

Language Endangerment in South Asia

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Abstract

Language endangerment is the very critical issues of 21st century because the extinction of each language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique expression of the human experience and the culture of the world. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human languages, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world's diverse ecosystems. Language is thus essential for the ability to express cultural knowledge, the preservation and further development of the culture. In the world, 500 languages are spoken by less than 100 peoples and 96% of the world's languages are spoken only 4% of the world's population. Data shows that all most all the minority languages of world are in endangered and critical situation and not becoming to the culture transmitter. This paper will explain the process, stages, paradigms, as well as the language endangerment in global and in South Asian context.

Key words: *Endangerment, Extinction, Genocide, Linguicide and Moribund.*

Introduction

An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use and its speakers no longer pass it onto the next generation. A language is considered to be endangered when the population of its speakers is diminishing, and the last generation does not exercise the use of the language actively or even at all. Asserting that “Language diversity is essential to the human heritage”, UNESCO’s Ad-hoc expert group on endangered languages (2003) offers this definition of an endangered language, “When its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next.

That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children”. UNESCO’s Atlas of the world language in danger (2010), categories 2,500 languages in five levels of endangerment: unsafe, definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. More than 200 languages have become extinct around the world over last three generations. UNESCO further mentioned that language endangerment is a wide spread phenomenon in the Northern part of Asia to Africa and Latin America. According to Woodbury (2012), an endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many

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languages are failing out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adults speakers; these languages will become extinct when their last speakers dies. Today, many languages or speech communities of minority language are shrinking and their language will ultimately vanish, if these developments are not reversed. Children may no longer acquire languages even when they are still spoken by many thousands of elderly speakers. It means, the sustainability of language based on the number of speakers or the number of children who are using their mother language in daily activities, that language will be in endangered position. There is no definite rule / law to identifying a language as endangered.

According to Krauss (1992), mainly there are three criteria to identifying the endangered languages: number of speakers currently living, mean age of native and/or fluent speakers and the percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency with the languages acquisition. He further described that those languages as safe if children will probably be speaking them in 100 years ; and endangered if children will probably not be speaking them in 100 years (approximately 60-80% of languages fall into this category) and moribund if children are not speaking them now. The statistical data related to language use may illustrate the extent of the problems of language endangerment. According to Ethnologue (2009), about 97% of the world people speak about 4% of the world's languages; and conversely, about 96% of the world's languages are spoken by about 3% of the world's people. Approximately 85% of the almost 7000 languages of the worlds are spoken in only 22 countries of the world. The summer institutes publication, suggests that as many as 20% of the worlds languages are moribund. According to summer institute of Linguistics (SIL) or Ethnologue (2009) data, we can calculate that 90% of the world population speaks the 100 most- used languages. This means that there are at least 6000 languages spoken by about 10% of the people on earth. These data and other information indicate that 90% languages of world are in endangered situation and facing the problem of extinction.

Objective of the paper

The overall objective of this paper is to discuss the stages and paradigms of language endangerment in the context of world as well as South Asia. The specific objective is to analyze the linguistic situation, number of endanger languages and the current situations languages of South Asia.

Method of study

Regarding to the above mentioned objective, analytical and descriptive methods are to be applied for this paper. The data used in the study is quantitative which are collected from secondary sources like ethnologue, UNESCO, published articles and other organization/individual research documents.

