

REVITALIZE OR NOT? MINORITY COMMUNITIES AND ENDANGERED LANGUAGES IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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Abstract: According to the statistics regarding the endangerment of languages, a very high percent of the languages of the world are in danger of extinction. Some estimations state that approximately 90% of the 6,000-7,000 languages spoken today will be extinct in 100 years if the processes of language change and language loss continue at the present pace. According to others, this rate is around 50%. This raises the question of language revitalization and of reversing language shift. My paper aims to present the newest trends in language revitalization theory and practices with a special regard to globalization and linguistic human rights from the sociolinguistic and ecolinguistic perspective. The paper also aims to give an overview of the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale which provides a more detailed description of the level of endangerment of the particular languages.

Keywords: language endangerment, language revitalization, newest trends, EGIDS, new technologies.

Introduction – language endangerment and language revitalization

According to the statistics regarding the endangerment of languages, a very high percent of the languages of the world are in danger of extinction. Some estimations state that approximately 90% of the 6,000-7,000 languages spoken today will be extinct in 100 years if the processes of language change and language loss continue at the present pace (Krauss 1992). According to others, this rate is around 50% (see Krauss, cited by Pusztay 2006a). The statistical data show that around half of the world's population speaks the 10 "largest languages" (constituting only 0.10–0.15% of the total number of languages); 8 languages have more than 100 million speakers; 96% of the languages are spoken by only 4% of the world's population; half of the languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers, while one fourth of the languages have fewer than 1,000 speakers (Skutnabb-Kangas–Phillipson 2008: 4; Grenoble 2006: 138; Pusztay 2006b: 65). The average number of speakers of a language is around 5–6,000, and only 600 of the existing 6–7,000 languages can be considered to be in a safe position; the more pessimistic opinions stating that only 300 languages are in fact not endangered (Krauss 1992: 7).¹ According to Rannut, only those 40–50 languages have an actual future that have been translated into computer code and have their own translated programs and operating systems (vid. Skutnabb-Kangas–Phillipson 2008). The newest literature on the vitality of languages lists Wikipedia (more precisely the existence of Wikipedia articles in a given language) as "an early indicator of some language actually crossing the digital divide", this being the indicator of "digital vitality" (Kornai 2013).

Ethnologue, the most comprehensive database of the languages of the world, features the following data on the status and vitality of languages: it estimates the number of languages at 7,106, out of which 1,519 are "in trouble", while 915 are "dying".² At the same time *Ethnologue* also keeps track of the languages that have become extinct since 1950, which means falling completely out of (even symbolic use), since no one retains a sense of ethnic

¹ It is a fact that determining the exact number of languages is encumbered by the difficulty of distinguishing languages from dialects, and that is why the databases applying different principles feature different numbers.

² <http://www.ethnologue.com/world> (Retrieved on May 9, 2014).

identity associated with the languages, and report 373 such languages in the latest edition of their work, estimating the rate of loss amounting to 6 languages per year. The 16th edition of *Ethnologue* was the first in the history of the publication in which the number of identified living languages went down (Lewis–Simons 2010: 104), featuring 6,909 languages as opposed to 6,912 languages listed in the 15th edition.³

There are several attitudes towards language endangerment: some oppose any type of involvement in the lives of languages (not even with the purpose of saving them) stating that their demise is due to complex social and economic decisions taken by the speakers, which should not be questioned. Another attitude favours internal or external, preferably professional involvement in order to halt tendencies of language loss invoking moral, ethical, scientific, economic arguments as well as the issues of linguistic human rights.

The classical conceptualization of the nation state does not favour linguistic diversity, neither do globalization trends which result both in the spread of a few “megalanguages” such as Chinese or English and in “translocal” and “deterritorialized” diasporic communities with a special structure of language use (vid. Blommaert 2010). However several sets of ideologies have been developed to create a motivational background to some kind of intervention into the processes of language shift and language loss, more exactly into the societies and domains in which these languages are or used to be spoken. One of these ideologies or approaches is language ecology, invoked by several scholars to approach the issues of the loss of linguistic diversity (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas–Phillipson 2008). As Krauss puts it: “Surely, just as the extinction of any animal species diminishes our world, so does the extinction of any language. Surely we linguists know, and the general public can sense, that any language is a supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism. Should we mourn the loss of Eyak or Obykh any less than the loss of the panda or Californian condor?” (Krauss 1992: 8).

