

WHY WE SHOULD CARE ABOUT LANGUAGE DEATH

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ABSTRACT: *The fortunes of any language can fall and rise and are linked familiarly to the fortunes of their speakers. Nowadays, there are many languages becoming widely spoken. Though, it is difficult for smaller languages to survive, a significant number of languages that have been successfully revitalized. The purpose of this paper is to explore themes of language death in various respects, with focus on why we should care about languages dying. This paper also answered some questions regarding the definition of language death and the estimated number of languages are endangered and currently in use. Additionally, it highlighted the problems surrounding the loss of languages, and provided some constructive solutions to reclaim and revive dead and endangered languages. This paper also included a number of recommendations for linguists and endangered language speakers or communities.*

KEYWORDS: Language Death, Endangered Language, Linguists, Language Revival, Reclaim.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of a language rises and ebbs in direct proportion to the importance enjoyed by the people who speak that language. Of late, many different languages are being spoken on a mass basis by a large number of people. Therefore, it is becoming difficult for smaller languages to survive. However, the possibility of the revival of smaller languages is not entirely gloomy. There are a significant number of languages that have been successfully revitalized, and there are ongoing initiatives to reclaim other endangered and no-longer spoken languages.

Language death is considered to be something sad and quite unfortunate. For many speakers of widely spoken languages, such a case may be difficult to grasp. However, this case is real, and it happens around the world. For example, more than eleven percent of the world's languages have less than one hundred fifty speakers each. Additionally, there are a significant number of languages that are likely to be no-longer spoken within the next century (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 40, cited in Hoffmann 2009, p. 6). In such cases, there is someone who will be the last speaker and feel a great sadness (Krauss 1992, p. 6, cited in Hoffmann 2009, p. 6). However, the loss of languages not only affect those people who speak them, but also linguists and anthropological communities. As an illustration, linguists may learn lots regarding human language by examining the forms that could be found in endangered and dead languages. However, with every loss of a language, the data in linguists' pool for study and their ability to make discoveries about the world gradually shrink. By reclaiming endangered languages and no-longer spoken languages, linguists are likely to gain a great source of information. Moreover, researchers from other disciplines can benefit greatly from endangered languages' speakers, who often have useful and helpful knowledge about environmental science and medicine which could be unknown to modern science (Hoffmann 2009, p. 7).

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on why should we worry about language death? It also aims to answer some important aspects, such as what is language death? How many languages are endangered and currently in use? The reasons behind language death and what can save languages from dying?

What is language death?

There are many ways in which languages die. First of all, if people do not speak their language in their community and pass it to the next generation, their language may decline and eventually die. The second important point is that if a group of speakers of a certain language do not have access to favorable conditions where they can earn a livelihood then that language may slide into irrelevance (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 5). The third factor which must be considered is that if a group of speakers does not believe that language forms an important component of their uniqueness just like what happened in different populations in Wales and Ireland then the desire to ensure the survival of their language gradually recedes (Singh & Jones 2005, p. 84). The fourth point is that the language which is not passed from parent to children will ultimately become a dilapidated version of itself. In addition to this, in case a language has just one remaining speaker then it will be deemed to have reached the end of its journey or be effectively dead whereas a language for which there are no present speakers is deemed to be extinct or dead (Crystal 2000, p. 20-21). Also, all the languages that are no longer in use today and there are no written documents or records of them can also be classified as extinct (Crystal 2000, p. 2).

In certain circumstances or scenarios individuals speak their native tongue in only some specific settings like for religious purposes and do not use it to interact with others. In such scenarios it is predicted that such languages will continue to remain viable for a reasonable time period and may regain certain degree of importance as vernacular tongues just like the instances of Ancient Greek, Church Slavonic, Coptic and Latin (Wurm, 1991, p.1). The above mentioned languages have been utilized primarily for academic purposes or religious practises; an example of this is Israel where increased use of Hebrew language is being seen on a day to day basis (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 188).

