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African Indigenous Languages death and revival; the causes and consequences

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ABSTRACT

Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to the grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. This paper will analyze the language death and the revitalization process with emphasis on the collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world. Linguistic ideas are still considered important, but have suffered considerably subsequently under rhetorical developments aimed at showing how linguistics had changed or was changing with the times. A language is often declared to be dead even before the last native speaker of the language has died. If there are only a few speakers of a language remaining, and they no longer use that language for communication, then the language is effectively dead. A language that has reached such a reduced stage of use is generally considered moribund. Language death may manifest itself when language change begins in a low-level environment such as the home or a high-level environment such as the government. The most common process leading to language death is one in which a community of speakers of one language becomes bilingual in another language, and gradually shifts allegiance to the second language until they cease to use their original language. language revitalization is often to recover the spoken use of the language. Although the goals of language revitalization vary by community and situation, a goal of many communities is to return a language that is extinct or endangered to daily use. The process of language revitalization is the reverse of language death.

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Introduction

An indigenous language or autochthonous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous peoples. This language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages may not be national languages, or may have fallen out of use, because of language deaths or linguicide caused by colonization. Indigenous language refer to the complex set of knowledge, skills and technologies existing and developed around specific conditions of populations and communities indigenous to a particular geographic area. It constitutes the knowledge that people in a given community have developed over time, and continue to develop (Edwards, J. 1985)

On a global scale, the problem of language death or endangerment is alarming, with the effect that bigger languages continue to expand their territories at the expense of minority languages, some of which do not even have as much as a territory for themselves. With the passing of time, many of such minority languages may not survive the onslaught of dominant others. On the African continent, a survey conducted on language death by Gabriele Sommer in Brenzinger (1992) provides a sufficient compilation of all the endangered languages across the continent. As to the causes of such death, language contact has been cited as the main reason languages cannot be issued death certificates either, not really the kind that can be issued for an organism, a human being for instance. Although linguists have usually claimed that a language dies when its last speaker is dead, reality also tells us that the process

of death itself started long before the death of the last speaker, when the population of its speakers lost their critical mass and often also when its structures were seriously eroded by those of the prevailing language, as in the case of Sutherland Gaelic.

Kenya is a multilingual country in which over 40 languages are spoken; however, English and Kiswahili dominate in that they are given official recognition while indigenous languages are not. English is used in education, for official purposes and international communication, while Kiswahili is the national language and is used in the political arena, parliament, and as a language of political unity and national identity. Indigenous Kenyan languages however have not been given the same amount of recognition. (Schrock, J.R. 1986) They are relegated for use at the household level and for interethnic communication. Although English and Kiswahili are regarded as languages of prestige in that they carry certain potential for economic benefit, Kenyan people also place great value on their ethnic languages because they carry the people's culture and oral history. However, as a result of increased social mobility, urbanization, inter-ethnic marriages, and formal education, among other factors, these languages face the possibility of extinction." (Crawford, J. 1995) A range of studies place languages spoken in Kenya between 30 and 60. Of these, about 65% are Bantu, between 30–32 % Nilo-Saharan, while the rest are of the Cushitic family. Exact figures as to how many comprise what group, or the absolute total, have been elusive.

Fishman, J.A (1991) observes that Language does not exist in a vacuum. It serves and is molded by other systems in the human mind. Because it is used for conveying ideas, its structure

and function must reflect these ideas. Because it is used for communication within a complex social and cultural system, its structure and function are molded by these forces as well. Yet once people have learned how to use language, it wields a power of its own. It aids them in thinking about some ideas and hinders them in thinking about others. It molds many aspects of their daily affairs.

