

Historical Anatomy on Issues of Language Decay, Survival and Change

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Abstract

This paper examines issues of language decay, survival and change. The fortunes of language can rise and fall and are intimately linked to the fortunes of their speakers. In the modern world, relatively few languages are becoming more widely spoken, and smaller languages are finding it harder and harder to survive. Prospects are not totally dire, though; several smaller languages have been successfully resurrected, and efforts are in motion to do the same for additional languages. Change is one of the unique characteristics of human language. As long as language is in constant use by human beings, it is subjected to unimaginable change. Any language that no longer changes commits natural linguistic death. This is the fate suffered by classical Hebrew as well as Manx language. These changes occurred initially without the notice of the users but as goes on they become noticeable by the speech community. The survival, change, and death of languages are intricate processes that are closely linked to the destiny of their speakers. A few languages are seeing an increase in speakers in the globalized world of today, whereas lesser languages are finding it difficult to survive. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, there are reasons for optimism, as attempts to bring endangered languages back to life have showed promise. One of the things that makes language so unique is its fluidity.

Keywords: Language, language decay, survival community and linguistic

INTRODUCTION

Language is shaped by new discoveries, interactions with other speech communities, advancements in science and technology, and the need for new modes of communication. Languages in contact often influence one another. For instance, the influence of Greco-Norman culture on English language during the classical period is still noticeable till date so much so that there are many Latin and Greek words in the language that have gained wide usage. Language change affects orthography, morphology, phonemes, syntax as well as semantics. The existence of such differences of the same language triggers questions as to how and why languages change over time and space. It is of the view that language change is still obvious and rather mysterious. The physiological and cognitive makeup of the entities who possess and utilize a language is the primary source of linguistic change. A change can propagate through a language term through lexical diffusion, or it can impact all instances of a specific sound type instantaneously. Whether or whether a linguist's innovation is eventually embraced by the linguistic community as a whole can be greatly influenced by sociological considerations. Nonetheless, general linguistic perspectives will be employed to present themes of language change, survival, and degradation.

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LANGUAGE DECAY

Language cannot endure without a community of individuals who can speak it and transmit it to the following generation. A community's language is likely to deteriorate and eventually disappear if they don't have a good place to live or a way to support

themselves (Nettle & Romaine, 2000) [1]. The motivation to preserve the language declines and it is likely to go into decline if a community no longer views its language as an essential component of who they are, as has happened for many people in areas like Ireland, Wales, and the Isles of Man (Jones and Singh, 2005) [2].

A language which is no longer transmitted from one generation to another is defined as moribund, while one which is no longer spoken is said to be dead or extinct. Moreover, if languages are considered tools of communication, a language with only one remaining speaker could also be considered effectively dead. Languages that have disappeared without leaving any written records or other documentation can be classified as extinct (Crystal, 2000) [3].

In some cases, people stop using languages as their normal means of communication but continue to use them in a specific limited domain such as religious ceremonies. In this way, languages can maintain a degree of vitality long after their use as community languages has ceased and may even be revived as vernacular languages. Latin, Ancient Greek, Coptic, Hebrew, and Church Slovenia have all been used for religious and scholarly purposes. For example, Hebrew has been revived as an everyday language in Israel (Wurn, 1991) [4].

In other cases, languages decline or lose all their speakers and are not used even in limited domains except for perhaps a few words and phrases but are sufficiently well documented to make their revival a possibility. Such languages could be considered neither fully alive nor completely dead. Instead, they might be referred to as sleeping languages which could be awakened. One of such languages is Miami, an Algonquin language spoken in part of Oklahoma until the 1960s, which fell into complete disuse for thirty years and is currently being revived (Leonard, 2008) [5]. The process of dialect loss is similar to language decline and eventually dead. However, it is only a part of the language that is lost, rather than the whole language. Dialects might die out if the ways of life associated with them disappear or if other dialects or varieties of language replace them. For example, local dialects of Welsh in some areas of Wales are being replaced by the standard Welsh some, 1998, and something similar is happening to Irish dialects in parts of Ireland (Ohlfearnain, 2008) [6].

