

## **INTD0111A/ARBC0111A**

# **The Unity and Diversity of Human Language**

Lecture #23  
Dec 6<sup>th</sup>, 2006

## **Announcements**

- Tomorrow is going to be a review. So, come with questions on anything we studied in this course. I will also answer questions on Assignment 4 or any other assignment.

## **Losing linguistic diversity: Language death**

- You should have been dazzled by now by the remarkable linguistic diversity that we discussed over the course of the term.
- Guess what! It could've been much more dazzling if we still had access to thousands of "extinct" languages.
- Estimates on the number of languages that could have existed today if none had become extinct range from 10,000 to 600,000, with 150,000 being considered realistic by most researchers.

## **Language death**

- Question: How does a language die and become extinct?
- Answer: When it ceases to be acquired as a native language by children.
- But why does that happen?
- Several reasons. Linguistics typically talk about four types of language death.

## **Sudden language death**

- Sudden language death occurs when all of the speakers of the language die or get killed. This was the case with Tasmanian. In 1887, the last speaker of a Tasmanian language died, and so did the language.
- Another example occurred in 1962 when an (no doubt imported) influenza killed all speakers of Trumai, up until then spoken in a single village in Brazil. Only 10 speakers were left.

## **Radical language death**

- Radical language death is similar to sudden language death in its abruptness. Rather than the speakers dying, however, they all stop speaking the language. Often the reason for this is survival under the threat of political repression or even genocide.
- Speakers, to avoid being identified as "natives", simply stop speaking their native language. Children are thus unable to learn that language, and the language ends up dying.

## Radical language death

- One example of radical language death involves suppression of an uprising in El Salvador through the killing of 25,000 peasants in 1932. After that event, the remaining speakers of the languages Lenca and Cacaopera stopped using their languages in fear of being killed too.

## Gradual language death

- Gradual language death is the most common way for a language to become extinct. It happens to minority languages that are in contact with a dominant language, much as American Indian languages are in contact with English.
- In each generation, fewer and fewer children learn the language until there are no new learners. The language is said to be dead when the last generation of speakers dies out.
- Cornish suffered this fate in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as have many Native American languages in both the North and South continents.

## Bottom-to-top language death

- Bottom-to-top language death is the term that describes a language that survives only in specific contexts, such as a liturgical language. Latin is one such example.
- Sometimes, a process of language revival can bring back one of these languages, as the case is with Modern Hebrew, and perhaps Cornish in the near future, when it starts to get acquired by children as a native language.

## On their way to “dying”: Moribund

- But languages can still have native speakers, but would still be considered on the verge of extinction if no children are acquiring that language.
- These are the so-called **moribund** languages.
- Here’s a passage from Michael Krauss’ article in the reading for today’s class:

## On their way to “dying”: Moribund

“The Eyak language of Alaska now has two aged speakers; Mandan has 6; Osage 5, Abenaki-Penobscot 20, and Iowa has 5 fluent speakers. According to count in 1977, already 13 years ago, Coeur d’Alene had fewer than 20, Tuscarora fewer than 30, Menomini fewer than 50, Yokuts fewer than 10 ... Sirenikski Eskimo has two speakers. Ainu is perhaps extinct. Ybykh, the Northwest Caucasian language with the most consonants, 80-some, is nearly extinct, with perhaps only one remaining speaker.”

## Endangered languages

- Unlike moribund languages, **endangered** languages are still acquired by children, but are projected to become moribund in the current century.
- Languages that are neither moribund or endangered are called “**safe**” languages.
- Let’s look at some figures here.

### Moribund and endangered languages

- According to Krauss, in Alaska only 2 of the 20 native languages are acquired by children, and only 3 of 30 languages in the small northern minorities of the former Soviet Union are learned by children. So, in these two areas alone, 90% of the languages are moribund.

### Moribund and endangered languages

- In the USA and Canada, 149 of 187 languages are no longer learned by children. So, 80% are moribund.
- In Central and South America, the situation is relatively better, with only 50 of 300 of Meso-American indigenous languages, and 110 of 400 of South American languages are likely to be moribund.

### Moribund and endangered languages

- The worst situation exists in Australia, with 90% of 250 aboriginal languages that are still spoken now moribund, and most of those are very close to extinction.
- For the whole world, some linguists believe that 50% of today's human languages are on their way to extinction in the current century.

