

ROLE OF MEDIA IN PRESERVING ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

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Abstract

From being considered as a catalyst to language extinction to being upheld as a significant tool for the preservation of endangered languages, the relationship between media and language has gone through multiple shifts. This paper aims to analyse multiple examples of the critical role that both mainstream media and social media play in the process of language preservation and revitalisation. Overall it directs that media and languages are interconnected, both needing each other to flourish and develop.

Keywords: Media, Language Preservation, Mainstream Media, Social Media, Language Extinction

1. Introduction

There are about 7,000 languages spoken in the world but the number keeps on declining with the constantly changing world which affects the behavioural pattern of a community in more than one way. It is a fragile time as roughly a third of the languages are now endangered, often with less than 1,000 speakers remaining. Meanwhile, just 23 languages account for more than half of the world's population. Reportedly, in India alone, 197 languages are categorised as endangered. When a community loses their native language they are not only letting go of their way of communication but also a part of their history and culture. For time immemorial, folklores, native scriptures and knowledge passed down by the elders to the newer generation have been a way of continuing a culture. Language plays a huge role in this transfer of knowledge. Extinction of them means the evaporation of an entire culture which will remain unknown for the coming generations.

There are so many words whose equivalent does not exist in the popular English language. For example, Hygge is a Danish word, referring to the feeling of cozy contentment while enjoying time with close friends or family. There is no single English word that can capture the concept as well as the Danish one. New generations of communities that lost their native language will never know their complete history in the same way as their ancestors did. In the coming years, the number of such communities can be in thousands. This is a matter of concern requiring immediate intervention. It is here that the significance of media emerges. At the very base of the media is communication. Communication is what media is made of and what media do. Language as a system that facilitates communication. A message will be effective or not depends on its language and the way it is communicated.

So it's safe to say that without language, media will be rendered useless because the very existence of media relies upon it.

In the age of globalisation, mass media relied upon dominant languages to widen their user base and earn more in revenues. But this popularisation of few languages came at the cost of other minor languages. Social media followed the same trend. Another shortcoming of media as described by Nancy Rivenburgh (2004) was that "although the news articles often present the statistics regarding the rate of language loss around the world, they manage to do so with no sense of urgency that this is a problem that needs to be solved"¹². Or as noted by Cazden (2003) "there is a paradox in suggesting that technology can be useful in revitalizing indigenous languages and cultures. After all, one kind of technology, television, has been influential in language and culture loss"¹³. However, over a span of a few years, the relationship between language and media has taken a stark turn.

Today the media, especially social media, is perceived as a vital instrument in bringing awareness about language loss and driving more people towards its preservation. Social media vested direct tools of language preservation within the reach of those who were most affected by it. There is a waning sense of dependency on traditional media when it comes to language revitalisation efforts. Frequent usage of endangered languages on media platforms helps re-establish their importance among people and breaks down the notion that such languages are not modern enough to belong in the technologically developed current world.

2. Analysis

Media in all forms is a way for people to connect with the world through information. It is a source of general awareness, recent developments, entertainment, education and more. Given the close relationship that people share with the media, it is understandable that the media in a manner directs what stays relevant and what becomes obsolete. The breakthrough to this came with the advent of social media. Social media created a level playing field, where the ability to pass on one's voice and opinions was given to the general public rather than to a few at the helm of media houses. This marked a shift in the role which the media played to preserve a language whose speakers were depleting.

No longer it was just to spread awareness but also to engage actively in its widespread preservation and revitalisation. As K David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College notes in a BBC article, "small languages are using social media, YouTube, text messaging and various technologies to expand their voice and expand their

¹² Rivenburgh, Nancy (2004). Do we really understand the issue? Media coverage of endangered languages. International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC). Retrieved February 27, 2021, from <https://web.archive.org/web/20160414040452/https://aiic.net/page/1512/do-we-really-understand-the-issue-media-coverage-of-endangered-languages/lang/1>

¹³ Cazden, C. (2003). Sustaining Indigenous Languages in Cyberspace. Page-2. Retrieved February 15, 2021, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED482034.pdf>

presence.”¹⁴ “A positive effect of globalization 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”¹⁵.

