

VANISHING VOICES: A POTENT THREAT TO GLOBAL LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Abstract

Language death and cultural disappearance are two sides of the same coin which are faced with the same irresistible forces of human migration and homogenisation of world civilisation. Language is endangered when its speakers cease to speak it or use it in selected domains. The paper identifies: attitudes, cataclysms, conflicts, education etc as responsible for this ugly linguistic scenario and establishes pedestals: roles of family (speaking), government (advocacy), linguists (documentation) as well as NGOs (sensitization). Language does not die alone rather it dies along with its

core values: unique sounds, names of animal and plant in the said speech community, unique forms of expression, traditional medicines and herbs, cultural heritage etc are swept away without trace! The paper concludes that many factors are responsible for language death and these could be internal and external. However, putative measures are suggested to halt this ugly linguistic trend.

Key words: language, endangered, culture, globalisation and attitude.

Introduction

“Every language has equal weight for the people who speak it and equal pan-human value as a cultural asset” (Osashito, 2004). In the study of language, the thin line of demarcation between language and dialect has not been clearly separated due to the fact that some languages have high degree of mutual intelligibility and comprehensibility but answer different names while others with little or no iota of mutual intelligibility answer one name. Despite this linguistic scenario, sociolinguists have come out with a purported figure of over 6000 languages across the globe. These languages are disappearing into a mysterious dungeon just like animal species in the jungle. Today, some factors can easily be identified as the bane of this phenomenon and they can be fingered as natural disasters e.g. cataclysms, and human activities e.g. war, migration, socio-economic and political activities which force people to leave for occupied

territories and as they settled, their languages give way to the ones in the new locale and in recent time, the advent of modern science and technology has hampered the successful thriving of our languages as the world become integrated in common languages, the world lingua francas – English, Arabic Chinese among others.

The world linguistic experts are in pains as languages are slipping out of their hands by the forces of modern world just like a veteran doctor watching his patient dying and he has little or no power to save him. Language is the carrier of people's tradition, culture and identity but the incursion of languages of majority speakers on the minority ones has threatened the survival of the world's races, ethnicity, customs, civilisation and our distinct ways of life. Greenberg, (2004) is of view that the majority of the world's 6,000 distinct languages are spoken by 10,000 people or less. Within the next 100 years these languages, together with their unique cultural identities associated with them, will go out of existence (Harrison and Whalen, 2000).

The Global Endangered Languages

Harrison and Whalen, (2000:6) say, “As the second millennium comes to a close, more than 6,000 distinct human languages are in use worldwide...by the year 2100, only half of these languages will still be spoken - a loss of one language in every 12

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years". Why are languages disappearing? The most fundamental reason is increased contact among formerly isolated human societies. Languages need isolation to develop and to maintain their distinctive characteristics. When isolation ends, local languages tend to disappear along with traditional ways of life. Ostler, (2000:5) posits that:

We face two alternative scenarios for the future. In one, the world is increasingly homogenised as minority cultures and their languages are swept away in the on-coming tide of standardisation. The accumulated knowledge of the millennia disappears, leaving the world a poorer place. In the other scenario, minorities keep their cultural integrity, and minor languages continue to exist alongside larger ones. Which scenario comes to pass depends to a large extent on our actions now.

Many indigenous peoples and linguists are working to halt this trend, which threatens to diminish the world's cultural and linguistic heritage. Much of a society's history and culture is contained in its language. To lose an ancestral language is to weaken the links to the ancestors themselves. As languages disappear, a wealth of culture, art, and knowledge disappears with them. The world's many languages also offer anthropologists and historians a unique resource for studying how humans spread across the earth. Much of what is known about the historical movement of human beings comes from the study of languages that were spoken by ancient peoples of the earth.

Evaluating Language Endangerment

The precise number of endangered languages worldwide is difficult to ascertain, largely because the distinction between separate languages and *dialects* is not always clear. A dialect is a version of a language that differs in pronunciation, grammar, and/or vocabulary. Determining whether the speech of a group of people is a dialect of a language, or has changed enough to be considered a distinct language, is a matter of "convention" as much as "linguistics".