Language revitalization is the answer to language endangerment, to the threats to language as well as to linguistic diversity. It is a complex set of methods and strategies aiming at the reinforcement of endangered languages, at reversing language shift, at language planning. It involves several areas of linguistic work: from language documentation to language teaching and acquisition planning, from status planning to linguistic human rights, from cultural aspects to new technologies in language learning.

This paper aims at presenting the latest trends in language revitalization: it wishes to identify the most important areas of research in the domain of reversing language shift, the introduction of the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale to meet and describe all levels of language vitality and endangerment, the challenges in language documentation as well as the use of the newest technologies in teaching and revitalizing endangered languages.

Language endangerment and language revitalization – a short introduction

Language revitalization and revival in its broadest sense dates back to the age of the Enlightenment, to the Haskalah movement, or the Jewish Enlightenment (outlined in the 1780s), when a group of European Jews realized the needs and possibilities to use the Hebrew

³ However – as previously mentioned – the current web version of *Ethnologue* includes 7,106 languages.

language in literary and everyday contexts, and started language planning, more precisely corpus planning.

The first wave of language revival activities is represented by the great national movements of the 19th century, when the national language became the central part of ethnical and national independence as well as the most important bearer of national identity. The second wave is considered to have occurred during the 60s and 70s (in some cases the 80s) of the 20th century, in parallel with and as a result of the collapse of the great colonial empires and the ethnic revival or renaissance movements (Gál 2010: 23).

In my opinion we can witness the third wave of language revitalization which is much more determined by the involvement of researchers and linguists; Krauss's and Fishman's studies on endangered languages has triggered a series of theoretical and practical works in various fields of study: the assessment of endangerment, issues of linguistic human rights, language learning and language teaching strategies correlated with the level of endangerment, case studies on endangered languages and revitalization practices, etc. (vid. Gál 2010).

Since the very beginnings – by applying the widespread *language-in-culture approach* – it was obvious that correctly assessing the level of vitality or the level of endangerment of a particular language is of utmost importance, and several scholars and groups of scholars attempted identifying the most important criteria in determining these levels. Some focused on the features of ethnolinguistic vitality (e.g., Giles et al. 1977), some on the levels of endangerment (e.g., Krauss 1992, Tsunoda 2006).

Joshua Fishman published his seminal work, *Reversing Language Shift* in 1991, in which he presented and described his 8-level Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale. This scale became to serve as the best-known evaluative framework of language endangerment for nearly two decades, providing a theoretical common ground for most theoreticians and practitioners of language revitalization. As its name shows, it focuses on the presence or absence of intergenerational language transmission within a community regarding the maintenance of a language and as such, in assessing language vitality. In its view intergenerational language transmission is not merely and simply an individual decision made by parents, but as “norms of use begin to erode, language shift will begin as the language loses domains in which it is found to be useful and in which its use is expected” (Lewis–Simons 2010: 105). When the number of domains of use of a particular language starts to diminish, parents may consider the language no longer being a valuable resource for their children and they decide not to transmit it to the younger generations, and as such the language loses more and more speakers, language shift taking place on the individual and the societal level. With the outlining of the domains of use of the language, Fishman's GIDS helps defining the position of the language “on this scale of disruption from full use by many users to no use by any users” (Lewis–Simons 2010: 105).

However – as Lewis and Simons emphasize in their 2010 introductory study of the EGIDS – Fishman's GIDS lacks some important features, such as the directionality of language shift as opposed to language development (i.e. which level is the language moving towards), as well as the description of all of the possible statuses of the language. It also emphasizes the individual, the home domain and the local community, while institutional development does not receive as much importance. Fishman's scale is also least elaborated at

the lowest end, nevertheless from the point of view of language revitalization a more detailed description is required.

Introducing the EGIDS – the newest trends in assessing language revitalization

As a response to the issues presented above, Lewis and Simons elaborated the Expanded GIDS, incorporating and harmonising the basic concepts of Fishman’s GIDS, of the UNESCO framework of language endangerment, as well as of *Ethnologue*’s language vitality categories. Their scale includes 13 levels as opposed to Fishman’s 8-level GIDS. The most important changes occur on level 6, where the EGIDS features 2 categories, 6a and 6b; similarly 8a and 8b correspond to a more general GIDS scale 8. EGIDS also includes the entirely new descriptive levels 0, 9 and 10, which – according to the authors – “allow the EGIDS to be applied to all languages of the world” (Lewis–Simons 2010: 110).

