

Forgotten Tongues: Assimilation of Language Endangerment and Revitalization

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ABSTRACT

Language endangerment refers to the concept and process of when a language faces a critical decline in usage, speakers, and intergenerational transmission, according to Bureau Works. As Salikoko S. Mufwene, professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago, has stated, about 80% of the world's thousands of languages will go extinct within the next century. Not only do the loss of languages lead to the loss of its cultures and traditions, but it also leads to certain effects that are unrelated to linguistic concepts, such as economic deprivation, aid dependency, and the unwillingness of the transmission of languages, according to Christopher Moseley, editor of "Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages." Though there are many studies and papers regarding the loss of languages, there have not been as many papers concerning the revitalization of languages through a variety of mediums. The goal of this paper is to address the history, background, and the "why" of language endangerment, as well as introducing how we can implement language revitalization to endangered languages.

Introduction

To briefly introduce, language endangerment—the process of when a language faces a critical decline in usage, speakers, and intergenerational transmission—has continued to serve as an issue that largely goes unnoticed, overlooked by many. However, many do not understand the significant impact the disappearance of languages can have within our communities. Having difficulty precisely quantifying the number of languages within our world today, many linguists have concluded that there are approximately six to seven thousand spoken languages used today. Unfortunately, according to Dr. Salikoko Mufwene, a world-renown linguist and professor of linguistics at the University of Chicago, 80% of the world's living languages will die within the next century. Ultimately, that leaves only about a thousand living languages by the year 2100. With the disappearance of these languages, we risk the discontinuation of traditions, practices, and customs which have formed the very basis of its culture. Language acts as a medium to which we can acquire knowledge regarding the people who use the specific language. Language acts as a key to an endless array of possibilities, opening the door to the learning of the people, culture, and traditions of those who use said language. This paper aims in discussing the history of the loss of linguistic diversity, as well as addressing and analyzing the possibilities of revitalizing endangered languages.

Author's Note

Ultimately, I plan to conduct my research in linguistics, specifically attempting to find effective processes and procedures to revitalize a near-extinct language. There are thousands of languages in the world today which offer an outlet into exploring diverse cultures, traditions, food, music, and people; however, languages have continued to become endangered or extinct due to the little population that continues to speak that language. It is ultimately the goal of my research to find why and how languages go extinct, in addition to the best methodology to revitalizing an endangered language. What has drawn me into this type of research is understanding the impact and significance that languages

have on forming one's identity and even passions and interests. Languages act as a key to a door, unlocking endless possibilities of learning about diverse backgrounds, cultures, people, and experiences, making the preservation of languages an important act to keeping these cultures safe and present in the advancing world. I remain passionate about this topic as I have first-hand experience as to how languages and cultures can impact my identity. Born in Iran and moving to the United States at a young age allowed me to become immersed in a westernized culture, thus separating me from the culture of my home country. This separation from my culture posed a problem at family events and reunions as I always felt out of place. I rarely spoke the language and felt disconnected with the Persian culture. However, I began exploring other languages and cultures in middle school and discovered my passion for the French language which eventually took form into a great passion of mine. Learning the French language kickstarted my passion for learning about the culture, attractions, food, celebrations, and people, thus allowing me to fully comprehend the power that languages have on forming one's identity and cultures they resonate with.

Background

Many linguists and historians have declared Sumerian, Akkadian, and Egyptian as the oldest languages with a clear written record, according to Scientific American. Though all three are extinct, most likely due to unsuccessful inter-generational transmission, written evidence serves as a vital factor in preserving languages. However, an important component to note is that determining the oldest language in the world or how languages sounded back in the day is near impossible since there is essentially no fossilized evidence to prove so. Though the examples mentioned previously such as Egyptian and Sumerian are proven to be the oldest languages, they are the oldest languages with a written record. Therefore, there most likely are thousands of other languages much older than the ones mentioned above which have not been recorded or preserved through other mediums. It critical to recognize that the preservation of languages through mediums such as audio recordings and writings serves an incredibly significant role to ensure that languages do not disappear without some sort of evidence or trace of their existence. The preservation of languages will later be explained throughout the revitalization section.