Dialects of English, for example, may vary slightly in "pronunciation", as with the difference

between speech in New York City and Boston, Massachusetts. Or dialects may differ radically with faint intelligibility, as between speakers in the Scottish Highlands and those in the mountains of Appalachia in the United States. The latter dialects may be as different as Spanish and Portuguese. However, convention holds that the far-flung English dialects are parts of a single language despite the fact that there is a "poor" or "lack of comprehensibility" among them, while Spanish, German and Portuguese are separate languages despite the high level of mutual intelligibility and comprehensibility among them.

Linguists have yet to acquire good descriptions of the dialects of most languages. Even if this information were available, it would be impossible to draw a clear line between all languages and their dialects. Sociopolitical factors inevitably play a role. German and Dutch, for example, are national languages, but some Low German dialects of northern Germany are mutually intelligible with some dialects of Dutch. On the other hand, Chinese is often characterised as a single language even though it encompasses many dialects that are "mutually unintelligible" and are as different as English, Spanish, and French (Greenberg, 2007).

Still, linguists generally agree that the world's 6 billion people currently use more than 6,000 languages. The distribution of these languages around the world is surprisingly uneven. About half of the total world population speaks one of ten languages: Mandarin Chinese has 836 million speakers; Hindi, 333 million; Spanish, 332 million; English, 322 million; Bengali, 189 million; Arabic, 186 million; Russian, 170 million; Portuguese, 170 million; Japanese, 125 million; and German, 98 million. The people who speak these languages occupy a great deal of the earth's livable surface. Most languages, however, are spoken by 10,000 or fewer people.

The greatest linguistic diversity is found in regions that sustain large populations, but where geographic features help keep groups of people apart. In the area of greatest linguistic variation, the island of Papua New Guinea, towering mountains and dense jungles create isolated pockets of various tribes, with about 1,000 distinct languages spoken by 4.6 million people. The islands of Vanuatu in the Pacific Ocean are home to about 200,000 people,

and the Vanuatians speak 109 different languages.

In the northeast African country of Chad, which stretches into the Sahara, 127 languages are spoken by the nation's 7.4 million inhabitants. Much of Chad's desert population is divided into small nomadic and semi-nomadic groups scattered across a vast, remote area. Experts believe that many of these groups have retained their linguistic and cultural diversity because of their relative isolation: They have remained largely untouched by the nation's political system, state-sponsored education, and mass communications. According to Greenberg (2007) Linguists divide languages into three categories by status: "healthy", "endangered", and "extinct". A healthy language is one that is currently being learned by children as a first language, spoken at home, used as medium of instruction in formal education, used as debating tool in state and national assemblies. Healthy languages are generally used in all walks of life - at work, in private and public settings.

Languages that are endangered are further divided into various levels of endangerment. In the first level of endangerment, in which a language is still considered healthy, the percentage of children who speak the language typically falls below the percentage for adults. If parents stop or are forced to stop teaching their children their native tongue, for whatever reason the language may rapidly become severely endangered, the next level of endangerment. A sudden shift toward severe endangerment has occurred with many Native American languages and with European languages such as Breton in northwestern France and 70% of languages in Nigeria for instance, Bura/Babur, Tera, Jara, Chibok, Kanahuru in Borno State and Buh, Numana, Akye, Nyankpa/Yeskwa, Kulere in Nasarawa State are typical (Usman, 2014).

Greenberg, (2007:6) says, "The most endangered languages are called *moribund*. A moribund language still has native speakers, but it is not being learned by children; often just a few elderly speakers remain". Usman, (2014:61) says, "Adamawa's Holma language has 4 aged speakers, as of 1987, Bubbure in Bauchi State has only 1 speaker at present, Fali language in Taraba State is extinct". Reviving a moribund language may require extraordinary efforts, including documentation, analysis, and intensive language

instruction. Languages now classified as moribund include the aboriginal *Nyulnyul* language in Australia, the Native American Osage language in the United States, and the Finnic tongue of Livonian in Latvia. Greenberg, (2007) orates that, "There are probably about 400 moribund languages worldwide".