REASONS FOR LANGUAGE DECAY

Language can disappear very rapidly if all or most of their die as a result of natural disasters, war or genocide (Wurn, 1991). One example is the 1932 massacre of Pipil (Nawat) speakers in El Salvador, after which many surviving Pipils stopped speaking their language as they feared further reprisals (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). Infectious diseases to which indigenes have no resistance can also have a devastating impact on these people and their languages. Two centuries after the Europeans first arrived in the Americas, for example, an estimated 90% of the indigenous population had died from diseases carried there by European people and animals (Crystal, 2000).

When a country or region is subjected to conquest, colonisation or large scale of immigration, the language of the incoming people is likely to become dominant, and speakers of local languages may be forced to, or feel the need to adopt the new language and assimilate to the new culture, especially if that culture is one that values monolingualism. Moreover, learning the new language may result in economic benefits, such as access to goods, services and employment. This also happens when people migrate to a country where different language is spoken (Wurn, 1991) & (Crystal, 2000).

The process of assimilation or language shift that occurs as a result of colonization or conquest often consists of a period of bilingualism during which the local people learn the language of the newcomers while retaining their own language(s). The length of this period varies, but in many cases it is not long before younger locals are more comfortable with the new language than with their native tongues, which they may see as irrelevant to their needs. At the same time, people may become ashamed of their language; use it less and in a decreasing number of domains. Parents may stop passing their languages on to their children, and the number of the speakers decays/declines, there will be fewer opportunities

to use the languages, and the remaining speakers are likely to become isolated and inward-looking. The local languages may become modified and simplified due to extensive borrowing of vocabulary and grammatical patterns from the dominant language, and unless efforts are made to reverse the language shift, the local languages will eventually die (Crystal, 2000) & (Wurn, 1991).

Deliberate language suppression has occurred in numerous instances worldwide. In Kenya, for example, Gikuyu-speaking children caught speaking Gikuyu in or near school were caned, fined, or forced to carry a sign saying 'I am stupid' or 'I am a donkey'. In Welsh schools, any child caught speaking Welsh had to wear a slate with 'WN' (Welsh Not) inscribed on it. They could pass it on to others who spoke Welsh during the day, and the child wearing the slate at the end was punished. A similar system was used in the Manx and in Brittany for Breton, while speakers of Tlingit and other Native American languages had their mouths washed out with soap and water for speaking their native language at school.

As a result of such treatment, many become ashamed of their language, they feel it to be inferior and lacking in importance; they become reluctant and embarrassed to use it, and do not pass their language to their children in order to prevent suffering in a similar way (Crystal, 2000) and (Jones & Singh, 2005)

LANGUAGE DECAY; A MATTER OF CONCERN

Many people, especially those from predominantly monolingual countries, believe that the world would be a better place full of mutual understanding and peace if everyone speaks same language. Nonetheless, there have been numerous disputes and civil wars among speakers of the same language. The economic cost of translating and interpreting between languages is advanced as an argument in favour of the monolingual world. While a lot of money is spent on translating and interpreting, that money should not be wasted; instead one could view it as providing a business advantage (Crystal, 2000), and being a 'lubricant of trade' (Arcand, 1996, p.119) [7]. Language can also have a positive economic impact on tourism, help to bring and keep communities together and give them self-confidence and sense of pride in their culture and identity (Crystal, 2000).

Language and culture are closely linked cultures are transmitted mainly via languages. When a language declines or dies the knowledge its speakers have accumulated over many generations may be lost, especially if they have left no written records. Language decline and loss can lead to a loss of history, beliefs, traditions, stories, songs, identity and reduce a community's cultural distinctiveness (Crystal, 2000).

In addition, (Ager, 2009), sums it up thus;

A country without a language, a country without an identity,

A nation without a language, a nation without a heart,

He who loses his language loses his world' [8].

