

[Others]

Language Diversity: A Dying Concept

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Abstract *Languages have been on a rapid decline throughout the course of human history. Estimated to be as many as 15,000 languages a millennium ago, today we are left with 6,000 or so languages spoken around the world, and this number is predicted to fall to as low as a few hundred within a century. Put simply, children around the world have stopped learning half of the world's languages. This is most evident amongst the languages spoken by the indigenous populations of Australia. From a rich linguistic tapestry of over 250 languages at the time of European settlement, the number has shrunk to a patchwork of fifteen languages held together by threads of pidgin, and there seems to be little in the way of practical solutions to save more from dying.*

Key Words: bilingualism, economic imperialism, language diversity, indigenous societies

Interdisciplinary Fields: Cultural Imperialism, Globalisation, Multilingualism, Intercultural Communication

Introduction

In 1788, the year the first ships laden with convict settlers breached the calm waters of Botany Bay in search of a favourable location to establish a penal colony, there were around 250 languages spoken in Australia. As the British settlers imposed themselves on the indigenous population and forcibly acquired their land, they not only introduced species of fauna such as rabbits and domesticated cats which wreaked havoc on the natural habitat, but also a language which spread like a plague through the local languages. In less than 250 years, their language, English, had decimated the number of local languages to around fifteen learned as a mother tongue (Crace and Russell 2002). While these figures are alarming for one country, they are a reflection of the shrinking diversity of languages throughout history. Some authors have estimated as many as 15,000 languages existed a millennium ago and now we are down to about 6,000 (Northrup 2005). Furthermore, this figure could be reduced to just a few hundred over the next century, which leads to the obvious conclusion: languages have a very high mortality rate.

Linguistic Imperialism

Human endeavour, the need to explore and conquer, initiated the global culling of languages. Seaborne invasion and settlement going back as far as bark canoes crashed through the restraints of geographic isolation and brought with it cultural, political and religious implications, which swallowed local languages (Carrithers 1992, p. 2). In some instances, native speakers were literally exterminated, as was the case in colonial Tasmania, or the mother tongue purged from their mouths by the heavy hand of government policy or the misguided intentions of the church. Thus, the languages of the countries who owned the seas became transnational dialects. Dutch, French, Spanish and English trading companies established footholds in cities around the world, and in turn spread bilingualism and multilingualism. Indeed, linguistic imperialism went hand-in-hand with economic imperialism (Crace and Russell 2002).

However, in later years, as advances in transportation tamed the tyranny of distance, and trade within national borders and across continents flourished, a second language was presented to native speakers more as an option than a poison pill. For instance, the spread of railways in 19th Century France created motivation for villagers to abandon their dialects because it could be more prosperous if they could deal with the traders in French (Pittenger 2005).

Language Interdependence

With the onset of the 21st Century and a global economy came an interdependent society with remarkable possibilities for linking people (Singer 2002, p. 143). Call the phone company in Australia on their toll free number for a problem with your phone and chances are your enquiry will be handled by English-speaking staff in a call centre in India. As the world has shrunk through the wonders of communication technology, a visa card network for languages now exists. Only 20 languages account for more than half the world's population of 7 billion people and the greater portion of this is taken up by four languages: Mandarin, Hindi, Spanish and English (Crace and Russell 2002).

English, in particular, is consciously associated with technical progress and popular culture, the combination of which promotes Western cultural images and products via ubiquitous mobile communications that can send and receive information basically from anywhere at anytime (Singer 2002, p. 145). Accordingly, the language marauders with their English accents are no longer pouring down gangways from ships, they are arriving through

website portals, satellite TV broadcasts, blockbuster movies, World Cup sporting events, pop music, and worldwide brands like Coca Cola and McDonald's. Moreover, these purveyors of packaged cultural products are arrogant. How else could a collection of pop stars from the US and Britain have the audacity to sing a song titled, *We Are the World*, in one language; English? It seems that in this hi-tech, interactive world with its culturally predatory tentacles, the West is inviting the rest of the world to come out and play, and it is saying yes.

Bilingualism

Some communities however are trying to delay the inevitable death of their language. In China, Manchu speakers are using the Internet to keep their language alive. Manchu was the language of the last imperial house to rule Beijing, but with the establishment of the Chinese Republic it was overwhelmed by Mandarin, the language of the dominant Han population (Aiyar 2007). While there are 10 million Chinese who are classified as ethnic Manchurian, among them it is estimated that only about 100 are native speakers and, as is the case with most endangered languages, most are elderly people (Aiyar 2007).

A dedicated band of Manchurians is logging onto Manchursky.com to learn the language of their ancestors. Some are also giving up their Saturday afternoons to attend classes taught by volunteers from the group (Aiyar 2007). However, as one of their teachers has confessed, it has not been easy to persevere with the lessons because there is no natural environment for the language. Manchu lacks any practical use in their daily lives and they are just 3,000 potential speakers in a population of 1.3 billion. They are aware that their efforts may well be in vain, but their passion and determination not to let their language become extinct with their generation, spurs them on (Aiyar 2007).

