

Endangered Languages in the News

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Abstract

This paper explains the concept of “endangered languages,” gives the background to the world’s language situation, and sets out a framework of reasons why language endangerment/death is thought to be negative for mankind. Then, two UK-based Internet newspapers are examined to see the extent of their coverage of endangered language issues and whether the articles are sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages. The articles are further analyzed, using the framework provided, to gain an understanding of which reasons are being put forward to the general public in popular newspapers to explain the negative consequences of language endangerment.

1. Introduction

One challenge facing those trying to promote any endangered language is getting the attention of the public. It is through public awareness that a groundswell of support for an endangered language can be achieved. Once there is awareness, there is an opportunity to promote the language within the local community, and in the country in which the community is situated. There is then the chance of getting recognition and various forms of support (including financial support) from the public, non-governmental organizations, and local and national governments.

The word “endangered” is very much within the consciousness of the general public. However, it is more usually associated with “endangered species” than with “endangered languages.” In schools, children from a young age are made aware of organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund, and many teachers set projects on endangered wildlife. The position of endangered languages is not known as well. Yet, as Harrison (2007, p. 7) points out, this is in spite of the estimated percentage of language endangerment (40% or more) being far more than that of birds (11%), mammals (18%), fish (5%), or plants (8%).

In section 2, this paper briefly explains the background to the world’s language situation and the problem facing endangered languages. Section 3 sets out a framework of reasons why lan-

guage endangerment and language death is a negative phenomenon for mankind. In section 4, two major UK-based Internet newspapers are examined, using the framework provided in section 3 of this paper, to gain an understanding of which reasons are being put forward to the general public to explain the negative consequences of language endangerment.

2. Present situation of endangered languages

Number of languages in the world

Estimates of the total number of languages in the world vary. However, in recent years linguists have come to general agreement that there are between 6,000 and 7,000 languages in the world today. According to the 16th edition of the S.I.L. Ethnologue (see <http://www.ethnologue.com>), in the year 2009 there were a total of 6,909 living languages (The Americas 993, Africa 2,110, Europe 234, Asia 2,322, The Pacific 1,250). Krauss (2001, p. 21) believes that these figures are “a little on the high side” and uses the figure of 6,000, “one millionth the human population.” From this we see that the average number of speakers per language is one million. However, the number of speakers for each language varies widely (the median number of speakers according to Krauss (1992, p. 7) being between 5,000 and 6,000), as does the ‘health’ of each language.

Language classification

In order to gain an understanding of the present state of the world’s endangered languages, there is a need for a classification of the ‘health,’ or otherwise, of each language, and there have been attempts to create such a framework (see Krauss, 1992; Wurm, 1998 for examples). UNESCO’s classification of endangered languages, as reported by Evans (2011), classifies endangered languages into four categories: 1. Vulnerable (where many children speak the language but it is restricted to certain domains); 2. Definitely endangered (where children don’t learn the language as a mother tongue); 3. Severely endangered (where only the grandparents’ generation speak the language, and the parents’ generation may understand it); 4. Critically endangered (where the grandparents speak the language partially and infrequently).

Present ‘health’ of the world’s languages

According to Krauss (2001), only a very small percentage of the world’s languages, perhaps

5 to 10%, can be considered 'safe,' and it is widely reported that half of the world's languages may die out within the next 100 years. Any language that fits any of UNESCO's four categories outlined above is in danger, with category 4 languages most likely to die out first.

3. Framework of reasons why language endangerment and loss is bad for mankind

The loss of languages affects mankind in many ways. Researchers in the field of endangered languages have attempted to set out the value to mankind of having a diversity of languages. After all, there are many people (often from the major language speaking areas of the world) who believe that a reduction in the number of languages would be beneficial to the world, leading to less misunderstanding and a cut in various administrative costs. In newspaper articles reporting on endangered languages, the writer has a choice between taking a sympathetic stance (believing language endangerment or death is a negative phenomenon) or being unsympathetic.

