

## **REVITALIZING LANGUAGE DIVERSITY: ITS VITALITY AND ENDANGERMENT**

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### **Abstract**

*A language is in danger of extinction when it is on the path towards extinction. A language is in danger of extinction when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly drenched number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, either adults or children. Language diversity is vital to the human heritage. Every language exemplifies the distinct cultural wisdom of a group of people. The death of any language is thus the death for all humanity. Although approximately 6,000 languages still exist, many are undergoing threat. Therefore, there is a prior need for language documentation, new initiatives and new materials, which are reciprocal and collaborative to enrich the vivacity of these languages. The obliging efforts of language communities, language professionals, NGOs and governments are very much indispensable in countering this threat. There is a vital need to build patronage for language communities in their efforts to establish meaningful new roles for their endangered languages. The paper will focus towards the documentation, maintenance and revitalization of these languages. The factors outlined in the paper identify imperative needs. In most cases, immediate attention is required in the following regions: language documentation; scholastic materials; the training of local linguists; the training of language teachers; new policy plans; public awareness-hovering; technical, logistical and financial support, etc.*

**Key Words: Revitalizing, diversity, endangerment, vitality, training...**

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### 1. The Endangerment of Languages:

#### 1.1. The development of linguistic diversity

**L**inguistic diversity in the world is governed by counteracting forces. Separation of speech communities leads to split of languages. Intense contact or even merger and various kinds of oppression of speech communities lead to loss of languages. If one assumes monogenesis of human language, then the number of languages must have increased in prehistoric times over the millennia. This means that diversifying forces predominated over reductive forces for a long time. The number of languages in the world probably reached its climax in the fifteenth century AD, i.e. before European colonization of Africa, America and Australia set in. Since then, the forces that extinguish languages have carried the day. Hundreds of languages have died out, and the process has been accelerating dramatically in the second half of our century, i.e. essentially during our lifetime. At present, there are over 6,000 languages still spoken in the world. It has been estimated (Hale et al. 1992) that only 10% of them will survive the next century. Currently, an estimated dozen dies out every year.

The issue of whether this is a desirable or a regrettable process for humanity will briefly be taken up in §3.3. Here I will just say that I think it is pernicious because it is necessarily bound up with a reduction of cultural diversity and a loss of sources of intellectual inspiration. This entails that forces striving for language maintenance merit our support in principle. However, every case has to be considered on its own, and no general rule is applicable. Whether or not one thinks that linguistic diversity should be saved, it is beyond dispute that it is one of the genuine tasks of the science of linguistics to document and describe the languages of the world. Linguistics has to do this for various reasons. First, the task is included in the public mandate to linguistics. Although a society

seldom formulates explicit mandates for sciences, it is clear that documentation and description of languages is one of the things that the general public expects linguists to do. In the case of endangered languages in particular, it is a service to the surviving members of a speech community who want to find out about their own roots. Second, documentation and description of languages provides the empirical basis for general linguistics. If we don't do this, linguistic theories of the future will be contingent on the properties of the languages which happen to be extant at that time to an even higher extent than this has been the case up to now.

### **1.2. Criteria of endangerment**

If a linguist chooses a language as the object of his descriptive work, the decisive criterion in recent years has seldom been the urgency to do this because the language was threatened by extinction. This criterion is gaining in importance insofar as the rate of extinction exceeds the rate of completed descriptions. Unfortunately, the endangerment of a language is not easily measured by objective criteria. The most important factor is probably the situation of the language in the social community. If the language competes with another one which ousts it from public usage and pushes it into the corner of intimacy, so that its range of use gets restricted, this is a first signal of alarm. Important clues to viability of a language include its use for school education, for written communication and in the media. A related aspect of the social situation of the language is the attitude that its speakers take towards it and competing languages. The situation becomes dramatic at the point where the language is no longer acquired by children. Then it is certain to die out with the death of its current speakers. Again, the sheer number of speakers, which is often used as an indicator of viability, is of secondary importance. Even a large speech community may shift its language within a few generations if they consider it to be socially inferior.

### **2. The documentary situation:**

There is no reliable estimate of the number of languages that have received linguistic description. An educated guess would seem to be that half of the world's languages are only known by their name. Of the other half, around a thousand may be

represented by descriptions that comprise at least a grammar. Over the past decades, the sheer number of descriptions of small languages published per year has increased as well as their comprehensiveness and quality. Insofar, descriptive linguistics has no reason to complain of current trends. However, there is no reason to lean back either. Most available descriptions still fall short of the requirements of comprehensiveness, intelligibility and adequacy. The requirement of comprehensiveness needs to be explained. Suppose an object of study is structured hierarchically in such a way that it breaks down into a small number of areas, each of which in turn breaks down into a small number of subareas, and so on, so that a finer degree of detail is reached at each lower level. In some cases, e.g. in the lexicon, the lowest level may consist of a large inventory of items which cannot, in principle, ever be enumerated, let alone described exhaustively.