In certain other scenarios no speakers are available for certain languages and as a consequence of this they can't be used for limited purposes also, only a few expressions or words are used. The group under which such languages are placed is that of not being totally dead or not being totally alive since written documents are available and there is a likelihood of restoration of their previous standing, in other words they can be classified as sleeping languages which are likely to rise from slumber. An example of this is Miami language, an Algonquin language which is used widely in Oklahoma and had been facing a decline in the last 30 years but is undergoing a revival at present (Leonard 2008, p. 2).

How many languages are currently in use?

Nowadays, there are about 3,000 to 10,000 languages that are widely spoken; however, there are a number of sources that give a figure between five thousand and seven thousand (Gordon, 2005). Grenoble & Whaley (1998) give a figure between 5,000 and 6,000; Ruhlen (1991, p. 391) believes that the figure is 5,000; and the Global Language Register suggests about 10,000 that includes some dialects as separate languages. In addition, Dixon (1997, cited in Černý 2010, p. 52) estimates that there are approximately 5,000 to 6,000 living languages in the world. However, the differences between dialect and language are largely dependent on sociopolitical

factors (Crystal, 2000, p.8). Clearly, there is no significant agreement about the number of languages currently in use, but it may range between 6,000 and 10,000 languages.

How many languages are endangered?

About 50% of the languages in the world have less than 10,000 speakers and there are 548 languages which can boast of less than 100 people who can speak it (Gordon, 2005). In addition, some of these languages are at risk of disappearing, and over the past few centuries the rate of language death has significantly increased (Wurm 1991, p.1). According to some dire estimates, there are more than four thousand languages that may become disappear by the end of the twenty-first century (Krauss 1992, p.7), and people are likely to use languages such as Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and English (Grenoble & Whaley, 1998). The Foundation for Endangered Languages conducted a study which focusses on the situation and postulated that greater than 50% of the languages present globally at present are facing the threat of demise and that the majority of languages will disappear within the span of a few generations (Foundation for Endangered Languages 2009).

How and why do languages die?

There are a number of reasons or events that contribute to the deaths of languages around the world. First of all, languages are likely to die quickly when all or most of their speakers pass away because of wars, genocides, or reprisals (Wurm 1991, p. 2). As an example, in 1932 in El Salvador, the speakers of Pipil (Nawat) stopped speaking their mother language since they feared further reprisals (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 6). Another reason for language death is the spread of infectious diseases among communities of people who do not have adequate immunity to resist such illnesses. Infectious diseases have a noticeable impact on indigenous peoples and their languages. An example is the impact of European entry in the Americas, about 90% of the native population passed away due to illnesses that they contracted from Europe and or their livestock (Crystal 2000, p.72).

Whenever a situation occurs where a geographical area or nation is conquered or overtaken by colonial masters then in the majority of cases it is the language spoken by the new entrants which becomes more important and the natives are under pressure to adopt the language of the new entrants. Also, the native speakers might feel that they have to incorporate the languages and traditions of the newcomers. In addition, this kind of scenario has a number of financial advantages associated with use of mastering the language of the newcomers like job opportunities, facilities and availability of new products. This scenario may also be witnessed when individuals migrate to a different nation where a completely different language is the language of conversation (Wurm 1991, p 5; Crystal 2000, p.77).

Another reason for language death is language shift or the process of assimilation that usually happens due to conquest or colonization. During this period, some bilingualism often occurs wherein local people retain their own language(s) while learning the language of the incoming people. In majority of such situations, the time period associated with this change is different but when the younger generation of native population is more at ease with the language of new entrants instead of their native tongue then there is a greater possibility of them considering the native tongue as defunct for serving their purposes. In addition, people may start to look down upon their mother tongue and only utilize it in very few circumstances. Also, the number of people able to speak a language decreases when languages are not transmitted from parents to their children. Hence, the final result will be that the language will slowly disappear as it will

be used in very few situations and the people who are still able to speak it may have to face segregation and may be forced to limit their social interaction. The native tongues may be altered and changed to a simpler form due to the influence of the dominant language in terms of grammatical formations or incorporation of a large number of idioms or words from it and if this change in the native language is not halted then there is a greater possibility of disappearance and demise of the native form (Crystal 2000, p. 79; Wurm 1991, p.13).