Theoretical Framework of endangerment of language

When certain language disappears, the question is: does this happen as a result of language death or are we talking about language murder or language shift? There are mainly following three paradigms to explain the disappearing (endangerment) of language: First is the Language death paradigm which believes that everything living in nature has a life-span, everything is burn, blossoms, withers away, is replaced by the next candidate then why not language? Language death is defined by Campbell (1994), as the loss of a language due to gradual shift to the dominant language in language situations. Such situations involve an intermediate stage of bilingualism in which the subordinate language is employed by a decreasing number of speakers in an equally decreasing number of contexts; until it ultimately disappears altogether ... languages in the process of dying are endangered languages. Second is the Linguistic genocide paradigm which claims that most languages at least today do not die a natural death. Linguicide thus, by contrast, implies that there are agents involved in causing the death of languages. In liberal ideology, described above, only an active agent with the conscious intention to kill languages would cause linguicide and other would fall within the domain of language death. Kangas (2000) believes that the agents for linguicide can be active or passive . And it is in relation to these two passive policies, especially in education are decisive today. The paradigm linguistic genocide analyses power relations between the language communities and wants to change the unequal relations between the languages. Third is the Language shift paradigm which was first described by Fishman (1991) and believes that the language shift paradigm is presented as a voluntary choice by the speech community as a response to the changing conditions in the entire environment. But there are some questions: was/is this shift voluntary-or was it forced? Would those who have shifted, rather had chosen the both- and alternative had it existed? Can a situation where there is no choice be labeled voluntary? Earlier, means for people livelihood were destroyed physically and intentionally, to force people to the mission stations, where their languages and world views were forcibly changed? Fishman (1991) developed a theory called Reversing Language Shift (RLS) which is considered to be a pioneering study of the efforts of linguistic minorities to preserve their language. Fishman's (1991) RLS theory suggests a model the Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS), which is very important theory for the measurement of vitality and endangerment of

language. This paper applied the Fishman's theory of Reversing Language Shift paradigm for the explanation of the endangerment of South Asian languages.

Language endangerment in the context of world

A lot has been written on language since the period of 1990s, especially since Krauss (1992). Recently the literature has been augmented by books such as Crystal (2000), Dixon (1998), Grenoble & Whaley (1998), Hagege (2000), Nettle & Romaine (2000) as well as more regionally focused publications such as Cantoni (1997), Brenzinger (1998) and Reyhner et.al. (1999). According to Mufwene (2002), these literatures has expressed apprehension, primarily deploring the fact that linguistic diversity is being lost at a dramatic speed and occasionally arguing that the native speakers of these languages are losing their cultural heritage. Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) mentioned that demographically the less than 300 languages (the really very big plus the big and middle sized languages) accounted in the early 1990s for a total of over 5 billion speakers or close to 95% of the world population. But these 95% of the world population speak considerably under 5% of the world languages. This means that more than 95% of the world languages have fewer than 1 million speakers each. Most of the figures about them are very unsure and estimates differ. Probably around 40% of the worlds languages are spoken by 1 million and 10,000 speakers each (smallish, small and very small languages). Somewhat over half of the worlds (oral) languages and most of the sign languages are spoken by communities of fewer than 10,000 speakers. These languages are the really small and minimal sized languages. And half of these, in turn, meaning around a quarter of the worlds languages are spoken by communities of 1,000 speakers or fewer. These really small and minimal sized languages are the most vulnerable oral languages of the world. According to UNESCO (2003) about 6000 languages exist in the world, among them about 5760 languages are spoken by 3% of the world's population. The remainder of the languages is spoken by 97% of the world's population. It is estimated that about 90%of the 5760 languages will be replaced by the dominant languages by the end of 21st century.

Ethnologue, is the largest present-day survey, first attempted a world-wide Review only in 1974, an edition containing 5,687 languages. Similarly, in the thirteenth edition of Ethnologue (1996) contains 6,703 language headings and about 6,300 living languages are classified in the International Encyclopedia of Linguistics (1992). There are 6,796 names listed in the index to the Atlas of world languages. The off-the-cuff figure most often heard these days is 6,000, with the variance sometimes going below, sometimes above. Crystal (2000) mentioned that about 96% of world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the population. Nearly 500 languages have less than 100 speakers; around 1,500 have less than 1,000; and 3,340 have less than 10,000. The data shows that 51 languages with just a single

speakers-28 in Australia, 8 in USA, 3 in South America, 3 in Africa, 6 in Asia and 3 in the Pacific Islands. This figure indicates that small tongues get abandoned by their speakers, who stop using them in favor of a more dominant, more prestigious or more widely known tongue. We lack an appropriate technical term to describe people abandoning complex systems of knowledge like language. So we rely on metaphors, calling it ‘language death’, language shift’, threatened languages, extinction, last words or vanishing voices.

