

# Deprived, Endangered, and Dying Languages

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The renewed interest in the fate of endangered languages has led to the adoption by the Permanent International Committee of Linguists (CIPL) of a major project on such languages and the publication of *Endangered Languages*, edited by R.H. Robins and E.M. Uhlenbeck (1991). This book contains not only a discussion of the conditions that lead to language death but also case studies of endangered languages around the world.

Although the concept of endangerment is taken as a given, in actual fact there is no uniform definition of "endangered languages." The most obvious definition is by number of speakers. Obviously, a language with fewer speakers is more likely to be endangered in comparison with a larger language. Speakers of such languages tend to learn another (more widely spoken) language for purposes of interaction outside their immediate community. Where language loyalty is not strong, it is a short step to language shift and eventual language death.

A figure of five hundred speakers has been suggested as a cutoff point for endangerment (Brenzinger, Heine, and Sommer 1991: 25), but even such a figure can only be approximate, since there are languages spoken by thousands of speakers which are nevertheless endangered, while some languages with fewer speakers manage to resist the threat of endangerment because of strong language loyalty.

Another definition of endangerment is the incidence of domination by a more powerful language (Hale 1992: 23). In this sense, many African languages will in varying degrees qualify as endangered either by a widely spoken national language such as Swahili or by an official language of wider communication (LWC) such as English, French, or Portuguese. It is doubtful if this is a useful definition in the African context as a strict application of it will obscure

the distinction between the really endangered languages and those that are merely disadvantaged.

From the point of view of descriptive linguistics, an endangered language may simply be one that has not been, or is only poorly, described. Many languages of the world are yet to be reduced to writing, which means there is neither a written literature, nor grammars nor dictionaries. Considering the enormity of the task and the fact that not much academic value is placed on such practical research (for example, in terms of appointment to positions and promotions), it follows that some of the lesser known languages may die off unrecorded and undocumented.

The definition that seems to me to be most satisfactory is the one based on use. From this standpoint, endangered languages may be seen as belonging to a point in a cline\* of language types ranging from deprived to dying. In terms of a hierarchy, a deprived language is higher in status than an endangered language in the sense that it is used in formal education and out-group communication. Such a language is said to be deprived because it is dominated by an official language, usually an LWC, which is used for administration and as the medium for secondary and tertiary education. An endangered language, on the other hand, is not used in formal education, and its communicative role is limited to in-group communication. In general, such a language is mainly used for traditional purposes: rituals, festivals, village meetings, etc. In contrast to these two types of languages, a dying language is one which is not used in any serious function, and its relevance lies only in the fact that there are some old people who have knowledge of the language and who are using it less and less, since there are fewer interlocutors to use it with.

An example each of the three types can be given from Nigeria. Yoruba is a language spoken by about eighteen million Nigerians. In some of the Yoruba-speaking states, it is used as a medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education and for the entire primary education in the experimental project, the Six-Year Primary Project, in some of the Yoruba-speaking states. There exists, in these states, a wealth of oral and written literature and a thriving dramatic tradition. The language is spoken as a second language by speakers of several small-group languages. In spite of its prestigious status, the language is still considered deprived,

\* The totality of variations exhibited by members of a series of adjacent populations of organisms of the same species.

since in the most crucial domain, it is subordinated to English, the country's official language.

A language which I have worked on in the Ogoja area of the Cross River State fits perfectly the definition of an endangered language. According to the 1963 census (now believed to be inflated), it is spoken by 9,874 people. Yet its use is restricted to communal activities. In 1964, when I started my fieldwork, the sole publication in the language was the *Catechism of Christian Doctrine in Mbube Dialect*, which had been translated by the Reverend R. Meenan in 1962. Since then, linguistic articles have been produced on the language, the first being an account of its noun-class system (Bamgboṣe: 1965), and an attempt has been made to devise a practical orthography. Without the effort of linguists, it is not unlikely that the language would have remained an oral medium, undocumented and undescribed.

My third example is that of a dying language. This is a language known as Owon Afa, which is spoken in Okeagbe in the Akoko area of Ondo State. The area in which this language is found is a Yoruba area; consequently, language shift has taken place among the younger generation, and the few older people who still speak the language are bilingual in this language and Yoruba. One of the effects of language contact is that a lot of the lexicon of the language has been borrowed from Yoruba, although it has retained some interesting morphophonemic features peculiar to the language (Awobuluyi 1972).

The sentiment is often expressed, and shared by many, that language, like any other human resource, deserves to be preserved. A comparison is frequently made between preservation of rare animal species and preservation of endangered languages (Krauss 1992: 7–8). It must be pointed out, however, that the parallel is not exact. While animal species can be artificially preserved in a natural habitat, language cannot be so preserved, since preservation means use. Unless speakers are willing to preserve their languages, it is only a question of time before the language eventually dies off. We shall return to this point later.

