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The Place of Endangered Languages in a Global Society

The Role of Language in a Present Society

Certainly, the role of language in the global scale is incredibly important. “Educators agree that the study of foreign languages plays an important role in a school’s curriculum” (LaVaute). Moreover, a person of 21st century should be aware about different cultures, conduct business with partners from different corners of the earth, make friends or even be in love with a person from abroad, be well-travelled constantly. Furthermore, new language studying process develops memory abilities, creativity and listening skills. Language engineering increasing role in our present society is a topic of a separate paper and is very closely connected with a language itself.

It is said that there are 5000 - 6000 languages spoken in the world today (some experts count 7000 languages). The question is about Endangered Languages. Some linguists believe that only several hundred will be alive till the end of a century. The problem is with languages that do not have many speakers in different countries. They are very much pressed, i.e. culturally, economically, etc. Globalisation adds a lot, because the language of more powerful nation starts its domination over the weaker one. Mondialisation is one more factor of influence. Sometimes globalization and mondialisation are referred as synonyms but they present different socio-economic aspects of a current world, each of which influence differently the endangered languages. Mondialisation means universalisation, for example McDonald’s, Hollywood movies, music that was disseminated all over the world and are used massively. As a result, the language of minority becomes not so popularly and disappears with time. Such process threatens scientific problems. The challenge is that “With the disappearance of unwritten and undocumented languages, humanity would lose not only a cultural wealth but also important ancestral knowledge embedded, in

particular, in indigenous languages” (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/>). Ethical problem arises as well in this case, because it looks like practically each community would prefer to save their language, if they have positive circumstances and opportunities to make it. The issue is that it is a kind of social unfairness, when one nation has many chances to develop and communicate their native language and another does not have.

What is an Endangered Language? The Importance of Languages

Generally speaking, an endangered language is a language which speakers are dying or just do not use it, exercising another language; or use it less, in fewer areas; when speakers do not use all language’s styles; when they do not pass it to the next generation. There are several factors that indicate an endangered language (according to UNESCO experts’ researches):

Intergenerational language transmission, Absolute number of speakers, Proportion of speakers within the total population, Shifts in domains of language use, Response to new domains and media, Availability of materials for language education and literacy, Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies including official status and use, Community members’ attitudes toward their own language, Amount and quality of documentation” (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17081573>).

“The extinction of whole families of languages is a tragedy comparable in magnitude to the loss of whole branches of the animal kingdom (classes, orders, families), for example to the loss of all felines or all cetaceans” (“About the Catalogue of the Endangered Languages of the World”). Similar situation could be seen within the correlation between language science and medicines area. “Seventy-five per cent of plant-derived pharmaceuticals were discovered by examining traditional medicines, and the languages of curers often played a key role. If these languages had become extinct and knowledge of the medicinal plants and associated cures had been lost in the process, all of humanity would have been impoverished and our survival as a species left more precarious” (“About the Catalogue of the Endangered Languages of the World”). It is possible to talk even

about human rights violation in this situation, i.e. if there is some kind of repressive regime, the community is forced to use another language – a tongue of a stronger community. Here personal losses and social identity crisis should be also taken into account, because a native language means native speakers' values, communications, relations, different kinds of well-being. That is why it is so important to save a native tongue. This is the reason why so many linguists are shouting about society and political problems when they understand that their native language is in danger. "About the Catalogue of the Endangered Languages of the World" publication contains several very vivid quotations regarding this issue:

Linguistic diversity ... constitutes one of the great treasures of humanity, an enormous storehouse of expressive power and profound understanding of the universe. The loss of hundreds of languages that have already passed into history is an intellectual catastrophe in every way comparable in magnitude to the ecological catastrophe we face today as the earth's tropical forests are swept by fire. Each language still spoken is fundamental to the personal, social and – a key term in the discourse of indigenous peoples – spiritual identity of its speakers" (Zepeda)

But why save our languages ... we should save our languages because it is the spiritual relevance that is deeply embedded in our own languages that is important (Littlebear)

I can not stress enough the importance of retaining our tribal languages, when it comes to the core relevance or existence of our people ... You could argue that when a tribe loses its language, it loses a piece of its inner-most being, a part of its' soul or spirit ... When it comes to native languages, the situation is simple: Use it or lose it (Skyhawk).

