

ENDANGERED LANGUAGES: SOME CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT

Language is not simply a tool for communication but a central and defining feature of identity as all human thoughts conceptualized through a language and all human values are pronounced and perceived through it. A recent UNESCO report indicates that India has the largest number of endangered languages in the world. A matter of concern, besides the absolute numbers, is the distribution of these endangered languages across number of speakers. The languages under threat include scheduled, non-scheduled as well as official languages of some of the states. Policies for protecting and promoting the entire range of endangered languages are needed if the linguistic diversity of India is to be preserved.

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INTRODUCTION

The method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way is called a language. It is a system of communication used by a particular country or community.¹ People transmit their knowledge by some form of language. There are three forms:

Sign (picture) language

Vocal (spoken) language

Symbolic (written) language

Those who are concerned with the concept formation believe that no concept has been completely formed until it has been expressed verbally and a true mark of civilization is the ability to put the concept on paper in symbolic form.²

When an individual views a pencil he perceives that the pencil is there. All of his senses confirm his perception. When the pencil is taken away, he retains it in his mind in the form of image. This is the beginning of concept formation. When he is able to verbalize the concept and say that a pencil is for writing then his behaviour demonstrates his grasp of the subject. But when he is able to use the pencil to transfer abstract ideas into sentences on paper, he is carrying out the symbol creating process which has enabled mankind to preserve that which was best about the past and to blend it into making a more productive present and a brighter future.³ Language is such an integral part of our lives that we are prone to take it for granted, to use it in our everyday activities without giving thought to the miracle which it really is. It

¹ Oxford law dictionary

² THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE, Dorothy L. Boyd, *Journal of Thought*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (JANUARY, 1974), pp. 36-39 Published by: Caddo Gap Press

³ Ibid.

is a uniquely human tool, a vital part of person's existence, and a reflection of life itself. Language is the most obvious example of how man has used symbols to store away the lessons of the past. With the help of these lessons, man today solves new problems. Through the use of symbols man has been able to create an order of reasoning, and the structuring of symbols into a scheme of relationships is what makes possible unity of a culture.

There are as many as 3500 identified languages throughout the world used in verbal communication. The number of written languages is much lower as speech is common in all societies but writing is not. It is through language only that humanity has come out of the stone age and has developed science, art and technology in a big way.

Language is critical to such basic mental processes such as thinking, understanding, and even dreaming. The importance of language is essential to every aspect and interaction in our everyday lives. Language is a constituent element of civilization. It raised man from a savage state to the age of globalisation and industrialization which he has reached today. Man could not become man but by language. An essential point in which man differs from animals is that man alone is the sole possessor of language. No doubt animals also exhibit certain degree of power of communication but that is not only inferior in degree to human language, but also radically diverse in kind from it. We use language to inform the people around us of what we feel, what we desire, and question/understand the world around us. We communicate effectively with our words, gestures, and tone of voice in a multitude of situation. As a personal thing, language is not only a mode of communication between individuals but is also a way for the expression of their personality.

Languages spoken in India belong to several language families, the major ones being the Indo-Aryan languages spoken by 75% of Indians and the Dravidian languages spoken by 20% of Indians.⁴ Other languages belong to the Austroasiatic, Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, and a few other minor language families and isolates.⁵

The Constitution of India does not give any language the status of national language.⁶ Article 343 of the Constitution of India states that the official language of the

⁴ "Indo-Aryan languages". *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 10 December 2016.

⁵ Moseley, Christopher (10 March 2008). *Encyclopedia of the World's Endangered Languages*

⁶ "There's no national language in India: Gujarat High Court". *The Times of India*. Retrieved 5 May 2016

Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script. English has been awarded the status of a “subsidiary official language”. States within India have the liberty and powers to specify their own official language(s) through legislation and therefore The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists 22 languages,⁷ which have been referred to as *scheduled* languages and given recognition, status and official encouragement..

The Central Government and a State Government uses Hindi and English for official purposes such as parliamentary proceedings, judiciary, and communications. In total Hindi population, The number of native Hindi speakers range between 14.5 and 24.5% , however, other dialects of Hindi termed as Hindi languages are spoken by nearly 45% of Indians, mostly accounted from the states falling under the Hindi belt. Other Indian languages are each spoken by around 10% or less of the population.⁸

States specify their own official language(s) through passing legislation. The section of the Constitution of India dealing with official languages therefore includes detailed provisions which deal not just with the languages used for the official purposes of the Union, but also with the languages that are to be used for the official purposes of each state and union territory in the country, and the languages that are to be used for communication between the union and the states *inter se*.

