Change, death of culture and minority languages

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1. Introduction

At a recent symposium of the National Folk Museum of Korea on Jeju Island, linguists and scholars from other fields gathered to discuss the plight of the language and culture of Jeju as well as of ethnic languages and cultures around the world. There was unanimous agreement that the eleventh hour has already struck, and the time to take action to preserve such endangered languages and cultures is now.

At the symposium I presented a paper on the phenomenon of language death worldwide. The following recaps important points raised in that paper and expands upon some of the issues I addressed therein. This essay begins with a brief look at the magnitude of language death globally. It then examines the process of language death and explores the structural decay rampant in many of the world's moribund languages. It closes with a discussion of the impact of language death and with a few suggestions for reversing the downward spiral in which many ethnic languages find themselves today.

2. The Extent of Language Death

Languages are dying at an alarming rate, and(not only) linguists have not been fast enough to react to the dangers that language death poses to both the field of linguistics and to humanity as a whole. In his study of Aboriginal languages in Australia, Dixon(1984:54) chronicles his failure to interview the last two known remaining speakers of Warungu, Peter and his sister Nora:

We'd missed our chance. The news filtered through that Peter had hit Nora over the head during a drunken argument that Christmas. She died quite soon afterwards, and Peter only survived her by a few months.

There are hundreds of such tragic stories that could be told. Indeed, the death of a language and its last speaker is not a rare phenomenon. In the countless speech communities in which language shift has taken or is taking place, the choice for one language usually entails the demise of the other(s). This is indeed catastrophic, considering that the disappearance of a language usually results in the termination of some, if not all, of the aspects of the cultural traditions of that language's speakers. Nevertheless, the phenomenon is relatively common.

Krauss'(1992) estimates on the number of dying languages appear to be the most plausible and are still largely accepted by linguists working with endangered languages More recent publications, such as Nettle and Romaine(2000) and Crystal(2000), attest to this., and the numbers are quite disturbing. For the Americas alone, Krauss estimates the total percentage of moribund native languages to be 33 percent, i.e. 300 of 900 languages. In Australia, the situation is even more distressing, with 90 percent of the 250 aboriginal languages moribund, most of them

"very near extinction"(Krauss 1992:5); the picture in Asia and Africa is not much brighter. Considering what we know about the languages we already consider moribund and how they became endangered, and given the economic and social conditions in many countries in which ethnic languages are still spoken, Krauss believeswe can predict how many languages will become moribund in the near future. He concludes (1992:7): "I consider it a plausible calculation that at the rate things are going the coming [21st] century will see either the death or the doom of 90 percent of mankind's languages."

3. The Nature of Language Death

3.1 Gradual Death of a Language

When a speech community shifts over time to the more dominant language(Language B) in a language-contact situation, the language which is abandoned(Language A) usually dies a gradual death. During the time needed to make the shift, an intermediate stage of bilingualism arises in the community. Initially, each language is used in separate domains. Eventually, Language B begins to take over domains formerly reserved for Language A, and, as time progresses, Language A is no longer used at all in the community.

Two of the best-documented cases of gradual language death are Arvanitika, an Albanian dialect of Greece, and East Sutherland Gaelic. Sasse(1992a) argues that studies of these two obsolescing languages uncover three phenomena relevant to language death. First, there are the extralinguistic factors: cultural, sociological, ethnohistorical, economic, etc., which are responsible for the pressure in a community to abandon Language A for Language B. These extralinguistic factors

then induce the second phenomenon, a change in speech behavior. Dorian's(1981) study of East Sutherland Gaelic, for example, demonstrates how the fisher folk came under socioeconomic and political pressure to abandon Gaelic. The language was not allowed to be taught in schools, and speaking Gaelic was highly stigmatized. Eventually, Gaelic speakers themselves came to believe that their language was inferior to English. Gaelic lost its public domains, and only its position in the home could save it from doom, for "in the case of a strictly local-currency language of low prestige, lacking any institutional support whatever, the home domain is clearly crucial to the continuity of the language"(Dorian 1981:82). The ultimate change in speech behavior then befell the Gaelic dialect: parents became reluctant to transmit the language to their children. Such negative language attitudes are common in communities shifting to a Language B and often at the root of changes in speech behavior. Sasse(1992a:14) reports that, although the attitudes toward Arvanitika are not totally negative(he refers to attitudes towards Arvanitika as "schizophrenic"), speakers consider their own language "ugly and useless." As a result, speakers stopped transmitting the language to their children, and the language was doomed to extinction.