The language becomes 'dead' when there are no more native speakers and nobody uses it. For example, "This week the Guardian reported that the last two fluent speakers of the language Ayapaneco are not speaking to each other" was posted in 2011 (Endangered languages: the full list). This means that Ayapaneco language is close to become dead. The problem is that

such situation leads to cultural traditions loosing. It is not news that, for example, poetry, songs are rather hard to be transferred into another language. Fishman states that

The denial of cultural rights to minorities is as disruptive of the moral fabric of mainstream society as is the denial of civil rights. Civil rights, however, are focused on the individual, while cultural rights must focus on ethnocultural groups. Such groups have no recognized legal standing in many Western democracies where both establishment capitalist thought and anti-establishment Marxist thought prophesies the eclipse of culturally distinct formations and the arrival of a uniformized, all-inclusive “modern proletarian” culture” (70).

Moreover, this specific issue can have also political problems, i.e. some privileges, different statuses, special rights, etc. could be lost. Taking into account the linguistic side, endangered language could be changed (as a rule, become simpler). It is naturally that language speakers are constantly trying to make their language easier irrespective the country; when the language is endangered it could be simplified according to the grammar of ‘stronger language’. In such a way we loose grammatical and phonological complexities that are very important. General situation looks rather sad, because in a case when so many languages disappear, future linguists would have a limited idea about what linguistic processes that are happening now, about world’s linguistic diversity. As a result, they will see a little skewed picture of our presence. The situation is important, because of one more fact – each language ‘contains’ a unique set of world perception and view, some intrinsic values, philosophy and particular cultural, pshychology, traditions, etc. Losing a language, a mankind losses all this. It means that the problem is rather complex and could not be underestimated.

The language becomes doomed, if young generation does not use it. Figures show the ‘size’ of a problem “Of the Native American languages of the US, 90 per cent are not being passed on to a new generation, while also 90 per cent of Australian aboriginal languages and over 50 per cent of minority languages of Russia are in a similar situation” (“About the Catalogue of the Endangered Languages of the World”).

To be more specific, an American linguist – Joshua Fishman – specifies eight levels of endangered languages. The ‘worthiest’ stage in his scale places languages that are used only by few speakers; then goes languages that are used by adults, but their children do not use, and even hear it; the sixth stage – some generations, communities are using it; the fifth – the language is used within some community, it is promoted by some programmes; the fourth – it is used in elementary school, so a child should know it and use freely; the third – a language is used by workers, in offices, there are vocabularies for separate domains; the second stage – when authorities are using a language, it is heard via different kinds of media; and the last one, the first stage indicate a language that is used by national authorities, by politicians of the high grade and lecturers in higher institutions.

The Sizes of the Endangered Languages Problem

The beneath mentioned figures can assist in situation’s scale understanding. The UNESCO statistics indicate that

At least 43 per cent of the estimated 6000 languages spoken in the world are endangered. This figure does not include the data-deficient languages, for which no reliable information is available. As their exact number is unknown, data-deficient languages are presented together with the safe ones”.



Figure 1. Vitality of Languages All Over the World

If taking into account the number of speakers, we receive a degree of endangerment of endangered languages:

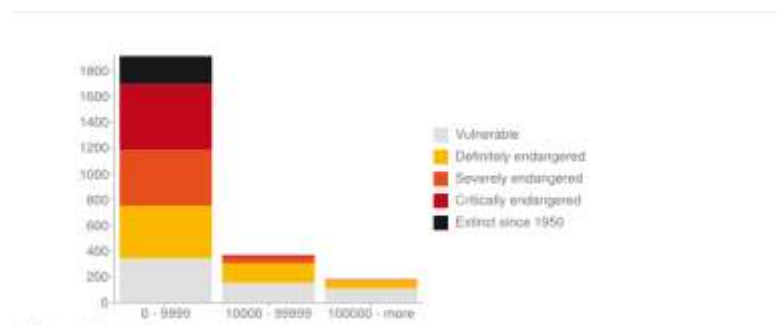


Figure 2. The stage of endangerment of languages.

Here the vertical axis shows a number of endangered languages and horizontal one - a size of a group of speakers.

The *Ethnologue Languages of the World* contains information about what language are having 'problems with its' existence'. There is a web version http://www.ethnologue.com/nearly_extinct.asp#Europe, in which not only names, alternative names, but geography and estimated number of speakers are indicated. Comments of linguists are included as well. After a short analysis of this resource becomes evident that the biggest number of endangered languages are in America; then goes the Pacific region; Asian and African areas place next stages. Surely, the Europe part of the land lost the lowest number of languages.

Positive Aspect of the Process of Languages Endangering

On the other hand, there are scientists, for example Peter Ladefoged (he is a phonetician), who believe that language 'dying' is a natural process and there is no need to do with this something. It is normal, because there are communities that do not need and want to communicate their native language, because of their own reasons. Present linguists should just do their best in order to document everything they can in order the science loose less, according to Ladefoged.

