

Endangered Languages

Most of the 7000 languages spoken in the world today will vanish before the end of this century, taking with them cultural traditions from all over the world, as well as linguistic structures that would have improved our understanding of the universality and variability of human language. This book is an accessible introduction to the topic of language endangerment, answering questions such as: What is it? How and why does it happen? And why should we care? The book outlines the various causes of language endangerment, explaining what makes a language “safe” and highlighting the danger signs that threaten a minority language. Readers will learn about the consequences of losing a language, both for its former speech community and for our understanding of human language. Illustrated with case studies, it describes the various methods of documenting endangered languages, and shows how they can be revitalized.

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Endangered Languages

An Introduction

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Preface

Like most linguists of a certain age, I came to the topic of language endangerment accidentally. I first began to study the Salish-Pend d'Oreille language in northwestern Montana in 1981, not because it was endangered but because it would provide insights into the Pacific Northwest linguistic area – a large group of northwestern languages belonging primarily to three different Native American language families (Salishan, Wakashan, and Chimakuan) that have come to resemble each other as a result of widespread multilingualism. I expected that understanding one member of the Salishan language family well would eventually help me understand the whole family, including its history, and I could then move on to compare Salishan languages to the languages of the other families in the Pacific Northwest, so that I could discover how all the groups had influenced each other. I still believe all that; but now I also believe that it would take me another century or so to understand this one language thoroughly, and for many years now my scholarly motive for continuing the study has to do with a fascination with the language rather than with the larger intellectual goal of studying language contact phenomena in the region. Meanwhile, another motive has become more and more prominent as I have become more aware of the precarious state of the language: I want to contribute whatever I can to the Salish and Pend d'Oreille tribes' efforts to preserve and revitalize their language, by documenting as much of it as I can while it is still possible to work with fluent speakers. I estimate that there are now fewer than twenty elderly tribal members who learned their heritage language in infancy and continued speaking it at least through the early decades of their lives. Time is short.

Then when I began thinking about endangered languages as a general topic, I realized that my first sustained fieldwork experience, fifty years ago, was also an endangered-language project: my dissertation research was a dialect study based on fieldwork I conducted in the former Yugoslavia. It was an effort to document and analyze a set of word formation patterns in nonstandard dialects, dialects that even then were being eroded through contact with the language then known as Standard Serbo-Croatian. Endangered dialects, endangered languages – they have more in common than one might expect at first glance. In a real sense, my career has been bracketed by concern about the loss of linguistic diversity.

Things are different nowadays. Research on endangered languages is a deliberate choice, not an accidental by-product of a project undertaken for other scientific reasons. Young scholars who engage in the research are most

likely to have as their major goal the documentation of languages that might otherwise be lost to their communities and to science without leaving a trace. They often have other goals as well – the investigation of a particular set of grammatical features, for instance – but they also want to preserve knowledge of a unique linguistic system and culture, as well as unique ways of speaking and using language, for the benefit of future generations, both in the heritage community and in the scholarly world.

Fieldworkers now also understand that it is unacceptable to visit a community, gather data, and then go away without a second thought. Giving back to the community – a dictionary, a grammar, help with the preparation of language lessons, copies of recordings and of old materials that are not locally available, videos, whatever the community wants and needs – is a standard feature of modern linguistic field research. This too is a major change in expectations for fieldworkers' responsibilities. In Yugoslavia, back in 1965–66, the idea of giving back to the community never occurred to me, or (I am reasonably sure) to the hospitable dialect speakers I worked with in the villages; today, on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, I concentrate on those aspects of the language that are of the greatest interest to the community (primarily a dictionary, but also analyzed texts), and I also try in other ways to show my respect and gratitude for the priceless opportunity that the elders and the tribes' Culture Committee have given me to study their language.

I was editor of the journal *Language* when the late Ken Hale, one of the greatest linguists of the twentieth century, organized a symposium on endangered languages at the 1991 annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America. By then it was clear that language endangerment is an urgent challenge from the viewpoint of speech communities and of linguists (who need to find out about the linguistic treasures in endangered languages). At my request, and following discussions between us that began in 1989, Ken collected papers from his symposium, edited them, and published them as the first article in the first 1992 issue of *Language*. Nancy Dorian's earlier endangered-language research, on Scottish Gaelic, was already well known at the time, and her 1989 edited volume *Investigating Obsolescence* had made a significant impact. But in the United States, at least, it was primarily Ken Hale's coauthored article collection 'Endangered languages' that led to the subsequent outpouring of articles, organizations, and funding initiatives devoted to endangered languages. I shepherded a sizable number of excellent articles to publication in *Language* during my seven years as editor, but commissioning and publishing 'Endangered Languages' is the editorial act I am proudest of.

In spite of my long-standing interest in the subject, I have largely been a bystander in the important developments of the last twenty years in endangered-language research; my main efforts in this area have been devoted to my continuing study of the Salish-Pend d'Oreille language. Other scholars and activists have shaped the field: catalogs of endangered languages, theoretical frameworks, technological advances in recording and archiving endangered-language data

and making it available on the internet, programs for revitalizing endangered languages, and outreach activities aimed at educating the general public about the impending catastrophic decline of global linguistic diversity.

My goal in this textbook is to introduce the topic of language endangerment to interested students and other readers new to the subject, by presenting some of the results of the last few decades of activity (by endangered-language communities as well as by scholars). Given my training and career path, the presentation of the material necessarily reflects my perspective as a linguist. I have tried not to lose sight of cultural aspects of language endangerment, and readers should certainly keep them in mind; but coverage of endangered cultures here is unfortunately shallow.

The book is meant to be accessible to readers with little or no background in linguistics. I have assumed only basic knowledge of grammatical terms, for instance, “noun”, “verb”, “transitive verb”, “intransitive verb”, “subject”, “object”, “direct object”, and “indirect object”; where other technical linguistic terms are unavoidable, they are defined on their first occurrence in the text and again in the glossary at the end of the book. There are no chapter-by-chapter exercises. When I’ve taught courses in endangered languages, I’ve asked each student to choose one endangered language and investigate it from perspectives corresponding roughly to the chapters in this book: How did it become endangered, and why? What are some social processes and (if any) linguistic results of its decline? What has the threatened loss of their language meant to the speech community? What will science lose if this particular language disappears? How well documented is the language, and what preservation/revitalization programs have been undertaken by the speech community? Each chapter ends with a list of sources from which the specific pieces of information in the chapter are drawn, together with suggestions for further reading on the various topics.

I acknowledge with gratitude the wonderfully helpful comments that several colleagues have given me while the book was being written and revised: Peter Austin, Nancy Dorian, Nick Emlen, Anna Fenyvesi, Kate Graber, and an anonymous reader for Cambridge University Press. Their suggestions have led to much improvement in the text, but of course none of these people is to blame for remaining errors of fact or interpretation.