Spoken in biologically diverse areas are many endangered languages. When such languages decline or die, a great deal of knowledge about agriculture and animal husbandry, botany, medicine, zoology and the ecosystem, some or much of which may not be known as western science (Crystal, 2000).

Languages are sources of endless fascination in their own right. For linguists, the existence of a great diversity of languages offer opportunities to discover the large variation. This can be in phonology, syntax, lexicon, pragmatics and discourse patterns, and search for linguistic possibilities shrinks every time a language dies (Crystal, 2000).

LANGUAGE SURVIVAL: REVIVAL AND REVITALISATION

All efforts to bring back languages which lost partially or completely their speakers can be referred

to as language revivals, while efforts to increase the number of people who speak a language and to expand its domain of use are referred to as language revitalisation (Jones & Singh, 2005). However, some authors, e.g. O’Laoire (1996) [9], use both revival and revitalisation when referring of some languages. Fishman (1991) [10], refers to the process of language revival! revitalisation as ‘reversing the language shift’ while Leonard (2008), suggests that in some cases language revival can be seen as the awakening of sleeping language.

LANGUAGE REVIVAL AND REVITALISATION AMONG WORLD’S NATIONS THE REVIVAL OF HEBREW

Hebrew, whose use as a community language had essentially stopped by 70 AD, is the most well-known and successful example of a language rebirth. Following that, Jews from various nations continued to utilize Hebrew as a common language and for literary and religious purposes. The first attempts to restore Hebrew as a common language were launched in the middle of the 1800s. Lyzer Ben Yehuda (1858–1922) was one man who was instrumental in these efforts; he was the first to use Hebrew exclusively in his home and promoted its use in schools and among others (Fell man, 1973) [11].

During the early twentieth century, the use of Hebrew as a vernacular language increased significantly among Jews in Palestine, and in 1941 the central council for the community of Israel was set up with the aim of imposing the use of Hebrew and to eliminate the use of other languages. Use of Hebrew as closely monitored, and propaganda, threats, insults, humiliation and even violence were used against those not using the language. In spite of this, many immigrants continued to speak their native languages at home while using Hebrew in public, but did pass their languages on to their children, who grow up monolingual in Hebrew (Shohamy, 2008) [12].

Together with Arabic, Hebrew is now an official language of Israel. It is used in both public and private settings, in the media, in literature, and as the primary language of instruction in schools, where students must also acquire Arabic and English. Immigrants o Israel are expected to learn Hebrew as quickly as they can after arrival. Hebrew lessons for adults are provided in intensive schools known as Ulpanim, while children acquire the language through immersion at school, and also receive some extra help if necessary (Shohamy, 2008).

While there is no doubt that Hebrew has been successfully revived has had negative aspects, including the aggressive elimination of other languages, and the imposition of Hebrew on immigrants, some of whom find it very difficult to become proficient in the language and are unable to secure employment or express themselves fully as a result.

Around the world, efforts are also being done to revitalize and revitalize languages. In North America, for example, most of the indigenous languages are vulnerable, endangered or moribund, and there are revival movements for any of them. There are also revival movements for languages in many other regions.

In many cases, Native American languages are in the terminal stages of decaying! decline when language revival efforts began, i.e. inter-generational transmission has ceased; most or all of their speakers are over child bearing age, and/or their use is restricted to a small number of domains. In other words, they have reached a stage 7 or 8 Fishman’s GIDS (Fishman, 1991), or are definitely, severely or critically endangered according to UNESCO’S criteria (UNESCO, 2009) [13].

Some language revival efforts, such as that of Cornish, get side-tracked by disputes about orthographies and! or which variety of the language should be used (Jones, 1998). Others enjoy popular support, but few of supporters go to the trouble of learning the language, or if they know t use ;tin their everyday lives, as in the case with Irish in Ireland (Murtag 2007) [14]. Culture appears to play an important role in many language revivals and can help to strengthen people’s sense of identity (Jacobs, 1998) [15].