Where there are Endangered Language?

If analyzing the geography of endangered languages, there is a general rule: the region that has a lot of languages, contains, at the same time, many endangered tongues. For example, South

America, Melanesia, etc. In the meantime, such languages that should be protected could be found in each country practically.

There were 312 American Indian languages in use when Europeans first arrived in North America; of these, 123 (40 per cent) are extinct and others were lost without record. In the US, of the 280 languages known from the time of first European contact, only 151 still have speakers (54 per cent), but all are endangered. Only 20 of these (13 per cent) are being learned by children, but by ever fewer children each year (“About the Catalogue of the Endangered Languages of the World”).

Some vivid examples of endangered languages:

- Apiaka (or Apiake, Apiaca) is a Brazilian language that is threatened by Portuguese language. It was announced that the last speaker of it was determined in 2007
- Bikya language seems to be extinct and experts did not document it. It is said that the last contact with a speaker of this language was performed in 1986 already. It looks like it was the last speaker who lived in Cameroon
- Taje (or Petapa) is an Austronesian language. It was announced that in 2000 the last speaker spoke it. The problem is that linguists and / or ethnographers did not document it and even do not know for sure whether it is still alive
- Dampelas (Dampal, Dian or Dampelasa) was used in eight Indonesian villages. According to UNESCO statistics 10,300 persons spoke it in 2000
- Diahoi (Jiahui, Jahoi, Djahui, Diahkoi, Diarroi) was used in Brazil and in Amazon area. It was rather isolated, that is why there are no clear evidences about its’ surviving or extincting
- Kaixana language ‘lived’ in Brazil, Amazonas. It is interesting that there are clear evidences about its’ last speaker – it is Raimundo Avelino
- Laua was used in Papua New Guinea. The last contact with its speaker occurred in 2000. Seems like it extincted already

- Yamana knows its last speaker as well. It is Cristina Calderon who lives near Chile's Beagle Canal Naval Base. The language is endangering by Spanish
- Kulon-Pazeh (or Kulun) was used in Taiwan. Its last speaker Pan Jin-yu, who educated others her native language, died in 2010
- Pemono is Venezuelan language. There is no evidence whether it is still alive.

Relations between Languages, Biodiversity and Planet Environmental Health

There is one more very interesting research of UNESCO experts about a direct relation between language and biodiversity, i.e. they state that language number decreasing affects negatively the natural environment.

There is a fundamental linkage between language and traditional knowledge (TK) related to biodiversity. Local and indigenous communities have elaborated complex classification systems for the natural world, reflecting a deep understanding of their local environment. This environmental knowledge is embedded in indigenous names, oral traditions and taxonomies, and can be lost when a community shifts to another language. Ethnobotanists and ethnobiologists recognize the importance of indigenous names, folk taxonomies and oral traditions to the success of initiatives related to endangered species recovery and restoration activities (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/biodiversity-and-linguistic-diversity/>).

If talking about endangered languages and endangered biological species, we should mention Michael Krauss who determines three categories of languages that 'faced' this problem:

- moribund: is a language which is not studied by younger generation, children, anymore;
- endangered: is a language that struggles bad conditions and becomes evident that children will not study it in the next century, irrespective the fact that now it is been studied;
- safe: indicate languages that are protected even at a political level; moreover, there is a big number of active speakers.

One more interesting research was performed by linguists Nettle and Romaine in 2000 regarding the correlations between planets environment and languages endangering. They state that if a language is endangering, the environment is endangered too.

In other words, when the habitat and socioeconomic system that once supported a vibrant indigenous culture disintegrates, that community starts to disperse – and along with it goes their language. Because of this relationship, the current pace of language loss around the world is seen by scientists as a critical - and urgent - indicator of the rapid pace of global environmental decline (Rivenburgh).

In such a way ecological situation of the whole planet is connected rather closely with cultural, i.e. language, sustainability. This fact shows once more that there is no important or not so important process on the earth. Everything should be tried to be taken into account.

What to do?

