

Language Endangerment The Causes and Attitudes of Language Death

Much like how species of biological organisms face endangerment and extinction, languages are also sometimes threatened by endangerment and extinction. Here in the United States, you don't have to worry about English going anywhere anytime soon. However, speakers of other languages in other parts of the world may be a part of the last generation of speakers of their language. According to British linguist David Crystal, roughly 500 languages have fewer than 100 speakers, and more than 1,500 languages have, at most, only 1,000 speakers. So what causes a language to face extinction, and why should it matter? In what follows, this paper investigates the primary causes of language endangerment and extinction, and then discusses the attitudes of language endangerment from various perspectives.

Part I: Causes of Language Death

First, let's examine some general statistics concerning languages and then discuss the causes of language endangerment. There are an estimated 6,000 languages in the world, however, that estimation decreases all the time. The world contains roughly 7 billion language speakers. Surprisingly, 96% of these 6,000 languages are only spoken by about 4% of the population. Additionally, over half of the world's current population speaks only 20 languages. So as we can see, a large amount of the world's languages only represents a small fraction of the overall population, while certain languages have grown to accumulate a massive amount of speakers. Just as languages can become threatened and die off, they can also grow to have billions of speakers, but what causes this to happen? The *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered*

Languages states that there are four main types of language endangerment causes, however in what follows, I am only going to discuss the two causes which have to deal with cultural effects.

The primary cause of language extinction is cultural hegemony. This happens whenever one culture or group of people who speak one language take on the cultural and linguistic traits of another more dominant culture for some benefits or opportunities. One example of this is the endangerment of the Ainu languages in Japan, spoken by the indigenous people of Japan and which now has only ~10 speakers. Speaking Ainu, they can only communicate with each other, but speaking Japanese, they can be more active members of the community. A culture may also decide overtime to abandon their native tongue for another language due to certain incentives such as political power or better education. One example of this is the language contact of Greenlandic and Danish in Greenland. The native Inuit people of Greenland speak an Eskimo-Aleut language called Greenlandic, which only has ~55,000 native speakers. However, Greenland has become an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark, and so Danish is also used in Greenland for a variety of purposes, and the majority of the Greenlandic people can speak both languages. Naturally, the indigenous Inuit people of Greenland want to preserve the Greenlandic language as much as possible, however, most international affairs as well as certain educational opportunities are only conducted in Danish. According to linguist Lenore Grenoble, The University of Greenland, which is the only university in Greenland, teaches mainly in Greenlandic. However, the university does not teach any natural (hard) sciences, and in order to study them, students must go to Copenhagen, Denmark where they are required to speak Danish. And so increasingly, native Greenlanders are using Danish (rather than Greenlandic) for international affairs and educational opportunities. In this case, the cultural

contact between these people are slowly forcing the native Inuit language out, as Danish (and even English) become more dominant and present more opportunities for the culture.

Another cause of language endangerment similar to cultural hegemony is the purposeful repression of a language, or political repression. This is whenever a nation or nation-state prohibits the uses of a particular language, thus limiting the opportunities for the use of those languages in public usage, such as in schools, the media, etc... Take, for example, the Basque language. Although the usage of Basque is not prohibited today, there was a time when its usage was prohibited. Basque is the ancestral language of the Basque people, who inhabit a region known as Basque Country, which is within the countries of France and Spain. Historically, the Basque people have always been a bit out of place since they are not a part of the Spanish or French groups which currently occupy their region. The origin of the Basque language is even unclear. The Basque people have been pressured by acculturation from the Spanish and French for centuries, and the Basque language came close to extinction in Spain when under the rule of former dictator of Spain Francisco Franco, the Basque language was prohibited. In today's society, the majority of Basque speakers are bilingual in either Spanish or French, and the numbers of native Basque speakers have also diminished, dipping below 800,000 and dropping. More and more Basque people are beginning to speak the language of their country (either Spain or France), due to the benefits that come with speaking that language (better communication with neighboring locations, for example). This again is similar to cultural hegemony, where one culture may (or may not) decide to pick up the linguistic traits of another dominating culture for certain opportunities or benefits. Although Basque is not currently endangered by definition, it has nowhere near the amount of speakers as Spanish or French, and most likely never will.

An interesting case I'd like to mention is Chinese. Traditionally, the Chinese have promoted Mandarin as a standard or official language for the Republic of China. Mandarin has been promoted by people such as the Commission on the Unification of Pronunciation and the government of the Republic of China. This is largely because China is a very vast and diverse place, with many different dialects of Chinese (and other languages) being spoken throughout different regions of the country. Certainly, promoting a single language for conducting business or official government business has its benefits, as it unifies the country in a way. Today, Mandarin has accumulated over 800 million speakers, more than other Chinese dialects. While some dialects of Chinese such as Cantonese continue to thrive (especially in Hong Kong) other dialects of Chinese and other languages are being pushed out or replaced by the popularity of Mandarin overtime. It's not that other languages or dialects in China are deliberately prohibited, but the promoting of one language in one region can indirectly result in the decline of another. And in today's world, as professor Li Lan of dialectology at the Institute of Linguistics under the Chinese academy of Social Sciences points out, "The government has tried to protect minority language by recording them, although the pace has not been fast enough to match the speed of their disappearance." The Tungusic language Manchu, a language spoken in Northeast China, now has less than 70 native speakers. I bring up the case of Chinese because I feel that Chinese is an example where causes of language endangerment can be a mélange of political/governmental intervention and cultural hegemony, and it is not necessarily one or the other.

Cultural hegemony and political repression still occur in societies today, and continue to influence and change language use. Things like war, genocide, or natural disasters, but cultural hegemony and political repression show how cultural, social, economic and political factors are the main force which threatens languages with the threat of endangerment.