The easiest kind of preservation is linguistic preservation. It is easy in the sense that this can be handled as a practical academic exercise without any political overtones (except in situations where the study of small languages is erroneously seen as a threat to national unity). Practical research that can be carried out includes collecting vocabularies, devising orthographies, preparing gram-

mars and dictionaries, collecting oral and folk material, and compiling other literary texts, especially poetry and drama. More linguistically oriented research could include phonological, syntactic, typological, and genetic descriptions, including theoretical issues arising from such descriptions.

It bears repeating that linguistic studies of endangered languages can be most rewarding. The distinctive features set up by Chomsky and Halle in *The Sound Pattern of English* (1968) account for phonological contrasts in language would not have been possible without the help of copious data from little-known languages. Chapter 7, with its many references and acknowledgments, bears testimony to this fact. The two Nigerian languages mentioned earlier are also excellent examples of the usefulness of information on smaller languages. Mbe is a Bantu language spoken in Nigeria, and the fact that it still preserves typical Bantu features has helped our understanding of the extent of Bantu language dispersal. Similarly, although Ọwọ̀n Afa is a dying language, the study of its vowel system has shown a survival of vowel coalescence which is not synchronically attested in Yoruba, the dominant language in which it is found.

There can be no question about the intrinsic value of a purely linguistic study of endangered languages. The responsibility of linguists in this matter is great. I have had cause to say in the past that one of the responsibilities of a linguist working in a developing country is a willingness to "dirty his hands" by engaging in practical concerns of orthography, and preparation of primers and literacy manuals. Such concerns do not earn linguistic accolades, but they are important all the same as a service to the community.

Linguistics departments cannot afford merely to preach about the value of studying smaller languages. They must do something about it. At the University of Ibadan, we approached our responsibility in this regard by:

1. Collecting word lists from a wide range of languages represented in the student population. (In this way, we were able to discover some hitherto unknown and unrecorded languages.)
2. Encouraging final-year students in linguistics to undertake their projects on little-known languages. (Over the years a lot of information has been gathered on many such languages.)
3. Devoting the departmental journal *Research Notes* to a publication of data (word lists; simple genetic classification; descriptive accounts of phonetics, phonology, morphophonemics, and syntax; annotated texts, etc.).

4. Assisting language committees in their language-development effort (e.g., introducing teachers to rudiments of linguistics, devising orthographies, helping with the preparation of primers and readers).

For endangered languages to be truly revitalized, linguistic preservation is not enough. Many of us have probably heard the apocryphal story of the linguist who rushed to record the last surviving speaker of a dying language. He got there in time to record only one sound – a glottal stop. The language died all the same because the last surviving speaker died. One of the ways of ensuring that a language does not die is to have it transmitted to the younger generation. This is best done by making it possible for initial literacy to be acquired in the language. If this is done, materials prepared in the language will not be consigned to the archives, but actively used. Here is where the responsibility of governments comes into the picture. A worthwhile educational language policy must provide a role for small-group languages, not only in adult literacy but also in initial literacy. The point has been made again and again in the literature that individual minority languages might not appear important because of the small numbers of speakers, but the totality of speakers of all minority languages may add up to a sizable proportion of the entire population. Thus, in Nigeria such languages account for 36.8 percent of the population, and in Ghana 44 percent (Bamgbose 1991: 107).

When all is said and done, the fate of an endangered language may well lie in the hands of the owners of the language themselves and in their will to make it survive. Even where governments are tardy in acting, local communities have been known to mobilize to develop their languages. The favorite approach is to set up language committees which then proceed to employ the services of knowledgeable language experts to devise orthographies and prepare literacy materials. Such committees in Nigeria have been very successful in generating interest and making it possible to use several languages in formal education. In this connection, mention must also be made of the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which is very active in many African countries; it concentrates largely on the development of smaller languages which are generally endangered. Although the ultimate objective of the institute is to use the languages for Bible translation and in teaching of Christian doctrine, the by-product of linguistic description and literacy materials more than justifies its activities.

Speakers' attitudes toward their own languages are not always positive. I recall a discussion with a Nigerian minister of education who dismissed his language as unimportant while proudly identifying himself with the more prestigious Hausa language spoken by the majority in the region he comes from. This experience is not atypical. People are often ignorant about their language and its intrinsic value. It is the duty of linguists to enlighten native speakers even of smaller languages about the capabilities of their language. Pejorative terms such as "vernacular," "dialect," "tribal language," etc., used in place of "language" tend to further reinforce the feeling of inferiority wrongly associated with minority languages.

In the final analysis, when everything possible has been done to keep a language alive, it may well be that the speakers have lost interest in its preservation and perhaps adopted a language of the immediate community. Much as this sort of attitude may be deplored, there is little that can be done about it. In this instance the linguist may have to be content with linguistic preservation only, since artificial use of the language cannot be engineered.

According to the statistics provided by Brenzinger et al. (1991: 28), 47 languages in Africa are extinct, 122 are in the process of extinction, and 53 are threatened by extinction. Even given that the total number of languages in Africa (including North Africa) is 2,142 (Grimes 1974), the apparent rate of language death is alarming. It is for this reason that the Project on Endangered Languages, which is designed to stem the tide of untimely language death, deserves the priority that it is now being accorded.

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