These dying languages may be useful for communicating with older generations. However, they generally lack the widespread usage needed to justify the effort to learn them. Children are efficient language learners, but they also learn quickly which language tools get them ahead and which do not. They will not learn a language simply because their parents or grandparents wish them to; they learn a language to use it. In fact, language is primarily meant to be spoken.

An extinct, or dead, language is one with no living native speakers. Dead languages include the "Sumerian language", used by people(s) of the kingdom of Sumer in Mesopotamia, and Oscan, a language of ancient Italy. Sometimes a dead language can be brought back to life. Hebrew, an old Semitic language that died out in the 2nd century BC, was revived as a vernacular tongue in the 19th and 20th centuries; it now serves as one of Israel's two official languages. The modern language is based in part on the ancient texts of the Jewish Bible (or Old Testament), a collection of documents written largely in biblical Hebrew. The vast majority of languages do not have a written form, however, making this type of resurrection impossible should the language die out.

What Is Being Vanished?

Usman, (2014:15) says:

Small languages, more than large ones, provide keys to unlock the secrets of nature, because their speakers tend to live in proximity to animals and plants around them, and their talk reflects the distinctions they observe. When small communities abandon their languages... there is a massive disruption in the transfer of traditional knowledge across generations- about medical plants, food cultivation, irrigation techniques, navigation systems and seasonal calendars.

The death of a language is likely to be felt most acutely by the people for whom the language is ancestral, but the loss has profound implications for the larger world as well. For an indigenous people, the death of a native tongue can be experienced as a “crushing loss of cultural identity”, because language is one of the most obvious means of expressing one's association with the group. In addition, oral histories passed on in a certain language provide the foundation for the unique worldview of a people, and losing the language usually means losing the worldview as well. Entire histories may be lost when oral traditions die. The sounds, rhythms, and poetry that made the language unique may be gone forever!

From a larger perspective, the loss of a language is incremental, much as with the disappearance of an animal species. Will humanity be able to carry on with one language fewer? Surely so, but the world's cultural diversity will be diminished and made less rich. If languages are windows to the mind, then there is one less pane to look through.

Important clues to human history are buried in languages. The origin and dispersal of modern humans is a hotly debated topic among anthropologists. Some of the most interesting data in this debate come from reconstructing the family tree of languages scattered across the world. The relationships among languages are still poorly understood, but they have yielded key insights into language evolution and early human migration. For example, they suggest that human language began about 100,000 years ago with a single language. This theory is called *monogenesis*. Many linguists believe the first language developed in East Africa and gradually spread northward to Asia and then to other parts of the world. As humans migrated, this language began diverging into a wide variety of distinct languages. By constructing a family tree of languages, scientists can shed light on the historical movement of peoples. However, many important relationships among migrating human populations may never be known because key languages and cultures have disappeared.

Rymer, (2014) says, “Valuable knowledge about the natural environment is often captured in local languages”. Scientists looking for medicinal plants have learned that the native names for various species can be helpful in determining which plants

might yield useful substances. For example, the Khanty, a semi-nomadic people living near the Ural Mountains in western Siberia, know the names and medicinal purposes of many species of mushrooms and tree fungi that grow only in this region. The Khanty have shared some of this knowledge with scientists, and the mushrooms have yielded useful medicines.

Ideas and attitudes are expressed differently in different languages, and the act of borrowing from one language to another helps people develop new ways of looking at the world. In the Siberian language of Tuvan, for example, snakes are called “ground fish,” suggesting that snakes are similar to fish but do not live in water. Similarly, Alago euphemistically called snake “ground rope” so no such connection is made in the English language. In another example from Tuvan, a 14-year old person is not described as 14 years old, as in English, but as “fifteening.” This expression, which may strike English speakers as strange, turns a number into a verb to refer to the next age a person will be.