Proponents of diversity have classified the benefits to mankind in different ways. Crystal (2000) chooses: need for diversity; languages express identity; languages are repositories of history; languages add to human knowledge; and languages are interesting. Miyaoka (2001) has: languages as a last stronghold of a culture; languages as irreplaceable intellectual assets; and languages as irreplaceable scientific assets. Krauss (2001) gives three arguments for preventing language loss: the ethical argument, scientific arguments, and the biological argument. Bradley (2001) identifies four types of reasons why work on endangered languages is important: linguistic, ethical, scientific and symbolic. The terminology is different, but there is overlap between each researcher's groupings, and the following list of reasons why language endangerment and death is a loss to mankind can be proposed.

(A) Affects on the individual/community

The death of a language, or endangerment of a language, affects the individual and the community. We need only take a moment to wonder how we would feel if we were deprived of our mother tongue. If our language were to be taken from us, many of us would be deeply troubled on many levels. This is the situation that many individuals and communities face in reality.

When Tefvic Esenc, the last speaker of the Ubykh language in Turkey, knew that his language was going to die along with him when he passed away, he wanted to express his pride in his language. To do so he had his gravestone enscribed, “This is the grave of Tefvic Esenc. He was the last person able to speak the language they call Ubykh” (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 2).

The link between language and an individual’s (or community’s) feeling of identity is strong. *Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon*, is a Welsh proverb that means, “A nation without a language is a nation without a heart” (see Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Crystal, 2000). This feeling of one’s mother tongue playing an important role in one’s identity is strong in the literature on endangered languages. Of course, it is certainly not the only factor in identity or ethnicity, as shown by the many indigenous people who no longer speak their native tongue, yet maintain strong allegiance to their indigenous roots. However, the mother tongue is often perceived as vitally important to identity. The Norfolk Island patois spoken in the South Pacific (inhabited by descendants of the *Bounty* mutineers) is in danger. One of the islanders, Alice Buffet, says, “If your mother tongue dies out it’s like having your right arm ripped off. It goes to the core of our identity” (Squires, 2001, p. 12).

The death or near-death of a language often brings feelings of regret. Luba Shibkeyeva, a member of the Tofalar people in southern Siberia, described the loss of language due to Soviet rule and its affect on her Tofalar identity thus, “You see, we are Russified, we do not even know our own language. We want to sing our own songs, but we don’t even know how” (Slackman, 2000, p. 11).

A Maori leader in New Zealand who died in 1989, Sir James Henare, described many of the Maori people’s feelings for their language, which although endangered is undergoing a revival: “The language is the life force of our Maori culture and *mana* [‘power’]. If the language dies, as some predict, what do we have left to us? Then, I ask our own people who are we?” (Nettle & Romaine, 2000, p. 23).

These testimonies are by people from different regions of the world, but they all carry a common idea that a language is strongly connected to culture and identity, and the death of a language brings a feeling of loss to the individuals who make up a community.

(B) Loss to culture and diversity

When we think of any individual language, we should think of what knowledge is contained

within that language. A language is the repository of the many strands of knowledge that come together to provide us with a picture of a group's culture. We can learn much about history, about ethnic identity, about politics, about society, about humanity, about human relations and values, and much more, through the unique way in which this information is encapsulated in each language. Miyaoka believes that it "... is fair to say that a language is primordially infused with culture. Language is a part of culture, and at the same time culture is built into language" (2001, p. 7-8). Language death, therefore, is not only an individual or community tragedy, but also leads to a wider cultural loss to mankind.

(C) Loss to science

The loss of languages has wide-reaching negative affects on science. Bradley (2001) points out that each society encodes its respective knowledge within its own language, and therefore each language views the world in a unique way. He, like many other recent contributors to this field, also makes the connection between language and ecology, stating that each society lives in a different ecological system and has unique knowledge of this environment and the plants and animals in it (For further examples in greater detail, see Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000, ch. 2; Nettle & Romaine, 2000; Terralingua web-site at <http://www.terralingua.org>). It is this knowledge that may hold vital "scientific value for the development of new drugs, foods and materials, all of which have practical and economic benefits too" (Bradley, 2001, p. 152). A vast wealth of scientific knowledge lies behind each language and each time a language dies, some of the world's scientific assets perish with it.

