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Endangered

Endangered languages are linguistic varieties spoken by relatively few people (perhaps most of them elderly), and/or in relatively few communities (perhaps even in a single, relatively small one), and/or on relatively infrequent occasions. They are languages whose future as anyone's primary (or even secondary) medium of day-to-day communication seems seriously in doubt—languages that in former times would have been identified as "moribund" or "dying."

Though the term "endangered languages" is of recent (post-1980) origin, research on languages like these has been carried on for a considerable period of time. Indeed, the whole tradition of "Americanist" anthropology has unfolded at least since the time of Franz Boas under the assumption that the linguistic varieties and cultural practices of central interest and concern (usually, those of Native American peoples) are in the process of disappearing once and for all, and need urgently to be documented for posterity (a familiar notion of "salvage" ethnography or linguistics).

Leonard Bloomfield commented in 1927 on the special problems of doing fieldwork in rapidly contracting language communities; but it was Morris Swadesh who, in 1948, applied the term "obsolescent" to these kinds of linguistic varieties, and this designation served the purposes of most researchers until the late 1980s.

By the mid-1970s a number of studies had begun to appear in the scholarly literature under a variety of rubrics, including "language obsolescence," language "replacement" and "shift," "de-acquisition," and sometimes, simply, "language death." These are not all synonyms, of course: "de-acquisition" suggests a focus on native-speaker competence (and the wide range of fluencies that can be observed), while "language shift" can occur whenever the members of a local speech-community begin pervasively to abandon the use of one linguistic variety in favor of another, regardless of whether or not the language being abandoned continues to be spoken elsewhere.

Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9(1–2):65–68.

Indeed, "language death" might be best understood as referring to the special case of "language shift" that obtains when a given local speech-community abandons (whether under obvious duress or not) the use of a form of speech that for whatever reason is not being spoken anywhere else (what difference a "dialect" makes—as opposed, say, to a "language," or a variety that is perhaps the last actively spoken representative of a language family or phylum—has never been made clear, but is obviously an important issue).

A central concern in the linguistic literature on language obsolescence and death has been to establish what, if any, the structural or grammatical consequences of contraction and obsolescence are. Do languages that are in the process of "dying" or falling out of use display in their linguistic structure any characteristic, telltale signs of their imperiled status (simplification of inflectional paradigms, perhaps, and/or loss of vocabulary, and/or loss of productive processes of lexical and syntactic derivation)? Efforts at comparison across cases of language shift and death have yielded relatively few clear answers to such questions. Some languages seem to survive intact for a time, only to "die with their [grammatical] boots on," simply disappearing upon the death of a last fully fluent, even impeccably competent, speaker (the Yana dialect spoken by the fabled Ishi comes immediately to mind here), while others seem to undergo a kind of progressive (regressive?) simplification—reminiscent in several respects of pidginization—in the speech of two or more generations of partially fluent speakers and "semispeakers."

Exactly when the phrase "endangered languages" first appeared in print is difficult to establish. Since about 1990, concerns about endangered languages have reached a wide public through a number of feature-length stories in newspapers of record. Over the same period, the issue has been the focus of a number of high-profile contributions in academic and scholarly journals. As of mid-1999 there is at least one active listserv on the Internet devoted exclusively to discussions of endangered languages, and there are many more listserves and websites with specific regional, language, and/or cultural foci that deal extensively with endangered languages and with closely related issues (carmen.murdoch.edu.au/lists/endangered-languages-l/; cougar.ucdavis.edu/nas/terralin/home.html; sapir.ling.yale.edu/elf). In June 1999 the MacArthur Foundation awarded two of its Prize Fellowships to linguists working on language renewal projects (in the U.S. Southwest and Brazil, respectively), raising the public "profile" of the issue even higher.

The "endangered languages" discussion has clearly emerged from post-1960s "environmentalist" discourse; in the scholarly literature and mass media alike, analogies are repeatedly drawn, equating the disappearance of "whole languages" with the disappearance of whole "worldviews" (and "whole cultures"), on the one hand, and with the disappearance of plant and animal species, on the other. In this context, then, "a species"—or "a language"—becomes an object of contemplation and begins to partake of some of the qualities of the Kantian Sublime.

Analogies like these, despite the strategic value they may have in attempts to garner public attention and support for cultural and linguistic renewal

efforts, may sometimes carry unfortunate ideological entailments. Remorse over the loss of languages *qua* scientific objects, over the "loss to science," in other words, may be keenly felt—"academic linguistics," as Michael Krauss has many times been quoted as saying, "may go down in history as 'the only science that has presided over the disappearance of the very subject to which it is devoted' "—but its relevance to what is happening "on the ground" in communities where ancestral languages are rapidly falling out of use (and even memory) is less clear.

If the study of obsolescent languages as lexicogrammatical systems—from the point of view of (Saussurean) *langue*, in other words—has yielded relatively few generalizations that could not also be made about structural (diachronic) change in language more generally, studies that have focused on the speech community and on speech as a form of practice—Saussurean parole—show much greater promise, even if far fewer studies of this latter sort have been carried out in any serious or sustained way to date.

Given this, it is difficult not to greet the contemporary emphasis on languages as "endangered" with some ambivalence, in spite of the obvious urgency of the work—including especially work that helps people in these communities find ways of preserving and maintaining ancestral forms of speech. Indeed, the emphasis to date in the "endangered languages" discussion has been on languages *qua* grammatical systems (and/or systems of nomenclature), as artifacts—valuable as such though they may be—of cognition: something akin to the Elgin Marbles, perhaps, in the realm of conceptualization.

Still missing from much of the contemporary literature on "endangered languages" is an anthropologically sophisticated understanding of language obsolescence and "death" as complicated social, cultural, and historical processes that usually unfold within small speech communities during periods of socioeconomic and political transformation (accompanied, virtually always, by societal bi- or multilingualism of an increasingly unstable sort). Much more ethnography needs to be done before "losses" can be properly counted, or even understood.

(See also *acquisition, community, competence, contact, media, performativity, register, variation, writing*)

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