

## LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND REVITALIZATION

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### 1. Introduction

Linguists have a variety of grim-sounding terms for languages with few or no native speakers. A language which has no native speakers (people who grew up speaking the language as a child) is called "dead" or "extinct." A language which has no native speakers in the youngest generation is called "moribund." A language which has very few native speakers is called "endangered" or "imperiled."

Language revival and language revitalization are attempts to preserve endangered languages. It is true that in the natural course of things, languages, like everything else, sometimes die. People choose, for a variety of valid social reasons, not to teach their children their own mother tongue.

### 2. Definition of Endangered Language

An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use. If it loses all its native speakers, it becomes an extinct language.

An endangered language is a language with so few surviving speakers that it is in danger of falling out of use.

A dead language (or extinct language) is one which has no native speakers.

### 3. Identifying Language as Endangered

- a) The number of speakers currently living.
- b) The mean age of native and/or fluent speakers.
- c) The percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency with the language in question.

### 4. Why Study Endangered Languages

- a) The knowledge acquired in the study of indigenous language is also of prime interest to other disciplines, such as anthropology, archaeology, history and prehistory.
- b) For regions in which no written historical accounts exist, language becomes a source of eminent importance for the reconstruction of cultural history.
- c) Language comparison and reconstruction may provide insights into certain aspects of the history and prehistory of a region.

## 5. The four degrees of Language Endangerment

### a) **Healthy/Strong**

All generations use language in variety of settings

### b) **Weakening/Sick**

Spoken by older people; not fully used in younger generations

### c) **Moribund/Dying**

Only a few speakers (non-children) remain; no longer used as native language by children

### d) **Extinct/Dead**

No longer spoken or potentially spoken

## 6. What Causes Language Extinction

- a) Because it is not useful in society, perhaps even a social liability, an endangered language is not passed on by parents to their children.
- b) Speaking the majority language better equips children for success in the majority culture than speaking a less prestigious language.
- c) Some governments actively discourage minority language use.

## 7. Assessing Language Endangerment

- a) Intergenerational language transmission
- b) Absolute numbers of speakers
- c) Proportion of speakers within the total population
- d) Loss of existing language domains
- e) Response to new domains and media
- f) Material for language education and literacy
- g) Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official language status and use
- h) Community members' attitudes towards their own language
- i) Amount and quality of documentation

## 8. Factors that help an endangered language progress

- a) Increase the language's prestige within the dominant community
- b) Increase their wealth and income
- c) Increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community
- d) Have a strong presence in the education system

- e) Can write down the language
- f) Can use electronic technology.

## 9. Revival and Revitalization

- a) Revival denotes bringing up of a language to use from its point of death
- b) Revitalization denotes any deliberate effort in giving force and life to a living language, which is at the verge of endangerment.
- c) A language, which has experienced near or complete extinction has been intentionally revived and has regained some of its former status is a revived language.

## 10. Language Revitalization

“Language Revitalization” refers to the development of programs that result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community and bringing it back into full use in all walks of life.

## 11. Languages targeted for Revitalization

Languages targeted for language revitalization include those whose use and prominence is severely limited, called endangered or weakening, or those that have only a few elderly speakers and seem to be dying, called moribund.

Sometimes various tactics of language revitalization can even be used to try to revive extinct languages.

Though the goals of language revitalization vary greatly from case to case, they typically involve attempting to expand the number of speakers and use of a language, or trying to maintain the current level of use to protect the language from extinction or language death.

## 12. Steps to sustain

Fishman's model for reviving threatened (or sleeping) languages, or for making them sustainable, consists of an eight-stage process.

- a) Acquisition of the language by adults, who in effect act as language apprentices (recommended where most of the remaining speakers of the language are elderly and socially isolated from other speakers of the language).
- b) Create a socially integrated population of active speakers (or users) of the language (at this stage it is usually best to concentrate mainly on the spoken language rather than the written language).
- c) In localities where there are a reasonable number of people habitually using the language, encourage the informal use of the language among people of all age groups and within families and bolster its daily use through the establishment of local

neighborhood institutions in which the language is encouraged, protected and (in certain contexts at least) used exclusively.

- d) In areas where oral competence in the language has been achieved in all age groups encourage literacy in the language but in a way that does not depend upon assistance from (or goodwill of) the state education system.
- e) Where the state permits it, and where numbers warrant, encourage the use of the language in compulsory state education.
- f) Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated, encourage the use of the language in the workplace (lower work sphere).
- g) Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated encourage the use of the language in local government services and mass media.
- h) Where the above stages have been achieved and consolidated encourage use of the language in higher education, government, etc.

### **13. Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL)**

FEL supports, enables and assists the documentation, protection and promotion of endangered languages. The preamble of the FEL summarizes its objectives as follows:

- a) To raise awareness concerning endangered languages, both inside and outside the communities where they are spoken, through all channels and media.
- b) To support the use of endangered language in all contexts: at home, in education, in the media, and in social, cultural and economic life.
- c) To monitor linguistics policies and practices, and to seek influence to the appropriate authorities where necessary.
- d) To support the documentation of endangered languages, by offering financial assistance, training, or facilities for the publication of results.
- e) To collect and make available information on all of the preservation of endangered languages
- f) To disseminate information on all of the above activities as widely as possible.

### **Conclusion**

Speech communities of endangered languages, linguists, language activists and policy makers have a long-term goal to accomplish in order to develop effective and viable strategies for sustaining the world's endangered languages.

A Navajo elder expressed the importance of language maintenance for his community in the following way:

**If you don't breathe,  
There is no air.  
If you don't walk,  
There is no earth.  
If you don't speak,  
There is no world.**

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