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Endangered Languages and Territorial Rights



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Synonyms

[Threatened languages](#)

Definition

Endangered languages are languages disappearing under the pressure of other languages. Diglossia and language extinction happen in territorial terms, in the generational presence of each language, in their contextual performance, in the status associated to each language, and in the linguistic evolution of the endangered language itself. Three basic factors of linguistic strategies – for both preserving and eliminating languages – are education, media-ICTs, and public administrations.

Although territoriality is not the only dimension of diglossia – e.g., we can find diglossia in

social networks or in migrating communities – it is still one of the main ones. Languages have traditionally been firmly attached to territories and they are still nowadays. In this respect, linguistic rights preservation and politics in support of an endangered language are developed by public administrations with competence in a territory where the language is spoken.

Description

Endangered languages are languages reporting a decreasing number of speakers, uses, and purity due to the pressure of another language or languages describing diglossic or multiglossic situations (King et al. 2008; Heller and Duchêne 2007; Spolsky 2012). Today, *ethnologue* (<http://www.ethnologue.com>) lists 7,097 languages all over the world, and some authors maintain that 96% of these languages are spoken only by 4% of the world's population (Snutnabb-Kangas 2008), being under the risk of extinction.

However, it must be noted that even if most times minority languages are endangered languages, that is not necessarily the case. For instance, Sentinelese language spoken by the extremely closed people living in the North Sentinel Island who have refused almost any external contact for centuries is not endangered, even if it only has between 100 and 250 speakers. On the other hand, some languages with millions of speakers are considered to be endangered because

of the pressure of bigger languages, as it is said with some Chinese languages under the pressure of Mandarin Chinese. Similarly, a particular language may be endangered in particular territories and contexts but not in others. Spanish language is one of the most spoken languages in the world but it is endangered in the Philippines, where the specific Spanish dialect is disappearing with a few thousand speakers. Sometimes Spanish is also said to be endangered in the academic publications and positions or in the business sector under the pressure of English. Generally speaking, diglossia affecting endangered languages has five dimensions: the territorial extension, the generational presence of the language, the common uses for each language, the social classes speaking them, and the languages themselves.

The territory where the endangered language is spoken gradually reduces. Sometimes the endangered language is broadly spoken, as it happened with the Aragonese language spoken in many areas of the Iberian Peninsula until the fifteenth century but nowadays spoken by some thousand people mainly in some deep Pyrenean valleys. The endangered language gradually takes refuge in more isolated territories like valleys, then it is spoken just in some small villages and finally it is only spoken in some particular houses.

The loss of languages is also a generational process. The majority of the native speakers of endangered languages are elderly people who do not transmit the language to their children and grandchildren. Many times, the children of the last generation of speakers understand the language but are not fluent speakers, so they cannot transmit it to the new generations. As a result, these new generations are not able to understand the language of their grandparents or great-grandparents.

Different languages are used for different purposes and social situations. The main language quickly becomes a lingua franca and it spreads in formal conversations, like administrative or cultural ones, and as a vehicle to communicate with authorities – politicians but also teachers, security forces, or doctors. On the other hand, the endangered language is restricted to close

social events, like family meetings, friends' parties, or traditional festivities.

Different social classes tend to preserve or abandon the language. The traditionally lower classes with low educational standards – like farmers in many regions all over the world – tend to preserve the endangered language while higher classes with upper education like teachers or doctors tend to quickly abandon it. If children are born in a family where the endangered language is still used in detriment of the new mainstream language, they may have poor academic performance at school promoting the already existing social inequality.

Finally, the endangered language loses a lot of its semantics and syntax acquiring linguistic solutions of the new mainstream language. At the beginning of this process, the influence is very limited, but over the time and generations it ends up with the total acquisition of the new mainstream language – sometimes forming a new dialect of the latter characterized by the presence of some vocabulary and linguistic formulas of the previous language, as it happened with the Spanish language spoken in Aragon. In the middle of this process, pidgins and creoles may develop.

For both the disappearance or the maintenance and revitalization of the endangered language, three different factors traditionally associated with the territory where the language is or was commonly spoken are mentioned: the education system, media, and public administrations. Schools are a key tool for the language maintenance or shift in the future generations, media play a significant role for both the dignification and promotion of the endangered language, and public administrations decide the linguistic policies to follow in the previous areas as well as in many others. Furthermore, the irruption of new Information and Communication Technologies and especially of virtual social networks supposes new opportunities and issues for the preservation and promotion of endangered languages (Cru 2015).

Politics involve both social bottom-up and political top-down processes. In the context of an endangered language, political support of linguistic rights must involve top-down processes

and strategies to revert linguistic loss. More specifically, endangered language promotion by means of education, media, and public policies helps to compensate diglossia.