3.2 The Semi-Speaker and Structural decay

When transmission to new generations is interrupted, the position of Language A is most radically threatened: it is at this point that Language A often begins to decay structurally. Children do not learn the language fully at home; they hear Language A only occasionally and are unable to develop normal language proficiency in it. The result is a continuum of proficiency in Language A within the community:

those who fully acquire the language at home are fully fluent speakers, while those who acquire the language only partially are so-called "semi-speakers"and speak Language A with varying amounts of proficiency. The proficiency of the semi-speaker will depend upon the speaker's linguistic talent, the degree of exposure to the language, the presence of older fluent speakers from whom the semi-speaker can acquire Language A, and a positive attitude towards that language. In the final phase of obsolescence, the speech community consists almost exclusively of semi-speakers(Sasse 1992b).

It is with the semi-speaker, writes Sasse(1992a:15-17): that we enter a new phase--and perhaps the crucial one--of the process of language death. This period is characterized by a phenomenon called language decay. Language decay is defined as the serious linguistic disintegration which is typical for the speech of so-called semi-speakers, i.e. that speaker generation which results from the interruption of language transmission. Their morphologyis extremely defective, they lose important grammatical categories such as tense, aspect or mood, even if these categories are present in [the dominant language]. Their speech often shows a pidgin-like simplification of syntax and a strong insecurity in the mapping of forms and functions. They are hardly able to master the phonological distinctions of [Language] A and show extreme variation in their pronunciation. A language in decay is not a language in the sense properly understood (a structured code), but an amorphous mass of words and word forms, stereotype sentences and phrases, formulaic expressions, idioms and proverbs, which are learned in "chunks," whose forms are imperfectly known and whose functions are poorly understood. When used in conversation, these linguistic fossils are put together in some random linear order without fixed syntactic rules.

There are numerous studies of languages of all typologies which point to such decay, though not always to the extent described above by Sasse: Mougeon and Beniak(1989) report decay in the determinative pronoun system of Welland(Canada) French; Voegelin and Voegelin (1977) attribute changes in the usage of relative clauses in Tbatulabal (Mexico) to imperfect acquisition by semi-speakers; Schmidt(1985) maintains that young speakers of moribund Dyirbal no longer control ergative usage.

Dorian's(1981) work with East Sutherland Gaelic offers the most detailed study of decay within a dying language. Semi-speakers no longer have a command of the Gaelic gender system: masculine pronouns appear where feminine pronouns should be, feminine diminutive suffixes incorrectly appear in place of their masculine counterparts, and gender marking on adjectives is often faulty. Moreover, semi-speakers exhibit incorrect forms for the dative and the vocative and have trouble with plural formation. No semi-speakers show a totally intact verbal system in Gaelic, having trouble with tense formation and mood, e.g. the conditional and the passive.

3.3 Decay or Borrowing?

It is necessary to distinguish between decay in Language A and elements which have appeared or disappeared because of borrowing from Language B, warns Sasse(1992a and 1992b), since even healthy languages in language-contact situations borrow not only lexical items, but also structure. Sasse(1992b:64) points out that languages in long-time contact situations exhibit "some kind of ideal goal(which may never be arrived at in effect) to develop a one-to-one relationship between the morphosyntactic systems of the two languages"; in

particular "there is a tendency towards an identical category system, and a tendency towards structurally similar means to mark these categories." Examples of such borrowings in the literature are countless, e.g. in the verbal system in Plain Pennsylvania German(Louden 1988). Sasse(1992b:64) and Thomason and Kaufman(1988:215 ff.) offer the example of Greek in Turkey: grammatical gender has been abandoned, and Greek syntax now models its Turkish counterpart. When Language A begins to imitate the patterns of Language B, we are most likely dealing with borrowing rather than decay.

It is also important to keep in mind that some changes in Language A may be taking place for internal reasons, i.e. they cannot be attributed to decay and may not necessarily be the result of language contact at all. An example of such a change can be found Haysville East Franconian(HEF), a moribund German dialect spoken in the State of Indiana in the USA that has lost nearly all its domains to English. Haysville East Franconian is not dying a "normal" gradual death, however: the absence of semi-speakers has left the moribund dialect morphologically and syntactically intact. See Ntzel(1998). In the dialect, unlike in Standard German, the word for 'the number two', tsvaa, can be inflected for gender: tsvee in the masculine, tsvuu in the feminine, and tsvaa for neuter. Many HEF speakers, however, no longer make a distinction, and the form tsvaa can now be used for all three genders. This leveling might at first be attributed to morphological decay(or contact with English), but a look across the Atlantic indicates otherwise: the base dialect in Germany is also losing the gender distinction for tsvaa, and the base dialect is by no means considered endangered. While language contact could play a role (HEF's contact with English, the base variety's contact with Standard German), morphological decay is not at work here.