The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale includes the following levels:

LEVEL	LABEL	DESCRIPTION	UNESCO
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.	Safe
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.	Safe
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generation are transmitting it to their children.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children.	Definitely endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.	Severely endangered
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically endangered
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

Table 1. The Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (Lewis–Simons 2010: 110)

The article also includes a set of key questions and a decision tree helping the assessment of the current status of any language and the determination of the level it can be included on the EGIDS (vid. Lewis–Simons 2010: 114). The questions also identify some of the major factors that need to be addressed in any language maintenance, revitalization or development project: identity, vehicularity, the status of intergenerational transmission, literacy acquisition status, and a societal profile of generational language use (Lewis–Simons 2010: 117).

The authors also feature a separate chapter focusing on the aspects of language revitalization, in which they change the label of each level with language revitalization rather than language loss as a central factor. They also modify the description of the levels “to reflect the upward trend of language use as the community moves from one less robust level of language vitality to a stronger one” (Lewis–Simons 2010: 117). Thus the “weakest part” of the scale is reinterpreted in the following way from the point of view of language revitalization:

6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned at home by all children as their first language.
6b	Re-established	Some members of the third generation of children are acquiring the language in the home with the result that an unbroken chain of intergenerational transmission has been re-established among all living generations.
7	Revitalized	A second generation of children are acquiring the language from their parents who also acquired the language in the home. Language transmission takes place in the home and community.
8a	Reawakened	Children are acquiring the language in community and some home settings and are increasingly able to use the language orally for some day-to-day communicative needs.
8b	Reintroduced	Adults of the parent generation are reconstructing and reintroducing their language for everyday social interaction.
9	Rediscovered	Adults are rediscovering their language for symbolic and identificational purposes.

Table 2. Revitalization EGIDS levels (Lewis–Simons 2010: 117)

Thus Lewis and Simons’s scale can serve as the basis of several interpretations of the state of any language: on the one hand it can help the researcher or the member of a certain community identify the level of language loss or disruption while applying the EGIDS, determining the actions or strategies the language planners need to take in order to move the language from one level to a higher one. On the other hand the revitalization EGIDS incorporates the revitalization concept into assessing any language that has been the subject of any revitalization or language planning processes in order to stress the level of progress.

Since its publication, the EGIDS has been incorporated in the assessment of the languages of the world by *Ethnologue* (every language included in the database being assigned to a certain level of the EGIDS), and is one of the several metrics developed to

measure the vitality of languages featured by SIL International, a worldwide Christian non-profit organization involved in the study, development and documentation of mainly lesser known languages.

According to Google Scholar (the web engine indexing scholarly literature), Lewis and Simon's article has been cited in 26 scholarly works since its publication⁴. One of the critical remarks formulated in the literature is that EGIDS simplifies assessment as it does not take into account the number of speakers (either absolute or relative), the language attitudes of the community as well as government policies or the extent of existing documentation (vid. Dwyer 2012). Dwyer also stresses that EGIDS assessment requires in situ language use surveying, as in the case of many languages such information is not available online or in print publications.

However a significant number of studies and articles use the EGIDS to assess the status and vitality of a particular endangered language or language variant (e.g., Hall et al. 2014, Kornai 2013, Regmi 2013, Ting-Ling 2013, Yadava 2013, Yu-Hsiu Lee 2014) and accept it as a valid tool in language planning regarding endangered languages.

The newest trends in language documentation and the role of new technologies

Once the decision has been made to revive and strengthen a certain language, there are several methods and strategies of language revitalization at the hand of the community or the linguist involved in such activities. Based on the level of endangerment or the level of vitality of the particular language (assessed by any valid metric tool – EGIDS, for example) there is need to select the methods and strategies that can be applied in the case of that particular language community in order to get the best results.

Language documentation is one of the most important goals of working with endangered languages as the researchers must be aware of the responsibilities this assumes. In the case of severely or critically endangered languages (so-called *late-stage languages* – Dorian 2010), documentation can be the only chance to create a record of the speech form in question. For a long period of time, and before considering the possibility of language revitalization, language documentation was carried out mainly in the interest of other scholars; however in the light of this new paradigm, the most important question is how documentation benefits the native speakers of the language. As such, language documentation can also serve revitalization: for example the development of a writing system – if there is none – can aid institutional or formal language teaching (however there has been a heated debate regarding the “collateral damages” caused by graphization, such as the loss of an oral culture or transitional literacy which in fact facilitates language shift – see Gál 2010: 121–125). However it is undebatable that if an endangered language has been well documented, its chances of survival and the possibilities of revitalization are increased. It is also important to view the language as part of a community and of a culture, as “our real goal should be a description and documentation of language ecologies. That is, we need to study languages as they are culturally and socially situated, in a full social context of production and use” (Grenoble 2013: 54).