### Number of languages by countries

(from Skutnabb-Kangas 2000)

Papua New Guinea	850
Indonesia	670
Nigeria	410
India	380
Cameroon	270
Australia	250
Mexico	240
Zaire	210
Brazil	210

### Reasons for language mortality

- Another 13 countries have 160 to 100 languages each, including the USA, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Chad.
- "Circumstances that have led to the present language mortality range from outright genocide, social or economic or habitat destruction, displacement, demographic submersion, language suppression in forced assimilation education, to electronic media bombardment, especially television, ... 'cultural nerve gas'." (Krauss, p. 6)

### Dying really fast

- Krauss argues that if we consider 100,000 speakers as a safety-in-numbers limit for languages, then we might perhaps put the number of "safe" languages at 600.
- But this means that the rest of the world's languages (6000 at least) are either moribund or endangered. In other words, the current century may actually witness the death or doom of 90% of human languages.
- Too sad!

### **So, why should we care?**

- We should care because the study of human language is a study of human nature and provides us with a window on human cognition.
- The more diversity there is, the more data we have to take on this endeavor.
- Imagine if this class had only data from English! How boring!

### **So, why should we care?**

- But language is more than just a system of grammar. It is also embedded within a whole culture.
- As Hale points out, “language ... embodies the intellectual wealth of the people who use it. A language and the intellectual productions of its speakers are often inseparable, in fact. Some forms of verbal art—verse, song, or chant—depend crucially on morphological and phonological, even syntactic, properties of the language in which it is formed ... Even where the dependency is not so organic as this, an intellectual tradition may be so thoroughly a part of a people’s linguistic ethnography as to be, in effect, inseparable from the language.” (p.36)

### **So, why should we care?**

- I encourage you to read Hale’s discussion of Damin and how losing it as a language also meant losing it as a cultural treasure and a window through which we can look at human intellectual endeavors.

### **Indigenous languages of North America**

- The study of the indigenous languages of North America has helped linguists know more about the nature of human language and the underlying principles governing cross-linguistic diversity.
- Throughout this course, we talked about several interesting phenomena from such languages.

### **Indigenous languages of North America**

- Polysynthesis of course comes to mind first.
- Incorporation.
- Head-marking.
- Case and agreement systems.
- Evidentiality.
- Aspect and tense.
- Animacy.
- Etc.

### **Indigenous languages**

- The same can be said about Australian languages, and how they helped confirm or disconfirm linguists’ hypotheses about language: Warlpiri, Dyirbal.

### So, what should we do?

- Do the best we can educationally, politically, and culturally, to increase the chances of survival for endangered languages. In this respect, we need to work with the communities where these languages are spoken to develop pedagogical materials and literature and promote the use of these languages in different domains.

### So, what should we do?

- Establish more and more organizations and centers that focus on the preservation of particular languages, like the Native American Language Institute, SIL (*ethnologue*), the Rama Language Project in Nicaragua, Mayan linguistics in Guatemala, etc.
- Urge national and international organizations (e.g. UNESCO) to get involved in the preservation of endangered languages.

### So, what should we do?

- A community may also try to revive its language. Perhaps the most dramatic story is that of Modern Hebrew, which was revived as a mother tongue after centuries of being learned and studied only in its ancient written form.
- Irish has had considerable institutional and political support as the national language of Ireland, despite major inroads by English. The same is now being done for Cornish.

### So, what should we do?

- In New Zealand, Maori communities established nursery schools staffed by elders and conducted entirely in Maori, called *kohanga reo*, 'language nests'. There, and in Alaska, Hawaii, and elsewhere, this model is being extended to primary and in some cases secondary schools. And in California, younger adults have become language apprentices to older adult speakers in communities where only a few older speakers are still living.

### So, what should we do?

- A growing number of conferences, workshops, and publications now offer support for individuals, schools, and communities trying to preserve languages. So, we should take advantage of these.

### So, what should we do?

- Because so many languages are in danger of disappearing, linguists are trying to learn as much about them as possible, so that even if the language disappears, all knowledge of the language won't disappear at the same time.
- Researchers make videotapes, audiotapes, and written records of language use in both formal and informal settings, along with translations. In addition, they analyze the vocabulary and rules of the language and write dictionaries and grammars.

### **So, what should we do?**

- Linguists also work with communities around the world that want to preserve their languages, offering both technical and practical help with language teaching, maintenance, and revival. This help is based in part on the dictionaries and grammars that they write.

### **So, what should we do?**

- Linguists can help in other ways, too, using their experience in teaching and studying a wide variety of languages. They can use what they've learned about other endangered languages to help a community preserve its own language, and they can take advantage of the latest technology for recording and studying languages.

### **Next class agenda**

- Review: Open discussion.