Comprehensiveness in the description of such an object cannot mean that each and every minute detail is represented. For one thing, this is humanly impossible; for another, it may be scientifically uninteresting. What comprehensiveness does mean is that each of the major areas at the highest hierarchical levels is considered. Practically none of the available descriptions accounts for all of the major aspects of a language. Traditional and structuralist grammars are often confined to the phonology and morphology. On the other hand, modern grammars seldom boil down to syntax. Many grammars are not accompanied by a dictionary; but there are also quite a few isolated dictionaries. More than half of the available descriptions do not give a single text of the language that would illustrate the grammar and give a vivid picture of the workings of the language. There is also an abyss between descriptions of the linguistic system and accounts of the historical and social situation of the language. Many grammars published in the era of structural linguistics don't give the impression that the language they describe was actually spoken by anybody. Even at the level of grammar, inveterate preconceptions about center and periphery have led to the result that certain subareas receive no treatment in the greater number of published grammars. These include proper names, word-formation, discourse particles, quantification and taxis (the syntax of verbal aspect). In §5, I will come back to a system of linguistic description that provides comprehensiveness. The requirement of intelligibility simply means that anybody who knows the language in which the description



is written and has a linguistic formation must be able to understand the description. A linguistic description may sin against this requirement in several ways. If it presupposes a certain model of grammar which it seeks to apply, it becomes unintelligible as soon as the model fades out of linguistics. Consequently, many tagmemic and transformational grammars of the sixties are not directly accessible today and require prior study of descriptive models then current in the history of linguistics. Another way of rendering a grammar unusable is to stick to the postulate of inducing the concepts of the description entirely from the peculiar structure of the particular language and then to give these categories idiosyncratic names. Writing an intelligible grammar requires some background in general comparative grammar.

The requirement of adequacy presupposes factual correctness. Over and above this, it comprises two tasks: First, the description must be general so that it and the language become comparable to others and that they can be explored by a typological approach. Second, the description must be specific so that the uniqueness of the language is brought out. We will see in §5.3 that these antagonistic tasks can be solved only if the description is based on two independent systems, one formal and one functional. However, it is clear again that many available descriptions are inadequate because they either vindicate generality at the cost of specificity, pressing the language into the Procrustean bed of some universal grammar, or they vindicate specificity, making the language look unlike anything else on earth. The current state of affairs as regards documentation of the languages of the world may be summarized as follows: Of more than half of the languages, little more than the name is known. The others have been described with very uneven devotion. Of the existing descriptions, only a small percentage meets the requirements of comprehensiveness, intelligibility and adequacy. What is perhaps most important, however, is that those languages that have received the fullest attention in descriptive linguistics are certain to survive the next century, while precisely those that are as yet undescribed are certain to be threatened by extinction. Once the quality of extant documentation of a given language has been assessed, a further criterion that may be considered is the uniqueness of the language. While every language is unique, some are more so than others. In a sense that I assume can be made explicit, a genetic isolate is

linguistically more valuable than a member of a large homogeneous family; and a typologically unusual language is linguistically more valuable than one that represents a well-understood linguistic type. However, it must be kept in mind that these are narrowly scientific criteria that have no import for the speakers of the language and their interest in its documentation.

### **3. Current linguistic activities:**

#### **3.1. The urgency of the task**

Grammars and dictionaries of languages outside European civilization have been written for several hundred years now. With the manpower available in all of linguistics, it would have been possible to fully document and describe all the languages of the world. This has not been done. The science of linguistics includes other tasks, and some of these have bound more energy than the description of new languages.

However, linguists must be aware that the object of their study has its own dynamics, which is largely outside their control. While there will be language as long as there will be linguists, linguistic diversity is diminishing fast. The nature of human language is variation; language manifests itself not directly, but only in the form of diverse languages. Linguistic diversity is thus an essential source of insight into the nature of human language. Linguists can make a choice whether they want to take advantage of this source of insight or whether they want to let it die out unexplored. It is a matter of priorities. Linguistic theory, language typology, mathematical linguistics, psycholinguistics and so forth are all essential fields of linguistics which have to be cultivated. However, all of them can still be carried out at leisure after most of the languages of the world have died out; and some of them, notably linguistic theory and language typology, can be carried out the more fruitfully the more languages have been described. Describing endangered languages is the only really urgent task of linguistics. A shift in attention and devotion of manpower is called for. A simple extrapolation from the performance of linguists in the past centuries into the next century, which will see the disappearance of the greater share of the world's languages, allows us to predict that we have to double our powers if we want to record at last a representative

portion of them. If this re-evaluation does not happen inside linguistics, we cannot expect the general public, including funding agencies, to appreciate the importance of the issue.