During the British Raj, English was used for purposes at the federal level. The Indian constitution adopted in 1950 envisaged that Hindi would be gradually phased in to replace English over a fifteen-year period, but gave Parliament the power to, by law, provide for the continued use of English even thereafter.⁹ Plans to make Hindi the sole official language of the Republic met with resistance in some parts of the country. Hindi continues to be used today, in combination with other (at the central level and in some states) State official languages at the state level.

The legislations and statutes governing the use of languages for official purpose currently includes the Constitution, the Official Languages Act, 1963, Official Languages (Use for

⁷ Languages Included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constution

⁸ “Scheduled Languages in descending order of speaker’s strength - 2001”. Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. Retrieved 1 July 2016

⁹ Kanchan Chandra, “Ethnic Bargains, Group Instability, and Social Choice Theory,” *Politics and Society* 29, 3: 337-62

Official Purpose of the Union) Rules, 1976, and various state laws, as well as rules and regulations made by the central government and the states.

According to Census of India of 2001, India has 122 major languages and 1599 other languages. However, figures from other sources vary, primarily due to differences in definition of the terms “language” and “dialect”. The 2001 Census recorded 30 languages which were spoken by more than a million native speakers and 122 which were spoken by more than 10,000 people¹⁰

ENDANGERED LANGUAGE

Imagine that you are the last speaker of your language. Every other person who ever spoke your language has passed away. You no longer have anyone to talk to in your own tongue. Family and friends of your generation, with whom you could have spoken, have died. Your children never learned your language and instead use the language of outsiders. If you want to interact with anyone at all, you must use a foreign language. In shops and newspapers, on television and radio, everything is in a foreign language, and you have no hope of ever seeing your language used in such situations. And, because you never have the chance to use and practice it, you find yourself forgetting pieces of your own language. There are words you used to know but cannot remember, and there is no one you can ask. It is also likely that you alone remember the traditional ways of your people, how you used to live; everyone else has moved on to live more “modern” lives. You feel a sense of loneliness even when surrounded by people. For many people, this situation is very real. Around the world, over eleven percent of languages have fewer than 150 speakers each¹¹. As many as half of the world’s languages will cease to be spoken within the next century.¹² In each of these cases someone will be the last speaker and experience these feelings. Already many have been unfortunate enough to be in this position. The loss of a language is devastating not only for those who speak it, however; it is also devastating to those who study languages. Linguists can learn a lot about human language in general from an examination of the forms found in endangered languages. With every loss of a language the pool of linguistic data, and with it the scope of our ability to learn about our world, shrinks. Endangered languages can be great sources of information, if only we can reach them before the last speakers die. Researchers from other disciplines,

¹⁰ “Census Data 2001 : General Note”. Census of India. Retrieved 11 December 2016

¹¹ Nettle, Daniel and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press

¹². Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world’s languages in crisis. *Language* 68. 4-10.

such as biology, medicine, and environmental science, also can benefit immensely from speakers of endangered languages, who often have detailed knowledge of local flora and fauna that may be unknown to modern scientists.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

Current reports estimate that there are slightly less than 7,000 languages in the world. Almost eighty percent of the world's population, however, speaks one of just 83 languages¹³. Almost 3,000 languages are spoken by 20.4% of the people, and some 3,586 languages are spoken by only 0.2% of the world's population. These languages are generally considered to be endangered. An "endangered language" is a language that is at risk of losing all of its speakers. According to Krauss¹⁴, as many as 50% of the world's languages are no longer being learned by new generations of speakers, leading him to conclude that "the number of languages which, at the rate things are going, will become extinct during the coming century is 3,000 of 6,000."

So we can say that an endangered language is a language that is at a risk of falling out of use, generally because it has few surviving speakers. If it loses all of its native speakers, it becomes an extinct language. UNESCO defines four levels of language endangerment between "safe" (not endangered) and "extinct":¹⁵

- Vulnerable: Most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home).
- Definitely endangered: Children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home.
- Severely endangered: Language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves.
- Critically endangered: The youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently

HOW DOES A LANGUAGE BECOMES ENDANGERED

¹³ Harrison, K. David. 2007. *When languages die : the extinction of the world's languages and the erosion of human knowledge*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

¹⁴ Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world's languages in crisis. *Language* 68. 4-10.

