

LIGN177: Multilingualism

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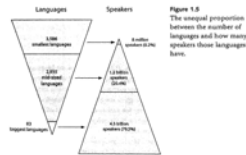
Language endangerment and death

Language death

- “A language dies when nobody speaks it any more.” David Crystal (2000), *Language Death*
- “Languages do not literally ‘die’ or go ‘extinct’, since they are not living organisms. Rather, they are crowded out by bigger languages.” Harrison (2007), p. 5

Population discrepancies

- The 83 languages in the world with the most numbers of speakers account for 80% of the world’s population
- 3500 languages are spoken by 0.2% of the world’s population



Where are the endangered languages?

- [UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger](#)

Endangered language numbers –

- **80%** of the native languages of the USA and Canada are moribund – no longer being learned by children
 - Central America and Mexico: **17%**
 - South America: **27%**
 - Australia: **90%** (of 250 Aboriginal languages) are near extinction
- Krauss (1992) *The world’s languages in crisis*. *Language* 68(1).1-42

Size matters

| Language | Number of speakers | Community size | Proportion |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------|
| Santa Ana Keresan (USA) | 300–500 | 600 | 50–83% |
| Ulwa (Nicaragua) | 300–500 | 2,000 | 15–25% |
| Sahaptin (USA) | 300–500 | 12,000 | .025–.042% |

Size and location matters

- Isolated communities have better chance of language survival
- Karitiana (Brazil) – 185/191 speak the language, isolated Amazonian community
- Scots Gaelic (Scotland) – 30,000 but English dominates
- Sora – 300,000 in Orissa state, India – threatened

Critical factor - children

- If children do not grow up speaking their parents' language, the language will become moribund
- Last speakers will be elderly, and the language will die with them



Critical factors

- Using the language at home
 - More home use --> chance for survival
- Speaker age (generational transmission)
 - Ever younger speakers = transmission
- Ages of shift in language use
 - Teenagers, peer pressure, employment
- Cultural cohesion and support

Why should we care?

- Human cultural heritage – myths, poetry, belief systems, songs
- Erosion of human knowledge – taxonomies, information packaging
- Human cognition – what is possible in a human language? How does the human mind organize information?

Erosion of knowledge

- 'Language disappearance is an erosion of ideas, of ways of knowing, and ways of talking about the world and human experience' (Harrison 2007:7)

Taxonomies

- Scientific naming groups species into categories according to common ancestry
- Folk taxonomies assign names based on behavior and appearance of animals, plants
- Indigenous languages provide potentially useful information on medicinal properties of plants, behavior of animals

Knowledge is lost

- Barí language (1500-2500 in Venezuela)
- Shift to Spanish and away from hunter-gatherer society
- 40-60% estimate of loss of traditional ethnobotanical knowledge of rainforest trees and plants
- Shift correlated with interaction with forest (little hunting, forest use)

Knowledge is lost

- Reindeer herders in Siberia have a large nomenclature of reindeer names
- Part of cultural knowledge of Tuvan, Tofa, Todzhu
- Russian-speaking reindeer herders have lost that knowledge

Human cognition

- Most languages are of three word order types:
 - Subject-object-verb (Korean, Turkish)
 - Subject-verb-object (English, Swahili)
 - Verb-subject-object (Irish, Tagalog)
- Verb-object-subject is less common (Tzotzil, Malagasy)

Human cognition

Object-verb-subject and Object-subject verb are found only in a handful of Amazonian languages (Xavante, Jamamade, Urarina, Hixkaryana)

If these languages had died without a trace, we would have erroneously assumed that such orders were cognitively impossible

Human cognition

Endangered languages may be structurally complex

Tuyuca (spoken in Brazil & Colombia) evidential system
– 5 ways of saying 'he played soccer' depending on the quality of evidence:

- diiga apewi I saw him play soccer
- diiga apeti I heard him in the soccer game but didn't see him
- diiga apeyi I saw evidence that he played soccer
- diiga apeyigi I got the information from someone else
- diiga apehiyi it's reasonable to assume that he played soccer

Linguists/anthropologists

- Linguists engage in 'documentation and description' of endangered languages throughout the world.
- Audio and video recordings
- Grammatical description, dictionary and pedagogical materials
- Photo: K. David Harrison working with Os (Chulym) in Siberia



Revitalization

- Many linguists, anthropologists and speakers of endangered languages work to try and *revitalize* languages
- Nicaraguan Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA) – partners with U.S. trained linguists – work on Rama, Sumu, Ulwa, Miskitu
- Social contribution – literacy, awareness that the languages have value → pride

Language transmission

- First language learning occurs naturally by children interacting with adults
- Language teaching programs are typically designed with *second* languages in mind
- Elders do not find it natural to ‘teach’ a language to children in a formal manner

Master-apprentice programs



- **Master-apprentice** programs – pairing of elder with youth in Native American communities
 - Umatilla in Oregon - 44 elders who spoke Walla Walla (5), Umatilla (14), and Cayuse/Nez Perce(25)
 - *"I gained interest, responsibility and appreciation for my language through this project. I'm learning more than language - I'm learning a deeper sense of our culture."*
- Quentin Case, a youth participant

The activist-linguist

- Krauss (1992:9) states:
‘We should not only be documenting these languages, but also working educationally, culturally and politically to increase their chances of survival’
- → Engage with local indigenous communities and governments for supportive language planning

Linguistic human rights

- ‘Schools are every day committing linguistic genocide’
- ‘English is the world’s worst killer language’



– Tove Skutnabb-Kangas

Linguistic human rights and linguistic genocide

- Tove Skutnabb-Kangas argues that linguistic genocide (annihilation of a language) can be
- done intentionally through physical genocide or through cutting off access to the language
 - cutting off access can be in the form of punishment for speaking or using a language
 - cutting off access can be through lack of use in education

Who owns a language?

- Jane Hill* questions the issue of language ownership in the debate over endangered languages:

Universal ownership - the assertion that endangered languages in some sense "belong" to everyone in the world

- language is part of our common humanity
- speakers of indigenous languages do not feel that their languages *belong* to others, they wish to retain control

* Hill, J. (2002) "Expert Rhetorics" in Advocacy for Endangered Languages: Who Is Listening, and What Do They Hear? *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 12

Ladefoged (1992) – the other view

- *Peter Ladefoged* devoted his career to the study of the sounds of the world's languages
- 'Another view of endangered languages' *Language* 68.809–11



Ladefoged's view

- Speaking about the Toda in India (~600 speakers)
- 'Many of the younger people want to honor their ancestors, but also to be part of a modern India. They have accepted that, in their view, the cost of doing this is giving up the use of their language in their daily life. Surely, this is a view to which they are entitled, and it would not be the action of a responsible linguist to persuade them to do otherwise.'

Salikoko Mufwene – the other view

- It's evolution – languages die, languages are born
- Socio-economic changes bring about shifts in integration of people into local and regional economies (may be triggered by transnational economic integration)
- Culture shifts and language shifts – these are not static entities that can be preserved unaltered