Part II: Attitudes of Language Death

Cultural and political factors play a huge role in the endangerment and extinction of languages, but why should we care? What is the problem with one language taking over another, or having a language die out completely? British Linguist David Crystal discusses five reasons why we should care about language endangerment in his book *Language Death*:

1. we need diversity in order to preserve our traditional cultural wealth
2. a language constitutes the primary symbol of ethnic identity
3. languages, written or unwritten, are repositories of history
4. languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge
5. languages are fascinating in themselves

These reasons reflect the attitude of many linguists and anthropologists around the world; it seems important to study, record, and attempt to preserve as many languages as possible. Reason #2 is particularly important here: “language constitutes the primary symbol of ethnic identity.” This is because when a person dies, who is the last speaker of a given language, that language dies with them. Additionally, their culture may also die with them. One example is the Aka-Bo language, an extinct Great Andamanese language. Bo’s last speaker, Boa Sr, died in 2010. When she died, linguist Narayan Choudhary of Jawaharlal Nehru University stated “Her loss is not just the loss of the Great Andamanese community, it is a loss of several disciplines of studies put together, including anthropology, linguistics, history, psychology, and biology.” (Watts, 2010) Another example is Marie Smith, the last speaker of a language called Alaskan Eyak who said “I don’t know why it’s me, why I’m the one. I tell you, it hurts. It really hurts.” (Baker p. 43) This is particularly interesting, because it gives us insight to the attitude held by an actual person who is the last speaker of a language. Native American Cheyenne member Richard

Littlebear (1999), who met with Marie Smith, said “I felt that I was sitting in the presence of a whole universe of knowledge that could be gone in one last breath. That’s how fragile that linguistic universe seemed.” (Baker p. 43) Marie Smith passed away in 2008, and thus so did the Eyak language of Alaska. Clearly from the opinions on both Aka-Bo and Eyak, the death of a language is perceived to be a generally negative phenomenon. This is why linguists, anthropologists, and people who care strongly about the situation take actions to preserve and maintain languages which are endangered or may become endangered over time.

The primary way to save (or attempt to save) an endangered language is to put some sort of language planning (or policies) in place. Chapter 14 of *Language, Culture, and Society* (Fifth Edition) uses the language planning of Swahili in Kenya as an example. According to this chapter, several dozen languages are spoken in Kenya, including English. Both English and Swahili serve as official languages, or languages set in place for practical and political reasons. However, only Swahili is recognized as the national language. This recognition of Swahili as the national language promotes the use of Swahili, and identifies the nation of Kenya, its people, and now its language as part of the same culture. Some hope that in recognizing Swahili as the national tongue, English (or any other language) will have a harder time pushing out Swahili, thus preventing any permanent language shift away from Swahili occurring in Kenya. However, as the book states, “The great variety of languages spoken in Kenya, the use of Swahili as a lingua franca, and also as an important instrument of the country’s detribalization, and the prestige that English still enjoys all indicate that language planning in Kenya will need to continue in the future.”

Language planning means more than just language policies, however. Language planning also means language revitalization for endangered languages, which can also call upon

methods of language shift reversal. Language revitalization simply refers to the deliberate effort to keep a language in use, bring a language back, and prepare the damage of language loss caused by language shift over time. There are many examples of movements encouraging and promoting the usage of a language which may need revitalization or someday face extinction, such as the Celtic languages in Europe (Irish, Welsh) and some Native American languages in North America (Cherokee, Navajo).

These kinds of processes such as language planning, policies, and revitalization all reflect the attitudes people have about language endangerment, and their attempt to save language. This is not the only point of view concerning language endangerment, however. There is also the attitude that if a language is dying, than it deserves to die. This is a more “evolutionist” view, a term borrowed from Darwin’s theories concerning the evolution of biological species. These people recognize that the most spoken languages spread their influence over time, in a “survival of the fittest” manner. A good example of this is the English language. Internationally, English has accumulated the largest influence as a common second or third language. According to the British Council, English currently has around 375 million first language speakers and an estimated 750 million people speaker it as a foreign language. The concept of English as a global lingua franca is not uncommon, in fact some have even tried to standardize it, such as the constructed and standardized version of English called “Globish” by Jean-Paul Nerrière. People who push for a standardized global language may criticize efforts to revitalize languages which are dying. Writer and Broadcaster Kenan Malik says that it is “irrational” to try to preserve all the world’s languages, according to BBC News Magazine. When the Aka-Bo language died out (an extinct language mentioned earlier), Kenan’s response was “In one sense you could call it a cultural loss. But that makes no sense because cultural forms are lost all the time. To say every

cultural form should exist forever is ridiculous.” So while some truly grieve at the loss of languages, others have the attitude that it is a natural process, and that if a language dies it deserved to die, and if a language is spreading, than it deserves to spread and accumulate more speakers over time.

At the end of the day, we must come to terms with the fact that we live in an ever globalizing world that is becoming dependent upon better and faster means of mutual communication. The causes of language endangerment and extinction such as cultural hegemony and political repression clearly show that the influence of languages can be strong, and language spread is usually an inevitable process which threatens the lives of thousands of languages. Attitudes about language death vary, as some believe we should revitalize and preserve languages while we still can, and other believes that we should let weaker and smaller languages die out. In any case, David Crystal is right when he claims that languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge, and so ideas like language documentation may be the least we can do for dying languages. However, this does not substitute for the death of languages and cultures, for as we know, languages represent the ethnic identity of the speakers of those languages, and sometimes when a language dies, a culture dies as well. Ultimately, whether it’s fortunate or unfortunate, examining the causes and attitudes of language death gives us insight to how a culture is related to language, and how language is connected to culture.

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