¹⁵ Moseley, Christopher, ed. (2010). *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*. Memory of Peoples (3rd ed.). Paris: UNESCO Publishing. ISBN 978-92-3-104096-2.

There are many reasons why a language might become endangered or even extinct. The physical loss of speakers (due to genocide, natural disasters, or similar causes), the disintegration of the language community (due to displacement, assimilation into the dominant population, or economic concerns), the homogenizing effects of mainstream media (in the form of dominant language television, radio, and print media), and the forced abandonment of the language (through overt suppression, often accompanied by the institution of dominant-language schools) are among the possible factors that lead to language abandonment.

English is also dominant in electronic media. For the most part, radio and television programs have been broadcast in just a handful of languages. According to Nettle and Romaine¹⁶, “by 1966, English was the language of 70 percent of the world’s mail and 60 percent of radio and television broadcasts.” Krauss¹⁷, refers to television as “cultural nerve gas” because it streams the majority language and culture into the homes of indigenous people and accelerates the rate at which they abandon their own languages and cultures.

Technology, for the most part, is not available in indigenous 16 languages, requiring these speakers to use the majority language if they want to make use of technology – especially the Internet – or have access to mass media. The causes of language abandonment discussed above are not necessarily deliberately caused. The homogenizing influences of economics and mass media, for instance, usually are not imposed for the purpose of suppressing a language (though they certainly could be). In the case of genocide, the community is deliberately targeted, but the language itself is not usually the target. In other situations around the world, however, languages have become endangered or extinct because the speakers have been purposefully forced to abandon their language by outsiders. By forcing local people to learn and use a new language, conquerors assert their supremacy over the people they have suppressed. In these cases, language shift is caused by deliberate language suppression. In the United States, Native American groups across the country were forced to abandon their native languages for English.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the government required that Indian children attend boarding schools, where they would be punished (often through corporal punishment) for

¹⁶ Supra n.11

¹⁷ Krauss, Michael. 1992. The world’s languages in crisis. *Language* 68. 4-10.

speaking anything other than English. Some of the children did not know any English when they arrived at these schools, but they were still punished for using their native language. One woman recently recounted her experiences as a young girl at one of these boarding schools, which she remembered quite clearly:¹⁸ Though she arrived at the school with her sister and several other girls from her home, she was unable to communicate with them because she did not speak English and was beaten on the backs of her hands (among other punishments) whenever

6 Conference on Endangered Languages and Cultures of Native America, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT; March 25-27, 2009. 17 she tried to speak in her native tongue. Such experiences predictably led many of the boarding school students, to develop negative attitudes toward their own native languages. Being told for years that your language is useless, and having your teacher respond to any attempt to speak the language by actually causing you physical pain, surely will have lasting effects on how you view that language.

The Critically Endangered Languages as per UNESCO Report in India are 42.¹⁹ Some critically endangered languages as per Unesco are: Aimol, spoken in Manipur; Baghati spoken in Himachal Pradesh; Nihali spoken in Maharashtra; Toto in West Bengal and Toda in Tamil Nadu, among others.²⁰

The Government of India has started a Scheme known as “Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India”. Under this Scheme, the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore works on protection, preservation and documentation of all the mother tongues/languages of India spoken by less than 10,000 speakers keeping in mind the degree of endangerment and reduction in the domains of usage.²¹

The survey on the Indian languages was carried out by Bhasha Research and Publication Centre and its findings show that the country in the early ‘60s had 1,100 languages out of

¹⁸ 6 Conference on Endangered Languages and Cultures of Native America, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT; March 25-27, 2009.

¹⁹ This information was given by the Union Human Resource Development Minister, Smt. Smriti Irani in a written reply to the Lok Sabha question.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Press Information Bureau Government of India Ministry of Human Resource Development 06-August-2014 Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India

which 220 have disappeared by now. Nations that neglected indigenous languages suffered extinction of aboriginal culture. Languages are a collection of memories, helping to cultivate a science that would help future generations.

