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## The Meta-Physical Inklings of Endangered Languages: The Effects and the Remedies

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper examines the meta-physical inklings of endangered languages, the effects and the remedies. For as long as humans have used language to communicate, particular languages have been dying. In an important sense, obsolescence is simply part of the natural life cycle of language, as many as half of the world's nearly 7,000 languages are poised to become extinct within the next century. When these languages die, it will impact the endangered language community and the academic community alike. Language plays a large role in identity formation, and the loss of a language has significant consequences for its speakers. Endangered language communities also stand to lose valuable cultural practices, such as oral histories, traditional songs and poetry, and other art forms that are tied to language. Linguistics, on the other hand, is at risk for losing half of the subject matter it studies. The study concludes that the major challenges faced by languages are the size of their speakers and their restricted domains of use amongst others. The paper suggests that The National Language Policy which allows and encourages the teaching and learning of mother tongue should be adhered to for proper utilization of opportunity in the injunction of the policy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Meta-Physical Inklings, languages, remedies

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

### **The Concept of Endangered Language**

Imagine that you are the last speaker of your language. Every other person whoever spoke your language has passed away. You no longer have anyone to talk to in your own tongue. Family and friends of your generation, with whom you could have spoken, have died. Your children never learned your language and instead use the language of outsiders. If you want to interact with anyone at all, you must use a foreign language. In shops and newspapers, and television, everything is in a foreign language, and you have no hope of ever seeing your language used in such situations. And, because you never have the chance to use and practice it, you find yourself forgetting pieces of your own language. You feel a sense of loneliness even when surrounded by people.

Current reports estimates that there are slightly less than 7,000 languages in the world. Almost eighty percent of the world's population, however, speaks one of just 83 languages (Harrison 2007:14). Almost 3,000 languages are spoken by 20.4% of the people, and some 3,586 languages are spoken by only 0.2% of the world's population. These languages are generally considered to be endangered.

An "endangered language" is a language that is at risk of losing all of its speakers. According to Krauss (1992: 6), as many as 50% of the world's languages are no longer being learned by new generations of speakers, leading him to conclude that "the number of languages which, at the rate things are going, will become extinct during the coming century is 3,000 of 6,000."Linguists have proposed several different ways to categorize languages in order to better understand the variety of linguistic situations. Krauss uses the term "moribund" to refer to languages that are not being taught to children as their first language. Unless something changes, moribund languages will cease to be spoken within a generation.

<b>Degree of Endangerment</b>	<b>Grade</b>	<b>Intergenerational Language Transmission</b>
Safe	5	language is spoken by all generations;

		intergenerational transmission is uninterrupted
Unsafe/Vulnerable	4	most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)
Definitely endangered	3	children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home
Severely endangered	2	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	1	the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
Extinct	0	there are no speakers left

Table 1: UNESCO’s Language Vitality and Endangerment framework

The most commonly used factor in evaluating the vitality or endangerment of a language is whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next (Fishman 1991). Endangerment can be ranked on a continuum from stability to extinction. Even “safe” (below), however, does not guarantee language vitality, because at any time speakers may cease to pass on their language to the next generation. Six degrees of endangerment may be distinguished with regards to Intergenerational Language Transmission:

**Safe (5):** The language is spoken by all generations. There is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language, and the intergenerational transmission of the language seems uninterrupted.

**Stable yet threatened (5):** The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts. Note that multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages.

**Unsafe (4):** Most but not all children or families of a particular community speak their language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains (such as at home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

**Definitively endangered (3):** The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

**Severely endangered (2):** The language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children.

**Critically endangered (1):** The youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language but do not use it, since there may not be anyone to speak with.

**Extinct (0):** There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

### **Types of Language Extinction**

Campbell and Muntzel (1989) identify four primary types of language death, each of which has linguistic and sociolinguistic consequences.

#### ***Sudden language death***

Sudden language death occurs when a language abruptly disappears because its speakers die or are killed. In such cases (e.g. Tasmanian; Nicoleño, a Native American Indian language in California), the transitional phase is so abrupt that there are few if any structural consequences as the language dies. It is, of course, possible for an already-dying language to suddenly become extinct, so that this type of death is not necessarily mutually exclusive with other types, but it is also possible for sudden language death to affect a monolingual group of speakers.

#### ***Radical language death***

This process resembles sudden language death in terms of the abruptness of the process, but is distinguished by the shift to another language rather than the complete disappearance of the speakers of a language. In radical language death, speakers simply stop speaking the language as a matter of survival in the face of political repression and genocide. Campbell and Muntzel (1989) cite radical language death for several Native American languages in El Salvador after an Indian uprising in the 1930s. Those thought to be Indian by appearance, including language use, were rounded up and killed in wanton acts of genocide. Many speakers of indigenous languages simply abandoned their native languages to avoid recognition as Indians.