Languages differ in the sounds they use, and some sounds are spoken in very few languages. The Khoisan languages of southern Africa, for example, appear to be the only languages that use *clicks* as everyday speech sounds. In English, such sounds are used for showing disapproval-the *tsk tsk* sound-but they are not a part of the language. This unique form of speech could disappear forever if the few existing languages that use clicks vanish.

Perhaps the most important loss that occurs as languages die is the native right to choose which language to speak. Some groups of people may decide they want to use a majority language to better their circumstances. However, many groups do not have this choice; they are forced to speak a majority language because their original languages are rapidly dying off or becoming moribund. For this reason, linguists, anthropologist Non-Governmental Organisations e.g. (UNESCO) are advised to preserve endangered languages.

Why Languages Phase out?

Osashito, (2004) says: “When a distinct culture that has been functioning as an organic whole loses the language in which the whole culture is infused, either it has already stopped functioning or the probability of its total collapse is high. In that sense,

we can say that language is the last bastion of culture". Languages have disappeared throughout history, but the scale of language death in modern times is unprecedented. Linguists estimate that about half of the world's languages died out in the 500-year period from 1490 to 1990. A variety of factors contributed to this trend of language extinction.

Historically, the main cause of language extinction has been the movement of people from one region to another. Humans have always migrated, seeking more favorable lands or fleeing adverse conditions, and they often move into territories already occupied. In some cases, as in India, distinct linguistic and cultural groups coexist for centuries. More typically, the dominant group displaces the weaker one, either by making the people move, by forcing them to use the new language, or by killing them off. For instance, in Northern Nigeria since 2007 till date when insurgency started by militia group called *Boko Haram*, many have left their speech communities and have been staying in camps without a unified language of communication. The languages of the affected speech communities die off and their children born in camps pick up pidgin as their mother tongue.

In Western Europe, for example, all languages are related with the exception of Basque, which is spoken in north central Spain and southwestern France. Linguists believe Basque is the last of many languages that once existed across Europe and were forced out by the arrival of Indo-Europeans beginning about 2000 BC. Indo-European languages adopted few Basque words, if any, suggesting that the groups did not peacefully coexist for any length of time.

Government policies have also contributed to the decline or death of many minority languages by restricting their use. For example, the United States in the 19th and early 20th centuries often took children away from their Native American parents and sent them to boarding schools, where they were forced to learn English. Children from different tribes were typically grouped together so English would be their only common language. Only about half of the 300 indigenous languages spoken in North America when the Europeans first arrived are still in use. In Nigeria the story is the same or

even worse as government has prioritized English and that has displaced all indigenous languages in private and public domains except Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba which are striving to survive the scourge. Australia enacted similar policies to assimilate Aboriginal peoples. In the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), many indigenous populations across the nation's vast expanse were subjected to Russification Programmes during the 1940s and 1950s. These programmes sought to teach children the Russian language and Russian cultural norms at the expense of their native languages and identities.

Efforts to limit language diversity are still common in some parts of the world. For example, the southeastern African nation of Tanzania encourages people to abandon their local languages for Swahili, which is widely spoken and officially sanctioned. This policy, like others in place in East Africa, is designed to encourage a sense of national identity in an ethnically and culturally diverse country.

Even nations that do not actively seek to hasten the demise of local languages typically implement a range of policies that encourage language uniformity. All nations, for example, limit the number of languages that may be used in official proceedings. In India, where more than 350 languages are spoken, only 2 are nationally sanctioned: English and Hindi. Only a few hundred languages receive official recognition around the world.

One reason most nations officially sanction just one or two languages is cost. It is simply less expensive to raise armies, collect taxes, and provide basic social services using a few languages, rather than many. Even when the will to preserve minority languages is present, the cost of providing government services or educational materials in multiple languages can be significant.