Language death also language extinction, linguistic extinction or *linguicide*, is a process that affects speech communities where the level of linguistic competence that speakers possess of a given language variety is decreased, eventually resulting in no naïve or fluent speakers of the Language, this may affect any language idiom, including dialects. Language death should not be confused with language loss which describes the loss of proficiency in a language at the individual level (Swadesh, M. 1948)

According to Brenzinger, M. (eds) (1992) The history of the world's languages is largely a story of loss and decline. At around 8000 BC, linguists estimate that upwards of 20,000 languages may have been in existence. Today the number stands at 6,909 and is declining rapidly. By 2100, it is quite realistic to expect that half of these languages will be gone, their last speakers dead, their words perhaps recorded in a dusty archive somewhere, but more likely undocumented entirely

Kraus (1995) posits that Language death can be due to language assimilation which may be voluntary or may be forced upon a population. Speakers of some languages, particularly regional or minority languages may decide to abandon them based on economic or utilitarian grounds, in favour of languages regarded as having greater utility or prestige. This process is gradual and can occur from either bottom to top or top to bottom. Once a language is no longer a native language, no children are being socialized into it as their primary language, the process of transmission is ended and the language itself will not survive past the current generation. This is rarely a sudden event, but a slow process of each generation learning less and less of the language, until its use is relegated to the domain of traditional use, such as in poetry and song. (Lagefoged, P 1992) Typically the transmission of the language from adults to children becomes more and more restricted, to the final setting that adults speaking the language will raise children who never acquire fluency. Language death can be fast, when the children are taught to avoid their parents' language for reasons such as work opportunities and social status. At other times, minority languages survive much better, for example when the speakers try to isolate themselves against a majority population. Often, especially historically, governments have tried to promote language death, not wishing to have minority languages.

The Language 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 languages (Hinton, L. 1994). 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 (Hinton, L. 1994). 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 Krauss (1992b), 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." Linguists have proposed several different ways to categorize

languages in order to better understand the variety of linguistic situations. Krauss uses the term "moribund" to refer to languages that are not being taught to children as their first language. Unless something changes, moribund languages will cease to be spoken within a generation. "Endangered" languages are those that are currently still being learned by children, but that will no longer be taught to children within the century. "Safe" languages are those that are neither moribund nor endangered, they are currently being learned by children nor are safe from extinction, for the time being at least.

During language loss sometimes referred to as obsolescence in the linguistic literature the language that is being lost generally undergoes changes as speakers make their language more similar to the language that they are shifting to. This process of change has been described by Wilson, E.D (1992) in two categories, though they are not mutually exclusive. Often speakers replace elements of their own language with something from the language they are shifting toward. Also, if their heritage language has an element that the new language does not, speakers may drop it. Overgeneralization, under generalization, loss of phonological contrasts, variability, changes in word order synthetic morphosyntax may become increasingly analytic, syntactic loss in the lexical categories and complex constructions

Crawford, J. (eds) (1992a) argues that the extinction of languages like the majority of creatures in natural history have fallen victim to predators, changing environments, or more successful competitors. Moreover, the pace of extinction is clearly accelerating both for languages and for biological species. In the past, despite a few exceptional periods e.g., the late Mesozoic era, when the dinosaurs died out, the process has proceeded discretely and locally. Today, by contrast, it is proceeding generically and globally. We appear to have entered a period of mass extinctions a threat to diversity in our natural ecology and also in what might be called our cultural ecology (Denison, N. 1977).

Kraus, M. (1992a) the problem with globalization in the latter sense is that it is the result, not a cause, of language decline, it encompassed in the former definition of globalization, is trade and capitalism. Trade does not kill languages any more than it kills any other type of cultural practice, like painting or music. Trade enhances the exchange of cultural practices and fosters their proliferation; it does not generally diminish them. Historically, regional trade has fostered the creation of many new *Lingua Franca*, and the result tends to be a stable, healthy bilingualism between the local language and the regional trade language. It is only when the state adopts a trade language as official and, in a fit of linguistic nationalism, foists it upon its citizens that trade languages become "killer languages." speaking a global language or a language of trade does not necessitate the abandonment of one's mother tongue.

