

Ecolinguistics and Endangered Languages

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I. INTRODUCTION

Linguists have regularly shown concern about the nagging problem of increase in the number of endangered languages, and they have not only tried to find out the reasons behind language death (Dalby, 2002; Krauss, 1992), but also seek out measures how to protect the endangered languages. As the interactive UNESCO World Atlas of Endangered Languages (last updated July 4, 2017), today as many as 2500 languages out of roughly 7000 languages spoken are endangered (Moseley, 2010). Anthropologists and sociolinguistics have studied the phenomenon, studied the society and its people, and have offered solutions. Of late, a new and emerging linguistics has emerged more successful in handling the issue of endangered language from a new perspective: the ecological perspective. This branch of linguistics, called Ecolinguistics, treats language as a living organism and studies the language in its locale, culture, and the language about itself --- all from the ecological point of view. Ecolinguistics begins with “the study of interactions between any given language and its environment” and helps in revival of a language by understanding the stories the community lives by, and the culture it is embedded in. What’s more, Ecolinguistics believes by changing the stories we can also alter the fate of a community, language, and ecology: we can save an endangered language.

Ecology and Endangered Languages

To lend the concept of endangered languages clarity, the findings of the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages may be cited here in a selective manner:

1. Language diversity is essential to the human heritage. Each and every language embodies the unique cultural wisdom of a people. The loss of any language is thus a loss for all humanity.
2. A language is endangered when it is on a path toward extinction. Without adequate documentation, a language that is extinct can never be revived. ... A language is in danger 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.
3. Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community’s negative attitude towards its own language. Internal pressures often have their source in external ones, and both halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many indigenous peoples, associating their disadvantaged social position with their culture, have come to believe that their languages are not worth retaining. They abandon their languages and cultures in hopes of overcoming discrimination, to secure a livelihood and enhance social mobility or to assimilate to the global marketplace.
4. The extinction of any language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. Each language is a unique expression of the human experience of the world. Thus, the knowledge of any single language may be the key to answering fundamental questions in the future. Every time a language dies, we have less evidence for understanding patterns in the structure and function of human language, human prehistory and the maintenance of the world’s diverse ecosystems.

The above points show that the UN has underscored the importance of the link between ecology, language, culture, and society.

Language death is loss of human resources as well as cultural resources. Ecolinguistics, which advocates for biodiversity, language diversity, and cultural diversity, “addresses language loss and language maintenance in the age of globalization and the question of how language construes our view of nature and

environment” (Fill, 2018:1). Ecolinguistics can come to the rescue of the endangered tongues by ascertaining the factors --- ecological, linguistics, cultural --- and through discourse analysis. It tries to understand the community and the stories it lives by. There may not be a uniform cause for language loss and it varies from place to place, community to community, and from language to language. An estimate shows that nearly 25% to 90% of the 7000-odd languages are facing the danger of extinction in one way or the other (Romaine, 2017).

Endangered Languages and Degrees of Endangerment

It may be noted here that all endangered languages may not be equally in danger -- they may vary in their degree of endangerment. In other words, the vitality of a language is a matter of degree and can be labelled and characterized.

Categories of Endangered Languages	
Degree of Endangerment	Description
Safe	language is spoken by all generations; intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Vulnerable	most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
Definitely endangered	children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
Severely endangered	language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
Critically endangered	the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
Extinct	there are no speakers left
Source: Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger, 3rd edn. Paris, UNESCO Publishing. (Online: http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/index.php?hl=en&page=atlasmap)	

There are various reasons behind language endangerment. Ecolinguistics considers the language used concerning the endangered language in question, the ecological considerations, and how an ecolinguistic approach can empower the community to revive an endangered language.

Ecolinguistics and Endangered Languages

Ecolinguists address the issue of sustainability, which largely impacts the ecosystem and thereby the language. Sustainability is a big issue for Ecolinguistics, which believes can be fairly treated and solved. Ecolinguistics not only believes in an ecological approach but also in a cultural approach where language plays a pivotal role in the restoration of ecology, culture, and language. Especially post-globalization, economic development has cast its evil shadow on many a traditional community, for example, the primitive tribal communities. As research studies have found, many tribal communities have been forced to compromise with their culture thanks to the impact of globalization and urbanization and in the process their languages, mainly oral, have got endangered. Ecolinguistics pleads for linguistic sustainability and respect for the habitat. Linguistic diversity cannot be sustained without biodiversity and language must favour ecology to sustain (Nettle 1999). Sociolinguistic ecosystems are advocated by Ecolinguistics, for they can sustain both ecology and language in a community. A balance between the ecosystem and its components, including language, is a necessity both for healthy and moribund languages. In fact, Ecolinguistics has offered a comprehensive perspective to diagnose the causes of language endangerment, the solutions required, and the linguistic choices to be made (Mühlhäusler, 1996). Language planning, according to Ecolinguistics, should be based on keeping the ecology safe as a part of community living (Mühlhäusler, 2000). Language maintenance, language planning, and linguistic corrections, therefore, require a sustainable, ecological point of view and remedy. A pragmatic ecosophy or ecologically etical philosophy can help in revitalizing a language than anything else.

II. CONCLUSION

Ecolinguistics does not only believe that a language is endangered when the ecology is itself under danger. It accepts the ecological preservation leads to linguistic preservation. It recons that the preservation of a language can never be possible without ignoring culture and environment of the language.

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