Stages or levels of endangerment of language

The language endangerment is the crucial case for the loss of humanity and human culture. When people die, they leave signs of their presence in the world, in the forms of their dwelling places, burial mounds and artifacts- in a word, their archaeology. But spoken language leaves no archaeology, when a language dies which has never been documented, it is as if it has never been (Crystal: 2005). Language endangerment is a continuous process which depends on the power, economy and technology used by the language. There are different concepts related to the stages or levels of language endangerment. According to Kincaid (1991), there are five stages of language endangerment: Viable language, Viable but small, Endangered language, Nearly extinct languages and Extinct language. Similarly, Wurm (1998) also mentioned the five stages but he has different explanation like Potentially endangered, Endangered languages, Seriously endangered, Moribund languages and Extinct languages. UNESCO (2010) and Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) mentioned the four stages of language endangerment and Krauss (1992) described only the three stages like Moribund languages, Endangered language and Safe languages.

From these levels or stages we can say that there are numerous schemes have been proposed for the understanding of language endangerment, among them the most comprehensive is UNESCOs language vitality and endangerment framework, which is mentioned in above UNESCO Red Book categories. It establishes seven degrees of endangered based on different factors. Of these factors, the most salient is that of intergenerational transmission: whether or not a language is used in the family and passed from an older generation to children. This factor is generally accepted as the gold standard of language vitality.

Language Endangerment in South Asia

The greater Himalayan region, which extends for 3,500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia’s most endangered languages. Politically, South Asia region is divided into eight independent countries: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Maldives which are linguistically very diverse region and having 500 languages. South Asian is the richest region in linguistic diversity. Moving across the

region in alphabetical order, Afghanistan boasts 47 living languages, Bangladesh is home to 39, Bhutan has 24, China 235, India 415, Myanmar 108, Nepal 123, and Pakistan 72 (Turin, 2007). The major languages of South Asia belong to five families: Indo-European (Indo-Aryan, Iranian and Nuristani), Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic (Munda and Khasi), Tibeto-Burman and language isolates (Burushaski, Kusunda and Nahali).

Table no. 1: Language family and distribution

S.N.	Language Families	Language distribution Regions
1	Indo-European	Indo-European languages predominate in the whole of the American and European continents with the sole exceptions of Finland, Estonia and Hungary (where Uralic languages are spoken). In Asia, they are in the majority in all South Asian countries (except Bhutan), in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Asiatic Russia. They are also dominant in Australia and New Zealand while in Africa they are spoken as a mother tongue in few places (Spanish in Equatorial Guinea, Afrikaans in South Africa).
2	Dravidian	Dravidian languages are spoken in many parts of India but the largest concentration of speakers is found in the four states of southern India (Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala). Many Tamil speakers live also in the north of Sri Lanka. Brahui is spoken in Pakistan (Baluchistan province). Small minorities of Dravidian speakers are also found in Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal, and expatriates in Southeast Asia, Fiji, South Africa and the Caribbean.
3	Austro-Asiatic	The Austro-Asiatic family is traditionally divided into small Munda and large Mon-Khmer subfamilies. The Aslian languages of Malaysia and the Nicobarese languages of the Nicobar islands (a part of India) have been tentatively included within Mon-Khmer but their classification is disputed. The Mon-Khmer subfamily has more than one hundred languages and a number of branches whose mutual relation is also controversial. Some recent classifications make Austro-Asiatic and Mon-Khmer coterminous, considering Munda as just another branch of the family.
4	Tibeto-Burman	Tibeto-Burman languages are spoken in Tibet, western China (provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, and western Hunan), in the north and east of South Asia, and in Southeast Asia. In the Indian subcontinent they are found in Baltistan (an area of