Endangered Languages and Education Systems

Education systems established in territories may help the promotion or the disappearance of endangered languages as they affect the majority of the underage population. Public institutions can directly decide the education system of public educational centers and can also indirectly establish the educational curricula to follow in private educational centers. Private schools may also enhance the learning and the use of endangered languages, as *ikastolas* in Basque language and *calandretas* in Occitan language. The use and promotion of languages in educational centers may gradually vary in two manners: the number of hours dedicated to the teaching and learning of the different languages, and the language used to teach the rest of subjects. Furthermore, schools may promote specific languages for the rest of academic and nonacademic activities, and the teaching and usage of both the endangered language and the mainstream language must be conciliated with the growing demand for other global mainstream languages. So far, schools are a key issue for the language maintenance or for the disappearance of the endangered language.

Endangered languages teaching and learning involve specific challenges (Hinton 2011). Thus, these languages do not have the same materials as mainstream languages and many times teachers must create their own materials. The number of speakers of these languages is usually reduced, one of the goals is to create a living community of speakers and students and teachers usually have motivations different to the ones they may have when learning and teaching global mainstream languages.

From a linguistic point of view, students usually learn a standard model of language, sometimes accused of being “artificial” both under the influence of the mainstream surrounding language and linguistic formulas developed to adapt endangered language to new lifestyles – and sometimes

to artificially make it more different and unique (Costa 2015; O’Rourke and Ramallo 2011). Contrary to the mainstream languages, students and new speakers of endangered languages may easily influence these standard models and they may spread particular linguistic solutions.

Apart from mandatory education, volunteer education by associations or school of languages is also a keystone in the maintenance and dignification of endangered languages. Many people all around the world manifest an increasing interest in endangered languages, they decide to learn them and sometimes they try to live their lives in these languages. These new speakers are usually young adults – sometimes teenagers – modern, urban, and to some extent politicized, in contrast to the traditionally speakers that are commonly elderly people related to traditional and rural ways of living (Costa 2015). Natives sometimes also demand learning their language, as they may be skillful in some areas like speaking or listening but they may lack knowledge about other areas like writing or reading.

Finally, teachers are necessary for the school teaching of both the language and other subjects in a particular language, for the adults’ teaching by associations or languages schools and for the teaching of some linguistic issues to native speaker. But the lack of native-speaker, well-trained teachers, and the lack of materials are common problems. To tackle these challenges, many communities and countries are developing strategies in order to train and take advantage of education professionals, linguists, and native speakers, many times working together within family contexts (Hinton 2011; Moore 2012).

Media

Development of media during the twentieth century opened the door for the spread of contents from some few senders to large populations. Radio and TV followed the lead of written press and they broadcast content to many people over wide territories. If most communications during the nineteenth century were between particulars by postal service, telegraph, and latter telephone, new technical developments changed the nature of communications and offer new leisure

opportunities. Most times, private and public new media preferred to use mainstream languages in detriment of the traditional ones, causing a serious damage on the latter. On the other hand, public administrations have the power to state the language and content for the public media while the same administrations can also regulate the use of the languages in private media (Jones and Uribe-Jongbloed 2012). For instance, the Irish government regulates the use of the endangered Irish language in media all over the country (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011).

Linguistically, the development and diffusion of endangered languages in media favors the establishment and popularization of specific linguistic forms, and many times, of a specific standard model of the language, which may be accused of “artificial.” If these discussions were already mentioned when talking about education, the necessity of new technical vocabulary associated with media boost them. On the other hand, as it also happens with education systems, the lack of resources is one of the main challenges for the development of media in endangered languages. Some communities want to enhance the use of endangered languages in media but native speakers many times do not have the technical capacities and communication professionals do not speak the languages. Some linguistic programs try to solve this lack of resources by promoting joint work of activists, native speakers, and media professionals.

The development of media in endangered languages has two purposes: first, to allow speakers to use and receive content in their language and, second, to make visible the language to non-speakers. Furthermore, people also ask for the presence of new global languages together with the previous mainstream and endangered languages, evolving from monolingualism to bilingualism and finally to multilingualism (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). During the twenty-first century, the development and popularization of new Information and Communication Technologies, and especially of virtual social networks and smartphones, create new opportunities and challenges. Speakers do not only receive content in their languages but they also create and