#### **4. Linguistic Methodology:**

##### **4.1. The current status of methodology in linguistics**

Structural linguistics, especially its American variety, was much concerned with objective procedures that would allow one to work out the structure of an unknown language. While those linguists came up with a number of methods which are still valuable today, they unfortunately maneuvered themselves into a blind alley because they considered it important that the linguist should not be concerned with linguistic meaning and proceed in complete independence from it. The way out would have been to drop this inadequate prerequisite. This, however, was not done. Instead, our science was profoundly influenced by chapter 1, §4 of Chomsky 1965, entitled "Justification of grammars". This assumes that linguistics is interested in "the speaker hearer's competence" (18) and claims that no adequate formalizable techniques are known for obtaining reliable information concerning the facts of linguistic structure ... There are, in other words, very few reliable experimental or data-processing procedures for significant information concerning the linguistic intuition of the native speaker. ... Furthermore, there is no reason to expect that reliable operational criteria for the deeper and more important theoretical notions of linguistics ... will ever be forthcoming. (19)

Chomsky then goes on to argue that this is not detrimental because there are "masses of evidence" already available. The task is to construct a grammar for them. This, however, is a theoretical, not a methodological issue, the more so, as the native speaker whose intuition is at stake is often the linguist himself (20). This construal of the methodological situation of linguistics has had an enormous impact on the field till today. It has led to an all but complete neglect of linguistic methodology. The result has been serious harm to the science and to the quality of available linguistic data. The problem of how we can, within the limits of available resources, obtain reliable, representative and interesting data from a little known language and then process, analyze and document these data so

that they can be explored by future linguists or even by interested laymen is a very real one. Thanks to the impact of generative grammar, we are almost as ill prepared for solving it as we were thirty years ago.

#### 4.2. Linguistic fieldwork:

Linguistic methods should help in answering such questions as the following:

- What kinds of data should I record? What kind of data represents the culture, what kind of data represents linguistic structure? To the extent that the data are free texts, which genres should be represented?
- Who are the best linguistic informants for the various purposes, and how do I identify them?
- How do I record high-quality linguistic data that leave nothing to be desired?
- What techniques of elaboration, presentation and preservation do I apply to such data so that they can serve as a primary documentation of the language?
- What are the techniques of elicitation and counter-check, the test frames, experiments and analytical procedures to find out about linguistic structure in all the areas of the language system?
- Given factual limitations, which parts of the documentation and description have priority, and which can be worked out in the future on the basis of my documentation?
- What is the format of the comprehensive, intelligible and adequate description that I want to produce?

Apart from methods of structural linguistics of more than thirty years ago, the most valuable hints to solve such problems may be found in fieldwork manuals. Due to various accidents in the history of our discipline, only one of which has been mentioned, there has been little or no tradition in the art of linguistic fieldwork in many countries which otherwise have a strong linguistics. Japan, Germany and Italy are among them. One of our immediate tasks is to elaborate fieldwork courses and to offer them to young linguists who will go to the field and record an endangered language. This will require the revision of many a linguistic curriculum in countries such as those just mentioned.



There is the danger that linguistic methodology is considered a trivial issue not only by theorists, but also by people who actually want to do fieldwork. The issue is not trivial, for at least two reasons. First, linguistic methodology does not boil down to fieldwork techniques. As the set of questions enumerated above is meant to show, its function is to bridge the gap between practical linguistic groundwork and the scientific account of the language, including its system. Most available fieldwork manuals are insufficient because they don't bridge this gap, but confine themselves to the practical side. What we require is a comprehensive methodology that helps the analyst in integrating his findings into a coherent description. Second, if we had unlimited time and manpower, we could neglect methodological issues because sooner or later the relevant facts would turn up despite the clumsiness of untrained linguists. However, the opposite of this condition is actually true. While the description of a language has taken various amounts of energy, from generations of linguists' work in the case of Latin and English down to the lifetime of one linguist in the case of many small languages in the last decades, we simply cannot afford to proceed along these lines in the next century. The languages are dying before our eyes. Efficiency becomes a real issue. We require a methodology that enables a linguist or a team of linguists and ethnologists to deliver a decent documentation and description of a language within five years. To elaborate such a methodology is anything but trivial. It requires a joint effort of scientists who are experienced in the field and who must put their experience at the disposal of young people who are willing to go to the field. And, needless to mention, such a methodology must make use of the computer for efficient manipulation and consistent treatment of large quantities of data.

### **Conclusion:**

The current situation in linguistics is characterized by an urgent need of tools for efficient documentation of languages. The Language Description System will enable more linguists to describe more languages with better quality in shorter time.

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