Ultimately, to understand how languages can become revitalized, it is important to recognize how languages have become endangered or extinct in the first place. Looking at previous historical events, it is evident that the loss of linguistic diversity stemmed from the effects of colonization. To briefly define, colonization is the "process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area," according to the Oxford dictionary. To fully assimilate how colonization results in the loss of languages, it is important to analyze specific examples of where this colonization process occurs. One example includes the endangerment of the language Chamorro, an indigenous language found in the Mariana Island of Guam, spoken by approximately 47,000 speakers. The island's colonization began in 1668 and lasted for about two centuries. Initially, Ferdinand Magellan, Portuguese navigator and explorer, arrived in Guam in the year of 1521. This initial interaction resulted in the burning of homes and the murder of the Chamorro people, explained Kenneth Gofigan Kuper. From 1668 to 1898, the Chamorro people endured the "Hispanicization" period, an era dedicated to the following of Spanish customs, language, traditions, and religion. The one-hundred fifty Chamorro villages which once overtook the geographical layout of the island were reduced to solely six districts, each with a central church. In addition to geographical change, the Spanish committed multiple offenses to rid the Chamorro culture. They destroyed sacred items of the Chamorro culture, degrading indigenous beliefs and customs. Ultimately, as the "Hispanicization" period came to an end, the American naval era is also a period which contributed heavily to the loss of the Chamorro language. The navy was persistent on the Chamorros to utilize the English language more frequently than the Chamorro language. The Chamorros were forbidden from speaking their native language at schools, signs hung around the building enforcing each student to speak the English language. However, colonizers perceived that once students returned home, they shifted back to the speaking of their native language, thus resulting in more policies and regulations which pushed for the eradication of the Chamorro language. They even went as far as to tell parents that their child would perform better in school if the parents spoke English with them at home, furthering the usage of the English language. Policies to further the utilization of English were

implemented, such as attempting to make English the official language of the country were attempted, forbidding the speaking of the Chamorro language in public spaces, etc. Ultimately, the story of the Chamorro language showcased how language can be used in rather a political way, but it can also be used as a medium to bring people closer to their culture and roots. This story is one of many languages which have been attempted to be eradicated to further push one's ideals, language, culture, and religion onto another.

To reiterate the significance of conserving endangered languages, we must understand that without linguistic diversity present, it presents a myriad of complications. To completely grasp the consequences of the loss of languages, Yale News applied the metric, "functional richness." According to the same site, "functional richness" is a metric similar to the one used in ecology, the metric which measures the number of species occupying niche space in an area. With this metric, they simply substituted languages for species to calculate the effects. The findings showcased that the consequences of the loss of linguistic diversity would vary based on the specific region. Regions where majority of indigenous languages are under threat, such as Northeast South America, Oregon, Alaska, and northern Australia, must confront the harshest consequences. The consequences include a loss of self-identity, it includes a weak bond with the values and traditions one grew up with, and it can result in the loss of the country's political legitimacy.

Revitalization

However, is it still possible to revitalize endangered languages to allow the continuation of the culture and language to live on? The answer is complicated. There are many attempted solutions to revitalize endangered languages. One of these solutions includes language policy.

Language policy refers to the "official government decisions regarding the use of language in the public domain, including courts, schools, governments offices, and health services," according to UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning. In the past, language policies were used to forbid the utilization of a specific language. In the case of the Chamorro language, which we discussed earlier, language policies were enacted to forbid the speaking of the Chamorro language on baseball fields and in classrooms. In addition, language policies in the form of punishment such as monetary fines would be enacted if a student was caught speaking the Chamorro language within school hours. Ultimately, these examples showcase the negative utilization of language policies, how these policies can enforce the discontinuation or cessation of a language. However, if language policies were used to cease the utilization of a language, it can also be used to revitalize the same language. Mufwene mentions that language policies could be integrated in schools so that the utilization of a threatened language is spoken in everyday use. However, Mufwene declares an underestimation regarding the efficiency of this application, stating that "Looking to schools and declarations of official status to assist endangered languages is much like looking for one's lost keys under the lamp post because that is where the most light appears to shine rather than because that is where they have been lost." Therefore, the integration of a threatened language into homes and allowing the children to grow up with this language serves as the most effective mechanism to revitalize endangered languages. Unfortunately, though this method serves as the most effective way to revitalize endangered languages, the government does not have the authority to govern what languages are spoken by families in their household, thus demonstrating a difficult solution to implement.