emit content, breaking the top-down nature of traditional media and allowing content and language malleability depending on contexts: it is not the case of a few senders communicating with large audiences, but of lots of senders communicating with their own audiences. So far, senders of information are also content creators and they use languages according to various factors: language confidence, language use in nonvirtual contexts, message to share, target audience, previous presence of the language in the channel, and characteristics of the channel itself (Cunliffe et al. 2013). Broadly speaking, the more confident the speaker is, the more he uses the endangered language in the ICTs, and the more the speaker uses the language in nonvirtual contexts, the more he uses it in virtual contexts (Cunliffe et al. 2013). The broader the expected audience is, the less the use of the endangered language. The more the presence of the minority language in the channel, the more the speakers tend to create contents in the minority language. Also, content about the language itself or about traditions typically related to the speakers’ community is usually created using the endangered language, while global, scientific, and technical content is commonly spread using the mainstream languages. And many social networks allow different messages to different receivers – e. g., public or private messages, groups, status, profiles – in which the speaker may use different languages (Cunliffe et al. 2013).

It must be noted that ICTs users are mostly young people, while the majority of the speakers of endangered language – at least native speakers – are elderly (Edwards 2002). These young users are often fluent in other mainstream languages (Fleming and Debski 2007). On the other hand, these new ICTs also enable the communication of migrants speaking endangered languages at long distances and they also can be used for language learning, teaching, and researching (Mirza and Sundaram 2017).

Public Administrations

Public administrations set education systems rules, media strategies, and many other issues concerning language use and promotion in public and private sectors, being a keystone in both

language substitution and language maintenance (May 2012). The promoted policies may be classified into monolingual policies, bilingual-multilingual policies, and liquid flexible policies. Monolingual and bilingual-multilingual strategies are usually top-down ones, while bottom-up processes are more significant in liquid flexible policies (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011; Ricento 2006). It must be noted that the existence of enough competent and powerful administrations for the territories where endangered languages are commonly spoken helps the development and implementation of these linguistic policies (Snutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 2010). If that is not the case, endangered language preservation has to be accepted among non-speakers (Sallabank 2013). Furthermore, sometimes public administrations and governments may support linguistic policies without putting them into practice.

Monolingual policies are commonly related to strong nationalist policies, under the idea of one nation one language. Administrations promote a linguistic unified country, first making all its inhabitants to speak the national language and then sometimes promoting the disappearance of the rest of the languages of the territory. These policies may also refuse the learning of other external mainstream languages. Strong nationalist strategies were historically common in big nations and countries, and some people argue that nowadays some smaller countries and autonomous territories follow this way (Pavlenko 2011).

Bilingual and multilingual strategies are many times the evolution of classical monolingual policies. Here, the governments and public administrations promote the national language as well as other languages spoken in different regions of the country – normally just in the areas where these other languages are spoken. These bilingual-multilingual policies are commonly related to the idea of inner national diversity.

During the twenty-first century, the irruption and popularity of new technologies and the increase of migrations are giving greater emphasis to speakers as final language users. People not only receive information from media, but also receive information from other individuals and

they themselves create and spread their own information. The possibilities offered by new Information and Communication Technologies also affect leisure opportunities. Similarly, migrations are increasing, paying special attention to short-term and medium-term migrations in which the global use of a lingua franca is more and more required – e.g., tourism, business trips (Kerswill 2006). And – in part as a result of all this – language learning is increasingly popular. As a consequence, languages are becoming more liquid and flexible, speakers are more autonomous when deciding which language to use and spread, favoring bottom-up linguistic behaviors and strategies, using different languages in different contexts and sometimes mixing them, favoring the appearance of pidgins. Virtual social networks offer many examples of this linguistic liquidity and flexibility (Cunliffe et al. 2013), while Latin migrant communities in the USA developed Spanglish as an English-Spanish pidgin, also favored by the mixture of both languages in global hits or TV series. Linguistic liquidity is not new and many historical examples are given among groups and territories without a strong linguistic authority – pidgins, creoles, language evolution, linguistic assimilation, and leveling – but nowadays technical developments may favor such flexibility.

Nevertheless, the linguistic autonomy of speakers and the flexibility and liquidity of languages must be controlled in order to maintain linguistic diversity under the menace of global powerful languages. Some authors argue that bottom-up current linguistic behaviors must be controlled and moderated by public governments and administrations in order to preserve languages and to offer the speakers correct linguistic models (Pietikäinen and Kelly-Holmes 2011). The top-down power of governments and administrations must not be used to impose linguistic behaviors and uses among speakers but to promote and guide the correct use of languages with the purpose of preserving them respecting people's autonomy and freedom. According to these policies and for the preservation of linguistic rights, public administrations must avoid any kind of discrimination against endangered languages like considering them an important legacy and

heritage object to be preserved instead of making them official and useful for the speakers.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Linguistic Territoriality](#)
- ▶ [Territorial Rights and Minority Languages](#)

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