

Status of Native American Language Endangerment

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Speaking of the sacredness of things, I honestly believe, as a linguist who is supposed to view languages as objects of scientific study, that somehow or other they elude us, because every language has its own divine spark of life. Philosophers have said that languages are, in fact, forms of life. I believe that. As I have said before, a hundred linguists working for a hundred years could not get to the bottom of a single language. I never heard any linguist disagree with that statement. Yes — and a hundred Navajo linguists working a hundred years on Navajo still, I am sure you would all admit, would not get to the bottom of Navajo. It certainly would help, though, if there were a hundred Navajo linguists working a hundred years on Navajo. Let us hope that Navajo and other such languages will be around for a hundred years.

Language survival is the central topic that I wish to address here today. First I recall an incident that occurred when I had the privilege of appearing at the hearings on the Native American Language Act of 1992 before the Senate Committee, a bill sponsored by Senators Inouye of Hawaii and Murkowski of Alaska. Senator Inouye introduced the subject by saying that there are still a lot of Native American languages around. In fact, he said — and I was impressed by this — there must be fifty or sixty such languages. Perhaps he was thinking in terms of the number of states — most people do not even think that many. Senator Inouye comes from a state that has only one indigenous language, Hawaiian, but that language is in a very serious situation, as are most other indigenous languages. It was my pleasure in testifying to correct the senator: instead of fifty or sixty Native American Languages, there are in fact about two hundred, maybe two hundred and ten, different North American languages still spoken by peoples of the United States and Canada. That is out of the total of over three hundred pre-contact languages originally spoken. So, perhaps two-thirds of Native North American languages are still around. That is an heroic achievement considering the odds that they have faced.

How much longer, though, will these remaining languages survive? That concern brings me here to Flagstaff, because it is up to us more than anybody else to help save these languages. No one today is actively punishing people, as far as I know, for speaking their language in school. Now people are losing their languages further, because they have been brainwashed for generations by English-only policy and pressure in the schools to give up their languages, unnecessarily, in the process of learning English. For their languages, they have been turned into their own worst enemies.

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Out of over three hundred languages, two hundred and ten are left, but for how much longer? We need to assess the viability of those languages in terms of what I consider the most crucial factor: namely, are children learning these languages in the traditional way, the best way, that has worked since time immemorial for uncountable generations. I would categorize in viability Category A those languages that are still being learned by children in the traditional way.

Category A is unfortunately now the smallest category in North America. About 175 of the 210 languages are spoken in the United States; the other 35 are in only Canada. Out of those 175 languages in the United States, only about 20, or eleven percent, are still being learned by children from their parents and elders in the traditional way. Things are somewhat better in Canada, where about 30 percent of the indigenous languages are still spoken by children. This improves the North American total, but Category A remains the smallest.

The second category is Category B, with about thirty languages, seventeen percent, in both the United States and Canada. These are languages still spoken by the parental generation, who could theoretically turn around and start speaking their native language instead of English to their children but generally they do not. Category B is the second smallest category.

The largest categories by far, unfortunately, are Categories C and D. Category C consists of languages spoken by the middle-aged or grandparental generation and up only. Note that I am not citing the number of speakers, since it does not really make that much difference if such a language has a million speakers or only a hundred. If a language of a million people is not spoken by anyone under fifty, then it is not going to last very much longer than such a language spoken by a hundred people. A large number of speakers in itself does not assure survival. Category C languages are found in about the same percentage in the United States and Canada.

Category D languages are those spoken only by a few of the very oldest people. These elders often do not have the chance to talk much to each other. The language may be completely out of use, or it may be only remembered, so not quite extinct. California is the state that has by far the largest number of indigenous languages in North America. Approximately forty of these languages are still remembered by at least one or two people in their eighties.

Category C includes about 70, or 40 percent, of our languages in the United States, and Category D about a third. Whereas the United States has a very small number of Category A languages still spoken by children, Canada has a much smaller number of Category D (nearly extinct) languages.