		North Pakistan colonized by the Tibetans in the 7th century), Ladakh (a region of northwest India akin culturally to Tibet), Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and in the northeastern states of India (Sikkim, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoran, Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh). In Southeast Asia they predominate in Myanmar and are also spoken in pockets in Thailand, Laos, and northwestern Vietnam.
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Source: Gutman & Avanzati, 2013

Most of the South Asian people speak Indo-European languages which are spoken by 80% of the population of South Asia and spreading all over the north and center of the region. They are followed by Dravidian languages, spoken by 18% of the population, mainly in the four southern states of India (Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu) and in the north of Sri Lanka. Tibeto-Burman is spoken in Bhutan, Nepal and Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir in northwestern part of India) as well as in the extreme northeast of the subcontinent by 1.2% of its inhabitants. Finally, Austro-Asiatic which has only 0.8 % is found in pockets in the Indian center and northeast (Gutman & Avanzati, 2013).

Table no. 2: Different level of language endangerment in South Asia

Country	Total	Vulnerable	Definitely endangered	Severely endangered	Critically endangered	Extinct
Afgansrhan	23	Brahui, Shughni, Pashayi	Wakhi, Rushani, Kati, Gawar-Bati, Parachi, Savi, Ashkun, Prasun, Waigali, Wotapuri-Katarqalai, Ormuri, Central Asian Arabic	Parya, Sanglechi, Munji, Gambiri, Shumashti, Ningalami	Moghol, Tirahi	
Bangladesh	5	Kokborok, Bishnupriya Manipuri Creole, Kurux	Bawm	Sak		
Bhutan	19	Tshangla,	Lepcha, Cho-ca-			

		Dzongkha, Cuona Menba, Kheng, Bumthang, Dzala, Kurtöp, Nyenkha, Gongduk, Nupbikha	nga-ca-kha, Lakha, Brokpa, Lhokpu, Chali, Dakpa, Black Mountain, Brokkat			
India	199	Gondi, Kumaoni, Kurux (India), Tulu, Meithei, Tamang, Kui, Khasi, Bodo, Mundari, Angika, Kokborok, Mizo, Karbi, Ho, Garhwali, Sora, Konyak, Ao, Irula, Kharia, Korku, Tshangla, Thado, Adi, Lhota, Nyishi, Rabha, Sherpa, Tangkhul, Angami, Phom, Dimasa, Ladakhi, Simi, Kabui, Yimchungru, Chokri, Sangtam, Mao, Bishnupriya Manipuri	Kangdi, Mandeali, Mising, Mahasui, Kurru, Kuvi, Limbu, Malto, Kului, Kodagu, Badaga, Chambeali, Kolami, Konda, Jaunsari, Bhadravahi, Kinnauri, Churahi, Kachari, Koch, Lepcha, Deori, Juang, Tiwa, Mara, Biete, Gangte, Nahali, Bawm, Hill Miri, Idu, Motuo Menba, Asur, Sulung, Gorum, Kom, Miji, Singpho, Turi, Aka, Bunan, Bharmauri, Moyon,	Geta?, Remo, Aiton, Tai Phake, Mech, A'tong	Parji, Sirmaudi, Gadaba, Koraga, Pangvali, Kuruba, Bangani, Lamgang, Muot, Naiki, Pu, Baghati, Takahanyila ng, Aimol, Birhor, Kota, Luro, Nihali, Sanenyo, Pengo, Koireng, Toda, Toto, Tarao, Purum, Lamongse, Mra, Na, Aka, Handuri, Ruga, Shompen,	Ahom , Andro , Chair el, Rangk as, Seng mai, Tolch a

