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Introduction

Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank

1.1 Language endangerment

It is generally agreed by linguists that today there are about 7,000 languages spoken across the world; and that at least half of these may no longer continue to exist after a few more generations as they are not being learnt by children as first languages. Such languages are said to be ENDANGERED LANGUAGES.[1]

Current language and population distributions across the world are heavily skewed: there is a small number of very large languages (the top twenty languages, like Chinese, English, Hindi/Urdu, Spanish have over 50 million speakers each and are together spoken by 50 per cent of the world's population), and a very large number of small languages with speaker communities in their thousands or hundreds. Economic, political, social and cultural power tends to be held by speakers of the majority languages, while the many thousands of minority languages are marginalized and their speakers are under pressure to shift to the dominant tongues. In the past sixty years, since around the end of World War II, there have been radical reductions in speaker numbers of minority AUTOCHTHONOUS languages, especially in Australia, Siberia, Asia and the Americas. In addition, the languages under pressure show shifting age profiles where it is only older people who continue to speak the threatened languages and younger people typically show LANGUAGE SHIFT, meaning they move to using more powerful regional, national or global languages. Language shift can take place rapidly, over a generation or two, or it can take place gradually, but continuously, over several generations. Language shift often takes place through a period of UNSTABLE BILINGUALISM or MULTILINGUALISM, that is, speakers use two or more languages but one (or more) of them is more dominant and used increasingly widely until finally it (or they) take over the roles previously carried by the endangered language(s).

Linguists are becoming increasingly alarmed at the rate at which languages are going out of use. A special issue of the journal *Language* (Hale *et al.* 1992), based on a colloquium held at the 1991 annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, drew the attention of the linguistics profession to the scale of language endangerment, and called for a concerted effort by linguists to record the remaining speakers, and to create linguistic archives for future reference. In this issue of *Language*, Krauss (1992) estimated that 90 per cent of the world's languages would be severely endangered or gone by 2100. According to more optimistic estimates such as Nettle and Romaine (2000) and Crystal (2000), 'only' 50 per cent will be lost.

This 'call to action' reinvigorated fieldwork and documentation of languages, which had characterized an earlier era of linguistics (associated with the work of Franz Boas and his students). In the past ten years a number of initiatives responding to the call of Hale, Krauss, Grinevald and Yamamoto (and others) have been launched, including:

- the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project,[2] funded by Arcadia, which gives research grants for language documentation projects, maintains a digital archive of recordings, transcriptions and metadata, and runs an academic programme with newly introduced MA and PhD degrees to train linguists and researchers;
- the Volkswagen Foundation's sponsorship of the DoBeS (Dokumentation Bedrohter Sprachen)[3] project;
- the US National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Documenting Endangered Languages initiative (DEL), 'a new, multi-year effort to preserve records of key languages before they become extinct';[4]
- the European Science Foundation Better Analyses Based on Endangered Languages programme (EuroBABEL) whose main purpose is 'to promote empirical research on under-described endangered languages, both spoken and signed';[5]
- The Chirac Foundation for Sustainable Development and Cultural Dialogue Sorosoro programme 'so the languages of the world may prosper';[6]
- The World Oral Literature Project based at Cambridge University, 'to record the voices of vanishing worlds';[7]
- smaller non-profit initiatives, notably the Foundation for Endangered Languages,[8] the Endangered Language Fund,[9] and the Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen.[10]

Intergovernmental agencies have taken on board the problem of the loss of linguistic diversity. The United Nations has a number of policy papers and guidelines for governmental action plans on the UNESCO website under the heading of safeguarding 'intangible cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2003a; 2003b; see Section 1.5.4 below for further discussion).

