

# The Phenomena of Languages: Death vs. Revival

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:6 June 2013  
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There is no such thing as an ugly language. Today I hear every language as if it were the only one, and when I hear of one that is dying, it overwhelms me as though it were the death of the earth.

*Elias Canetti*

## Introduction

Language has always been considered the hallmark of humanity and the prime reason for mankind's dominance. Its characteristics and the processes of its acquisition are the kinds of attributes - perhaps the most important ones - that distinguish humans from all the other species. For some Africans, a newly born infant is a "kintu", a "thing" but not yet a "muntu", a "person" since only when children start learning the language are they regarded as being human (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2007, p. 3). However, there are "700" other reasons that point to the significance of human languages. The most significant are the personal enhancement and the enjoyment that people have from studying and learning them (UK Subject Centre for Languages, as cited in Gallagher-Brett, 2005, p. 2). For linguists, analysing languages in literature (i.e., "poetry, ritual speech, and word structure") is important because such languages in context are the best records for the "nature of human cognition" as well as the "collective intellectual achievements of...culture(s), offering unique perspectives on the human condition(s)" (Fromkin, et al., 2007, p. 486).

Linguistic analyses have focused on different areas, one of which is language change. The study of language change is often termed "historical linguistics" and it has increasingly spread "over a wide range of areas", which consequently has produced a desultory and a contradictory literature. In other words, scholars, sociolinguists and psycholinguists, for example, have examined language changes from an angle suitable only for their own fields but not for those of others. In the last twenty-eight or so years, scholars have changed their perspectives towards the types of issues which they have to address when documenting any language change. Traditionally, they were "concerned with reconstructing the earliest possible stages", and describing phonetic changes, that is sounds. Little else, such as changes in syntax, semantics, pidgins, and creoles, dead/dying languages, or even "sociolinguistic and psycholinguistics factors which underlie many alternations" was of interest to them (Aitchison, 1994, p. ix). Nowadays, however, these previously ignored topics have become the focus of many analyses.

Also, in the nineteenth century, linguists had the belief that languages were similar to species (humans, plants, and animals) in the sense that they went through a predictable "life-cycle" process (Hock and Joseph, 1996, p. 446): "birth, infancy, maturation, then gradual decay and death" (Aitchison, 1994, p. 197). It was stated by Bopp (1827, as cited *ibid*) that "languages are to be considered organic natural bodies, which are formed according to fixed laws, develop as possessing

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S. Talal Musaed Alghizzi

The Phenomena of Languages: Death vs. Revival

an inner principle of life, and gradually die out because they not understand themselves any longer, and therefore cast off or mutilate their members or forms". In the twentieth century, linguists do not endorse this simple metaphorical belief although languages do sometimes die out. Examining current thinking regarding languages is the focus of the discussion below.

According to the *Ethnologue Languages of the World* (2011), there are "over 6,909 known living languages" and every 14 days a language dies out (National Geographic, 2012). Crystal (2000, p. 20) believes that these languages can be categorized in relation to the level of existence safety into "five levels". First, there are "viable languages", which have many widespread native speakers; these will thrive for a long time. Second are "viable but small languages", with an estimated population of "1,000" native speakers in isolated communities or "internal organization" but with profound appreciation of their languages as the "marker(s) of" their identities. Also, there are "endangered languages" which are not used by many people, but have "growth in community support", and adequate circumstances. These make survival a possibility. Finally, there are the "nearly extinct languages" which are spoken only by limited number of elderly native speakers.

### **Language Death and Revival**

Apart from these levels of existence safety, there are two phenomena that have been addressed thoroughly by linguists (i.e., language death and revival). As regards language death, although the two terms: dead and extinct, have been used by most linguists interchangeably, others still make distinctions between them. In Crystal's article (1999, p. 56) and Hock and Joseph's book (1996, p. 446), both terms refer to "when the last person who speaks (a language) dies". Fromkin, et al. (2007, p. 486) stated that "a language dies and becomes extinct when no children learn it". Trask - with a broader definition (1996, p. 329) - maintained that in linguistics, a language is considered to be dead/extinct "when it no longer has native speakers... (and the fact that) in some cases, ... (it) may continue to find some use as a ceremonial, literary, scholarly, or, most especially, religious language". For instance, despite having various, evolved descendants, Latin, a theoretically "dead" language, survived by only being used in scientific writings of scholars in Europe and as a religious language in the Roman Catholic Church. Remarkably, some of that church's "clergy learned to speak it". In addition, in the sixteenth century, the ancient Egyptian language, Coptic, was overwhelmed by Arabic and ceased to be a living language. However, it is still being used as "a liturgical language by African Christians today" (ibid).