Many scenarios have been played out globally where languages have been knowingly crushed. For instance, in Kenya schools, any child caught speaking Gikuyu was fined, caned, or forced to carry a slate saying, "I am a donkey," or "I am stupid." For another example, in Welsh schools, any student caught speaking Welsh in or around school had to wear a sign inscribed "Welsh Not." The punished child had to wear the slate until the end of the day. Similar systems were used in many places; for example, Breton in Brittany: if anyone speaks their native languages at school in these communities, their mouths will be washed out with soap and water. As a result, some native speakers become ashamed of their mother tongue; they become embarrassed and reluctant to use it. In addition, they feel their languages are inferior and lacking in importance, and because of that they do not pass their language to the next generation because they do not want them suffering in a similar way (Singh & Jones 2005, p. 83; Crystal 2000, p. 84).

Assessing the vitality of languages

There are many ways to assess the vitality of languages and to predict how they will survive in the long term. One of them is to look at the number of the language's speakers. For example, a language with one hundred speakers in a massive population, perhaps tens of thousands, can be considered highly endangered. However, A language spoken by only a few 100 people might hold a solid position amongst a population whereas a language when spoken by thousands of people but who are distributed amongst a large number of people who speak a more dominant language may not have that strong a position. In most cases, the likelihood of rebirth of a small language is quite less. In fact languages which are spoken by a large number of people can also reach the brink of disappearance if their place is taken by a different language in certain important sectors like education. An example of this is the preferential use of English for the purpose of teaching at university level in place of the Yoruba language which is spoken by 40 million people (Crystal 2000, p. 13).

Fishman (1991) assesses language vitality by using the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) and introduces the concept of reversing the language shift (RLS) (see figure 1). Fishman (1991) delimits four social changes that can affect language choices, namely economic forces, social identifiers, demographic factors, and mass media. Data from figure 2 show that stage one languages are the least threatened because they are used in the higher levels of media, work, government and education. On the contrary, the most seriously endangered are in stage eight languages because they have few speakers. However, the remaining six stages rank among these two poles (Černý 2010, p. 52).

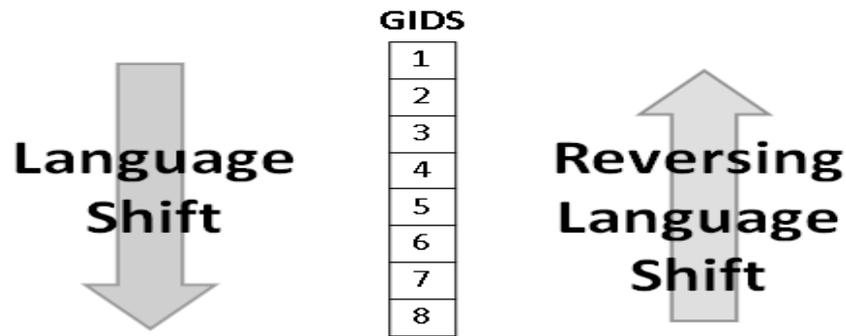


Figure 1: The Basic Premise of GIDS (Fishman 1991)

Stage One	Used by higher levels of government and in higher education.
Stage Two	Used by local government and the mass media in the community.
Stage Three	Used in business and by employees in less specialized work areas.
Stage Four	Language is required in elementary schools.
Stage Five	Language is still very much alive and used in the community.
Stage Six	Some intergenerational use of language.
Stage Seven	Only adults beyond child-bearing age speak the language.
Stage Eight	Only a few elders speak the language.

