

## **ENDANGERED & EXTINCT LANGUAGES**

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### ***Abstract***

*This research paper looks into the various aspects and factors that surround the phenomenon of endangerment and subsequent extinction of a language. The paper also encapsulates the importance of preserving and reviving such languages in order to tap into the incomprehensibly large potential of knowledge that these languages and cultures hold in them.*

***Key words:***

HIGHER EDUCATION &  
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### **Introduction**

An extinct language is a tongue or dialect which has no fluent speakers in the present world. In some cases, extinct languages are contrasted to some extent with dead languages. These languages, unlike extinct languages, are still known as fundamental dialects or tongues and are also used in written form in case of special contexts. The similarity between dead languages and extinct languages only stems from the fact that the languages falling into both these categories are not used by anyone in terms of everyday oral or written communication.

On the other hand, an endangered language is a particular native or indigenous tongue which is on the verge of extinction. Endangerment of a language points to the fact that the number of fluent speakers of the language are decreasing at a steady and threateningly fast pace, which could eventually lead to the language becoming extinct or “dead”.

Language is an aspect by which the identity of a population can be formulated and understood, the extinction of which could have severe consequences for the speakers of that language. According to Hoffman (3), out of the 7,000 languages that make up the approximate number of languages prevalent in today's world, it is estimated that nearly half of these would completely disappear by the end of this century. This fact has serious implications to both the indigenous community that uses the native tongue and the academic community, which is stripped of the essential knowledge of linguistics and dialects that these languages can offer in the form of research or study. The extinction or loss of a language could also result in the subsequent loss of a precious reservoir of cultural integrity that has been passed on through the generations in the form of oral traditions, songs, poetry and several other types of indigenous art forms.

This sense of loss of identity and indigenous culture can bear severe consequences for both the speakers of the language as well as the individuals who are seeking to uncover its hidden potential through academic research. This becomes the sole reason to ensure that the integrity of indigenous languages are maintained and that further endangerment of existing languages are prevented to a large extent. To understand how to preserve a language, the first step is to understand the way by which languages become endangered and consequently disappear.

### **Causes of Endangerment and Subsequent Extinction of a Language**

There have been several cases where the native languages of a region eventually fall out of use and are replaced by a more widely spoken and well-known language or dialect in place of the

indigenous language that thrived in the region in the past. These cases have been documented in nations as well, the biggest example being the rise of the English language in the U.S. or the prevalence of Spanish in Mexico. According to Woodbury (2), a major reason behind the cause of endangerment and subsequent extinction of a language is that the language is not being the new generations of children, nor by new adult speakers, the result of which can be the total extinction of the language in the not so distant future. According to Krauss (6), almost 50 percent of the languages that are prevalent in the world today, are not being learned by the new generation, a direct consequence of which can point to the extinction of nearly 3,000 to 6,000 languages by the next century. There have been dozens of cases which involve only a single survivor who is a fluent speaker of a particular language or tongue. The death of this sole torch bearer of the language will irreparably cause the loss of the language, leaving behind no legacy and cultural remnant of the language itself.

There have been numerous cases that have been attributed to the endangerment and subsequent extinction of a language. One of the major causes of subsequent loss of a language is attributed to the physical loss of speakers of that particular language. This can be in the form of genocide, natural disasters and other related causes. A classic example of this would be in the form of the genocide of Tasmanians in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by European invaders. This wide scale extermination resulted in the loss of a variety of languages. Another example is seen in the disappearance of a number of languages which were indigenous to the Arawak people of the Caribbean, as highlighted by Crawford (22). These languages were completely lost after about a generation since the first contact that the people had with Christopher Columbus.

However, a more common cause of the loss of a language can be attributed to the pressure which an indigenous community feels in order to integrate itself into a more powerful and superior group. When this happens, the people of the smaller indigenous group usually learn the tongue of their superiors to facilitate convenience, a direct result of which is the subsequent extinction of the language. This was especially seen in Greenland, in Denmark, where Kalaallisut was eventually replaced by Danish. Sometimes the oppressors of indigenous populations forbid the speaking of the indigenous tongue in order to facilitate the spread of their own language among the suppressed community. A classic example of this would be the case of Native American speakers who were punished for uttering their native tongue in boarding schools till as recently as the 1960s. Other factors responsible for the extinction of languages include the effects that mainstream media has in terms of homogenizing by portrayal of a dominant language television, print media and radio, the major dominant language in today's media being English. According to Nettle and Romaine (39), the language that constituted 70 percent of the world's mail and 60 percent of television and radio broadcasts was English, as estimated in the year 1966.