When Language A begins to lose categories that are present in Language B, however, Language A is most likely in the process of decay. Sasse(1992b) points to Arvanitika, which has lost categories present in Greek but not compensated for the categories lost: e.g., aspectual distinctions have been lost, and articles have either disappeared or are used incorrectly. The gerund, which has an exact parallel in Greek, has been lost, and gender agreement is no longer observed. Semi-speakers use few suppletive forms, and analogy "goes in all directions"(1992b:71). Irregular forms appear where they shouldn't be and are lacking where they ought to be(cf. Campbell and Muntzel 1989 discussed in 3.2). In short, Arvanitika has lost its power of expression, and extinction is imminent.

3.4 Decay and Lexical Borrowing

Lexical borrowing is not necessarily an indicator of structural decay within a dying language. Speakers of Haysville East Franconian(HEF) have borrowed heavily from English: for example, the English words refrigerator and car are common words in the German dialect, for the simple reason that those objects did not exist when the dialect was imported to Indiana in the 1850s. But not only words for modern inventions have found their way into the Haysville variety, as illustrated in borrowings such as creek and fence, which were introduced into HEF long before the dialect was endangered; such borrowings can be considered the natural result of language contact.

While doing fieldwork in Indiana, I did ascertain that the greatest difficulty for HEF speakers appeared not to lie in the syntax or morphology, but rather with the lexicon: even the most conservative fluent speakers often asked me how to say a particular item in German.

Dorian(1981:145) also notes problems with lexical retention for some of her fluent speakers, but claims that "lexical recall did not correlate well with grammatical conservatism for such speakers," i.e. not only semi-speakers who have no control over the grammar have trouble recalling lexical items.

Thus, even extensive borrowing is unlikely to be a symptom of decay in a moribund language. As an aside, a similar case can be made for extensive borrowing(usually from English) into many non-endangered languages today. While the myriad of English lexical items used in modern German, for example, may be superfluous, gratuitous, and even annoying The problem of anglicisms in German has been treated extensively in the literature. There is no room here for a lengthy discussion of this topic.
, those words do not indicate that German is decaying or in danger of becoming obsolete(although arguments to the contrary have been forwarded). Nonetheless, the relationship between the global spread of English and the demise of ethnic languages cannot be denied.

4. What Is at Stake?

All linguists, one should hope, realizethat scientific reasons alone justify the preservation of every tongue. We need access to as many languages as possible in our struggle to perfect our theories concerning the structure of human language. Had no linguist interviewed the last speaker of Ubykh, a Northwestern Caucasian language which became extinct in the 20th century, we may not have thought it possible for a language to have such a massive inventory of consonants, although now it seems some newly studied African languages may have even more(Haspelmath 1993).It is indeed disturbing that most languages

predicted to survive into the next century show no great typological or geneticvariation from one another: this, as Bobaljik and Pensalfini (1996:18) point out, has serious consequences for the field of linguistics, since typological diversity is essential for understanding "the universals of grammar and the possible range of language variation."

Nettle and Romaine(2000:13) agree, but they also offer arguments for preserving endangered languages that should convince the non-linguist as well. They maintain that linguistic diversity is directly related to biological diversity: in fact, the two are often inseparable, perhaps casually connected through coevolution in specific habitats. Our research has shown quite striking correlations between areas of biodiversity and areas of highest linguistic diversity, allowing us to talk about a common repository of what we will call biolinguistic diversity.

The authors then provide statistics to support their claim:
The greatest biolinguistic diversity is found in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples, who represent around 4 percent of the world's population, but speak at least 60 percent of its languages and control or maintain some of the ecosystems richest in biodiversity.

Where species of plants and animals are facing extinction, they conclude, languages are also endangered, and as both species and languages become extinct, what we know about our world is bound to become more limited. To illustrate the point, Nettle and Romaine (2000:16) provide the following two examples:
In the Native American language Micmac, trees are named for the sound the wind makes when it blows through them during the autumn, about an hour after sunset when the wind always comes from a certain direction. If an elder remembers, for example, that a certain stand of

trees used to be called by a particular name 75 years ago but is now called by another, these terms can be seen as scientific markers for the effects of acid rain over that time period. One Palauan traditional fisherman born in 1894had names for more than 300 different species of fish, and knew the lunar spawning cycles of several times as many species of fish as have been describedin the scientific literature for the entire world.