The extended reach of mass media, such as satellite television beamed to the most remote corners of the globe, encourages the spread of a few chosen languages. The Internet offers people around the world information and entertainment, but most materials are available only in the most common languages. Minority language communities must therefore adopt the language of the majority to learn about the world.

Perhaps the most important cause of language extinction is the decision of native speakers to shift to a majority language because it offers more prestige and economic opportunities. Immigrants in the United States are often proud of their ability to speak English and even prouder of their children's native command of the language. Seeking a better life, some Native Americans in Latin America are discarding their local tongues for Spanish, and indigenous peoples of Africa are adopting French, English, or Swahili.

Halting the Deterioration

Over the last 30 years of the 20th century, awareness of the linguistic and cultural roots of minority peoples increased remarkably. Grassroots organisations dedicated to preserving indigenous languages arose around the globe, and many governments came to recognise the problems faced by minority language communities. Much of this concern is tied to human rights; language is often recognised as a component of those rights. In 1996 language-rights specialists and organisations from around the world signed a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights in Barcelona, Spain. These individuals and groups are currently working to ensure that the declaration wins adoption as an international convention of the United Nations (UN).

Despite this growing awareness, the responses to language loss are varied. In some cases, endangered languages are aggressively protected. In Wales, for example, Welsh language groups have saved the once-endangered tongue from extinction. Welsh is now used in some schools for instruction, and radio and television broadcasts in the language are common. In other cases, however, indigenous languages slip away without a trace.

The reassertion of ethnic or cultural pride is often an important part of the effort to restore dying languages. The political struggle in Northern Ireland offers a case in point. The number of Irish speakers steadily declined after England conquered Ireland in the 16th century. Under English rule, use of the Irish language was portrayed as a sign of backwardness. But when violence between Protestants and Catholics erupted in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, the language became a symbol of Irish cultural identity. The Irish language

has since won a growing following in parts of Ireland as well as among some Irish groups in the United States. In 1998 the first all-Irish-speaking television station, Teilifis na Gaeilge (TnaG), was established in Ireland.

In a similar fashion, the native Maori language of New Zealand has come back from near extinction. Efforts to breathe life into the Maori language were part of a larger movement that began in the 1920s among native Maori to reclaim ancestral lands, revive traditional music and dance, gain political rights, and end discrimination. In 1987 New Zealand recognized Maori, along with English, as an official tongue.

Groups promoting minority languages often devote their efforts to increasing the use of the language in public spaces. These efforts usually focus on education, since educating children in the native language, at least in the early grades is an important factor in maintaining the language. A notable achievement occurred in 1999, when a group of Hawaiian students graduated from high school after receiving their education entirely in Hawaiian. The students were among the first to participate in the Hawaiian language immersion programme, which began with just 28 children in 1987 and now includes about 1,600 students in 16 public schools. These types of programmes require the creation of native-language curriculum materials and improved dictionaries to enable fuller discussion of non-native texts in the native language.

The availability of texts and other historical sources is essential for groups that wish to revive a dead language. When sufficient written materials exist, as they did in the case of Hebrew, the language can be "reconstructed". The restored language will not be identical to the original, but it can provide a satisfying approximation that is eventually learned by children. Using such sources, several Native American groups are working toward language restoration, including the Mohegan and Pequot in Connecticut and the Wampanoag in Massachusetts.

In many cases, however, little or no language material is recorded in any form. Linguists have therefore mounted a major effort to record languages, in written and spoken forms, all over the world. These records may be of immense value to

the preservation of a native community's culture and history, even if the current generation does not achieve fluency in the language.

“Many tools are used to record a language. A linguist's most basic tools are special phonetic symbols, used to write the sounds of a language, and audio recordings” (Usman, 2006). Video recordings can capture additional information about how speakers talk, including the importance of gestures, or the way they interact. Sometimes linguists want to learn about the mechanics of speech, such as the amount of air pressure a Khoisan-language speaker uses to produce “a click sound”. This information can be captured with a tiny air tube inserted into the mouth of a native speaker. Miniature video cameras are also used to study the activity of the vocal chords. All of these modern technologies enable researchers to preserve the otherwise fleeting sounds of spoken language.