Table 1.1. *UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework*

Degree of endangerment	Intergenerational language transmission
Safe	language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
Definitely endangered	children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
Severely endangered	language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
Critically endangered	the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
Extinct	there are no speakers left

One of the tasks that UNESCO has tried to tackle is how to categorize levels of endangerment. Assessing levels of language knowledge and use is an important element of language documentation and planning because 'a language spoken by several thousand people on a daily basis presents a much different set of options for revitalization than a language that has a dozen native speakers who rarely use it' (Grenoble and Whaley 2006: 3). Although numerous schemes have been proposed, the most comprehensive is UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework,[11] which is shown in Table 1.1. It establishes six degrees of vitality/endangerment based on nine factors. Of these factors, the most salient is that of intergenerational transmission: whether or not a language is used in the family and passed from an older generation to children. This factor is generally accepted as the 'gold standard' of language vitality (Fishman 1991). (For more on measuring language vitality, see Grenoble, Chapter 2, and Grinevald and Bert, Chapter 3.)

1.2 Counting languages

Overviews of the study of language endangerment usually start with a list of statistics about the number of languages in the world, the proportion considered endangered, and so on. The usual source of statistics concerning the number of languages and their users is *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009), which listed 6,909 living languages at the time of going to press.

However, this headline figure masks inherent problems in the counting of languages, as the Introduction to *Ethnologue* itself recognizes. Many linguists use the criterion of MUTUAL INTELLIGIBILITY to distinguish languages: if users of two language varieties cannot understand each other, the varieties are considered to be different languages. If they can

understand each other, the varieties are considered mutually compre-
hensible dialects of the same language. However, mutual intelligibility
is to a certain extent a function of attitudes and politics; that is, whether
or not people want to understand each other. Such attitudes are, in part,
linked to whether a community considers itself to have a distinct ethno-
linguistic identity, but members of a community may not agree about
this. Because of such issues, some linguists (especially sociolinguists and
anthropological linguists influenced by postmodern theories) now ques-
tion whether language boundaries can be identified at all.

Politics also plays an important part in language differentiation.
Following nineteenth-century philosophers such as Herder, language
has been considered a crucial element of national identity, with 'one
state, one people, one language' being seen as the ideal. But languages
do not necessarily follow political boundaries. For example, Quechua is
often thought of as one language, but in fact this is an overarching name
which denotes a group of related language varieties (Coronel-Molina
and McCarty, Chapter 18). Linguists distinguish between twenty-seven
Quechuan indigenous languages in Peru, but the Peruvian government
only recognizes six of these as languages (the official national language
is the colonial language, Spanish). Minority groups may claim full 'lan-
guage' status for their variety, especially if it has been disregarded as
a 'substandard' dialect in the past (e.g. Aragonese in Spain). Separatist
groups may highlight linguistic differences to support their cause,
while national governments may play these down. Paradoxes such as the
mutual incomprehensibility of Chinese 'dialects' compared to the mutual
comprehensibility of mainland Scandinavian languages are clearly moti-
vated by political and nationalistic considerations rather than linguistic
ones. (See Bradley, Chapter 4, on the many complex issues connected to
delineating languages, with other examples from South-East Asia.)

In addition, complete information on all of the world's languages is not
available: the majority have not been recorded or analysed by linguists,
have no dictionaries or even written form, and are not recognized offi-
cially in the countries in which they are spoken. What information there
is available, is often out of date: for example, for Guernesiais (Channel
Islands, Europe) the information in *Ethnologue* is based on a 1976 estimate
and ignores more recent data such as the 2001 census.

The Introduction to *Ethnologue* admits that: 'Because languages are
dynamic and variable and undergo constant change, the total number of
living languages in the world cannot be known precisely.' Nevertheless,
the traditional approach to counting languages is still followed by
most researchers, and also by the UNESCO *Atlas of Languages in Danger of
Disappearing* (Moseley 2009). Despite their shortcomings however, at the
very least these compendia provide a useful guide to relative levels of
linguistic diversity around the world. Figure 1.1 shows the proportion of
languages in each continent. It can be seen that Europe is by far the least
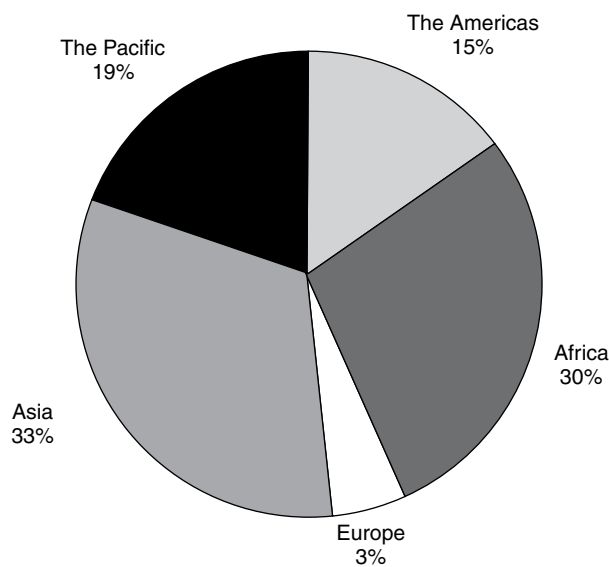
Figure 1.1. *The proportion of languages in each continent of the world*