Figure 2: Adaptation of Fishman’s Scale for Threatened Languages (Černý 2010).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) utilises 9 parameters to evaluate the vitality of a language. The parameters include the total number of the language's speakers, the percentage of people speaking the language in the total population, passing of language from one generation to another, areas where it is utilised, mass media and its use in novel sectors; official attitudes and policies; attitudes toward the language within the community; official attitudes and policies; available documentation; and amount and quality of documentation (see figure 3). The purpose of using these factors is to classify languages as safe, vulnerable, severely endangered, critically extinct, or critically endangered. Vulnerable languages have child and adult speakers, but they are used only in some domains. Languages that are only spoken by older generations can be considered as severely endangered languages. Extinct languages have lost all their speakers, and critically endangered languages are spoken by only elderly speakers who rarely speak them (UNESCO 2009).

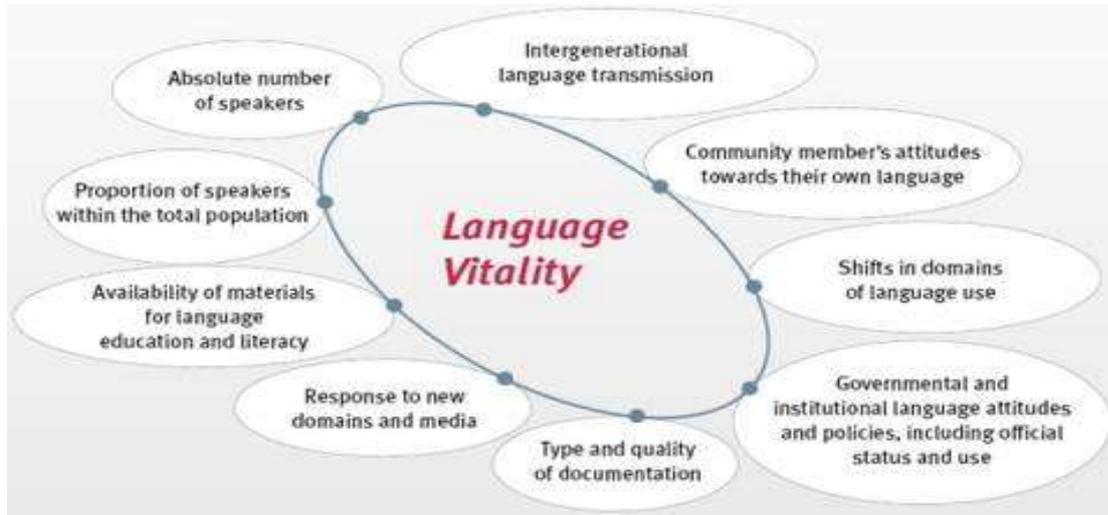
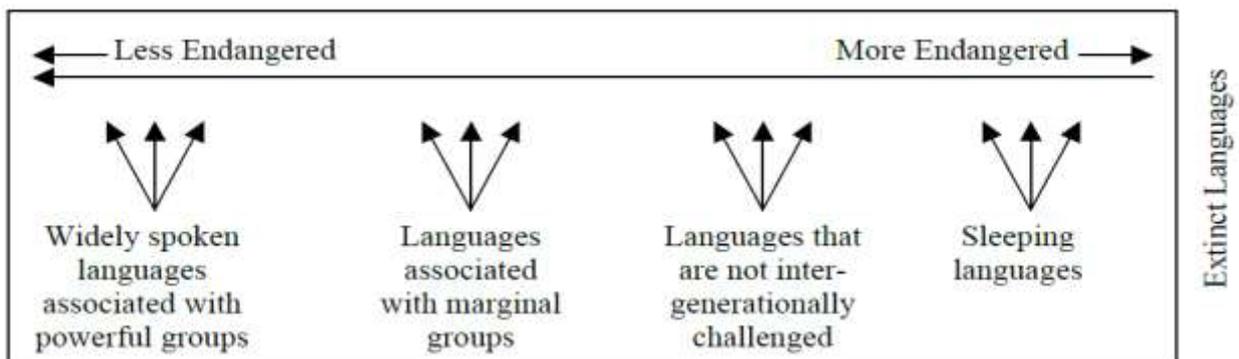


Figure 3: UNESCO Language Vitality (UNESCO 2009).