### **Preservation of Endangered Languages**

There cannot be a single factor which can be attributed to the preservation of a particular indigenous endangered language. Instead, there has to be diverse array of factors working together in unison in order to ensure that a particular language can be saved from

“death”. There have been some well documented cases of languages being “brought back to life” through the efforts of the local community as well as the support from outside forces. The most stunning example of this can be seen in the case of the revival of Modern Hebrew, which was given back its status of a mother-tongue after centuries of it being learned only in its written ancient form. In New Zealand, there are specialized nursery schools established by the Moari community in their villages, which are known as “kohanga reo”, which roughly translates to “language nests”. These nursery schools have one thing in common i.e. the native language of the Maori community. All the educational facilities offered at these schools are conducted in the native language of the community in order to ensure that the people understand the importance of their mother-tongue and strive to preserve the inherent culture of their community through the language.

According to Woodbury (1), due to the increasing risk related to the seemingly apparent loss of languages in the modern world, linguists are making a conscious effort in order to ensure that languages facing the threat of extinction are preserved. A vital and important aspect related to prevention of language endangerment and extinction is to ensure that the knowledge and inherent culture that the language has passed on through the generations is preserved and documented. To ensure the same, linguists are trying to gain as much knowledge as they can from a particular language so as to ensure that all the knowledge of the language does not disappear even though the language may get extinct at some point of time.

Linguists also work with indigenous communities and minorities and provide them valuable support in the form of technical and practical knowledge in relation to various aspects that deal with maintenance, teaching and revival of the native language. Linguists can further use their extensive knowledge of several other endangered languages and utilize that knowledge in order to ensure that the native language of a community is preserved. They can further use latest technological advancements in order to ensure that the language is properly documented through use of both audio and visual recordings and samples, along with written records.

Hoffman (18), stresses on the fact that one of the most important steps to ensure the preservation of a language is the general empowerment of the community or speakers and the language itself. By elevating the prestige or value of a particular language, linguists can promote a sense of pride among the speakers of the language as a whole. If a community looks at their language from a more positive perspective, they would actively strive to ensure that its values and inherent cultural traits are preserved.

## **Examples**

### **The Lenape Community and Languages**

The Lenape Indians were an indigenous community which inhabited the Delaware River Valley region, which is present day New Jersey. Owing to the region, they are also known as the Delaware Indians. These small communities thrived in the region during the seventeenth century. They were mostly disintegrated and not associated with each other, resulting in the

absence of a cohesive community. The major reasons for the loss of the inherent culture of the communities were their displacement from the region due to various factors. They were driven off their lands during the American Revolution.

The Lenape Indians had two basic languages that were inherent to their community- Unami and Munsee. Both these languages belonged to the Eastern Algonquian language family. Munsee is an endangered language, with a handful of speakers in the form of Lenape Indians who have settled in Canada. On the other hand, Unami is now officially an extinct language, with virtually no living speakers today.

Although there are no fluent speakers of the language today, there have been numerous efforts aimed towards reviving the Unami language. The efforts are to ensure that the language is revived and preserved among the local population of Lenape Indians residing in Oklahoma and Pennsylvania. The various ways by which the language is trying to be revived include facilitating language classes and ensuring development of teaching material for the same through extensive research and study of the scarce documentation that is available in terms of the language. A full-fledged university level course has also been started in the language at Swarthmore College, which ensures better awareness about the language among the general public.

### **/Xam Language of the hunters-gatherer communities of South Africa**

/Xam, commonly referred to as San, was a Southern Khoisan language which was indigenous to some of the hunter-gatherer communities inhabiting Southern Africa. The language has become extinct now, with no remaining speakers of the same existing today. The extinction of this language occurred through one of the cruellest genocides in the history of Africa. These events also led to the complete loss of the identity of the people and also resulted in the loss of their inherent heritage.

According to Brenzinger and de Graaf (8) the eradication of the San community started off as a small scale resistance that was launched by the San in answer to the invasion of their region by colonialists, known as "trekboers". In response to this invasion, the colonialists decided to pummel the San communities with the help of commandos. The hunter-gatherer communities were no match to the colonial armed forces and could not defend themselves against such a powerful and overwhelming military attack. These attacks were started in the 1750s and resulted in the extermination of a large part of the San community. The colonialists never even thought of the prospect of taking prisoners as they thought it would be of no use to them, economically. During the 1870s, it was clear that the colonialists had a different view of the resistance. Instead of quelling the uprising, they resorted to completely eradicate the San communities by the use of brute force. The last remnants of the community were hunted down by the usurpers of the Bushmanland, namely the Boer and the "Bastaard" mercenaries.

### **Conclusion**

The importance of the native tongue of a community and the cultural reservoirs of knowledge that these languages hold, cannot be underestimated at any point of time. Only when the people

are reminded of the vast wealth of knowledge that exists in these indigenous languages can they make a conscious effort in preserving their mother-tongue. Linguists have to work towards ensuring that the immense knowledge and traditions related to the indigenous languages are not lost. After all, a mother-tongue is representative of the identity of a community and defines every aspect of its societal workings.

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