The truth is, most people don't "give up" the languages they learn in their youth. They tend to speak those languages either until they die or they no longer have someone to speak them with. Instead, languages are lost when the process of intergenerational transmission is altered or interrupted (Sasse H.J 1992). To wipe out a language, one has to enter the home and prevent the parents from speaking their native language to their children one good answer is urbanization. If a Luo and a Gikuyu meet in Nairobi, they won't likely speak each other's mother tongue, but they very likely will speak one or both of the trade languages in Kenya; Swahili and English. Their kids may

learn a smattering of words in the heritage languages from their parents, but by the third generation any vestiges of those languages in the family will likely be gone.

In other cases, extremely rural communities are drawn to the relatively easier lifestyle in cities, until sometimes entire villages are abandoned. Nor is this a recent phenomenon. The first case of massive language die off was probably during the Agrarian (Neolithic) Revolution, when humanity first adopted farming, abandoned the nomadic lifestyle, and created permanent settlements. As the size of these communities grew, so did the language they spoke. No language could grow very large, because the community that spoke it could only grow so large itself before it fragmented. The language followed suit, soon becoming two languages. Permanent settlements changed all this, and soon larger and larger populations could stably speak the same language (Sapir, E 1931).

Pinkers, S. (1994) argues that naturally, we do not have similar estimates for the rate of language extinction. Because languages leave no fossil record, there is no way to calculate the rate at which they died out in the past. But the phenomenon of language death is strikingly similar and causally linked to the death of biological species. Modern cultures, abetted by new technologies, are encroaching on once isolated peoples with drastic effects on their way of life and on the environments they inhabit. Destruction of lands and livelihoods; the spread of consumerism, individualism, and other Western values; pressures for assimilation into dominant cultures; and conscious policies of repression directed at indigenous groups threatening the world's biodiversity as well as its cultural and linguistic diversity. Languages clearly do have value, if for no other reason than simply because people value them. (Pratt, R.H. 1973, Robins R.H Unlenbeck eds. 1991) Local and minority languages are valued by their speakers for all sorts of reasons, whether it is for use in the local community, communicating with one's elders, a sense of heritage, the oral and literary traditions of that language, or something else entirely. Again, the praxeologist is not in a position to evaluate these beliefs. The praxeologist merely notes that free choice in language use and free choice in association, one is not dictated by the edicts of the state, an individual will choose the best to satisfy their demand of whether for minority languages or lingua franca, what people find useful, they will use.

Renfrew, C. (1987) indicates that Languages have no genes and thus carry no mechanism for natural selection. Their prospects for survival are determined not by any intrinsic traits, or capacity for adaptation, but by social forces alone. As a practical matter, in discussing language shift it is probably impossible to avoid biomorphic metaphors like ecology, survival, death, extinction, and genocide. But unless we remain vigilant, such metaphors can lead us into semantic traps, and these traps have political consequences.

Reyhner, J. (1992) Conceiving language loss as a Darwinian process implies that some languages are fitter than others, that the "developed" will survive and the "primitive" will go the way of the dinosaurs. no linguist who makes such an argument, there are plenty of laypersons who do add such voices are heeded by legislators, as testified by the advance of the English Only movement since the mid-1980s.) Some scholars of "language death" have helped to perpetuate this misunderstanding by ignoring its social and historical causes. By focusing exclusively on "structural-linguistic" factors, they imply "that a language can

'kill itself' by becoming so impoverished that its function as an adequate means of communication is called into question.

Linguists have proposed several different ways to categorize languages in order to better understand the variety of linguistic situations. Krauss (1992a) uses the term "moribund" to refer to languages that are not being taught to children as their first language. Unless something changes, moribund languages will cease to be spoken within a generation. "Endangered" languages are those that are currently still being learned by children, but that will no longer be taught to children within the century. "Safe" languages are those that are neither moribund nor endangered are currently being learned by children nor are safe from extinction, for the time being at least. Oftentimes the term "endangered language" is used to describe both the endangered and moribund languages.

