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Language Death Prognosis: A Critique of Judgment

Abstract

The present paper analyzes and challenges the ability of linguists to judge about the degree of language endangerment. It demonstrates that our prognostications about language obsolescence, although they *may* be true, are *not necessarily* true due to certain characteristics of the sources of the data on perceived linguistic vitality crucial for diagnosing language attrition. The information about language circumstances is based on one of the three sources of data: claims by the speakers; observations by the scholars; and statements by indigenous scholars. Each of the three sources of information contains a trap that makes the data difficult to rely upon. Claims by the speakers are determined by the situation in the language community. In a language shift situation characteristics of linguistic proficiency in many cases reflects not the actual language proficiency, but rather the person's position on the generation scale and community expectations concerning language proficiency determined by age. Observations by the researcher are determined by the current theoretical paradigm, in the core of which there lies the concept of language attrition. Scholars observing and reporting language loss reflect, to some extent, not so much the real processes but rather their own expectations determined by the theoretical paradigm. Finally, statements by indigenous scholars often combine both tendencies. Prognostications made on the basis of these sources are thus far from trustworthy.

1. Introduction

Languages are dying: this is a fact. Languages of the Russian Far North are dying faster than in many other areas of the world: this, unfortunately, is also a fact. In his paper Michael Krauss (1997) lists several languages of Siberia that have become extinct in the course of the 20th century – such as Kott, Assan, Arin, Pumpokol, Chuvan ¹, Omok, Kamasin, Mator, Kuril Ainu, Sirinek Eskimo and some others.

¹ The Chuvan language, in fact, became extinct much earlier: Georg Maidel who traveled in north-eastern Siberia in mid-19th century, wrote that “The Chuvans, in fact, have already ceased to exist as a people <...> [in 1866, 1869 and 1870] I wasn't able to find in the tribe a single man who would know his native tongue” (Maidel 1894: 63). Waldemar Iochelson reported that, by the end of the 19th century, all reindeer Chuvans already spoke Chukchi and all riverside Chuvans spoke Russian (Iochelson [1928] 1994: 227-230).

Languages are dying in spite of the fact that the number of the world languages is “growing”: in a later publication (Krauss 2001: 21), Michael Krauss demonstrates how the number of known languages has increased in 25 years (1974-2000) from 2,687 to 6,809. This “growth” is due to the obvious improved information and coverage, to the “perennial problem of definition between language and dialect” (ibid.: 20), as well as to the fact that “what might have been functionally one language might now become a dozen, not by linguistic change but only sociolinguistic change” (ibid.: 22).

This, let me repeat, is a fact: there are languages both extinct and “functionally extinct” (Krauss 1994)². Basing their judgement on this fact, linguists make prognostications as to how many of the world’s languages may become extinct in the next 20 years, or by mid-21st century, or in a hundred years. No one seems to doubt that the speed of language extinction is increasing, or that, bearing in mind that there are, as of today, up to 370 world languages that are extinct, “we could soon be loosing that number every decade” (Krauss 2001: 22), or that language diversity of the world is dangerously decreasing. The easy way of assessing the number of languages that will, or may, become extinct in future is adding mean life expectancy to the age of the youngest speakers: if the youngest speakers are now in their 50s, and life expectancy is 70 years, then it is argued that the language will be extinct in 20 years, give or take half a decade.

The question arises, however, how well can we judge? Do linguists have sufficient and reliable information about the process of language extinction? The purpose of the present paper is **to analyze and challenge our ability of judgment** in this area. I will try to demonstrate that our prognostications, although they *may* be true, are *not necessarily* true due to certain characteristics of the sources of the data linguists use. Furthermore, I will argue that it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to acquire reliable data concerning perceived linguistic vitality which is crucial for diagnosing language attrition.