Use of social media to form online groups can be seen as one of the prominent ways to connect the younger generation with their native language. Facebook groups like Omniglot Fan Club boasts of close to 30,000 members who use the platform to learn and spread information about dying languages. There are also Facebook groups dedicated to specific languages and dialects like that in the case of Owé, a Nigerian dialect, where members not only discuss literary things like idioms and proverbs but also delves into social issues. Many other languages like Aymara, Ojibwe, Cree and more have benefitted from the social media groups and have been able to rekindle the fading interest of young people in them.

Social media extinguishes the limitation of a physical space to communicate in native languages rather it creates a new virtual space that connects people who would like to discuss in their native tongue but are now dispersed all across the globe. Another point that is worth highlighting is that social media allows the integration of multiple formats that can be used to deliver communication interestingly and in an easy-to-consume manner. Social media platforms also realise the capacity of minor languages and the personal experience that it provides to their users. They are increasingly expanding their support interface to cater to such languages. Facebook currently supports 111 languages while Twitter’s translator widget supports 34 languages. Facebook users can also request a language through the website and if there is enough demand, the language will then be included in the translation application. In contrast to the dynamic social media sphere where people directly affected by the erosion of languages took charge of preserving it, mainstream media’s role is more centered around spreading awareness about it. Mass media through its coverage can not only highlight the plight of an endangered language but being a watchdog it can also bring relevant authorities’ attention towards the adversity too.

Among the various verticals of mass media, community-driven media efforts have been more successful in strengthening the language preservation efforts. As noted by Kishindo and Chikaipa (2018), globalisation has made it unusual for institutions to use minority languages at the expense of the recognised official languages. “Minority-language-speaking communities, commonly the less privileged, are deprived of a chance to sustain their languages which are a symbol of their identity and culture. However, the rise of community radio, centered on local or community development, has created a favorable circumstance for the promotion of minority languages and cultures,”observed Chikaipa

¹⁴ Amos, J. (2012, February 18). Digital tools 'to save languages'. Retrieved February 22, 2021, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-17081573>

¹⁵ IBID

and Gunde (2020)¹⁶. Community radios delivering content in minority languages have two-fold benefits. On one hand, they help remove the barriers of literacy and make communities a key stakeholder in their development, on the other hand, they empower a local language as a significant tool of development thus increasing its relevance.

Apart from community-centric media, another mass media vertical that has been able to bring the spotlight to the issue of language preservation has been films and television series. HBO's series *My Brilliant Friend* is a noteworthy example of making full-fledged languages but dialects a part of preservation too. *Neapolitan Novels* by Elena Ferrante, the books on which this show is based are written in standard Italian but the series was filmed by local actors in the Neapolitan dialect. Neapolitan is classified as 'vulnerable to extinction' by the Endangered Language Alliance. Dubbing popular films into an endangered language has also come up as a popular means of catching the attention of younger generations towards these languages. The University of Hawaii's Academy for Creative Media undertook a dubbing project under which they made efforts to dub the popular animated Disney movie 'Moana' in Hawaiian and gave its free copies to every school in the state. Hawaiian, which is classified as a critically endangered language by UNESCO, can effectively benefit through this preservation effort since it is in the form of a well-liked entertainment medium targeted towards future speakers of the language.

Media made the process of language preservation and revitalisation democratic in every sense of that word. Social media has especially driven this momentum with its ease of accessibility and connection with the younger generations. Instead of just being limited to native speakers, social media has roped in even speakers from dominant languages to engage in conversations involving the necessity to save languages. Continuous media exposure depicting multiple facets of language extinction puts it as a general issue of concern rather than restricting it to scientific communities. This amplifies the awareness as well as overall efforts that go toward saving the dying languages.

