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Language Death: Natural Progression or Inevitable Tragedy?

Language is a feature of culture that is common to all communities. There is not a single community of people in the world that does not have one. Languages are records; they are entire histories and vast amounts of cultural knowledge codified within lexicons (vocabulary), different grammars, and varying syntactical structures. Whether languages are spoken by an enormous community (English, Mandarin, and Spanish) or a remote community (Nandi, Native Hawaiian), they are all fundamentally the same: they serve as a means of communication and help tie people to their cultures and communities. However, not all languages have equal amounts of value placed on them. It is simply a fact that the world's most widely spoken languages have more value assigned to them because they are the languages of commerce, globalization, and international communication. Their use has cemented their status as dominant, and although these top languages will change as time goes on (they may even splinter into other languages as Latin and the romance languages did), they will most likely never die out. They are often the official languages instituted by various nations, and whenever a smaller language comes into contact with them, they are almost always stifled. Their far-reaching influence necessitates their use as people of smaller language communities come into contact with them. Most people do not notice because they are part of the communities that speak these more dominant tongues. A lack of awareness is extraordinarily dangerous because it blinds people to other ways of life, including other languages which are in danger of dying or have already gone extinct.

This issue is critical because of the detrimental effect that language death can have on our understanding of how our species developed not just on the western hemisphere, but all over the globe. We completely lose a deeper understanding of how different peoples developed, what they and their ancestors thought about the world around them, and how they organized their societies based on what they found to be important through first-hand experience. In essence, we lose insight into the history of our race and we lose cultural knowledge about the world that we may never again attain. Language provides us with a small window into a world we may never have known to exist, which is why I argue that language death should be prevented (ideally), or at least understood.

Some explanations of ideas common to linguistics are required in order to understand the process of language death. The first is what is called a “language ideology.” As explained by Alexander Wahl (a graduate student in the Linguistics department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, or UCSB) in a lecture on the term, a language ideology is a socially constructed idea that we have about languages and the people that use them. They tend to be evaluative and stereotypical and do not reflect any intrinsic qualities about languages or the communities that speak them (Wahl). What this means is that many of the things that people say about languages that are solely grounded in aesthetics are (as they sound) completely lacking in factual support. In other words, language ideologies are essentially rules/guidelines/opinions that people believe *should* be followed or *should* be correct (Woolard and Schiefflin 56). Expressions such as “German is an ugly language” and “Irish accents are sexy” are personal opinions that reflect specific individuals’ language ideologies. Language ideologies are also common among instances of language death as some people have the opinion that fewer languages would facilitate unity on global scale, an issue which I will address later.

Many of the world's languages that are on the verge of extinction or have already died are languages that are/were spoken by very small communities in remote parts of the world. Their relatively unknown statuses can lead people to hold negative ideologies or perceptions about them and their endangered positions (mainly because they have no cultural ties to the communities that speak them). These ideologies are hazardous when they are widespread because such ideas tend to keep power and relevance away from smaller languages while reinforcing the dominance of widely spoken languages. This salient issue is discussed by Wade Davis in a 2010 *Scientific American* article, in which he argues that "It is not change or technology that threatens culture; it is domination." And that is only if people know that those more remote languages even exist; the effects are worse when a person is unaware that there are languages that have died and that, consequently, pockets of cultural knowledge have been lost. Although I mentioned that no language is intrinsically more valuable than any other language, ideologies in which the maintenance of a "small" language is condemned tend to be problematic because they promote (and by extension, maintain) the idea of the world's most dominant languages as elite.

The terms I want to discuss next are "language" and "dialect." For the purposes of this paper, the definitions that we will use are ones given by Professor Mary Bucholtz of UCSB. She describes a language as "a group of related norms" and dialects as "varieties within [a] language." Now there are several other factors to consider when defining these two terms, but these definitions are adequate enough for my arguments and paper. The reason I want to explain the differences between these two terms is that many people do not know that they are actually different. And for that reason, they may not consider the death of one language to be that important if it is surrounded by several other communities that they assume speak the same or a

similar language. While this can be true of some regions (some languages do closely resemble another that is located near it), it is not always the case. For instance, Native American languages that are distinct from one another are not merely dialects derived from the same master tongue—they are all individual languages. Two of them may be located in close proximity to each other, but that does not mean they are mutually intelligible (that speakers of one will understand the other). I stress this point because if one believes that the same cultural knowledge may be contained within multiple related languages, then they do a disservice to the languages that are dying out. The fact that languages remain distinct regardless of their proximity to another one means that if one dies, their individual knowledge and perspective is lost also; neighboring communities may have valued different phenomena and occurrences. This distinction is necessary because it allows us to view languages as individual entities rather than just subcategories of larger groups. By acknowledging the difference between a language and dialect (the definitions of which are occasionally contested), we are forced to deal with every language on an individual and intimate basis.