#### ***Gradual language death***

The most common type of language death, and the one most critical for our examination of language variation here, is the case of language loss due to “the gradual shift to the dominant language in a contact situation” (Sasse 1992: 22). In such cases, there is often a continuum of language proficiency that correlates with different generations of speakers. For example, fewer

younger speakers use the dying language variety and with less proficiency in more restricted contexts than their older cohorts within the community; speakers who do not have a full range of functional or structural competency in the language have often been labeled *semi-speakers* (Dorian 1977), though the label obviously covers a wide range of proficiency levels.

### ***Bottom-to-top language death***

The distinguishing feature of bottom-to-top language death is the way in which the situational contraction of language use takes place. In many cases, a dying language will be retained in more casual and informal contexts while it is not used in more formal settings. In the case of bottom-to-top language death, the language loss takes place in everyday conversation and casual settings while the language is retained in more formal, ritualistic contexts.

### **Global Studies on Language Endangerment**

Hornsby, (2013) used three criteria in determining an endangered Language, which he called “The Indicators of Language Endangerment” thus: The number of speakers currently living; the mean age of native or fluent speakers; and the percentage of the youngest generation acquiring fluency in the said language. He further suggests that a more complete scale would look something like that proposed by (Lewis, 2006) containing seven parameters of endangerment thus: age; demographics; language use; language cultivation; development; literacy; and education; status and recognition; language attitudes; and amount and quality of documentation.

According to (Ngure 2012), although study on language endangerment is considered as a relatively new field, there are a number of studies conducted by linguists around the world on the phenomenon. He conducted the study of the 25 languages that are the most endangered in the world. Bikya, a Cameroonian Bantoid language out of this study which had only one speaker left in 1986, Njerip, also a Bantoid language spoken in Mambila, Taraba state of Nigeria and in Cameroon, which had four speakers left in 2004 and the Ongota, an extinct language that belonged to Ethiopia are the only African languages mentioned in the study. The study concluded that each and every one of the 25 languages mentioned was either moribund or nearly extinct. But since most of the studies are over 10 years, we can conclude that some could be extinct now.

Similarly, (Vincent, 2014) also contributed in this field. He identified Europe’s 24 most endangered languages. The study identifies the endangered languages by how many speakers are left. For example, according to the study, the Karaim language of Ukraine had only six speakers left, while the Ume Sami language of the Scandinavian mountain range had only 10 speakers left, and the remaining speakers of the Cornish language were just about 574. According to the study of Europe’s most endangered languages, 4 were Britain and the Channel Islands languages; Guernesiais, Jerriais, Cornish and Manx. The study concluded with how languages could be revitalized, with the example of how the Manx language was revived following the enrolment of 50 students in an immersion program where they are educated mainly in Manx language, after the death of the last native Manx speaker in 1974.

## **Language Endangerment in Africa**

Africa is the most linguistically diverse continent in the world, according to UNESCO Ad Hoc Committee on Endangered Languages (2003). People speak close to 2000 different languages, which is a third of the world's linguistic heritage.

As a global phenomenon, endangered languages are discovered in various continents such as the African continent where many languages, linguistic identities and cultural heritages are assimilated into other more prestigious languages like Swahili in Tanzania, Somali in Somalia, or Arabic in the state of the Maghreb region.

Hameso 1997, also discussed the language of education in Africa, citing the use of indigenous languages as the best option for the language of education. He compared the problems facing local languages in Kenya to challenges faced by conservationists in their dealings with environment. He cited the government policy on language which did not include the indigenous languages in the educational curriculum, and also the designation of English and Kiswahili as the official and national languages respectively in 1974, as what gave birth to the state of *laissez faire* (delegative leadership), which obtains up to now. He concluded with the view that basic education needs African languages.

## **Endangered Languages in Nigeria**

Currently, the languages listed for Nigeria numbered 527 languages out of which 520 are living languages and 7 are extinct. 10, out of the living languages are non-indigenous, 20 are institutional, 78 are developing, 351 are vigorous while 27 are threatened and 44 are dying (Lewis, Simons and Fennig, 2016:1). Therefore, Nigeria is a country of many languages. Unfortunately, the most remarkable implications of multilingualism is the fact that it leads to the subsequent endangerment of some of the languages involved in the process which, in turn, gives birth to language extinction (Wardhaugh, 2000). Solomon (2003) believes that the scenario is becoming pathetic and unfortunate that most of the young people that are living mostly in urban centres of our society contribute drastically to language death in their inability to communicate effectively or fluently in their mother tongue. Ugwuoke (1999) and Crozier & Blench (1992) claimed the number of 5,000 speakers to be a borderline for endangered languages. Based on such a borderline, Ogwuoke discovered one hundred and fifty-two (152) indigenous Nigerian languages in some states as "in danger of disappearing." The numerical presentation came with Bauchi having the largest number of twenty eight (28) languages as endangered, followed by Kaduna, Plateau and Taraba with eighteen (18) languages each.