(D) loss to linguistics

The extinction of languages is a clear loss to the field of linguistics. It is therefore a matter of concern for many linguists. Those that value the importance of linguistics as a field of scientific study would therefore feel that language loss is important for this reason alone. As Crystal has written,

The aim of linguistics is to define the nature of the human language faculty, comprehensively and explicitly. What is the range of possibilities which the human brain allows, when it comes to the construction of languages? To answer this question, we need to obtain evidence from as many languages as we can, and to go back as far into history

(and pre-history) as we can. Each language manifests a fresh coming-together of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary to form a system of communication which, while demonstrating certain universal principles of organization and structure, is an unprecedented event and a unique encapsulation of a world view (Crystal, 2000, p. 54).

However, this is perhaps the weakest of the reasons. Krauss (2001, p. 29) has pointed out that it is counter-productive for linguists to argue for the cause of saving endangered languages with this reason as their rationale. It sounds “self-serving and trivial to the average hard-working taxpayer.” There are indeed other reasons that carry far greater appeal for the non-linguist.

4. Endangered languages in the news

The Study

British newspapers can generally be divided into the “quality broadsheets” and the “tabloids.” The four main broadsheet newspapers are The Times, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian and The Independent. For the purposes of this study, it was decided to concentrate on the latter two newspapers, as it was deemed that their political stance would make them more likely to cover stories on the theme of endangered languages than the former two. Articles pertaining to endangered languages were searched for in the Internet versions of The Guardian and The Independent during the period between January 2010 and August 2011. These articles were then analyzed to see whether the reporting was neutral, sympathetic or unsympathetic to the cause of endangered languages; and if sympathetic, to use the framework set out in section 3, to see the argument given for why language endangerment/death was perceived to be negative.

Summary of Results

In total, there were 12 articles on endangered languages in this 20 month period, 7 in The Guardian and 5 in The Independent. 8 of the 12 articles were sympathetic in tone to the plight of endangered languages, 4 were neutral and none were critical of attempts to save endangered languages. Several of the articles gave general background information on the situation of endangered languages around the world. Of the 8 articles sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages, 4 gave the primary reason for concern being a loss to culture and diversity, 2 concentrated on the loss to science, 1 focused on the loss at the

individual/community level, and 1 had no primary reason. As for secondary reasons for concern about endangered languages, 3 articles covered the loss at an individual and community level, and 1 article was concerned about mankind's loss of culture and diversity. More detailed information on each article is shown below.

The Newspaper Articles

Guardian Article 1: The death of a language (Shariatmadari, 2010)

Summary: The catalyst for the story was the death of the last speaker of the Bo language of the Andaman Islands. Language death was reported as "not unusual," but that the "loss of each one is a small tragedy." The article includes a critique of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, casting doubt on the idea that the language we speak determines the way we think. It is very sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (B) Loss to culture & diversity

Secondary position on language endangerment: (A) Loss for individual/community

The author quite clearly states that the "loss of endangered languages like Bo is more a cultural than a scientific tragedy." He states that language loss "represents the passing into nothingness of a culture, evolved over thousands of years, complete with games, fables and folk songs that will never be heard again." The author mentions the cultural benefits of rescuing endangered languages, before concluding that "death of a language is the most obvious symptom of an acute human crisis: the loss of a store of wisdom, and a sense of community. We should work, wherever we can, to prevent it."

Guardian Article 2: Linguist on mission to save Inuit 'fossil language' disappearing with the ice (Brown, 2010)

Summary: An article reporting on the efforts of a Cambridge researcher in the Arctic to document the language and culture of the Inughuit people in Greenland. The article is sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages, and focuses on the fact that climate change will mean this community will have to move south, leaving their culture (and probably their language) behind.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (B) Loss to culture & diversity

Secondary position on language endangerment: (A) Loss for individual/community

The author quotes the researcher who says that the Inughuit have a “distinctive intangible cultural heritage” and that if the language dies, then “their heritage and identity will die with it.” The article also focuses on just how endangered the community is becoming, and how in the case of the Inughuits, it is geographical displacement that is the main cause for endangerment of the language, not an unwillingness on the part of parents to speak to their children in the mother tongue.