In addition, there is another factor of language policy that must be taken into consideration, and that is even if a language policy exists to support an endangered language, it does not always necessarily mean that the policy is effective at implementing this change. For example, Mufwene states that the Native American Language Act (NALA) of 1990 was passed in order to preserve the dying languages and their cultures. However, just because the word "act" is in the name does not mean that there are active protocols completed to preserve these languages. NALA had no planning dimension, as Mufwene states, and in a way, it taught linguists and people around the world to not be deceived by these language policies which seem like they were passed to aid in the cultural and linguistic revitalization of languages.

On a brighter note, a success story of language policies includes the Māori language in New Zealand. Though the Māori language is one of the two official languages on the island, it is an indigenous language spoken by the Māori

people and is facing severe endangerment due to the colonial policies which marginalized the language, according to the LinkedIn article “What are some successful language policies in global contexts?”. As a result, the Māori Language Policy was enacted, paving the way to the language’s revitalization process. The act includes promoting the usage of the Māori language through mediums such as marketing and promoting the language and celebrating the history of the Māori language within New Zealand’s history, according to an article known as “Teaching Indigenous Languages – Marketing the Māori Language.” Reports have shown an increase in the Māori language from 24.0% in 2018 to 30% in 2021, according to “The Guardian.”

Technological Revitalization

In addition, technology can also play a major role in the revitalization of endangered languages. Though we are in a time where some perceive technologies as distractions or instruments of negative effects, they can play a critical role in bringing languages back to life. According to the article “The role of technology in preserving endangered languages and cultures,” digital approaches such as language learning applications and digital archives serve to preserve languages, which is a method we have learned that allows languages to live on whether they continue to be spoken or not. However, there are a variety of factors which contribute to the effectiveness of the revitalization process through language learning applications. A few of these factors include the learner’s motivation, consistency, learning environment, teaching strategies, and even uncontrollable factors such as age and first language. Language learning applications, however, do provide many benefits. According to a literature review published by the University of Victoria which analyzed the effectiveness of language learning applications with a concentration of Indigenous language learning, language learning applications provide many benefits such as the fact that they are portable, economically accessible, and permit independent learning at one’s individual pace. Language learning applications in general allow individuals to engage in an interactive activity which provides cognitive benefits such as improved concentration and better academic performance. However, many have begun questioning the actual effectiveness of learning a foreign language through a technological application: the most population application being “Duolingo,” an application which holds language learning curriculum for more than forty languages. According to an article published by “FluentU,” it stated that technological applications such as Duolingo do not offer resources and selections for more advanced speakers. Applications similar to Duolingo may be beneficial and effective at learning a foreign language, but specifically with a target audience of novice or people who are completely unfamiliar with the foreign language. In addition, there is very little conversation preparation offered throughout the application. As the entire point of learning a language is to be able to communicate with someone in that specific language, an application with very little emphasis on conversation practice proves to be inefficient and ineffective at teaching users how to speak a foreign language.

For technological revitalization to prove effective, a conversational section of the application would prove to be an effective way at learning the language, thus contributing to its revitalization. Applications which resemble this formation include language learning platforms such as “iTalki” and “LanguaTalk,” web sites which permit users to purchase lessons online and allow users to converse with someone already fluent in target language. These types of applications which contain this conversation feature prove to be effective as 72% of participants within an iTalki effectiveness study increased their oral proficiency by at least one level and 78% of participants improved their written proficiency, according to the “iTalki Efficacy Study.”

Conclusion

With all information taken into consideration, it is apparent that language endangerment is heavily influenced by previous historical events which have shaped the utilization of the language today. This may include historical events such as colonization, where indigenous populations were forced to follow the culture, traditions, and utilization of language by the colonizers. Regarding language revitalization, language revitalization can take many forms such as

through language policies and technological applications; however, each has a limit to their effectiveness. It is ultimately the preservation of languages which will increase the revitalization factor of endangered languages.

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