Closer to the home of indigenous Australians, the Central Land Council, funded by the federal government, has been creating *natural environments* in remote areas for Aboriginal culture and languages to exist. In recent years, 40,000 square kilometers were dedicated as an Indigenous Protected Area (IPA) to boost survival of remote communities in the Northern Tanami. The Northern Tanami, which borders the red dustbowl of the Tanami Desert, has an unbroken history of Aboriginal traditional use and management, and is a historic location with a large number of cultural sites and dreaming tracks (CLC April 2007).

In announcing the dedication, David Ross, Central Land Council Director, said investing in the bush was vital for young Aboriginal people

because lack of employment opportunities was contributing to urban drift, alienation and social dysfunction (CLC April 2007). Yet, while the government takes great pleasure in dedicating IPAs in remote areas to create havens for indigenous culture, it has turned its back on the preservation of indigenous languages. The number of bilingual schools or Two Way Schools in the Northern Territory, which were established in cooperation between the Federal Government and the Northern Territory Government, has dropped from twenty-two in 1973 to just eleven (CLC: Aboriginal languages 2007). These bilingual schools teach English, as well as encourage, but don't necessarily teach, the student's mother tongue.

The closing of Two Way Schools was prompted by the Northern Territory Government, which branded the bilingual education program a failure, a decision it based on the English literacy and numeracy rates of the Aboriginal students and not their mother tongues (Lingua franca 2000). A significant finding of the Collins Report, which was commissioned by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs to look into the Northern Territory Government's claim, determined that most of the teachers in bilingual schools usually began their teaching with no knowledge at all of local languages and had no ESL training or experience (Lingua franca 2000). Consequently, they could teach neither language, effectively.

Real World Considerations

From a pragmatic standpoint, true bilingual education and populations where major languages coexist with local languages, and each individual local dialect is apportioned equal value, are more of a romantic ideal than a workable proposition (Oster 2005, p. 543). In Australia alone, the practicalities of teaching English alongside 15 different Aboriginal languages in remote areas would seem impossible to do with the resources available and the entrenched attitudes of mainstream Australia, which date back to 1788.

For functioning bilingual schooling to exist in Australia for indigenous populations, some languages would need to be passed over, which raises the issue of how to determine which languages should be taught and which should be disregarded. Presumably, the most widely spoken languages would be taught which promotes less diversity, as is evident in the Northern Territory.

Under real world considerations, true bilingualism has to begin with children who have an environment where they can use their native tongue. A telling example is the situation with Wirrangu, the language of the Wirrangul tribe of indigenous Australians and their home in a place called White Wall on the Nullabor Plain in Central Australia. Two ladies in their

eighties are saddled with the unenviable distinction of being the only remaining speakers of Wirrangul. Literally, when they die so will their language; a terminal prognosis which can be traced to their desire to give their children a better start in life by sending them to English-only schools. These schools not only eroded the children's ability to speak their mother tongue, but also their motivation to use their language after introducing them to a popular culture of TV, movies, pop music and Disney characters. At the same time, their language had to deal with the nomadic nature of indigenous Australians. As Wirrangul families moved out of White Wall in search of better opportunities, the newcomers who took their places brought with them their own languages and with time outnumbered the locals through intermarriage. The introduced languages of Pitjantjatjara and Kokatha became the most commonly spoken languages in White Wall, and the likes of Gladys had to rely on Pidgin to bridge language barriers. The next generation of Wirrangul and half-Wirrangul children only spoke Pitjantjatjara and Kokatha, placing Wirrangul in distress, because, as the native speakers of Wirrangul started to die off, there was no-one to take their place.

The notion of defibrillating a language in linguistic arrest such as Wirrangul, however commendable, is in essence wishful thinking. As linguist John McWhorter suggests from his own efforts in teaching Navajo to adult Native Americans:

Trying to teach people to speak their ancestral language will almost never get past the starting gate. Without a practical reason to use the language, chances are the students won't get past a few expressions and some interesting vocabulary (2007).

Conclusion

People are usually rational caretakers of their own well-being and given a choice they will choose a language which best suits their needs. In the light of an expanding global economy with its side-effect of cultural imperialism, language diversity appears to be a retrospective notion which laments a time of geographic isolation and technological retardation. Papua New Guinea is a shining example. Its forbidding terrain and the fact a large majority of the population does not have phones, serves language diversity well (Miller 2002). Papua New Guinea is home to the highest concentration of languages anywhere in the world with over 800 different tongues, which prompted UNESCO to describe Papua New Guinea as a fitting example for civilizations to follow (Miller 2002). But, is UNESCO really suggesting we pull all of our satellites out of their orbits; ground all planes and ships;

dismantle the Internet; destroy all mobile communications networks; and close all borders in the name of protecting native languages from outside influences? In many respects, the increasing death toll of languages around the world can be seen as linguist euthanasia.

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