Leonard (2008) assesses language vitality by using a language endangerment continuum that places languages that are no-longer spoken at the right and languages that are vastly spoken by powerful communities in the other side. Languages which are on the left are classified as less endangered, while languages in the right are considered endangered. There are no languages considered 100% safe. Languages with little or no documentation or with no speakers are considered as extinct and outside the endangerment continuum.



Why should we worry about languages dying?

Because languages express identity: Language plays a leading role in defining people’s identity, and the loss of language may impact people in negative ways. According to Sir James Henare, who expressed the influence of the loss of the Maori language, “The language is the life force of our Maori culture and mana [‘power’]. If the language dies, as some predict, what do we have left to us? Then, I ask our own people who are we?” (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 23). However, language can influence people in positive ways as well. As an illustration, people can have an emotional experience and sense of pride and identity when they reacquire their ancestors’ mother tongue. For example, Aden Ridgeway, who is an Aboriginal politician,

said, "Language is power; let us have ours!" (Ridgeway 2009). Another example is a participant who attended a workshop in May 2012 (Port Lincoln, Eyre Peninsula, South Australia) about Barngarla Aboriginal language reclamation who expressed that learning the language was "liberating" and that she felt a sense of identity. Moreover, another one said that their ancestors are happy (Zuckermann 2013). Identity is a way of being that makes the individuals of any community recognizably the same. People can discern each other's identities by looking at customs like dress, ritual, beliefs, and the whole panoply of personal behaviors, but language is the most ubiquitous among all these behaviors. It is available even when people cannot see each other, as in talking in the dark or shouting at a distance. Language is the primary symbol, or register, or index of identity (Crystal 2000, p. 39). There are many metaphors that describe language as a way of discerning identity. According to Dixon (1997), "A language is the emblem of its speakers," and Barthes (1977) said, "Language is a skin" (Crystal 2000, p. 40). There are many proverbs that capture the importance of identity, and without language, that identity would be lost. As an example, a Welsh proverb says, "Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb galon." It means, "A nation without a language is a nation without a heart" (Crystal 2000, p. 36).

Since languages provide valuable information to the mankind's search for facts: Language can reflect a unique interpretation of human existence, and this may give people another motive to care about languages' deaths. Linguists and academics can learn a great deal from them; for example, endangered and no-longer-spoken languages may provide various levels of intellectual profundity, more so than widely spoken languages. According to a famous proverb from Slovakia, "With each newly learned language, you acquire a new soul." In addition, there is a proverb from France that can describe how language can play an important role in knowledge: "A man who knows two languages is worth two men." According to Emerson (1860), who takes up this theme, "As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man." These messages and proverbs state clearly that there is a lot of data and knowledge that can be enjoyed and learned by experiencing other languages (Crystal 2000, p. 44).

The loss of languages has a significant influence on human knowledge. In other words, languages' deaths can affect academics and linguists who study the human capacity of other languages. As an illustration, the more academics and linguists know about the varied methods of using other languages, the more knowledge they will have about human creativity. According to Nettle & Romaine (2000, p. 11), "Linguistic diversity gives us unique perspectives into the mind because it reveals the many creative ways in which humans organize and categorize their experience." Clearly, the fewer languages or methods of documentation that linguists know, the less diversity they can work with, and the less diversity academics can draw on to learn about human creativity in language. Moreover, no-longer-spoken languages or endangered languages contain a huge amount of data that can be beneficial for the field of linguistic study. For instance, at the beginning of linguistics as a field of study, the majority of scholars focussed on Indo-European languages as they were associated with many different languages, had strong interrelationship and demonstrated many similarities (Nettle & Romaine 2000, p. 28). But, languages that are on the brink of extinction or those which have become defunct have huge amount of information stored within them which can act as a source of important and beneficial information to both linguistic researchers and scholars. According to Nettle and Romaine (2000, p. 56), "Many Hawaiians have now forgotten more of that local knowledge accumulated and handed down orally over the past 2,000 years than western scientists will ever learn." As these data were communicated orally, they have been forgotten

along with the language. If a language is allowed to become extinct, then all this important and useful information will disappear with no chances of recovery. In a nut shell, it can be said that linguistic researchers and people who speak such endangered tongues might have to face the threat of loss of valuable information and facts in case such languages become extinct. In addition, both linguists and speakers of such languages can work together in order to be able to help each other to reclaim these languages; however, the situation is not that simple (Hoffmann 2009, p. 22).