Similarly, Dalby(2003:213) lists instances in which crucial medical knowledge has been "derived from languages that are no longer spoken or are likely to disappear soon."

At the outset of this paper, I claimed that language death usually entails the loss of most, if not all, of the cultural aspects associated with the language. A culture may still live on in some form even when the language associated with it is no longer spoken by any or all of the ethnic community. However, althougha Native American who speaks, for example, no Apache may still legitimately consider himself Apache, he must admit that his inability to speak his ancestral language limits his access to many elements of his ethnic cultural heritage. Dorian, in personal communication to Tsunoda(2006:165), rightly claims that "a person who does not speak Xish [any language X] is still an Xman, but is an impoverished Xman by comparison with his fluent grandfather or grandmother." Or, as Mithun(1999:2) writes:

The loss of a language represents a definitive separation of a people from its heritage. It also represents an irreparable loss for us all, the loss of opportunities to glimpse alternate ways of making sense of the human experience.

Indeed, language reflects what we know about our environment and ourselves, and each individual's language represents his or her own window to the world. Moreover, all people have a right to maintain and

transmit their own language, i.e. their own cultural and intellectual heritage, to the next generation. For moral, scientific and aesthetic reasons, we should be concerned with the survival of all languages.

5. strategies for preservation

Given the high stakes, linguists have the obligation to develop strategies to save as many languages as possible from extinction. It is not an option for a linguist to study a language without being interested in the fate of the people who speak it: Crystal(2000:145) aptly compares such a linguist to a doctor who collects medical data without any regard for the future of the patient. But what can be done to safeguard the future of our "patients?"

I again turn again to Crystal(2000:127 ff.), who proposes six means by which speakers of endangered languages, with some outside help from e.g. politicians and linguists, can create conditions conducive to language maintenance. He argues that an endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community; increase their wealth relative to the dominant community; increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community; have a strong presence in the education system; can write their language down; and can make use of electronic technology. Thus, Crystal sees the keys to the survival of a language in the literacy within the speech community and in the standardized orthography of the endangered language.

Some of Crystal's suggestions are more easily implemented than others, but all have one thing in common: the speakers themselves must be motivated to take their linguistic fate into their own hands to some extent and cannot depend exclusively on outside support, such as

financial backing or legislation under the auspices of a national government, to sustain the life of their language or culture. There must be, as Nettle and Romaine(2000:177) suggest, a "bottom-up approach to language maintenance,"i.e. a grassroots movement to keep an endangered language alive. National and international attention is good, but local action is critical: the household domain must be protected, as a language not spoken at home cannot survive. The natural habitat of the language and the culture of its speakers must be preserved. Nettle and Romaine(2000:179 ff.) offer examples of such local initiatives that have proven successful. A grassroots organization in Hawaii was responsible for founding Hawaiian immersion preschools in which parents are actively involved and even attend language classes themselves. With the help of outsiders, the Karaja people of Brazil have set up schools in which their children are initially instructed in their native language and then later in Portuguese, and Karaja history and culture play an important role in the curriculum. The teachers are not "imported" from outside communities, but are locals trained in their own villages.

Teaching an endangered language at school is certainly desirable, but a classroom is nonetheless still an artificial environment. Parents must take the initiative to speak the language at home, and they must be convinced that bilingualism is something positive. Irish parents may fear, for example, that their child will be less proficient in English if the child learns Irish at home. Such fears are groundless, yet they are widespread and a great hindrance to language maintenance. It is the linguist's job to let parents know the positive effects bilingualism can have on children and the community at large.

While advocating a grassroots approach, Nettle and Romaine (2000:200 ff.) do not simply dismiss "top-down"efforts to maintain

endangered languages. Legislated protection of endangered languages can certainly be useful, just as they are for endangered species of plants and animals. They point out that programs in the European Union, such as the European Bureau of Lesser Used Languages and the MERCATOR Network, have proved beneficial to speakers of minority languages. They also endorse a UNESCO Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, in which governments agree to recognize the linguistic and cultural diversity within their territories and to guarantee the rights of minorities to maintain their languages and cultures.

Several books on language revitalization have appeared within the past couple years, most notably Grenoble and Whaley(2006) and Tsunoda(2006). Much remains to be done, and it is time to put ideas of language maintenance and revitalization into practice. We have little time to waste in our efforts to preserve one of our greatest resources, human languages.

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