

The Extinction of Languages

Research question: What are the causes and effects of language extinction, and what are the possibilities for the future?

Both spoken and written languages have existed for thousands of years, as a way for humans to communicate knowledge, ideas, and customs. Each language offers its own culture, which in turn means that with the death of a language comes the death of a culture. The destruction of languages has occurred for almost as long as humans have used language to communicate with one another. The phenomenon of language eradication has a number of contributing factors including social and political aspects such as globalization and the use of *linguas francas*. Historically, language extinction is intensified by political implementations, and has catastrophic cultural and social effects, but there are solutions for the future of the world's languages.

As more and more languages become extinct, certain customs of these languages die, too. Entire cultural societies are affected by language endangerment and extinction. An example of this is among the Aka culture, which resides in Palizi, India. Among them was a man named Pario Nimasow. His father and grandfather were both priests, but because his father died without teaching him the language, he could not continue the family tradition (Rymer). The endangerment and extinction of unpopular languages has tragic effects on the culture associated with them, because language is a very significant element of culture. Another example of culture being lost in the event of assimilation is with the Paharis at Khopasi. The linguistic minorities are

forced to adopt the Nepali language and nationalistic monoculture, which causes them to abandon their own cultures (Timalsina). The natives are afraid that with the assimilation in Nepalese culture, they will not only lose their language and culture, but also their identity as a nation of people. Another language forced to abandon cultural and linguistic characteristics is that of the Tuvans. This particular nation of people is located in Russia, and is comprised of less than a quarter million speakers. In the Tuvan culture language, there are many customs, ideas, and words with meanings that other languages simply do not have. An example of this would be Tuvan throat singing, which is entirely exclusive to this society (Rymer). The death of this language would signify the halt of cultural practices. Furthermore, Tuvans have words for several of their unique ideas. For instance, Tuvans believe that the “past is ahead of them while the future lies behind.” In their language “songgaar” means to go back, in the future, while “burungaar” means the opposite: to go forward, in the past (Rymer). In more widely used languages, such as English, words like this do not exist. The annihilation of this language would signify the loss of entire unique ideas such as songgaar and burungaar. However, the Tuvan language is not the only small language with words exclusive to its own tongue. The Seri language, located in Mexico, also has words and phrases particular to its nation’s diction. In the Seri language, there are more than 50 words for all kind of relationships, such as “atcz,” which specifically means “daughter of a parent’s younger sibling,” and “azaac,” which is defined as the “daughter of a parent’s older sibling” (Rymer). There is a distinct contrast between the two, whereas in the English language, both words would be translated as “cousin.” The loss of this language would mean not only lost customs and culture, but also the loss of specific diction.

Many instances of language loss have been instigated by political interventions. Political oppression in the form of language restrictions have greatly contributed to the phenomenon of language loss. The act of suppressing ethnic groups can be described as “a political-discursive process in which specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible within the dominant national political culture” (Fernandes). This refers to the act of governments abolishing all cultures in hopes to gain a more nationalistic and culturally homogeneous state. In the event of Russification, the Russian government ordered the eradication of all non-Russian cultures or nationalities, as a way of ensuring Russian loyalty and nationality. Groups of ethnic minorities were forced to assimilate by abandoning their native culture for Russia’s (“Russification”). Along with culture, the native languages were forcibly replaced with the Russian language. Another form of language genocide as a result of political oppression is with the Ryukyuan languages. This language’s natives live on an island near Japan. As a result of their proximity, Japan gained control of the Ryukyu kingdom, and forced them to speak standard Japanese. In addition to the forced acculturation, Ryukyuan people were discriminated against for speaking their native languages (“10 Modern Cases of Linguistic Genocide”). Because of this, the Ryukyuan language is much less widely spoken than before Japanese control. In the late 19th century, the United States also annexed a nation of people, Hawaii. Throughout the 20th century, the Hawaiian language was gradually overridden by the English language, due to the annexation of Hawaii by the United States of America. This is partially due to the fact that the Hawaiian language was banned from being taught in Hawaiian schools by the United States government, despite English and Hawaiian both being the official languages of the state. By the 21st century, the Hawaiian language was considered endangered, with only 2,000 speakers left. However, in

the last few decades, several schools teaching Hawaiian have been constructed (“Hawaiian... Pronunciation”). Over time, it is possible that the education could produce enough speakers to save the language from endangerment. Though language death is sometimes inevitable, there are ways to prolong the lifetimes of less popular languages and cultures, for future generations.

Just as they have in the past, languages will continue to disappear in the future. Small language extinction has become an eventuality, due to globalization and the use of more dominant languages. According to Russell Rymer, it is predicted that almost half of the languages spoken in the world today will die in the next 100 years. Today, an occurrence similar to Russification is taking place in China. The Cantonese language is being superseded by the more vastly popular language, Mandarin. Though more than 60 million people speak Cantonese, the Chinese media and education system insist on focusing solely on Mandarin. For example, in Hong Kong, “the province's official broadcaster ... was planning to quietly switch most of its programming from Cantonese to Mandarin [...]” (Sonmez). With the lack of Cantonese recognition in society, and proper Cantonese education, it is possible that in the near future, it could become endangered. Though Mandarin is the most spoken language in the world, Spanish and English are placed second and third, with nearly one billion speakers between the two of them. Oftentimes, such widely known languages take over and oust small languages. This particular event occurs throughout North, Central, and South America. In the United States alone, there are many native languages that lose their speakers to English. Among these is the Comanche Tribe, located in Oklahoma and New Mexico. Despite efforts in 1994 to preserve Comanche language and customs, there are very few members of the tribe who still speak the

Native language (“Comanche”). As of 2010, the Comanche language has 100 speakers left alive (Moseley). Unfortunately, it is almost guaranteed to continue to decline as elderly members of the tribe pass away. In the country of Mexico, there are several endangered languages, such as Paipai. According to a 2008 recording, there are only 226 speakers left alive (Moseley).

Opportunities to pass down language and culture to younger generation are sparse due to the fact that adopting the country’s official languages makes communication with other cultures so much easier. Some believe intercultural communication would be easier with the use of a lingua franca, or a common language between nations. According to Andrew Sewell’s Oxford journal, lingua francas are convenient, but it is not necessary to wipe out entire languages and cultures in order to facilitate international contact. It is imperative that the world find proper lasting solutions for this problem.

In order to mitigate the events of language extinction, it is important to have plans for the future. One solution to this major problem is to create a dictionary for endangered languages. David Harrison and Greg Anderson created a dictionary for the Tuvan language. Steve and Cathy Martlett also worked on a dictionary for an endangered language, the Cmique Iitom dictionary. With the help of a dictionary, endangered languages survive past their last speaker’s death. This way, specific customs are preserved, and cultural assimilation does not force the eradication of important societal customs. Although the extinction of languages may seem inevitable, any efforts to prolong a language will be beneficial for the cultures associated with it.

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