A linguist, who seeks to assess the situation with a given language, can use several sources of information about that language:

1. own field data and observations
2. published data and observations by other scholars who conducted fieldwork in

² The latter case reflecting a situation when a language isn't spoken any more, but there is, or might be, individual exceptions, such as a person raised by grandparents who still is able to communicate in the language and provide information for documentation of the language.

- the area
3. “objective” information: state and local census data, statistical data of different kinds
 4. statements by indigenous scholars, local activists, ethnic elites – usually in the form of publications in the media, presentations at seminars and conferences, etc.

A closer look at these potential sources of data shows that, in fact, they boil down to three main types. Field data are acquired through observations and interviews, through specific questionnaires and other types of collecting statistics. Interviews, as well as questionnaires and other statistics, including censuses, are simply written record of what the speakers have said about their language competence, or about language competence of others. Statements by indigenous scholars / activists are also nothing but self-observations and / or statements by the speakers about their (others') language proficiency. In other words, our information about language circumstances are based on:

1. claims by the speakers
2. observations (intuitions, guesses) by the scholars, and
3. an intermediary option when scholars are themselves speakers, or former speakers

I will try to show that each of the three sources of information contains a trap, and that these traps are (at least) very difficult to avoid.

2. Claims by the speakers

Individual statements of informants, be it speakers, semi-speakers, rusty speakers or forgetters, pertaining to their (and others') proficiency in a given language are determined, to a large extent, by the language situation in the language community, as well as by the extent to which the informant is aware of, and worried about, this situation. When we hear statements by the speakers about the condition of their language in the community, we tend to interpret it as our informants' responsible and reliable opinions about the 'real' situation with the language. However, these opinions are almost never totally individual, nor independent: they are controlled by the general discourse of and in the community: although the informants may be sincere and open, their assertions are influenced by conventionalized ideas of the community as a whole (compare Shoji 2001).

In a language shift situation, or in a situation explicated by the community as such, there are within the community at least three distinct generations, or better age groups. “The older generation” are considered by

everybody as real knowledgeable people, bearers of tradition and “the old language”; their children, the middle generation, will usually be described as “remembering some language, but not all of it”, and their grandchildren, “the kids”, will be characterized as “not speaking it at all”. Characteristics of linguistic proficiency of individual people by our informants will in many cases reflect not their actual proficiency, but rather the person's position on the generation scale. Community expectations concerning language proficiency are determined by the age of the person, and linguistic self-expectations and self-assessment of the people will change with age. The community expects “the elders” to speak the language fluently and to know it in its wholeness; the community expects “the kids” not to speak the language at all, and “the middle generation” to be somewhere in between. The middle generation “know” that they speak the language worse and less than “the elders”, but better than “the kids”. However, when the old generation passes away and the middle generation are “promoted” to their position (become the elders), they automatically become best speakers of the language, not only because there is no one better, but also because they have taken the social niche which presupposes close-to-perfect linguistic (and cultural) knowledge.

Let me refer to an excellent article by Nick Evans (Evans 2001). Dealing specifically with the Australian situation, Evans writes that it is often the case that a certain individual A knows the language L better than individual B but, from the community point of view, A has less “property rights” of L, and consequently B is promoted by the community to the position of “the best speaker” of L. Then, after B's death, A can become “the best speaker” because the obstacle has been removed and he can now demonstrate his knowledge openly. Speakers can give inaccurate accounts of their actual language competence for a variety of reasons: for example, they can simply be shy of their “insufficient knowledge” of the language. Another reason may be respect to the elders who are considered by the community “rightful owners” of the language. It may be that only at about the age of 30 or 40 people gain responsible position in their communities, and the ability to speak their traditional language marks, in the local ideologies, adulthood. Prior to this age, the person is supposed to speak a dominant language (English, Russian, Spanish) which marks the status of a child or young person; for somebody to speak traditional language before “coming of age” might be considered as a challenge to those “in power”.