This is the primary focus of my paper: the death of languages. I will discuss what types of languages have a tendency to die out, how they die, why their deaths are significant, and ultimately explain methods by which they are preserved or revitalized. I will focus on a few languages in order to illustrate what is lost when a language dies and why we, as people completely detached from their existence, should care about them. I will accomplish this by addressing the following questions: What do we lose? It's not our culture, so how does it affect us? Fewer languages seem like a good thing, why should small languages be preserved? This paper is not intended to express why languages should be saved, but rather why they should be studied. Death is a natural part of any biological organism, and similarly, death is a natural part

of a language's life. The best way to approach the issue of language death would be to record whatever we can in order to improve our understanding of how our species developed as well as gain knowledge about parts of the world that we might otherwise have lost.

Languages die in a variety of ways. Two of these ways are explained by linguist Jean Aitchison in her book *Language Change: Progress or Decay?*: “language suicide” (198) and “language murder” (204). Although the wording is a bit extreme, the connotations are accurate: in the first type of death she describes, languages slowly draw from a larger, more widely spoken language. This process is usually spurred on by the community of speakers themselves as they become more exposed to the larger language and start to draw from and include it in their own languages. As an example, Aitchison cites the inclusion of English grammar and words in Guyanan Creole (199-200). In the homicidal type of language death, a language is taken over by another language—not necessarily through entirely hostile means (though that too is a possibility), but rather through a community's gradual loss of speakers to another, more dominant language. As the smaller community comes into contact with a larger one and begins to assimilate into the more dominant culture, it gradually begins to lose its speakers, which leads to its eventual death (Aitchison 204-208). These definitions are accurate but are very closely related—so closely, in fact, that I would say they are both effects of what is called language shift. In general, language shift is a very big factor in the life cycle of a language (whether it causes death or just change). Language shift, to put it simply, is the process by which a community's language changes. The term is usually applied to the loss of language among an immigrant family, but is applicable to language death as well. Language shift can occur in a variety of ways, two of which were discussed above. However, to move from the abstract concepts of language shift to more concrete examples, I am going to discuss a few other ways that languages die (also

related to language shift) by looking at specific communities or languages.

Many history books teach us about the arrival of Europeans to the Americas. As these history lessons continued while we got older, more was revealed to us about the relationship between the indigenous peoples and the Europeans. We may know a bit about how they suppressed certain aspects of indigenous cultures, but language is rarely discussed in depth. Many indigenous tribes had languages that were specific to their cultures, but with the arrival of colonial figures and the onset of their cultural oppression, many of these languages were stripped from Native American communities. Initially, many tribes were confronted violently as they were forced to move from their lands into reservations. As time went on and more humane methods were developed to deal with the native tribes, other approaches were used to stifle their cultures and, consequently, their languages. One such method was the institution of boarding schools, which are discussed in detail in a 2008 National Public Radio online article. According to Army officer Richard Pratt, who founded one of these schools, boarding schools were specifically designed to “kill the Indian...save the man” (qtd. in Bear). Native Americans were forcibly taken from their homes and their families and enrolled into boarding schools where they were forced to wear “civilized” attire, their hair was cut, they were given Americanized names, and they were forced to use English; all symbols of their heritage were essentially erased. By the time they were released from these schools, they had forgotten most of their native languages. Because of this lost bit of their heritage, they were unable to speak with their elders, and thus unable to fully partake in their cultures since many Native American tribes pass down their mythologies, history, and knowledge through oral traditions (Bear). This is a clear example of how cultures were systematically oppressed, and also provides a concrete example of how languages can die. The people who were forced to attend these boarding schools lost the use of

their language, distancing them from their cultures and heritages and ultimately excluded them from a rich history of cultural knowledge.

I have discussed the background of what certain linguistic terms mean and how they relate to the issue of language death. I have explained how languages can die and why it is important to understand the processes by which languages become endangered and eventually extinct. Next, I want to discuss the situation surrounding a language that almost went extinct as well as a language that is endangered, but has no clear plan for preservation.