Because of aesthetic reasons: Languages play a vital role in defining people's cultures; in other words, language ties closely with culture, and when communities lose their language, they lose a number of aspects of its culture. As an illustration, there are a considerable number of practices that depend on language. For instance, losing language is likely to lead to the loss of many verbal art forms such as poetry, and traditional songs. Even if the language was written, it may lose some aspects such as its tales unless they are translated into other languages (Hoffmann 2009, p. 21). Language loss has substantial implications for both the individual and the collective identities of any community. Ken Hale, who worked with a considerable number of endangered languages, said, "When you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It's like dropping a bomb on a museum, the Louvre" (Ken Hale 2001, cited in Zuckermann 2013). According to Boroditsky and Gaby (2010, cited in Zuckermann 2013), the Kuuk Thaayorre, which is a language spoken in Pormpuraaw in Cape York, its speakers always use cardinal directions instead of 'left' or 'right.' The speaker of Kuuk Thaayorre always can understand where he or she is situated, and this use of directions influences one's awareness of time. This can indicate that each language has various levels of intellectual profundity. To demonstrate this variety, the following table has some unique words from different languages around the world:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persian <i>nakhur</i> is a 'camel that will not give milk until her nostrils have been tickled.' • <i>Mamihlapinatapai</i> is a word in the Yaghan language of Tierra del Fuego in Chile and Argentina. It refers to 'a look shared by two people, each wishing that the other will offer something that they both desire but have been unwilling to suggest or offer themselves.' This word can be broken down into smaller parts, or morphemes, thus: <i>ma-</i> is a reflexive/passive prefix (realised as the allomorph <i>mam-</i> before a vowel), <i>ihlapi</i> [ihapi] 'to be at a loss as what to do next' (the lexical root), <i>-n</i> stative suffix, <i>-ata</i> achievement suffix, and <i>-apai</i>, a dual suffix, which has a reciprocal sense with <i>ma-</i> (circumfix). • <i>Tingo</i>, in Rapa Nui (Pasquan) of Easter Island (Eastern Polynesian language), is 'to take all the objects one desires from the house of a friend, one at a time, by asking to borrow them, until there is nothing left.'

Table 1: Some unique words from different languages (De Boinod 2005, cited in Zuckermann 2013).

Such beautiful vocabularies should not go missing because they are essential to the cultures from which they come and are fascinating to outsiders. Therefore, it is important to reclaim

sleeping languages in order to keep such fascinating words and cultural practices alive (Zuckermann, 2013).

Because of utilitarian benefits: Language can provide a number of benefits such as improving the speakers' health and economic benefits. However, language revival can benefit the speakers and improve their mental and cognitive health. As an illustration, when a language is revived, then there is a possibility that the speakers of that language will feel a bonding towards their cultural history and customs. In addition to this, many cognitive benefits are associated with use of more than one language; various researches have shown that children who speak more than one language have higher non language related cognitive capabilities if compared to children who use only one language. (Kovacs & Mehler 2009, cited in Zuckermann 2013). In addition, bilingual children have more opportunities to improve their auditory processing and attention (see, e.g., Krizman et al. 2012, cited in Zuckermann 2013):

“The bilingual’s enhanced experience with sound results in an auditory system that is highly efficient, flexible and focused in its automatic sound processing, especially in challenging or novel listening conditions.”

There is evidence that shows that multilingualism can provide a number of advantages, namely, it can reduce money spent on health care, improve quality of life, and slow dementia. According to a recent study, by using a second language, decision-making biases can be reduced (Keysar et al. 2012, cited in Zuckermann, 2013):

“Four experiments show that the ‘framing effect’ disappears when choices are presented in a foreign tongue. Whereas people were risk averse for gains and risk seeking for losses when choices were presented in their native tongue, they were not influenced by this framing manipulation in a foreign language.”