Guardian Article 3: Can Google break the computer language barrier? (Adams, 2010)

Summary: An article that looks at the progress made in computer-based machine translation software. It touches on the possibilities for improved translation services between many languages in the future, setting out the ideas of those who are very optimistic alongside those who are more “cautionary.”

Framework:

Stance: Neutral

No overt arguments for the saving of endangered languages. However, the article does include the idea of the Chairman of the Foundation for Endangered Languages that “translation engines such as Google’s will eventually liberate the world from the necessity of learning dominant languages, such as English, and will reinforce linguistic diversity,” thereby at least reporting indirectly that the loss of languages can be considered to fit framework section (B) Loss to culture & diversity.

Guardian Article 4: Half of living languages face extinction (Tobin, 2011)

Summary: An article outlining the Cambridge University database called the World Oral Literature Project. The project “document[s] vanishing languages – and everything about the culture and society they convey – before they disappear.” It is a factual article with general information about endangered languages and quotes from an endangered language researcher outlining the importance of endangered language documentation.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: General background information & (B) Loss to culture & diversity.

Most of the article gives factual information about the World Oral Literature Project, although it also reports the words of one researcher involved who asserts that the “work means we’re helping not only endangered languages to stay with us, but all the culture and history that they denote.”

Guardian Article 5: Language at risk of dying out – last two speakers aren’t talking (Tuckman, 2011)

Summary: An article on the Mexican language of Ayapaneco which has only two remaining speakers. The language has become particularly newsworthy as the two speakers do not actually speak to each other, rendering the language, for all intents and purposes, dead. The article notes the revitalization efforts of researchers in creating an Ayapaneco dictionary. There is also general background information to the indigenous language situation in Mexico, as well as other endangered languages around the world.

Framework:

Stance: Neutral

Primary position on language endangerment: General background information

Guardian Article 6: Endangered languages: the full list (Evans, 2011)

Summary: An article related to Guardian Article 5 and the “poignant” story of the last two remaining Ayapaneco speakers. This article provides a list of endangered languages as set out by UNESCO, and asks readers for suggestions as to better ways of displaying the considerable amount of data.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: General background information with links to UNESCO websites concerned with the plight of endangered languages.

Guardian Article 7: Children’s book aims to save dying Alaskan language (Flood, 2011)

Summary: The first translation of an English book into Tlingit. It is a children’s story book and the hope is that it will help revitalize the language which has only 500 speakers. The arti-

cle focuses on the textualization of what is an oral language, and efforts to keep the Tlingit language of Alaska alive.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (A) Loss for individual/community

The article is sympathetic to this endangered language and focuses very much on the Tlingit-speaking community and the necessity to pass the language on from the older generation to the children. The storybook that has been translated into Tlingit “asks today’s younger generation to think about where they come from, who they are, and who they may choose to become,” and all in the native language of the community.

Independent Article 1: Making technology speak your language (Relax News, 2010)

Summary: An article explaining the joint efforts of Microsoft and UNESCO to allow people to access technology in their own language. The article has general information about endangered languages but explains how efforts are being made to make “emerging languages” more relevant by providing technology in those languages. Languages such as Welsh, Maori and Inuktit have already been successfully set up.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (B) Loss to culture & diversity

Secondary position on language endangerment: (A) Loss for individual/community

The author quotes Irina Bokova, director-general of UNESCO. She outlines the loss to mankind as a whole saying, “Linguistic diversity is under threat.” She goes on to say, “This loss not only erodes individual communities and cultures, but more broadly, the very makeup of our societies,” thereby confirming that there is loss felt at the community level as well. She believes that, “Linguistic diversity promotes mutual understanding and dialogue. Access to learning in local languages is of utmost importance for reducing social exclusion ... It is crucial that we bolster these efforts because each language is a treasure.”