Hawaiian was a language that held a lot of importance for the Native Hawaiians living on the islands before the US annexed them in the late 1800s. But after the annexation, Hawaiian was banned from most public spaces, the most important of which being in governmental contexts and public schools. This necessitated the acquisition of English in order to competently succeed in school as well as to understand what was happening politically. This legislation inadvertently led to the formation of Hawaiian Pidgin English (HPE) and, later, of Hawaiian Creole English (HCE, though it was used more as an identity marker by the younger generation during the 1930s) as well as to the decline of Native Hawaiian (Roberts 332-333). The Hawaiian language was seen by the Hawaiian rulers as a representation of their national identity; it was symbolic for who they were as a people, so when the vernacular (HPE) was initially used as a means of instruction, there were not many issues as it allowed them to express themselves in a manner that was considered progressive and desirable by Hawaiian leadership. But as time progressed, English was adopted by most schools as the language of instruction, and Native Hawaiian gradually came closer and closer to endangerment (Beyer 160-164). The annexation of Hawaii and the government's policy regarding the Hawaiian language are what led to its decline. This exemplifies how contact with a larger language affects the existence of more remotely

spoken languages. Hawaiian was threatened by what was deemed to be the dominant tongue, by what was considered the more elite variety by English speakers. Native Hawaiian was ultimately preserved through the efforts of linguists and Hawaiians during the 1970s (Wahl); the “Hawaiian Language immersion movement” led to the revitalization and maintenance of what was a dying language. I have learned about Native Hawaiian in several linguistics classes and they all discussed how the creation of schools in which classes were taught in Native Hawaiian (as well as the people who taught the language to the younger generations) is what led to its revival. Efforts such as the creation of schools are just one of the ways in which languages are preserved. What we would have lost had Hawaiian become extinct are centuries of oral traditions and stories regarding the history of their people. Many of their mythologies that explained the local phenomena of their world would have been lost had we lost the language, and, in addition, our knowledge about how they developed as a people and how that has affected the world would have been less detailed.

A language for which there is no perfect solution for preservation is Nandi. I bring up Nandi because it is an instance where much of the language decline can be attributed to its own speakers who have voluntarily abandoned certain aspects of their language. The reason this language is in danger is the declining usage of a subfeature of Nandi: the anthroponym. An anthroponym is a naming convention in which a person’s name changes throughout the course of their lives; it can reflect a person’s gender, age, time of birth, achievement of maturity, or increasing level of responsibility, as well as connect them to other people in their tribe. It is ultimately a large defining characteristic of the Nandi people as it is an expression of who they are as individuals and as a community (Chobet-Choge 44-45). As Nandi culture came into contact with other groups, certain anthroponyms began to lose relevance as people became more

accustomed to other, more desirable ways of living and ways of naming (46). This naming convention is important because of its representation of Nandi culture; it codifies their history and beliefs and expresses the cultural values held by their people. The situation surrounding the anthroponym is interesting because of their willingness to abandon specific aspects of their language. Their voluntary abandonment of certain features complicates the argument that languages should be saved because we cannot force a community to maintain something that they are autonomously deciding to no longer use. Language death is a natural progression, and in the case of Nandi the best approach may not be preservation but rather collection of data about the language so that it is at least documented and understood—so that the knowledge they have is not lost.

At this point I have discussed linguistic jargon, explained how languages can die, and provided examples of one language that almost died but was revived and one language for which there is no clear plan for preservation. So it should be clear that languages are intrinsically tied to the cultures in which they developed and, as a result, contain various amounts of useful knowledge. According to Roger M. Keesing, a cultural anthropologist, “The cognitive economies that make linguistic communication possible rest on what native speakers know about their world...” (14). This means that understanding those languages provides a deeper understanding of how those cultures developed, and ultimately allows us more insight into the history of our species, which itself promotes (not necessarily causes) unity among people. Since not all cultures express their histories through an overt or explicit explanation in their tongue (as seen with Nandi, sometimes culture is located in the grammar and construction of words), it would not be enough to simply transcribe endangered languages into more widely spoken languages. While that would of course increase our understanding of that specific culture, it

would lack authenticity and heritage—characteristics that speak volumes about the cultures in which those languages developed and are necessary to our understanding of them. Furthermore, the preservation of a language also increases our knowledge of how languages themselves are formed; it clues us in to explanations as to why specific verbs are used, why certain sounds are made when saying a specific word, and why the syntax of a language is constructed in a specific way. This a secondary type of knowledge that is gained through preventing language death (or at least studying languages that are in decline). Although this knowledge is not necessarily useful or interesting to the general public, it does increase our understanding of how people develop. Though what we gain from preserving endangered languages is mostly variety and distinction, I argue that we also gain understanding and compassion for cultures other than our own, thus helping to facilitate a more peaceful coexistence with other cultures.

Obviously, understanding how cultures developed and the histories of their languages do not beget peace as there are other fundamental issues to consider. But that does not mean that the attempted maintenance of dying languages is a fruitless process because the process itself garners information that we would otherwise lose (e.g. knowledge about remote regions, including properties of local plant life and animal life). So what, then, is to be done in order to preserve a language? How are languages saved?