linguistically diverse continent, which is worrying if other parts of the world continue to follow European trends.

1.3   Causes of language endangerment

The causes of language endangerment can be divided into four main categories (synthesized from Nettle and Romaine 2000; Crystal 2000; see also Grenoble, Chapter 2):

- natural catastrophes, famine, disease: for example, Malol, Papua New Guinea (earthquake); Andaman Islands (tsunami)
- war and genocide, for example, Tasmania (genocide by colonists); Brazilian indigenous peoples (disputes over land and resources); El Salvador (civil war)
- overt repression, often in the name of 'national unity' or ASSIMILATION (including forcible resettlement): for example, Kurdish, Welsh, Native American languages
- cultural/political/economic dominance, for example, Ainu, Manx, Sorbian, Quechua and many others.

Factors often overlap or occur together. The dividing lines can be difficult to distinguish. For example, in the Americas and Australia disease and suppression of indigenous cultures spread after colonization, and in Ireland many Irish speakers died or emigrated due to colonial government inaction which compounded the effects of the potato blight famine in the nineteenth century.

The fourth category, which is the most common, can be further sub-divided into five common factors (see also Grenoble, Chapter 2; Harbert, Chapter 20):

- **economic**: for example, rural poverty leads to migration to cities and further afield. If the local economy improves, tourism may bring speakers of majority languages
- **cultural dominance** by the majority community, for example, education and literature through the majority or state language only; indigenous language and culture may become 'folklorized'
- **political**: for example, education policies which ignore or exclude local languages, lack of recognition or political representation, bans on the use of minority languages in public life
- **historical**: for example, colonization, boundary disputes, the rise of one group and their language variety to political and cultural dominance
- **attitudinal**: for example, minority languages become associated with poverty, illiteracy and hardship, while the dominant language is associated with progress/escape.

More recently, there have been many community initiatives for LANGUAGE REVIVAL or LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION of endangered languages to expand the contexts in which they are used and to ensure they continue to be passed on to new generations (for examples see Grenoble and Whaley 2006; Hinton and Hale 2001; Hinton, Chapter 15; Moriarty, Chapter 22).

1.4 Why worry about language endangerment?

1.4.1 Value to linguistic science

Throughout history languages have died out and been replaced by others through LANGUAGE CONTACT; that is, contact between groups of people speaking different languages, or through DIVERGENCE due to lack of communication over distances (Dalby 2002). Until recently this was seen as a natural cycle of change. But the growing number of linguistic varieties no longer being learnt by children, coupled with a tendency for language shift, where speakers move to languages of wider communication (especially major languages like English or Spanish), means that unless the myriad inventive ways in which humans express themselves are documented now, future generations may have no knowledge of them. For example, Ubykh, a Caucasian language whose last fully competent speaker (Tevfik Esenç) died in 1992, has eighty-four distinct consonants and, according to some analyses, only two phonologically distinct vowels. This is the smallest proportion of vowels to consonants known, and the possibility that such languages could exist would have been unknown

if linguists such as Georges Dumézil, Hans Vogt and George Hewitt had not recorded the last fluent speaker before he died and analysed the language (Palosaari and Campbell, Chapter 6, discuss and exemplify several other examples). Krauss (1992: 10) called for 'some rethinking of our priorities, lest linguistics go down in history as the only science that has presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated'.