The best way to preserve an endangered language is to keep it alive by “speaking it” and a variety of innovative teaching efforts are underway to do just that. For example, the Master-Apprentice Programme, pioneered in 1993 by linguist Leanne Hinton of the University of California at Berkeley, pairs a younger member of a group with an older speaker for one-on-one language training. By focusing on a single student, the teacher can make the learning faster, surer, and more permanent. The programme's goal is that the younger person becomes a fluent speaker who can train other members of the community and bring the language back into use. Approximately 60 masters and apprentices participated in the programme during the first three years of its existence, according to Hinton. Participants included speakers of 20 Native American Languages in California, including Hupa, Karuk, and Mojave.

A wide range of national and international groups are working to halt language extinction. These groups include; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) the United Kingdom's Foundation for Endangered Languages; the international group Terralingua; Germany's Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen; and the U.S.-based Institute for the Preservation of the Original Languages of the Americas (IPOLA), the Native American Language Institute (NALI), and the Endangered Language Fund. Although these

groups differ in various ways, all of them share the ultimate goal of preserving the diversity of human language.

Cul-de-sac of Linguistic Diversity?

Prior to the 20th century, many languages with small numbers of speakers survived for centuries. The increasingly interconnected modern world - *globalisation* makes it much more difficult for small language communities to live in relative isolation, a key factor in language maintenance and preservation. It remains to be seen whether the world can maintain its linguistic and cultural diversity in the millennium ahead. Many powerful forces appear to work against it: population growth, which pushes migrant populations into the world's last isolated locales; mass tourism; global telecommunications and mass media; and the spread of gigantic global corporations. All of these forces appear to foreshadow a future in which the language of advertising, popular culture, and consumer products converge. Already English and a few other major tongues have emerged as global languages of commerce and communication. For many of the world's peoples, learning one of these languages is viewed as the key to education, economic opportunity, and a better way of life.

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in for centuries, including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also countless others. For speaker communities, languages are the creations and the vectors of tradition. They support cultural identity and are an essential part of a community heritage (UNESCO (FAQ on Endangered Languages))

Only about 3,000 languages now in use are expected to survive the coming century. Are most of the rest doomed in the century after that? Whether most of these languages survive will probably depend on how strongly cultural groups wish to

keep their identity alive through a native language. To do so will require an emphasis on *bilingualism* (mastery of two languages). Bilingual speakers could use their own language in smaller spheres-at home, among friends, in community settings-and a global language at work, in dealings with government, and in commercial spheres. In this way, many small languages could sustain their cultural and linguistic integrity alongside global languages, rather than yield to the homogenising forces of globalisation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Usman, (2014:71-2) affirms steps to take in halting the decline of our vanishing voices and cultural disappearance thus:

1. Role of the Family: parents must transfer languages intergenerationally to their younger ones. This is the first and the most important spring of socialisation because any language that a child is first introduced to becomes his instrument of thought and for the analysis of his world view.
2. The Role of Community and Special Schools: community leaders and language experts must make a concerted effort to design and implement language programmes where children are taught their languages particularly at pre-primary and primary school levels.
3. **The Role of Language Experts:** is to document our endangered languages as a sure way to revitalise them. For instance, Greek and Latin were revived through documentation by language experts.
4. **The Role of Public-Policy Makers:** government kills and preserves languages by its

policies and programmes. If government policies and programmes are designed to favour particular languages as media of instruction in schools and government functionaries for instance; Hausa and Swahili in Africa, Arabic in United Arab Emirates, English in United States of America, Australia and the entire Europe, Chinese in Asia etc among over 6,000 languages of minority speakers that are threatened by extinction is seen as a deliberate effort by the government to wipe them across the globe.

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