Objective of the paper

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. The important but sometimes problematic role that the academic study of language plays in the preservation of endangered languages. Though the requirements of academia occasionally may be at odds with those of the community, linguists and speakers of endangered languages have the potential to create a symbiotic relationship. Though each can exist without the other, their respective efforts can be enhanced when they cooperate with each other. This paper examines how a language becomes endangered through the consequences it has and how it can be saved

Consequences of Language loss

Schmidt, A (1990) As many as half of the world's nearly 7,000 languages are poised to become extinct within the next century. When these languages die, it will impact the endangered language community and the academic community alike. Language plays a large role in identity formation, and the loss of a language has significant consequences for its speakers. Endangered language communities also stand to lose valuable cultural practices, such as oral histories, traditional songs and poetry, and other art forms that are tied to language. Linguistics, on the other hand, is at risk for losing half of the subject matter it studies. The study of linguistics, along with other academic disciplines, can greatly benefit from the information found in endangered languages. (Mc Laughlin, D. 1992) Conversely, endangered language communities can benefit from expertise of linguists, particularly in regard to language revitalization efforts. The goals of linguists, however, may not always coincide with the goals of the endangered language speakers themselves. As a result, academic culture and traditional culture may clash, causing tensions between linguists and the community. (Crawford, J. 1995) While there may be occasional conflicts between the interests of linguists and those of speakers of endangered languages, through mutual respect and an awareness of sensitive issues, linguistics and endangered language communities both can benefit from greater cooperation.

The loss of a language has substantial implications for academia. The study of endangered languages is important for the field of linguistics. For academics who study the human

capacity for language, the more we know about the varied ways of using language, the better to explain such capacity. Linguistic diversity gives us unique perspectives into the mind because it reveals the many creative ways in which humans organize and categorize their experience" (Schwartz, J. 1994). The fewer languages in existence or the less documentation there is, the less diversity there is with which to work, and the less we can learn about human creativity in language.

Wilson, E.D (1992) posits that Language has a huge impact on one's sense of identity. The perception of an individual is defined by how to situate oneself in relation to others. The language one speaks constitutes a large part of this identity. Because it is so crucial to identity, language can become a very emotionally charged topic. Language is so central to our everyday lives, and to our sense of self, that people can become very defensive if they feel their language is being threatened.

Pinkers, S. (1994) The peculiarities of a given language do not significantly affect the thinking of those who speak or write in that language, and so the differences between languages are largely accidental or irrelevant to the meaning of the text. The theorists have a very optimistic view of the ability of translators to put the meaning of a text into different languages in ways that are perfectly natural or idiomatic for the "receptor" languages. For example, the New Testament scholar D.A. Carson says in one place, "Although it is true that the meanings of words only partially overlap between languages, nevertheless 'all languages can talk about the same meaning and for that matter about all meanings."

Language is an extremely important aspect of conducting business in the constantly changing global business environment. Without the proper communication skills, most businesses, and individuals, will not succeed. One's concepts and ideas are only as effective as one's ability to communicate them. In order to create a lesson plan that explains how language affects intercultural business communications the following concepts will be discussed: high and low context language, language diversity, interaction, informal and nonverbal languages, vocabulary, conversation taboos, and the nature of language in general. In addition to these concepts, language translation as well as both the positive and negative aspects of using an interpreter (Feldman, J. A. 1991)

Heath, S.B (1972) A person's social class is reflected in his speech. People who have lower educational levels or who are new to English-speaking countries often speak different forms or dialects of English than their middle- or upper-class counterparts. The inability to speak standard business English can interfere with a person's ability to find a high-paying job, obtain an education or become upwardly mobile in society. The lack of language skills are often passed from parents to their children