Spoken by some 2,500 villagers on the Maharashtra-Madhya Pradesh border, Nihali, language is on the verge of extinction as speakers are migrating to find work, and merging with other communities. Prof Anvita Abbi, a distinguished linguist, said, “By allowing languages to die out, we are destroying what needs to be preserved. The task of saving these languages all over the world has already begun. All we need to do is spread awareness among the people.” she further added that in the process, we document the language, describe its grammatical format and prepare dictionaries. Besides, we are also working on its revitalization.

WHAT CAN SAVE A LANGUAGE FROM DYING

Generally speaking, elevating the prestige of a language is required to keep a language from being abandoned. If the speakers of a language feel that it is valuable and important to maintain their language, then they are less likely to stop using it. An increase in prestige can be achieved in many different ways, including the use of the language in media and technology, official governmental recognition for the language, and increased economic status of its speakers. Though Krauss²² referred to television as “cultural nerve gas,” television and radio can also be useful in enhancing the prestige of a language.

If programs can be broadcast in an indigenous language, the speakers will not only have more opportunities to hear their language, but they will be hearing it in a context often associated with higher economic and social standing. Use of indigenous languages where normally only a majority language would be used shows that minority languages can be just as viable in today’s modern world. Some non-profit organizations have focused on this aspect in their support of endangered languages. Cultural Survival, Inc.²³ for example, runs a Guatemala Radio Project which supports community radio stations that broadcast in various indigenous languages, providing “news, educational programming, health information, and traditional music, all reinforcing pride in Mayan heritage.”

²² Supra n.17

²³ Cultural Survival, Inc. 2008. Guatemala Radio Project. Retrieved from <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/programs/grp/program>

Like Krauss, the organization sees the influx of majority language and culture programming as detrimental to indigenous concerns. Despite the harmful effects of mainstream media, however, the organization also sees the potential that radio has for promoting indigenous language and culture.

Raising the economic and social status of the people themselves can in turn elevate their language. An influx of wealth to an indigenous population can help to raise the community's status and as a result, raise the status of their language. Such an increase in wealth can also help to fund revitalization programs, as is the case in the Ayas Valley, Italy, where several tri-lingual schools (French, Italian, and the local Franco-provençal) are funded by the recent shift to a tourism-based economy²⁴. Dorian claims that when a population experiences a gradual increase in prosperity, "it may be that its usefulness lies above all in the fostering of a middle class with the social self-confidence to insist on traditional identity and heritage." Members of a middle class have an increased economic and social standing that lends itself to the kind of self-assurance that aids in preserving minority languages.

Though most languages in the world have no official status²⁵, gaining governmental recognition can be beneficial for indigenous languages. Official status can lead to more resources for the language, both monetary and otherwise. It allows for (or buoys) the use of the language in official contexts, making knowledge of the language more valuable in the public sphere. Governmental recognition also increases the prestige associated with the language by placing it on the same level (at least theoretically) as the majority language. Some communities with endangered languages attempt to keep their language from dying through various revitalization efforts.

Revitalization can be attempted through 20 many different methods, including in schools (immersion or bilingual schools or language classes), other classes (for adults or children), master-apprentice programs (native speaker "masters" paired with non-speaker "apprentice" learners), and home based immersion, among others. Each situation must be analyzed to see which method will work best for the community's needs and wishes. Some programs (or combinations of programs) will be better suited to a particular community than others. Linguists who study endangered languages can provide knowledge about what programs

²⁴ Dorian, Nancy C. 1998. Western language ideologies and small-language prospects

²⁵ Supra n.11

have worked for other communities. These programs must, however, have the full support of the people themselves. No matter what a linguist might say or do, if the people are not at the heart of the program, the revitalization will fail.

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE LOSS ON CULTURE

The possibility of language revitalization brings up a question often asked about language loss: Why does it matter if a language dies? If there are over 6,000 languages, why does it matter if one disappears? Wouldn't the world be better off if we all spoke the same language? From a purely physical standpoint, losing a language will not kill the people who once spoke it. Despite all of this, however, something very valuable is lost whenever a language dies. Language is closely tied with identity. The language you speak defines who you are in a major way. Your native language also binds you to others and creates a community of speakers. A leader among the Maori of New Zealand, Sir James Henare, expressed the potential impact of the loss of the Maori language in the following way: "The language is the life force of our Maori culture and mana ['power']

Language plays a major role in defining ourselves in relation to, and in contrast with, others. The loss of language also causes the loss of other culturally significant practices that are dependent on the language. Oral histories are lost if no one can speak the language any more. Likewise, traditional songs, poetry, and other verbal art forms are lost. Even if the language has been written down, language loss may cause written tales to be lost as well, if they were not translated into another language first. For example, it was not until the discovery of the Rosetta Stone that modern experts were able to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics. When a community loses its language, it also loses many other aspects of its culture. Language loss has a significant impact on both the collective and the individual identities of a community.

