a geographical location. It helps people to maintain their linguistic identity wherever they may be in the world. The shift from *globalization* and *internationalization* to the notion of *localization* has steadily grown into an industry in itself with its own association, LISA (the Localization Industry Standard Association). New technologies like spelling checkers help to handle bodies of specialized knowledge. Computer assisted self-study materials is another facility. Yet, software developers need to become more multilingual. They need to implement comprehensive coding conventions for non-Roman alphabets.

Akira Yamamoto, linguistic anthropologist, distinguishes nine factors to maintain and promote small languages:

- The existence of a dominant culture which favours linguistic diversity.
- Having a strong sense of ethnic identity within the endangered community.
- Promotion of educational programs about the endangered language and culture.
- The creation of bilingual/ bicultural school programs.
- The training of indigenous speakers as teachers.
- The involvement of the speech community as a whole.
- The creation of easy, simplified and accessible language materials.
- The development of written literature; both traditional and modern.

- The maintenance and strengthening of the environments in which the language must be used.

Besides, Lynn Landweer, sociolinguist, suggests eight indicators of ethno-linguistic vitality for endangered languages.

- The extent to which it can resist the influence of a dominant urban culture.
- The number of domains in which it is employed.
- The frequency and variety of code switching.
- The existence of a critical mass of fluent speakers.
- The distribution of speakers across social networks.
- The internal and external recognition of the community as a unique group.
- Its relative prestige compared with the surrounding languages.
- Its access to a stable economic base.

The Role of a Linguist:

A linguist has several tasks to carry out, in order to secure the future of a language. According to clinical linguistics, the tasks are of three types: those to do with diagnosis and assessment, those to do with description and analysis and those to do with intervention and re-assessment. They should have a broader perspective as they take up the role in helping indigenous community understand its unique linguistic heritage and the forces which threaten it. They should be able to grasp the sociopolitical realities of the endangered situation and must develop social and political skills to be an effective member of a language revitalization program. A thorough grounding in fieldwork principles and practices is obligatory. This puts the field of 'preventive linguistics' within the domain of applied linguistics. A linguist should be wary of not being too theoretical and empirical. The aim is to increase the generality of descriptive statement and the power of theoretical explanation. Documentation is a top priority in cases where there is a real risk of impending language

death. Linguistic isolates, such as languages without a recognized affiliation and of uncertain linguistic relationships, should be given top priority. Archives' research is important in places previously colonized. Face-to-face sessions with speakers enables the linguist to make immediate analytic decisions about sounds, patterns and meanings which then can be checked with ethnic consultants. Audio-recording facilities are important as they help to capture the dynamic aspects of the language. Video facilities help to record the associated non-verbal communication.

A linguist is not free of challenges. The level of competence of the consultants in fluency of the endangered language is critical for the linguist. The possibility of fake data can be another problem. They may often be challenged to have an intense commitment with the endangered situation. It can adversely affect them as there will be physical and mental exhaustion. A western investigator is often suspected of economic exploitation; that some fieldworkers give up. Other threats include rain, heat and insects, theft, collateral destruction by forces in a civil war and deliberate destruction of indigenous language materials by antagonistic governments.

The Revitalization Team:

The emergence of a team is relevant as many languages need proper planning and management to survive. Revitalization requires longitudinal research, which is expensive and time consuming. A working team can consist of community members and fieldworkers in order to perform diverse duties. Members such as community administrators, linguists, elders, good general speakers, teachers, material designers and writers can be part of the team. The goal needs to be '*on* a language, *for* its speakers, *with* its speakers and *by* its speakers'. A positive approach to teamwork is critical for success. The team members should have accurate and realistic awareness of the contributions each can make to the project. The chances of conflicts on the issues of

intellectual property rights, ownership and stewardship of a language should be solved through discussions. Ultimately, the copyright of the raw data remains with the community, whereas, copyright of literary data remains with the author. Reconstruction of dying languages from available resources is possible and a classic case of language revival is Hebrew.

Languages are dying at an unprecedented rate. It is not adequate to praise extinct languages, but the alternative is to act. Linguists in the front line need much support as we can mobilize. The raising of public awareness is a crucial step. The present generation has a greater role and responsibility in reviving dying languages and their interventions are not to be delayed.

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