3. Media's role in preserving Indian Languages

According to a report, in India, more than 190 languages are categorised as endangered. Some of them are Onge, Aimol, Manda, Gadaba, Birhor, Toto, Tarao, Pengo, among others. As per the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI), over the last 50 years, the world's Hindi-speaking population has increased from 260 million to 420 million. Over the same period, the English-speaking population has gone from 320 million to 480 million. However, the growth of Hindi, English and other major languages within India has come at a price: Around 250 languages in India have disappeared in the last 50 years.

Survival of such endangered languages depends upon the multiple media verticals and on public efforts in utilizing them as an influential tool. Prof Harrison, who is part of the

¹⁶ Chikaipa, Victor & Gunde, Anthony. (2020). The Role of Community Radio in Promotion of Indigenous Minority Languages and Cultures in Malawi. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*. Pg-02. 10.1080/19376529.2020.1751633.

National Geographic Society's Enduring Voices Project, documents how the Koro community of Arunachal Pradesh is using technology like YouTube to carry forward their language and knowledge base. They are making YouTube videos about medicinal plants, beads and myths in Koro language. This can be seen as a perfect amalgamation of a traditional language passed down through generations finding a renewed space of expression within modern technology to continue on with its legacy. Another meaningful example of using the internet and social media for the propagation of minor languages can be seen in a bunch of Facebook-inspired social media pages- Muganool in Tamil, Prasangik for Assamese, eJibON for Bengali, Shabdanagari for Hindi- that are dedicated to specific languages. The language of content from news to communication on these sites is vernacular. It develops a unique sense of community and closeness while communicating from miles apart on social media.

Compared to social media, language preservation efforts by mainstream media are still in a nascent stage, mostly limited to event-specific programmes and coverage. Community-centered conventional media has achieved more success in India when it comes to language preservation. As per data by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India currently has 251 operational community radio stations. These stations have been monumental in bringing grassroots-level changes and giving voice to people in their own native languages. One such preservation effort as reported is by the tribal community of Asur, Jharkhand. Asur language is listed in UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger. In a community left with only 7,000-8,000 fluent Asur language speakers, it was a mobile radio initiative that caught the eye of the masses. Tribal rights activists got together with local community members to form Asur Tribal Wisdom Centre, an organisation involving Asur tribes. Together they created radio programmes in the Asur language aiming to preserve the language and culture of the tribe. The initiative reinstated the community's interest in their own language, meanwhile piquing the curiosity of younger generations to get involved in it.

Such initiatives when multiplied and backed by governmental aid can leave a definitive mark in the language preservation efforts. Language preservation is an enormous task and there are no quick fixes to it but never before the chances to resurrect dying languages were as high. With technology presenting an equitable tool directly in the hands of those affected, each aspect of saving languages- protection, preservation, documentation- can be dealt with in a colossal and long-lasting manner.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the media's role in the advancement of language preservation efforts through multiple examples. It also noted a shift in the way media transformed from being a harbinger of minor languages' extinction to being a potent tool in saving them. Its broadcast of on-going preservation work and appealing projection of how different communities perceive life through their languages continues to propel the people-centric initiatives in language preservation. With the advent of new technologies in media, like artificial intelligence, augmented reality and more, there is a possibility that minor languages can further find immersive ways to interact with people. The growing expanse

of technology also means that more communities will have access to it. They can utilise it to take their languages to wider demographics.

The role of media in language preservation remains scattered with some verticals like community media and social media covering a larger portion of it as compared to mainstream media like television. While TRPs and ad revenues have a larger say in what goes on-air and influence media organisations' decisions, it is to be noted that conventional media is also a significant tool to draw the attention of governmental authorities. They can urge the government to bring relevant policies to aid other media verticals or initiatives that are helping preserve endangered languages. As the world languages continue to falter rapidly, the role of the media in preserving them is monumental than ever before. It is only through collective utilisation of all resources, human and technological, we can save the various ways of viewing the world and life, called languages.

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