Many language revivals and revitalizations involve teaching of the languages in schools. However, teaching languages for an hour or two a week, or less, is likely to produce many fluent speakers (O'Neill, 2005) [16]. Immersion education, which uses the language being revived as a medium of instruction, appears to be a much more effective way for people to acquire the languages, both for children and adults.

Additionally, it is feasible to rejuvenate languages. Many factors affect the likelihood of success of such initiatives, including the state of the languages when the revivals or revitalizations begin; the levels of community and official support; how much time, effort and money people are prepared to invest in the languages; and the opportunities available to use the languages to the cultural, political and! or religious identity of their speakers also appear?' to be important.

LANGUAGE CHANGE

Language, like human being, changes over time and space. Religious belief holds that although God created man with the ability to speak, God inevitably brought about change by increasing the languages of the globe when man figured out how to abuse this ability. An illustration of this is the Tower of Babel in the Bible. All languages all over the world could be said to have a common ancestor owing to the lesson from the Tower of Babel. The Proto Indo-European family of languages adds flavour to this point of view. Edward Finnegan (2008) posits also that 'it's no longer secret that languages change over the years' [17].

One of the results of language change is that a single language, over years, can develop into several unidentifiable languages. The Indo-European family of languages provides a clear picture of language change over time and in space. In spite of the changes that took place in the past, one could still trace their common ancestor because the languages are related.

Yule, G. explains that the process employed in establishing some possible Examining "cognites" is one way to find family connections between various languages. He also says that within groups of related languages, we often find closer similarities in particular set of terms. For instance, the English forms mother, father and friend are cognates of German forms mutter, vater and freund. On the basis of these cognate sets, one could propose that such sets in modern English and German preferably have a common ancestor in what has been called the Germanic branch of Indo-European. Similarly, the Yoruba forms isu, oko, okuta, oko are cognates of the Igala forms uchu, oko, okuto, oko respectively. These cognates also show that the modern Yoruba and ;gala could be traceable to the Yoruboid family of languages.

Comparative reconstruction is a process that can be started using data from the cognate sets. Reconstructing what must have been the original, or proto form, in the common ancestral language is the aim of this procedure. It's similar to attempting to infer the great-grandmother's characteristics from the shared traits of the group of grandchildren.

To appreciate the concept of language change better, it is important to sojourn through the historical periods of English so as to discover changes that had taken place over time.

OLD ENGLISH

Old English developed from the Germanic languages spoken on the British Island by a group of tribes from Northern Europe that succeeded in conquering the British Isles in 5th Century A.D. These tribes are the Anglos, the Saxons and the Jutes. The grammar of English looks strange is highly inflectional. The orthography is different from the modern day English, for instance, 'man' was 'wif', 'cid' 'child', 'mete' 'food', 'etan' 'eat'. Many of the lexical items in Old English were Latin.

MIDDLE ENGLISH

The influence of Norman Conquest which brought about French into English changed the fortune of English till date. During this period, French became the language of nobility, government, education, law and language of social 'interaction. This took place for two hundred years. Virtually, English language changed in terms of sound system, orthography and grammar. In fact, this is the source of lexical items such as 'army', 'court', 'defence', 'faith', 'prison', 'tax', and so many others.

MODERN ENGLISH

Modern English is characterized by loss of inflection that defined Old and Middle English. Many of the lexical items borrowed from foreign languages were dropped, orthography became standardised following the convention of a. the chosen (R.P This innovation makes Modern English looks fresh and modernised.

CONCLUSION

It is obvious that language dances to the rhythms of human existence that use it. Language becomes decayed when it is no longer in use by its speakers and may glide towards natural death. Following this view, one is left with no option but to agree that the phenomena of language decay, survival and change attract the attentions of linguists and other individuals concerned with human existential development. This is so because language serves as an instrument of human identity and there cannot be a society without language which is the carrier of the people's cultural life. There is a general belief that change can lead to deterioration, decay, death as well as renovation depending on the nature of the change.

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