Indigenous Languages in the United States

Native languages are still spoken to some degree in twenty-nine, maybe thirty, of the fifty states in the U.S. I shall proceed with a quick regional survey. In Hawaii, until very recently, virtually no one under the age of seventy could still speak Hawaiian, except the residents of the one small privately owned and very isolated island, Ni'ihau. These residents numbered around 200, including about thirty Hawaiian-speaking children. The rest of the state is approaching

Category D level. Hawaii is the only one of our states that has its own single native language, which before the U.S. takeover was powerful and prestigious.

In Alaska there are only two languages still spoken by children. Siberian Yupik is the only one spoken by everyone in two villages of about one thousand people altogether on St. Lawrence Island. Central Yupik is the largest language in Alaska, and children speak that language in 16 of 60 villages. There are 18 other languages in Alaska with no children speakers. The Arctic wilderness is by no means exempt from the language devastation that we see in the rest of the United States. Moreover, in the entire Northwest or Pacific Coast no Native American language is still spoken by children, and nearly none belongs in even Category B. Only in the Southwest are many Native American languages relatively viable and vital. In Arizona and New Mexico we find that Cocopah, Havasupai, Hualapai, Yaqui, Hopi, Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Western Apache, Mescalero, Jemez, Zuni, some Tiwa, some Keresan are still spoken by at least some children. How much longer can these languages remain in Category A, as still spoken by children?

In the rest of the United States some Cherokee is still spoken in Oklahoma, farther east the Alabama language is spoken in Louisiana, it is similar to Choctaw, which is spoken in Mississippi. Choctaw is still spoken by children, and we could learn a lot by finding out why this is so after so many years of contact. There are other languages still spoken by elders in the east — for example, Pasamaquoddy in Maine and several Iroquoian languages in New York. Considering the history of that part of our country, it is a miracle that they are still there at all.

The last category is Category E, consisting of languages that are extinct. There is some question from the point of view of the Administration for Native Americans, which administers funding under the Native American Languages Act of 1992, as to whether programs should be funded to revive languages that are entirely extinct, but for which there is good documentation. Those are certainly a small minority of the over 100 extinct North American languages.

World Languages

Native North American languages are about three percent of the world's languages at present. There are approximately six thousand languages still spoken by mankind, plus or minus maybe 10%, depending on how you define language as opposed to dialect. The best information comes from the Summer Institute of Linguistics' *Ethnologue*, which does a better job than any other single book of listing the world's languages, their number of speakers, and their viability. I estimate that between twenty and fifty percent of the 6,000 are no longer spoken by children or will no longer be spoken by children by the end of this century. By the year 2000, between twenty and fifty percent of the world's languages will be in Category B or worse. For the languages then still spoken by children, the question is for how much longer.

The only way to calculate the enormity of the endangerment is to calculate how many of the world's languages can be considered "safe," i.e., will continue

to be learned by children in the traditional way for the foreseeable future. Of the six thousand or so languages spoken on earth, I would say that perhaps three hundred to five hundred can still be considered “safe.” Some have such large numbers, over a million, of speakers, so that they could not easily die out fast. However, let us not forget that Breton had a million speakers in living memory, and is now spoken by very few, if any, children. It is thus difficult to name a threshold of safety in sheer numbers.

Most of the world’s two hundred or so sovereign nations have English, French, Arabic, or Spanish as their official language, and there is maybe a total of a hundred more national or regional official languages, but these largely overlap with those languages actually spoken by a million or more persons, which number two hundred and some. We can, therefore, assume that at best a total of about three hundred languages are “safe” by having a million or more speakers and/or state support. These represent only about five percent of the world’s languages. Even if we could find that six hundred — double that number — are “safe,” that would be only ten percent of the total.