Linguists, Evans concludes, must be patient and should not rush to proclaim somebody “the last speaker”: in the course of time, new people can appear whose knowledge of the language will be much better than it had been

estimated by linguists, or by themselves, for that matter. Evans writes that he heard the title “the last speaker” attributed to three different people, one after the other, of the Kungarakany group (Australia): first to a woman whose knowledge of the grammar of this language was almost flawless; then, after her death, to a man whose knowledge of the grammar was somewhat less complete, and finally, after his death, to a woman who remembered quite a few words but had a limited grammar and pronunciation. At any given moment, there is somebody who is considered the oldest and the best speaker, sometimes the last speaker.

In other words, it is often the case that middle-generation informants claim that they “have forgotten the language”, but after several years, when they become “the elders”, it appears that they speak the language quite well (and could have spoken it well all their lives, but wouldn't). I have already written about this “linguistic regression”, that is, returning to communicating in the native language in the old age (Vakhtin 1993; 2001); Nick Evans also gives several examples of this phenomenon in his article.

Language competence of these people has always been enough for normal communication in the language: the same people who had claimed 20 years earlier that they did not speak it, and sincerely believed what they claimed, can suddenly begin to speak the language quite fluently, and remember things they seemed (and thought) to have forgotten. And, although the language they speak now will differ slightly from the language of their parents (interference can be predicted here, which comes from a lifetime of using the dominant language), nevertheless prognostications of the language life expectancy based of the claims recorded 20 years earlier may turn to be faulty. (One should not overlook political aspect of the problem here – an aspect that is clearly expressed in Evans' paper. In some areas, native speakers, being social people, are involved in local political movements of some sort or other, and they often may be tantalized by the option to play the political card of proclaiming their language endangered – which may affect their answers to questionnaires and interviews by linguists who study their language situation.)

This “returning to the native language” has been described by Michael Clyne (1977; 1981) for elderly immigrants. Clyne noticed that many elderly Dutch and German immigrants in Australia demonstrated, with age, decline in use of English and increase in use of their native languages. This phenomenon can be detected not only in the language of those who have lost contact with English-speaking *milieu* after they stopped working or those whose English-speaking children do not live with them any longer. The same

features are traced also in the speech of the elderly immigrants who continue to actively work and / or are married to English-speaking spouses (Clyne 1977: 50). Clyne suggests that psycho-physiological and neuro-physiological factors can be accountable for this.

It is possible that similar factors work among elderly speakers of an indigenous language in a language shift situation. If this is so, then we will have to add a new type to the long list of speaker types: besides fluent speakers, semi-speakers, rusty speakers, rememberers, forgetters etc., a group of *future speakers* will have to be identified. Their shift to the (apparently forgotten) mother tongue described above may be a reflection of a complicated "life cycle" of the speakers with respect to their native language, and will make prognostications of language attrition difficult because even self-assessments of "future speakers" seem to be unreliable.

Additional difficulties are found in interpreting answers of speakers to various questionnaires, such as those used in census data collecting. In the Soviet censuses, a very unclear notion of "native language" was used to solicit information about command of the traditional and the dominant language. The scholars usually interpreted the meaning of "native language" as main spoken language, while the speakers can see it as something different – as their main spoken language, or as a language used in their families when they were children, or as a language their mother spoke, or simply as their traditional (ethnic) language. It is often the case that people name as their "native" a language they rarely use, or know worse than some other languages, or even do not know at all (see Silver 1986: 88-94 for details)³.

Dorothy Waggoner comments, in her work on American censuses, that answers of a respondent who belongs to a minority can differ depending on his social status, or his interpretation of this status. A respondent may be reluctant to acknowledge that he uses at home any language but English because this is "un-American" As one of her informants have formulated, "it would be impolite to say that you do not speak the language of the country that gave a home to you" (Waggoner 1988: 71).

Similar statements for Gaelic can be found in works by Nancy Dorian: interestingly, she writes, almost all incomplete speakers consider Gaelic their native language regardless of their real level of command (Dorian 1982: 55).