On the other hand, Aitchison (1994) disagrees with Trask's last point, believing that Latin is a dead language but not an extinct one since it changed its name and appearance through its descendants: "French, Spanish, Italian, and Sardinian". Thus, he maintained that the term extinct must only be used to allude to the tragic event of "total disappearance of a language" (p. 197). Similarly, Shahriar (2011, p. 1) endorses Aitchison distinction but prefers the definition of an extinct language to be: "no longer has any speakers, ... although it is known to have been spoken by people in the past, (but) modern scholarship cannot reconstruct it to the point that it is possible to write in it or translate into it with confidence".

The following are some of the extinct languages of Europe and Asia:

Language Name	Alternate Names	Families	Parent Subgroup	Brief Description	Linguist List Status:
Tangut (China)	Hsi-hsia; Xixia; Tanguhti	Sino-Tibetan	Tangut-Qiang (Tanq)	It was the official language of the Tangut empire (known in Tibetan as Mi-Nyag). In the 11 <sup>th</sup> century, it broke free of the Chinese Song dynasty and was destroyed by the Mongols in 1227. The last text dates from 1502, so the language continued to be used after the destruction of the Tangut state. It had its own script, despite using the Tibetan script occasionally. It died in 16 <sup>th</sup> centuries AD.	Extinct
Aequian (Italy)	---	Indo-European (Indo-Germanic he, Indo-Hittite)	Umbrian (umbr)	An ancient language of the Alban hills of East-central Italy near Rome. The Aequi lived in this area at least as early as the 5 <sup>th</sup> century BC, but after the second Samnite war in 304 BC, they were conquered by the Romans and Latinized. Very few texts exist.	Extinct

(Adapted from Ethnologue Languages of the World, 2011, & The Linguist List, 2012)

## Types of Death

Furthermore, scholars have identified four major types of language death (Fromkin, et al., 2007, p. 486).

First, there is the “bottom-to-top language death”. This phrase is applicable for describing languages whose survival has been confined only to special contexts (e.g. religion, science, etc.) as is the case in the previously mentioned example: Latin.

Second, there is “sudden language death”. This happens when all of the native speakers are killed, either by natural phenomena such as hurricanes, volcanoes, earthquakes, etc., or by more powerful neighbours. For example, in the nineteenth century, the Yahi - Native Americans in California - were massacred by the white settlers who colonized their land. Sixteen Yahis who fled into the desert and died from cold, hunger and disease, and only one survived, but eventually died with no language except his/her mother tongue. Also, when the British occupied the island of Tasmania in 1803, the occupying officials regarded the indigenous population as obstacles to the Britons’ schemes of settlement. Consequently, British soldiers were permitted to shoot Tasmanians upon sight. In 1980, only 200 remained alive, but they were held captive in a concentration camp where medical care and adequate food were not available. Similar to the Yahis, the last imprisoned women died old, knowing no word of English (Trask, 1996, p. 324).

Third, there is the “radical language death”. This occurs abruptly when the speakers of less prestigious languages decide to completely stop conversing in their native language - between themselves and to their children - favouring, though reluctantly, the other, dominant one. The adoption of the dominant

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S. Talal Musaed Alghizzi

The Phenomena of Languages: Death vs. Revival

language is regarded as a survival technique occasioned by their not wanting to be identified as natives, especially in countries where natives of minority languages are under “the threat of political, (educational) repressions, or even genocide”. Unfortunately, when their children grow up not hearing the native language of their parents in their environment, that language will vanish as soon as the last one of the native speakers dies.

A dramatic example of this can be found in the history of the United States of America. After the World War I, American officials, national teachers’ organizations, and others in power prohibited the use of any languages besides English in schools (i.e., the languages of children who migrated from non-English-speaking countries). An even earlier instance of this same practice began in the mid-eighteenth century and lasted until the early part of the twentieth century when indigenous Native American children in government schools were forced to abandon their native languages and culture.