Between the twenty to fifty percent of the world’s languages already no longer spoken by children and the five to ten percent of the world’s languages considered “safe” are forty to seventy-five percent of the world’s languages that can be considered (merely) endangered. These languages are still spoken by children alright, but mass communication and social change threaten them severely. Their fate depends of what people do, not just on what governments do. However, there are many countries in the world where the languages are still being persecuted and hounded out of existence.

The country that has the most languages on earth is Papua New Guinea. What is happening or is going to happen to its eight hundred some languages? Indonesia, including Irian Jaya, now has over seven hundred languages. Little is allowed to be known of what is happening in Indonesia. Nigeria has four hundred and ten languages, and India has three hundred and eighty. Language diversity is concentrated very unevenly around the world. Note also that those areas of language diversity tend to be in the same areas where biodiversity is concentrated. That is precisely where bulldozers and ethnocides are doing their work today.

Conclusion

Why should we care about what is happening? Here are four reasons. First, there is the aesthetic reason. Each language has its own beauty. The world would be a less beautiful and less interesting place if we had fewer languages. In other words, does mankind live by bread alone, is not beauty essential to human existence? We sense this is so in some very deep, non-trivial way.

Second, there is the scientific reason. Theoretical linguists need to study the greatest possible variety of human languages, not just English and as a countercheck, say, Japanese. That could be called a trivial and self-serving argument of linguists, who might want to keep languages around at the public expense just so they can study them. However, language diversity also includes

the knowledge of the world that is embedded in every language, which we cannot afford to lose. Languages contain traditional wisdom, for example of medicinal plants — which tree has bark that may prevent cancer, but the name of that tree is about to become extinct. Diversity also includes the fact that each language has a different way of seeing the world in its grammar. The death of any language diminishes our ability to think in different ways.

Third, there is the ethical argument. Who gets to choose which languages survive and which do not? We brutishly seem to be allowing “survival of the fittest” to prevail over human rights in this matter, even though as human beings we are also supposed to be endowed with reason and the ability to control our impulses and plan rationally for the future.

The fourth reason, most important of all, for preserving languages is that just as we are beginning to understand the world, the biosphere we live in, as a web of life, an ecosystem, on which our physical survival depends, so should we understand that our intellectual and linguistic diversity also forms a system necessary to our survival as human beings. Our lack of concern for indigenous languages implies that we have now reached some new Babel-like pinnacle of wisdom that allows us to make this unilateral and irrevocable decision to let ninety some percent of our languages go. Have we truly reached that stage of wisdom? I do not think so. I think we had better let posterity to decide, by transmitting to future generations what has been given to us in the best shape we can.

How can we do this in our part of the world? First, realistic assessments need to be made. What is the state of a language in a given community; what age groups can speak it? Second, realistic goals need to be set for the programs that are appropriate to the state of the community’s language. If, for example, the children do not speak the language, then the only way to bring the language back into living, fluent use by the children is to put them in some kind of immersion program, rather than to schedule fifteen minutes a day of writing the names for animals on a blackboard.

Children learn to swim in the water, not in a classroom. One could even get a Ph.D. in swimming and write a book about it, then jump in the water and drown. Anybody who has had four years of high school French and then gone to Paris has probably had a similar experience. The academic approach has its own value, but it does not, by itself, produce a vital living language.

After two thousand years of no native speakers of Hebrew, a century ago the first few native speakers were raised. That is a social miracle, and it was not done without trial and commitment. People have to have the will to do that. Languages are apparently different from biological species in this way, since it is possible to revive them. For the survival and revival of Hebrew, the deep devotion to the academic approach had great value.

Finally, I note around here that people are not doing some of the things they need to do to save their languages because they are in a state of denial about language loss. They are blinding themselves to the danger threatening their languages, because of the painful process they went through, being punished in school, for example, for speaking their language and being educated with so

Stabilizing Indigenous Languages

much English and with none of their own language that it takes extra effort to speak it now. Denial is a key word. I believe it now represents the most important barrier that impedes the stabilization, revival, and maintenance of our languages.