⁴ Data retrieved on May 10, 2014.

Language documentation in the 21st century goes hand in hand with new technologies and electronic mediation, as in addition to communicative use and materials production, documentation is one of the possible routes for the effective use of technology by communities (Hermes–King 2013: 126). Several scholars have discussed the connections between language revitalization and the new technologies emphasizing the importance of indigenous media and technology as ideology (e.g., Eisenlohr 2004). In the era of the internet, of computer and mobile-assisted language learning, language revitalization has gained new ground on the internet and in new media contexts. Hermes and King also stress that technologies can be interpreted as both the means and modes of production, as well as of rapidly creating language materials and resources (Hermes–King 2013: 126).

The scholarly literature on language revitalization shows that the newest technologies always played an important role in developing revitalization methods: there are several accounts of revitalization programmes from all around the world making use of the telephone, of the radio, of the television, of the media, as well as of multimedia software.

The development of technology can be identified in the newest trends in language revitalization as well. The most recent scholarly literature describes a number of cases in which the newest technologies are applied in teaching endangered languages: special software were created for learners of such languages, for example *Ojibwemodaa* for the learners of Ojibwe (Hermes–King 2013), mobile apps are starting to be used in indigenous language learning (Begay 2013), and the roles and possibilities of technology in indigenous language communities are widely discussed and presented in scholarly articles (e.g., Galla 2010).

The internet, social networking sites as well as the new media has provided a virtual presence for endangered languages. This can provide input and practice for learners as well new domains of use (Sallabank 2011). There are several internet sites that allow the speakers of a certain endangered language to meet in virtual communities, use and learn their language (e.g., Wetzel 2006).

The internet and information technology has manifold advantages in language revitalization: on the one hand they provide the means to document and archive linguistic and metalinguistic data, audio and video materials, databases, multimedia word dictionaries (most frequently developed by participatory processes of the speakers of the endangered languages, see e.g., Yang et al. 2007) as well as web portals listing studies and further information on the language and on the linguistic community, which help promote and foster the languages and the cultures they were created in. On the other hand the newest technologies and the internet can function as the medium of language teaching and learning through multimedia software, language learning sites and internet courses. Social networking sites provide an important new domain of language use for the speakers and learners of the endangered language (e.g., the case of the Welsh language on Twitter, Jones et al. 2013).

Besides the above presented advantages, technology also has an important symbolic role in language revitalization as it helps achieve relevance, significance and purpose (Galla 2010). The presence of lesser-used languages in electronic and IT mediation does not only encourage language maintenance and revitalization by providing the speakers and the language learners with opportunities to practice and maintain skills in the language but it also facilitates “a transformation of ideological valuations of the language so that the lesser-used language is viewed as part of the contemporary world and as relevant for the future of a

particular group” (vid. Eisenlohr 2004: 24). However it needs to be mentioned that the newest technologies are not equally available to all learners of endangered languages, particularly those lacking access to computers, the internet and other technological platforms (Holton 2011: 373).

Conclusions

When it comes to issues of language endangerment and language loss, language revitalization theory and practice can no longer be overlooked. If the question is whether to revitalize endangered and/or minority languages or not, the newest scholarly literature gives account of the fact that more and more languages undergoing language shift and language loss are included in revitalization programmes, thus an active response to language endangerment has become the major discourse in linguistics.

The newest research on endangered languages has shown the importance of the correct assessment of the level of endangerment in order to develop successful revitalization strategies, as well as in order to apply the most adequate methods in the given community. The need to incorporate the latest technologies in documenting, teaching and learning endangered languages is seen as of an utmost importance both from the practical and the ideological points of view. However the most critical issue in language revitalization is the active involvement of the local community, as “decades of evidence from around the globe indicates that successful language revitalization efforts are rooted in community initiative, investment, and commitment” (Hermes–King 2013: 125). This means that without the consent, the cooperation and the participation of the language community revitalizing any language is practically impossible. Thus in the end it always comes to the local communities to decide whether to revitalize or not.

Resources

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