³ Compare the situation with Kirgiz cited in (Belikov 1999: 566): 48% of those who named Kirgiz as their native language do not speak it. Answers to the question on "native language", and changes in those answers with time, can reflect not so much the real (linguistic) changes in the extent of language usage, but merely (sociolinguistic) changes in the relative weight of one of identity markers (cp.: Karklins 1980: 419).

This may be one of the reasons underlying “an absurd statistical rule”, as Vladimir Belikov calls it: in urban areas of Russia figures for those who name an endangered language their native tongue are *higher* than in rural areas. That is to say, in larger cities where the Native Peoples of the North live as a very small minority, and often in mixed marriages, they claim a language L to be their native more often than in small villages some of which may be close to mono-ethnic: for Orok, for example, the numbers are 18,5% for rural, 49,3% for urban; for Udeghe – 18,5% rural, 33,9% urban; for Aleut – 20,5% rural, 33,8% urban, etc. (Belikov 1999: 565, footnote 11).

These are observations that undermine our hopes to get 'objective' information from direct responses by the speakers, be it non-elicited self-evaluations, responses recorded in interviews, or filling in of statistical and / or census questionnaires.

3. Observations by the scholars

The other type of possible data on language situation come from observations (intuitions, guesses) by the researcher. It is common knowledge nowadays that the researcher is able to “see” only what s/he expects to see: every linguist comes to the field armed (or should I say blinded?) with her or his “scholarly paradigm”. The current paradigm was shaped in mid- and late-20th century: in the core of this paradigm there lies the concept of language attrition. I will refer here to a seminal article by Susan Gal (1989): declarations that cultures, languages and dialects are disappearing are, Gal writes, a constant and central rhetoric figure of European ethnography. The same tendency can be traced in European dialectology, ethnography and folklore studies. Scholars who worked in these fields always tended to go for their data to “remote rural areas”, to “the old people”, looking for archaic, unchanged and thus “authentic” cultural elements. Changes were interpreted as distortions, as loss of authenticity. Susan Gal calls this approach “pastoral” and continues that the same is true for anthropological linguistics: linguists, too, always looked for “best speakers” who could provide information about the language in its “least polluted” form. The past is regarded as a model, a paragon. Although many linguists explicitly repudiate this pastoralist approach, still, as Gal states, it considerably affects their results. This is reflected in both the “language death” metaphor itself, and in exaggerated attention scholars pay to lost elements of grammar and lexicon and to “degree of completeness” of individual speakers' language. Contrary innovative processes are noticed less

frequently and studied less thoroughly⁴. It is possible, Gal concludes, that awareness of distorting effects of “pastoral” tradition will give us the necessary analytical distance from which we could more adequately look at this problem (Gal 1989: 315-316).

Grinding Gal’s phrase to sharpness, one can say that, when scholars observe and report language loss, they reflect, to some extent, not so much the real processes that take place in the language but rather a scholarly and literary tradition to which they are accustomed (cf. Gal 1989: 315). Amidst a unanimous chorus singing the song of attrition, it is very difficult to be one voice reporting opposite processes.

4. Statements by indigenous scholars

This third possible source of information is often regarded as the most reliable: information in this case comes from scholars and activists who are themselves speakers of the language. An obvious asset of those scholars is that they often know the language in question better than anybody else (ideally, they are native speakers of it), and that they usually have the necessary professional training as linguists, and are thus able to judge it ‘objectively’. However, this double asset can easily turn into a double handicap: their statements about the situation with their native language often combine both tendencies described above. Being native speakers of the language, indigenous scholars fall into the same trap as all other speakers; being scholars, they follow the same pastoralist paradigm.