Several of the languages currently being documented by researchers are ENDANGERED SIGN LANGUAGES, which have been shown to reveal important insights into how humans communicate in non-oral modalities. Some of these endangered sign languages are still in the process of development and can thus also shed valuable light on linguistic evolution. Ahmad (2008) points out that most overviews of language endangerment omit mention of sign languages (an exception is Harrison 2007). As well as facing similar problems to other minority languages, users of sign languages have to counter prejudice from those who do not recognize them as full languages.

1.4.2   Cultural heritage

UNESCO's website states: 'Cultural diversity is a driving force of development, not only in respect of economic growth, but also as a means of leading a more fulfilling intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual life.'[12] Linguistic diversity is cited as a 'pillar of cultural diversity' and:

> Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development, are of strategic importance for people and the planet … When languages fade, so does the world's rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression – valuable resources for ensuring a better future are also lost.[13]

This is also the theme of David Harrison's (2007) book *When Languages Die* in which he demonstrates the many and varied ways in which aspects of human cultures and societies and aspects of human languages are intertwined and mutually affecting.[14] All societies throughout the planet have ORAL LITERATURE; that is, cultural traditions expressed through language in the form of stories, legends, historical narratives, poetry and songs. Harrison and others have argued that the loss of endangered languages means the loss of such knowledge and cultural richness, both to the communities who speak them and to human beings in general (what UNESCO has described as 'intangible cultural heritage').

1.4.3   Language and ecology

A number of authors identify parallels, and even correlations, between cultural and linguistic diversity and biological diversity. Biological

scientists, especially Sutherland (2003), have found that places such as Indonesia and Papua New Guinea which have a high number of different biological species also have a large number of different languages, especially compared to Europe, which has the fewest of both. This theme has been taken up enthusiastically by the organization Terralingua[15] and some researchers and campaigners (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas 2002). It has also received considerable public attention, e.g. in the UK, through a series of programmes on BBC Radio entitled *Lost for Words* and the TV chat show *Richard and Judy*.

Does this mean, however, that there is a causal link? Are the causes of language death and species decline the same? Sutherland (2003) concludes that although there is a clear correlation between cultural and biological diversity, the reasons for decline are likely to be different. However, a number of 'ecolinguists' employ the tools of critical discourse analysis to claim that the endangerment of the natural environment is in part caused by language, pointing out linguistic practices which reveal an exploitative attitude towards the natural environment (e.g. papers in Fill and Mühlhäusler, 2001). A more political interpretation might argue that the decline in both linguistic and biological diversity are by-products of globalization and/or international capitalism.

'Ecolinguistics' has a tendency to treat language as a living organism which, as Mackey (2001) reminds us, is a fallacy: languages are human artefacts not species, and do not have a life of their own outside human communities (see Michael, Chapter 7). Human communities therefore need to be sustainable in order to maintain their languages.

1.4.4 Language and identity

Languages are often seen as symbols of ethnic and national identity. Many endangered language campaigners claim that when a language dies out, a unique way of looking at the world also disappears (for example, Dalby 2002, Fishman 1989, Nettle and Romaine 2000). This can be seen as a weak version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which claims that our way of thinking, and thus our cultural identity, are determined by the lexicon and syntax of our language (Carroll 1956, Mandelbaum 1949). Discourse on endangered languages has therefore been criticized for being 'essentialist' and 'deterministic', especially by Duchêne and Heller (2007).

Many recent writers, influenced by postmodernism, see identities not as fixed, formal realities, but rather as fluid, constructed while people position themselves within and between the various social settings of their everyday lives (for example, Castells 2004, Omoniyi and White 2006), e.g. we may think of ourselves primarily as students at one point in the day, and as members of a sports team at another. This may help to account for the paradox whereby many endangered language speakers claim a strong identification with their language, yet do not transmit it

to their children. As Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985: 239–40) note, feelings of ethnic identity can survive total language loss. Dorian (1999: 31) comments: 'Because it is only one of an almost infinite variety of potential identity markers, [a language] is easily replaced by others that are just as effective. In this respect the ancestral language is functionally expendable.'