INITIATIVES TAKEN BY THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT TO PROTECT THE ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

There is no language called minority language. The Census of India has classified language in the categories of scheduled and non-scheduled languages. There are 22 scheduled and 100 non-scheduled languages. The government has initiated a scheme to protect, preserve and document endangered Indian languages - spoken by less than 10,000. Under the scheme "Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages of India", Mysore-based Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) is working on the protection, preservation and

documentation of endangered languages.²⁶“Keeping in mind the degree of endangerment and reduction in the domains of usage, the institute looks after preservation of these Indian languages,”²⁷

Galvanized by the grim situation of lesser known languages in the country, the Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages (SPPEL) was instituted by Ministry of Human Resource Development (Government of India) in 2013. The sole objective of the Scheme is to document and archive the country’s languages that have become endangered or likely to be endangered in the near future. The scheme is monitored by Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL) located in Mysuru, Karnataka. The CIIL has collaborated with various universities and institutes across India for this mission.²⁸ At the moment, the languages which are spoken by less than 10,000 speakers or languages which are not linguistically studied earlier are chiefly considered to be documented in this Government of India scheme. Presently, 117 languages have been listed for the documentation. Documentation in the form of grammar, dictionary and ethno-linguistic profiles of about 500 lesser known languages are estimated to be accomplished in the coming years.

MISSION OF SPPEL

Every passing day, languages across the world are becoming endangered due to several factors. In India alone, the perilous situation of languages spoken by lesser known tribal communities is alarming. Language endangerment is followed by language extinction. Once a language got extinct, the world view and the traditional knowledge system which are embedded in the language of the community too perishes. Saving and preserving through digital documentation and archiving of these endangered languages of the country is the mission of the SPPEL.²⁹

During a two-day workshop on ‘Endangered tribal languages in south India’, organised by the Anthropological Society of India and the CIIL, L. Ramamoorthy, Head, Linguistic Data Consortium for Indian Languages, CIIL, said that the objective is to bring out dictionaries and also document and preserve the ethnic knowledge system enshrined in the languages,

²⁶ <http://mhrd.gov.in/protection-endangered-languages-country>.Retrived on4th january 2017

²⁷ Human Resource Development Minister Smriti Irani told the Lok Sabha in a written reply.

²⁸ www.sppel.org.retrived on 4th January,2017

²⁹ *ibid*

including folklore. It also intends to frame grammar rules. Experts would give suggestions for the revitalisation of these languages.

About 70 languages from different parts of the country would be studied in the first phase and 500 would be taken up in a span of 10 years, Mr. Ramamoorthy said. The study and documentation of each language would cost between Rs. 6 lakh and Rs. 8 lakh, he added.

CONCLUSION

Majority of the Indian languages could become extinct if timely efforts are not made to preserve them. According to Indian linguistics, of 380 languages spoken in India, 96% are endangered. In fact, in India, only 4% people speak 96% of these endangered languages while 96% natives speak 4% of the major languages.

The Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture (ABILAC) has been actively involved in taking initiatives in making dictionaries of a trilingual kind so that users can relate to indigenous languages while looking for Assamese or English words. In July 2013, a trilingual Bodo dictionary was completed and a manuscript presented to the institute. A trilingual Bishnupuriya Manipuri dictionary is also on the verge of completion. A workshop was also carried out in July 2013 on Tiwa language for a similar dictionary. The main objective is to develop the endangered languages. It needs to be standardized through different steps. These dictionaries are a step towards preservation and developing the languages. More books need to be published in these languages.

The government could develop institutions and programmes to help people learn languages and explore culture. Schools and colleges can adapt their medium of instruction to the mother tongue of the student, and technology can bridge any gap. University grants and scholarships could create awareness and encourage people to explore languages. The government plans to develop a trilingual E-dictionary which will contain audio-visual elements as well as the grammar of the language.