The main methods by which languages are saved are through revitalization and maintenance. Maintenance is the process by which languages are documented and taught to younger generations, while revitalization involves the inclusion of language practices in cultural activities. Maintenance and revitalization are made possible by the efforts of both linguists who study language and the people who speak the languages themselves (Wahl). Since many languages are undocumented, a necessary first step in those situations is to begin documenting

languages. The following methods are generally discussed by linguists as some of the more effective ways dying languages can either be saved or studied. These methods include further developing an already existent, but rarely used, alphabet as well as creating an entirely new alphabet. Creating an alphabet helps communities document their histories and stories, making it an especially useful method of maintenance to communities that use oral traditions as a means of passing on history. Creating schools that teach the language to adults and most importantly to children is another very effective method of maintaining a language; the use of an endangered language by younger generations helps to ensure that the language is used by future generations. These types of methods have been used effectively (though admittedly on a relatively small scale) to maintain languages spoken by Native Americans as well as Native Hawaiian.

Some researchers and linguists agree that revitalization can (and perhaps should) rely heavily on technology and media. Technological advances have made it easier to record and promote the use of dying languages. As electricity spreads to more points across the globe, a community's access to the internet, and, by extension, the rest of the world, enables their own language to be used more often and in a more modern sense as websites are made and translated into their languages. Media helps to maintain languages through radio shows and television programs that are recorded in the local variety (of course depending on the technological capabilities of any given community), which help to maintain pride in a community's heritage and revitalize interest in the use of their language (Eisenlohr 24). If linguists can expand their methods to include technological advances into the process of language preservation, any community that is interested in preserving their language can be helped to do so.

A common argument against language preservation is that there are too many languages as it is—that the preservation of a dying language grounds certain so-called underdeveloped

communities in an archaic way of life and keeps them from joining the more modern world. This idea is further expanded upon by claiming that if communities around the world spoke a smaller number of languages, we would be more unified globally. The last part of that argument does indeed have some merit. If there were fewer languages spoken, perhaps it would facilitate more understanding. However, much of that argument relies heavily on an individual language ideology as it implies that languages that are dying should be left to die out, and those speakers should in turn learn languages that are already in power. The ideology implies and reinforces the idea that languages that are already in power should remain dominant. The main problem with that idea is that it serves to homogenize our understanding of people and other cultures. It enables us to be less tolerant and understanding of ways that are different than our own. On top of that, we lose out on understanding how certain languages were constructed and why they were constructed in that way.

In *Why Regret Language Death?*, Neil Levy addresses the argument about cultural autonomy as it pertains to language in the following way. If many communities voluntarily adopt another language because it is a more effective means of communication or trade or just generally benefits them more than their own, who are we to decide that their language needs to be revitalized? It is a voluntary action and the right of every community of speakers to decide when and how their languages progress, whether that progress precludes maintenance and revitalization or language shift and atrophy (Levy 373-375). Although this point may seem counterproductive to the focus of my research, Levy's response addresses an important issue, one which was encountered while discussing the Nandi. The loss of a language is a great grievance, but it is ultimately up to a community to decide how to treat the progress (or decay) of their own language. Unfortunately, this means that some valuable knowledge will be lost, but it

is occasionally an inevitable part of a language's life cycle. I argue that these languages should still be studied (with permission of course) so that we still learn about their development despite the fact that they will die. There is a vast collection of cultural knowledge located within language, and if we lose that, we not only lose a link to the past but we also lose possible tools for the future. As Levy suggests, "One language might be...a more precise instrument in which to think about (say) ecological problems and develop[ing] solutions to them" (Levy 376). So with the permission and help of small communities, we can gain an understanding of certain parts of the world that we may be unfamiliar with as well as help communities attain a modern place in the world without compromising their autonomy.

After discussing the backgrounds of methods of extermination and decay, providing specific languages as examples of the way languages can die, proposing methods of maintaining languages, and negating the counterarguments meant to maintain the "status quo," there is little else I can do. I started my research with the hope of proving that languages are worth preserving, and I believe I have succeeded. However, I have also learned through my research that language death is sometimes unavoidable, which is a fact that linguists have to accept. Language death must be treated as inevitable despite its tragic nature. This does not mean that dying languages should not be studied, but rather that not all of them can be saved. A commonly accepted fact among linguists is that half the world's languages will go extinct within the next century. Efforts to revitalize and maintain languages can decrease that number, but the focus should be on studying languages while we can to attain the knowledge and histories that are present in all of them.

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