Independent Article 2: Explorers in India find something almost unheard of: a new language
(Buncombe, 2010)

Summary: An article outlining the discovery of the Koro language in the foothills of the

Himalayas in India, and the unusual nature of finding a new language. It has quotes from the researchers who made the discovery. Also, the article concludes with some information of other endangered languages around the world.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (C) Loss to science

The author quotes K. David Harrison, one of the researchers, who states that, “[Koro] contains very sophisticated knowledge that these people possess about this valley, the eco-system, the animals, the plants, how they have survived here, how they have adapted. If they switch to another language, that knowledge will simply be lost.”

Independent Article 3: Language erosion: You don’t hear that often... (Spinney, 2010)

Summary: A further article on the discovery of Koro (see Independent Article 2 above). Concentrates on the Koro language, but also places the discovery within the debate between Chomsky’s universal grammar and a Sapir-Whorfian view of language (see Guardian 1), with heavy emphasis on a critical view of Chomsky’s universal grammar.

Framework:

Stance: Sympathetic

Primary position on language endangerment: (C) Loss to science

Secondary position on language endangerment: (B) Loss to culture/diversity

The author quotes one of the researchers of the Koro language, K. David Harrison, who believes that “languages such as Koro must be preserved because of the knowledge they contain, and because the sheer diversity of human languages provides a window on the inner workings of the human brain.” Linguistic diversity is seen as a useful scientific tool, and any loss of language is therefore a loss to science. Harrison does also note the importance of cultural loss, saying, “If [Koro] dies, a unique culture will die with it.”

Independent Article 4: Jason and the argot: land where Greek’s ancient language survives (Connor, 2011)

Summary: An article about a north-eastern Turkish community of 5000 who speak a language that is thought to be very similar to ancient Greek. The article focuses on the connection to the past and only talks about the endangered nature of the language in one short paragraph.

Framework:

Stance: Neutral

Primary position on language endangerment: Small amount of background information.

Apart from the background information to the Romeykas language, it is noted that, “Many of the world’s languages are disappearing as once-isolated populations become part of the global economy, with children failing to learn the language of their grandparents and instead using the dominant language of the majority population, which in this part of the world is Turkish.”

Independent Article 5: Languages on Papua vanish without a whisper (AFP, 2011)

Summary: An article outlining the fast-disappearing local languages of New Guinea that are being displaced by Indonesian. Also, there is mention of the influence of English in Papua New Guinea, and general information on the documentation of endangered languages and UNESCO’s efforts to save endangered languages worldwide.

Framework:

Stance: Neutral

Primary position on language endangerment: Background information on both the optimistic (“art and culture can stop Papuan languages being forgotten”) and pessimistic (“it is almost impossible to preserve a language if it is no longer spoken in everyday life”) views of the future outcome for endangered languages.

5. Conclusion

From one perspective, it should be celebrated that in a 20-month period two UK-based Internet newspapers covered 12 articles on endangered languages, simply because this would have been unheard of thirty years ago. Information about endangered languages is certainly more newsworthy than it once was. However, one article per newspaper every three or four months does not constitute wide coverage of a worrying situation for many of the world’s smaller languages.

From the newspaper coverage during this 20-month period, the general public would learn a certain amount of general background knowledge about the world’s endangered language situation. They would also receive a viewpoint sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages in 67% of the articles. In half of these sympathetic articles, they would read that the

primary reason why we should be concerned about endangered languages is due to mankind's loss of culture and diversity, whereas only one quarter of the sympathetic articles focused on the loss to science. Most of the coverage of the loss to individuals or community was covered as a secondary reason why language endangerment was a negative phenomenon.

For the sake of many of the smaller languages of the world, it is hoped that more articles sympathetic to the cause of endangered languages are published in the newspapers in the future, no matter whether they focus on the loss to individuals/communities, loss to culture and diversity, or loss to science.

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