The rationale for this practice was that abandoning their native tongues would make it much easier for the children to be assimilated into the English-speaking majority’ (Hock and Joseph, 1996, pp. 447-448). Consequently, as in the case of “Cherokee” children, their percentage of being 75% bilingual dropped to 5%. This is currently the case, regardless of there being “22,000” native speakers, since the Cherokee language is currently threatened by the fact that the tribe’s youth are generally not interested in acquiring their native tongue (Redish, 2001, p. 1).

Fourth, there is the term used to describe the long process some languages take in becoming extinct: “gradual”. This lengthy progression of some minority languages is the opposite of the aforementioned type in the sense that it is not sudden; instead, native speakers slowly but willingly abandon their native languages for sake of more prestigious ones. In each generation, the number of children learning their parents’ native languages dwindles until it reaches the point where there are no more learners. It is then that these native languages are termed “dead”. For example, in 1995, there were only five native speakers of the Livonian language, which is/was spoken in the village of Kurzeme in Latvia country located in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. Also, in 2003, there were just four speakers of Baldemu, the language of a village in the Diamare Division in the north of Cameroon. Both of these languages are nearly extinct because the speakers of the former shifted to Russian, whereas the latter began using Fulfulde, the two dominant languages (Ethnologue Languages of the World, 2011).

### **Two Possible Scenarios for the Gradual Disappearance**

However, it is worth mentioning that there are two possible scenarios for the gradual disappearance of minority languages. The first is “language suicide” (Eckert et al., 2004,p. 107). This phrase is applicable to describe what commonly occurs between two languages which are “fairly similar to one another” (Aitchison, 1994, p. 198). In this situation, it is easy and common for the less prestigious languages to have a tremendous borrowing (i.e., in syntax, phonetics and lexicons) from the ones with greater social approval and from which they have been derived. These kinds of borrowings may lead to the entire effacement of the less prestigious language in the long run.

The best examples which may illustrate the aforementioned points are the ones of two developing languages: pidgins and creoles vis-à-vis the dominant languages. It is more likely for pidgins - “a simple form of a language especially English, Portuguese or Dutch, with a limited number of words

(sounds and syntactic structures), that are used together with words from a local language” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010, p. 1105) - to disappear or to expand and eventually evolve into a totally different language and then become “the mother tongue of a speech community” (i.e., creole) (Aitchison, 1994, p. 190). This process of expansion is a consequence of the massive borrowing from the prestigious languages and is called “decreolization/relexification” (Trask, 1996, pp. 319-327).

For example, the approximately “1,500” residents in a Guyanan village called Bushlot who are of East Indian origin and whose parents were brought from India as labourers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, have developed the English pidgin their parents learned from African field-hand workers to what is known today as “Guyanan Creole”. This creole is currently in the gradual process of decreolization. Despite the fluctuations between the usage of the two words that begin infinitives, “fi/fu”, or “tu” - similar in position and meaning to the English “to” - as in “Tshap no noo wa fu/tu du” translated as “the fellow didn’t know what to do”, the predominance of ‘tu’ is increasingly evident. Nonetheless, the usage of ‘tu’ has gone through three stages, according to the types of verbs that it comes with. The first stage is using it after ordinary verbs: “ron:(run), kom: (come), and wok: (work)” as in: “jan wok tu mek moni” translated as (John works to make money). The second stage only appears after “desiderative verbs”; expressing wanting or a desire: “Jan won tu mek moni”: (John wants to make money). Finally, it has been found in usages with “inceptive verbs”, such as “start and begin”: “Jan staat tu mek moni” translated as (John started to make money) (Adapted examples from Bickerton, 1971, as cited in Aitchison, 1994, p. 199).

The second scenario is “language murder” (Eckert et al., 2004, p. 107). It occurs between languages which are different and whose native speakers are in close contact with one another; one of these two languages will gradually disappear. For example, the “500 or so” speakers of Kwegu language - also the name of the village - who live along the bank of the Omo River in Ethiopia, have only one source of income and that is bee-keeping. The honey made is sold almost exclusively to their powerful neighbours: the Mursi and Bodi. For business and survival purposes, Kwegu become bilingual in those languages since they are “socially and economically useful”, but the Mursi and Bodi usually see no advantage in learning Kwegu. This is not the only reason for the decrease in the number of Kwegu native speakers; there’s also the fact that their male Mursi and Bodi neighbours can marry Kwegu girls and male Kwegus cannot marry females of those tribes. In spite of the fact that the first generation of these mixed marriages yield fluent bilinguals in both languages, the next generation becomes less proficient in the dying language: Kwegu (Dimmendaal, 1989, as quoted in Aitchison, 1994, p. 204).