“Two additional experiments show that using a foreign language reduces loss aversion, increasing the acceptance of both hypothetical and real bets with positive expected value. We propose that these effects arise because a foreign language provides greater cognitive and emotional distance than a native tongue does.”

Language revival is able to increase cultural tourism and decrease delinquency. However, cultural tourism plays an essential role in the economy of every country around the world. There are many people who wish to learn about Aboriginal languages and cultures. For example, in Australia, Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal cultures contribute to the tourist dollar and represent an important part of Australia’s image. Therefore, it is necessary to protect and revive the Aboriginal languages in order to keep this point of attraction. In addition, revival languages can benefit the economy and provide more opportunities for Aboriginal people to work. It is clear that language reclamation projects can improve mental health and social cohesion, and they are able to decrease the amount of money that is spent on social dysfunction and medical health. Briefly, language revival can encourage cultural tourism and aid in ‘closing the gap’ (Zuckermann, 2013).

What can save languages from dying?

Despite the fact that there are a number of forces that can cause death to indigenous languages, many forces which can support endangered languages. As an example, languages are less likely to disappear if their speakers feel that it is necessary and valuable to save their languages.

Furthermore, language can be preserved by implementing methods such as using the language in media and technology and gaining official and community support (Hoffmann 2009, p.18).

As per the view of Krauss (1992) according to whom television acts as a nerve gas with the ability to impact cultural beliefs, both television and radio can play a vital role in maintaining the importance of a language. If a program is prepared in a native tongue then there will be more chances for speakers to hear their language being spoken. Also, use of native tongue in mass media in place of the commonly used dominant language proves that the native tongues can function successfully in the modern era as well. Various charitable groups have lent their support to the cause of utilization of endangered tongues in media. An example is the Guatemala Radio Project which provides backing to local radio stations, helps in broadcasting in native tongue like news, programmes related to education and health and classical music, all reinforcing pride in Mayan heritage.” Therefore, it is clear that media can play a potential role in enhancing and promoting indigenous language and culture (Cultural survival, 2009).

CONCLUSION

To sum up, loss of language is classified as a terrible loss. However, there are many languages becoming increasingly widely spoken; thus, it is becoming more difficult to revive some languages, such as Aboriginal languages. Reviving, revitalizing, and maintaining these kinds of languages is not easy; however, it is still possible. There are a number of factors that can revive endangered and no-longer-spoken languages, including the community of language, the time frame in which the revival begins, the level of official and community support, the dedication and motivation of groups and individuals, and official governmental recognition for the language.

According to Grinevald (1998, p. 143), “Bridging the gap between academic linguistics and community wants and efforts is surely one of the major challenges of the linguistic profession as it faces the situation of endangered languages at the turn of the new century.” A significant number of challenges that can be found, but by working together, endangered language speakers and linguists can benefit simultaneously.

This paper has aimed to explore themes of language death in various respects. They are the meaning of language death, the number of languages that are currently in use, the number of languages that are endangered, and how and why languages are dying. Why should we care about languages dying? What can be done to save languages from dying? Indeed, significant research has highlighted the problems surrounding the loss of languages, and it has provided some constructive solutions to reclaim and revive dead and endangered languages. In fact, in linguistics, a great deal of time has elapsed. Therefore, linguists should begin to put their acts together before such languages wind down. As Dorian (1998, p. 21) said, “Having waited too long before undertaking to rally support for threatened languages, we may find ourselves eulogizing extinct languages whose living uniqueness we had hoped instead to celebrate.”

The linguists on the front line, who work in this field, should intervene to reclaim dead and endangered languages because time is running out. It might be late for some languages, but linguists may hold in their hands the future of other languages. Therefore, linguistics needs much support in order to study and revive languages that are definitely in danger of

disappearing or becoming severely endangered, critically extinct, or critically endangered. In addition, the raising of public awareness will play an important role, and hopefully, this research may play its part in that.

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