One should again remember political considerations here – I have in mind both indigenous and non-indigenous scholars. Language endangerment rethoric has become popular, and recent years have seen considerable increase in available funds to study endangered languages; these funds are more easily accessible by professional linguists from the West than by linguists who are simultaneously speakers of indigenous languages. To quote my anonymous reviewer, “I really think that the issue of bandwagoning by linguists should at least be raised – and don’t we all know linguists who have interpreted

⁴ There are of course contrary examples, such as for instance (Schmidt 1985), in which the development of new linguistic forms is shown; however, such facts are usually cited outside the literature on language endangerment, and their connection with the processes of language shift is not discussed. It is important that when we document language loss we do not miss creation and development of new language forms, and document those properly, too (Gal 1989: 316).

“endangered” quite liberally⁵. Western linguists in most circumstances stands to gain more from language endangerment situation than indigenous ones, although the latter group is also sometimes tempted to play the political card. Furthermore, the indigenous scholars' accounts of their language conditions are often – quite understandably – braced by a highly emotional attitude towards the whole situation with their languages and cultures (these are, let us remember, languages and cultures of suppressed minorities struggling for survival against economically, socially, and politically powerful, dominant cultures). Because of this, their statements are – again, quite understandably – often politicized, and aim at various political and / or economic goals.

Finally, statements by indigenous scholars are often tinted with their authority which comes from being native speakers of the language: they are difficult to contradict and even to question because “of course they know better” what is happening to their own language. These statements are very hard to challenge, although their accuracy can hardly be higher than that of the other two sources of information.

5. Conclusion

All three sources of information, besides their limitations described above, have one additional drawback: native speakers, linguists, and indigenous scholars usually have first-hand information about a geographically very limited portion of the language situation. But all three categories of people tend to generalize and extrapolate their limited knowledge of the situation onto “all (our) people”, or “the whole of Kamchatka”, or “all indigenous minorities of the Russian Far North”, or even to “the whole globe”. What may be true of one village from which we have first-hand data (and even these data can not be fully trusted, as I tried to demonstrate) is not necessarily true for a neighboring village; exactness of scholarly statements requires extreme caution here ⁶.

⁵ It may not be hundred percent ethical to quote from an anonymous internal journal review but this addition suggested by my reviewer is so nicely worded and so appropriate here that I can not stand the temptation.

⁶ One can not help recollecting a joke about three travelers, a biologist, a physicist, and a mathematician, who see a black sheep from a train window in Scotland. “Look, – the biologist says, – Scottish sheep are black!” “You have to be cautious in your generalizations, – the physicist answers. – We can only say that there is one black sheep in Scotland”. “All we know, – the mathematician corrects them, – is that in Scotland there is at least one valley, where there is at least one sheep, at least one side of which is black”.

To conclude, prognostications made on the basis of the data the inadequacy of whose sources has been described in this paper are far from trustworthy. This can be demonstrated if we analyze, as I have done elsewhere (Vakhtin 1997), similar prognostications made hundreds of times throughout the 20th century and well into the 19th. Let me quote from my own earlier publication:

“For more than a hundred years, people who worked with Northern languages have repeated, time and again, the same description of the language and cultural situation among the natives, and the same grim palmistries: ... that the languages are on the verge of extinction; that native cultures are distorted and “spoiled”, and, generally, that the diversity of languages and cultures is quickly turning into monotonous and homogeneous alloy. However, many of the languages that were declared moribund, and many of the cultures that were proclaimed doomed continue to exist. <...> The languages and the cultures proved to be much more tenacious, much more viable than it had been anticipated by... anthropologists and linguists” (Vakhtin 1997: 53-54).

From a practical point of view, I think that the data linguists are using to analyze, assess and predict language attrition are not always adequate enough, to put it mildly, and, unfortunately, it may be much more difficult to acquire adequate data than it is usually thought. We linguists should collect them scrupulously and carefully and try to avoid the traps described in this paper. From a theoretical point of view, I am convinced that the world of languages, both linguistically and sociolinguistically, is much more complicated than we think today, and, although vulnerable, still is at least as hard to destroy as the natural environment. Like nature, it may have powerful compensating and balancing mechanisms we do not know much about. At least, I hope that I am right here.

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Sociolinguists who generalize about language situations often make similar mistakes.

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