### **Revitalization versus Revival**

With respect to the revival of a dead language, some linguists draw distinctions between the former term and “revitalization”. Language revival is defined as “the resurrection of a dead language”, whereas revitalization is “the rescue of a dying language” (Redish, 2001, p. 2). The latter is observable in the case of Guatemala’s dying language: Uspanteko. Stan McMillen of SIL, who lived there for years and speaks the language, stated that it has been being actively revitalized and its usage promoted by enthusiasts and by the Mayan Academy. The language will be broadcast on radio soon; in addition, the “3,000” remaining native speakers are passing on the language to their children as their native language, rather than teaching them the official government language, which is Spanish (as quoted in Grimes, 1971-2000, p.218).

The definitions of a dead language have been diversified in the sense that what a dead language is for a group of linguists might not be so for others as in the case of Latin, since those others could argue that it is religiously and scientifically still active. Nonetheless, one common characteristic between all dead languages is that none of them produces native speakers. Also, there is the issue of maintaining how successful a revival is. For example, enthusiasts for two languages that “died out” in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Manx and Cornish in the British Isles, and for Indian Sanskrit, which has been rapidly dying since the 1970s, have been trying to revive them. For Redish (2001) and Hock and Joseph (1996), the revival is partially successful since some of those enthusiasts have learnt it as a second language. But, for Trask (1996) it is a total failure because there are no native speakers.

The only celebrated example whose successful revival all of the above mentioned linguists have agreed on is Modern Hebrew. Although it has been used in modern times as the language of scripture, rituals, etc., its use as a spoken medium died out centuries ago (Janson, 2002). The language has undergone two attempts at revival. The first one, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was by Zionist movement members who wanted to stress the Semitic identity of the Jewish people by calling for the use of Hebrew as the maker of their identity. This attempt was only partially successful because few people stated speaking the language. In fact some Jewish groups refused to learn it and asserted that Yiddish should instead be the language of Jewish identity. The second attempt was after establishing the country of Israel in Palestine. This attempt is regarded as having been successful, not only because Jews speaking different languages became bilingual but also since their children became native speakers of the language.

## Conclusion

Upon consideration, it is obvious after discussing the two phenomena of languages, death and revival, that the reasons behind their existence are either the appearance or the lack of political or cultural repressions, globalization and economic integration, relating language to identity, and the dominance of some languages over less prestigious ones. Nonetheless, can the extinction of some languages in coming century be expected? A realistic answer would be yes. The reasons for this are not driven from the “Darwinian position” endorsed by some linguists, where language death is viewed as a natural development (Hock and Joseph, 1996, p. 451), or even questioning the creditability and the effectiveness of interventionists’ contributions to the survival of endangered ones. Instead it is because of the size of the problem that dying languages face. It is a fact that “half” of the total number of world languages is currently labeled endangered (Crystal, 1999, p. 56), and trying to revitalize them would be trying to hold back the tide, attempting the impossible.

The process of revitalization requires a combination of effort, time, and money, often a great amount of each one. Each endangered language demands the dedication of a group of linguists, which could be an issue because there are not enough of them for all the endangered languages. These linguists would be required to do the arduous tasks of analyzing a language’s structures, vocabulary, sounds, etc. That analysis would consume a lot of time, but would destiny allow native speakers to transmit their language to their children or witness the application of these analyses in schools? That would be most unlikely in all the cases concerned. For instance, in 1995, Bruce Connell was visiting Mambilla in Cameroon doing fieldwork. There, he met Bogon, the only surviving native speaker of the Kasabe language. Because of a time issue, Bruce had to travel back to his country, but he returned after a year. Nevertheless, by then Bogon was dead, and the language disappeared forever (ibid). Also, financing a

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S. Talal Musaed Alghizzi

The Phenomena of Languages: Death vs. Revival

linguist to analyse one particular language would cost almost “\$100,000” a year. So, calculate how much this would cost if a language were being analysed by a number of linguists over three-to-four years (ibid). Moreover, there are many endangered languages. Therefore, I would say that the death of some of these is inevitable; linguists have to accept that at least a few languages are destined for extinction. This would be especially the case if they do not contribute to the construction of their native speakers' identities and/or if those speakers themselves question their languages' usefulness.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:6 June 2013

S. Talal Musaed Alghizzi

The Phenomena of Languages: Death vs. Revival

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