Fortunately, there is no situation in which there is no way out. The process of language endangering could be stopped or, at least, suspended. For instance, there are many linguists, experts and organizations that are working actively on this process and believe that there are three main stages that could prevent a problem: first of all, the language that is at risk should be documented (grammar and vocabulary are better to be recorded. The recording may be audio-visual as well. It is very important to document different oral traditions. Surely that a good archive is needed in order all this material could be well protected and with the aim to secure an access to these ‘treasures’ for future generations); the second step should be a language revitalization (it is a situation, when community creates conditions for active speakers number increasing. This could be done via politics, education system, etc., for example. Online technologies could assist here greatly, as many vocabularies, courses, materials are better to be available to anyone. There are experts (Fishman, for example) who believe in cultural democracy restoring; Fishman claims that social reforms should inevitably include minority language revitalization; one more issue he stresses a lot of attention on

is a positive wish of speakers to use a language, he explains that there is much more affect when a family willingly uses a language of minority in their day-to-day life than it is promoted by a government; and surely, Fishman reminds about social boundaries importance, as this would promote the language of minority usage within the community social activities); and the third stage is post-vernacular maintenance (when a dead language is being taught and learned).

The above mentioned algorithm of language rescuing clearly indicates that the cooperation between community members and linguists can assist greatly within this kind of problem. An environment is rather significant as well, especially political and social one, because a positive attitude towards a specific language, respect to this language should be developed there.

There is one more possible way out, i.e. digital technologies. Jonathan Amos, science correspondent, states rather interesting thought: "Facebook, YouTube and even texting will be the salvation of many of the world's endangered languages, scientists believe" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17081573>). Even the globalization can help, irrespective that negative aspect that was mentioned above in this paper. North American tribes can serve as a real example. The issue is that they use different social media in order to attract their younger generation to use their native language and create an environment in which a speaker would talk this language with pleasure and not because of obligation. Siberia and Mongolia experts developed an iPhone applications in order a user can have a pronunciation vocabulary with him / her. David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics, believe that

Small languages are using social media, YouTube, text messaging and various technologies to expand their voice and expand their presence. It is what I like to call the flipside of globalisation. We hear a lot about how globalisation exerts negative pressures on small cultures to assimilate. But a positive effect of globalisation is that you can have a language that is spoken by only five or 50 people in one remote location, and now through digital technology that language can achieve a global voice and a global audience (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-17081573>).

“In some cases, people have created an orthography [script] for languages that have never been written down, so they can send SMS messages to each other” (Vince).

Moreover, nowadays the mankind possesses different programs, and looks like there will be more, that try to save this kind of cultural heritage. For example, there is UNESCO’s Endangered Languages Programme that maintains

communities, experts and governments by producing, coordinating and disseminating: tools for monitoring, advocacy, and assessment of status and trends in linguistic diversity; services such as policy advice, technical expertise and training, good practices and a platform for exchange and transfer of skills (<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/endangered-languages/>).

Or Google, American Internet services provider that is famous all over the world, launched recently the Endangered Languages Project. It

is an online space designed for speakers of endangered languages and those passionate about their preservation, Google said in its promotional video. It features the most comprehensive information, the option to upload video, audio, documents, and share your knowledge and experiences (Smith).

One more interesting project – the Enduring Voices Project. Its aim is assistance at a stage of language revitalization and endangered language maintaining. It uses a model of Language Hotspots in order to spread information about languages’ diversity all over the world. The ‘Hotspots’, because these areas possess many languages that need to be protected and / or that are not well-studied. The team of a project developed Talking Dictionaries in order to transfer knowledge about sounds of a specific tongue to each volunteer all over the world.

Conclusion

Many linguistic and even political conferences, meetings touch the problem issue of endangering languages. The paper shows why it is a crucial problem and stresses the need to perform real actions. The optimistic point of view within this situation indicates that desire to help and practical exercises produce an effect. One more important issue that a paper stresses attention on is the significance of existing of languages that do not possess many speakers. The science is basing on these languages as well and they are important. It is obvious that if something in the universe was lost, changes are inevitable.

The paper shows that the endangerment of any language is rather complex process and problem. Taking into account the history, becomes evident that it is not new for a mankind, because of influences into invaded territories. As a result, some countries then faced with multilingualism, another – dying languages. Everything depends on colonisation styles, politics, willingness, etc.

The future of this process is an adjective process. The paper contains rather pessimistic point of view, but many issues will depend on economic, social, cultural, personal, etc communications and relations between different nations, countries, communities. It is a known fact that there are countries that face globalization without great losses in language variety. On the other hand, the economic life is uncertain in other countries and no one knows what will happen with that nation.

A very important aspect here is a heritage from previous ancestors, i.e. saving of this heritage. If younger generation is not doing it, they never have their native traditions, culture, as well as language.

To be honest, the development, stagnation, death of languages are natural processes. That is why the work of linguists is significant as can save history for future researches.

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