		Creole, Chang, Nruanghmei, Rengma, Cuona Menba, Hmar, Paite, Wancho, Bhumji, Kheza, Gutob, Minyong, Tangsa, Khiamngan, Maram, Apatani, Galo, Korwa, Liangmai, Zeme, Nocte, Tagin, Mzieme, Koda, Anal, Maring, Bangni, Khoirao, Manchad, Padam, Hrangkhoh, Pochuri, Khampiti, Taruang, Rongpo, Miju, Bokar, Sherdukpen, Balti, Padri, Purik, Spiti	Brokshat, Bori, Jangshung, Milang, Tinan, Darma, Byangsi, Kanashi, Khamba, Lishpa, Dakpa, Khowa, Pasi, Zaiwa, Kundal Shahi, Bhalesi, Jad, Khasali, Koro, Zangskari		Tai Nora, Tai Rong, Tangam, Onge, Sentilese, Jarawa, Great andamanese, Bellari, Langrong, Manda	
Nepal	71	Kumaoni, Tamang, Angika, Bantawa,	Newar, Magar, Gurung, Limbu, Chamling, Thangmi,	Danuwar, Majhi, Dhimal, Darai,	Yakkha, Barām, Hayu, Kusunda,	Dura

		Sherpa, Satār, Chepang, Ghale, Kurux (Nepal), Sunwar, Kulung, Sampang, Thakali, Wambule, Shingsaba, Kohi, Jero, Seke	Kham, Lepcha, Ha-lung Tibetan, Thulung, Khaling, Dol- po, Chantyal, Jirel, Tsum, Dungmali, Nupri, Limirong Tibetan, Bahing, Athpahariya, Nyishangba, Darma, Byangsi, Yamphu, Chiling, Kāgate, Kaika, Narpa, Tilung, Gyasumdo, Khaccaḍ Bhoṭe, Langthang Tibetan, Loke Tibetan	Kumāle, Puma, Nachiring, Raji, Chintang, Lohorung, Mewahang, Raute, Sām	Surel, Dumi	
Pakistan	27	Brahui, Khowar, Maiya, Burushaski, Balti, Purik, Spiti	Wakhi, Bhadravahi, Torwali, Bateri, Kati, Gawar- Bati, Phalura, Yidgha, Savi, Ushojo, Ormuri, Kundal Shahi, Jad, Zangskari	Dameli, Kalasha, Chilisso, Bashkarik, Domaaki, Gowro		
Srilanka	1		Vedda			
Maldips	-	-	-	-		

Source: UNESCO, 2011

Table shows that most the languages of this region are either definitely endangered or severely endangered. Among these countries, India and Nepal has a large number which are belongs to endangered situation. India has 30 languages and Nepal has 6 languages which are critically endangered conditions. Turin (2007) mentioned that, from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east, sustains over 150 million people and is home to great linguistic diversity and many of Asia's most endangered languages. He further mentioned that, there are many reasons and modalities by which mother tongues become endangered, including declining speaker numbers, the transformation of the traditional habitat of a linguistic community through deforestation, or even natural disasters, such as the landslides, fold and earthquake (Toba et al. 2002). Most of these above mentioned languages did not gain the national or provincial status in the medium of education, political power, administration and other domains of national life. In spite of, in the past these languages were used for communication, identity, heritage, cultural ethos, ritual practice, myths, historical documents etc. But now there is a change in the practice of these languages among the younger generation. This change is mainly due to the policies of the government, global mass media especially internet, television, radio, cinema, social media and other communication systems.

Conclusion

More than 85% languages of South Asia are in endangered situation which is the serious issue because each language shares such an intricate bond with the culture, it is associated with that it alone can facilitate a somewhat through analysis of culture. It is believed that language is vehicles of culture, belief, ideology and shared history and that language and culture are mutually constitutive. That being said, different languages across the globe are continuously dying and causing the death of the premise and the backbone of entire civilizations forever losing their heritage and tradition (www.nepalhomepage.com). This stands as true for Nepal's endangered languages as it does for any other countries languages. Hence study, research and documentation of endangered languages is the very urgent and essential issue in global as well as in Nepal.

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