Nevertheless, maintaining regional identity is seen as increasingly important in the era of globalization. Language is one of the ways in which people construct their identities, and thus may be highlighted when it seems salient. As Lanza and Svendsen (2007: 293) suggest: 'language might become important for identity when a group feels it is losing its identity due to political or social reasons' (see Grinevald and Bert, Chapter 3). Language planners and activists may promote symbolic ethnicity and 'localness' as means to encourage language revitalization.

1.4.5 Linguistic human rights

The right to use one's own language, in public or even in private, is not universally accepted. For example, in Turkey until recently, the existence of Kurdish was officially denied: Kurds were known as 'Mountain Turks', Kurdish names were not allowed, and there were no media or other services in the Kurdish language. In the last few years there have been some improvements in minority rights due to Turkey's application to join the European Union. The EU has declared overt support for linguistic diversity and minority rights, which has led to significant improvements in prospective member states (Commission of the European Communities 2004).

People who are not fluent in national or official languages need access to services such as education, the media and the justice system, and inadequate translation might deny them access to justice. In many countries (e.g. Uganda, Haiti, the Seychelles) the vast majority of the population do not speak or read/write the official (usually ex-colonial) languages, and are thus denied the opportunity to participate in public life.

Romaine (2008: 19) combines several of the above points by arguing that preserving linguistic ecology will ultimately benefit both human social justice and the natural world:

> The preservation of a language in its fullest sense ultimately entails the maintenance of the community who speaks it, and therefore the arguments in favour of doing something to reverse language shift are ultimately about sustaining cultures and habitats … Maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity is a matter of social justice because distinctiveness in culture and language has formed the basis for defining human identities.

However, it could be argued that many current linguistic ecologies are not healthy for endangered languages and need to be improved

rather than preserved. (For more on linguistic ecologies, see Grenoble, Chapter 2.)

1.4.6 Education policy

Research has consistently found that education through the 'mother tongue' provides the best start for children (e.g. Baker 2006, Cummins 1979, 1991, Cummins and Swain 1986). ADDITIVE BILINGUALISM correlates with higher general educational achievement, including in other languages. However, the full advantages are only reaped if both linguistic varieties are afforded equal (or at least respected) status, and full BILITERACY is developed (Hornberger 2003, Kenner 2003), that is, people are able to read/ write in both languages that they use (see Lüpke, Chapter 16, for critical discussion of literacy in minority and endangered languages). Children from minority-language backgrounds face disadvantages in 'submersion' situations in mainstream, majority-language classes where little linguistic support is provided (Edelsky *et al.* 1983; Coronel-Molina and McCarty, Chapter 18). SUBTRACTIVE BILINGUALISM, where one language is replaced by another, can lead to loss of self-confidence and lower achievement. If we really want children from minority backgrounds to fulfil their full educational and economic potential, their home languages should be supported; the majority population would also benefit from multilingual and cross-cultural education.

It is often assumed that shifting language will bring economic benefits. But linguistic intolerance can mask other discrimination, especially racism. Blommaert (2001), Sealey and Carter (2004) and Williams (1992) see language MINORITIZATION as a symptom of wider hegemonic ideologies and social and political inequalities. This point is echoed by Nettle and Romaine (2000), who note that linguistic minorities do not always benefit from shifting to a new language (see also Harbert, Chapter 20).

1.4.7 Wouldn't it be better if we all spoke one language?

Another common assumption, especially among non-linguists, is that using a single language would bring peace, either in a particular country or worldwide. Linguistic diversity is assumed to contribute to interethnic conflict (Brewer 2001) and is seen as a problem rather than a resource (Ruíz 1984). But as noted above, language conflicts are very rarely about language alone. Some of the worst violence in human history has occurred where language was not a factor at the start of the conflict, e.g. Rwanda or former Yugoslavia, or, further away in time, the Korean War, the American Civil War and the War of the Roses. In the case of former Yugoslavia, linguistic divergence was a consequence rather than a cause of conflict (Greenberg 2004): what was formerly known as Serbo-Croat is now split into Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin, with