## **Causes of Language Death**

According to Nettle & Romaine 2000; Crystal, 2000, the causes of language endangerment can be divided into four main categories:

1. Natural catastrophes, famine, disease, earthquake, tsunami etc.
2. War and genocide, for example, Tasmania (genocide by colonists); Brazilian indigenous peoples (disputes over land and resource); El Salvador (civil war).

3. Overt repression, e.g. for 'national unity' (including forcible resettlement):
4. Cultural/political/ecological/economic dominance

*Political factors* involve asymmetrical relations of power between different ethnic and social groups. Languages representing politically subordinate groups are more likely to undergo shift than those associated with dominant groups, although there are well-known exceptions where the language of the politically oppressed group has been retained while the language of the dominant group is lost (Fasold 1984).

*Ecological factors* include geographical location and physical environment, as well as population demographics. The numbers and concentrations of speakers and their physical proximity to other groups are important factors in language maintenance and death. On a micro-level, the kinds of social networks within the community and the interactions of community members with outsiders are essential variables in the maintenance and recession of a language variety.

At the same time, *cultural values* have to be considered along with patterns of contact. Henning Andersen (1988) observes that it is not uncommon for communities that are becoming more open in terms of increasing contacts with the outside world to remain psychologically closed; nor is it unheard of for relatively closed communities to be psychologically open, wholeheartedly embracing the cultural and linguistic innovations they happen to encounter.

### **Wouldn't it be better if we all spoke one language?**

Another common assumption is that using a single language would bring peace, either in a particular country or worldwide. Linguistic diversity is assumed to contribute to inter-ethnic conflict (Brewer 2001) and is seen as a problem rather than a resource (Ruíz 1988). But as noted above, language conflicts are very rarely about language alone. Some of the worst violence occurs where language is not a factor at the start of the conflict. In the latter case, linguistic divergence was a consequence rather than a cause of conflict (Greenberg 2004): what was formerly known as Serbo-Croat is now split into Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin, etc., with different writing systems and loan words which emphasize desired ethnic and religious affiliations. On the other hand, an increasing number of studies see recognition of linguistic rights and ethnic identity factors as necessary for conflict resolution (e.g. Ashmore et al. 2001; Daftary 2000).

### **What can Save a Language from Dying?**

When a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. Although language loss may be voluntary or involuntary, it always involves pressure of some kind, and it is often felt as a loss of social identity or as a symbol of defeat. What factors can help to save a language and prevent it from dying? Although there are many forces that can endanger indigenous languages, there are also many forces that can support such languages.

Generally speaking, elevating the prestige of a language is required to keep a language from being abandoned. If the speakers of a language feel that it is valuable and important to maintain their language, then they are less likely to stop using it. An increase in prestige can be achieved

in many different ways, including the use of the language in media and technology, official governmental recognition for the language, and increased economic status of its speakers.

Some non-profit organizations have focused on this aspect in their support of endangered languages. Despite the harmful effects of mainstream media, however, the organization also sees the potential that radio has for promoting indigenous language and culture.

Raising the economic and social status of the people themselves can in turn elevate their language (Dorian 1998). Governmental recognition also increases the prestige associated with the language by placing it on the same level (at least theoretically) as the majority language.

Revitalization can be attempted through many different methods, including in schools, other classes (for adults or children), master-apprentice programs, and home-based immersion, among others. Each situation must be analyzed to see which method will work best for the community's needs and wishes. Linguists who study endangered languages can provide knowledge about what programs have worked for other communities. These programs must, however, have the full support of the people themselves. No matter what a linguist might say or do, if the people are not at the heart of the program, the revitalization will fail.

## **Conclusion**

Many different languages are being spoken on a mass basis by a large number of people. It has been established that most Nigerian languages are endangered due to certain factors such as economic, socio-political, religious factors and the negative attitude of the speakers towards their language. Some languages, although not extinct but critically endangered can be saved through revitalization programs such as documentation, standardization and provision of pedagogical materials etc.

## **Recommendations**

1. If there is need to revitalized, maintain and develop the endangered language, then there is urgent need to fully document and standardize the language so that it has an accepted orthography.
2. The National Language Policy which allows and encourages the teaching and learning of mother tongue should be adhered to for proper utilization of opportunity in the injunction of the policy.
3. The language should be taught in schools especially in the environs of the native speakers, followed by the adequate provision of Pedagogical, grammatical and literary materials for the smooth flow of teaching-learning programs especially for adults and evening classes for youths and other interested clients etc.



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