Indigenous language typically distinguishes one community from another. For some communities, traditional language takes on a personal meaning and also reflects a community's interests. Some communities depend on their traditional language for survival. This is particularly true of traditional environmental knowledge, which refers to a particular form of place-based knowledge of the diversity and interactions among plant and animal species, landforms, watercourses, and other qualities of the biophysical environment in a given place. (Schwartz, J. 1994) The importance of indigenous languages to the growth and development of a child cannot be overemphasized; Values, mores and norms embedded in the

indigenous languages would be lost to children and in the society at large if these languages continue to be relegated to the background. It is sad to note that the acquisition and use of our indigenous languages among children and youth has ebbed seriously, thereby threatening the survival of indigenous languages. It has become a common fad among them to take pride in the use of foreign languages.

Language Revitalization

Africa is a language-rich continent. In millions of African communities today, thousands of languages are regularly being used for learning and communication up to 2110 of these languages has been identified by language researchers over the years. (Edwards, J. 1985) defines Language revitalization, language revival or reversing language shift as the attempt by interested parties, including individuals, cultural or community groups, governments, or political authorities, to reverse the decline of a language. If the decline is severe, the language may be endangered, Moribund or extinct. In these cases, the goal of language revitalization is often to recover the spoken use of the language. Although the goals of language revitalization vary by community and situation, a goal of many communities is to return a language that is extinct or endangered to daily use. The process of language revitalization is the reverse of language death.

Zsasz, M.C (1977) argues that the Total revival of a "dead" language in the sense of having no native speakers into a self-sustaining community of several million first language speakers has happened only once, in the case of the Hebrew Language, now the national language of Israel. In this case, there was a unique set of historical and cultural characteristics that facilitated the revival. 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.

Edwards, J. (1985) sums it by 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, (Fishman, J.A 1991) 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

Feldman, P. (1983) also suggests several steps to be taken to protect languages from extinction. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community. The need for higher visibility of indigenous and threatened languages, often starting with token appearances in advertising and public-service leaflets, leading to use of language for place names, public signs, and road signs an endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community. This also increases their status and their authority. An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the

eyes of the dominant community. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down. Although the problem of choice of dialect/variety of the language as the basis for the writing system is difficult, in the end, most language revitalization projects include literacy as a necessary component. An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology. Language survival emphasizes the notion that languages have life, just as most of the natural world has life. The fact that many languages under threat are spoken by people whose natural environment is also under threat enhances the perceived logic of this perspective (Kraus, M. 1995).

Conclusion

The subject matter of language loss is obviously much more complex than the relevant ever-growing literature in linguistics has revealed. There have been many proposals for solutions to what is considered disastrous for the mankind: the loss of linguistic diversity. Curiously, this has been correlated with loss of cultural diversity. However, it can be argued that there has been replacement of an older form of diversity by a new kind, because globalization has not really made the world more uniform, although it has enabled more exchanges between older, distant cultures. The solutions have also revealed very little understanding of how a language dies, what the real immediate causes are, independent of the fact the socio-economic ecologies of the relevant populations have been changed by contacts with other populations. The question of whether languages as entities strangely separated from their speakers have rights that prevail over those of their speakers has hardly been addressed from the perspective that languages are tools which should enable their speakers to adapt to ever-changing ecologies rather than from the perspective now dominant in linguistics, viz., that speakers should serve their languages and preserve their integrity.

Indigenous language users first need to determine the current status of their language and then set realistic goals for their language revitalization efforts. Regardless of whether these goals include literacy clubs, once goals are established, language activists need to concentrate on the methods, materials, and motivation they will use to achieve their goals that will either lead indigenous language learners to communicative competence and more sophisticated language usage or to failure. No one person, community, school, university, tribe, or government program has all the answers to keeping any indigenous language alive. It is only through sharing successes and learning from failures that the extinction of indigenous languages can be prevented. More needs to be done to create a network of information sharing between indigenous communities. The many attempts to get the word out about the importance and value of indigenous languages, the current peril they are in, and what can be done to revitalize them.

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