

## TWO KEY CONCEPTS OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT: LANGUAGE OBSOLESCENCE AND LANGUAGE DEATH\*

### 0. Introduction

In the past few decades the growing awareness, among language communities and linguists, of the seriously endangered position of the majority of the world's languages has led to various initiatives aiming at revitalizing or maintaining threatened languages: documentation, preparation of didactic materials and language courses, training of instructors, language survival programs, specialized conferences and scholarly publications, claiming of linguistic-political rights, language awareness programs, etc.<sup>1</sup> Language endangerment and the position of minority languages have become part of the political and cultural agendas worldwide. In 1992 the Council of Europe adopted the European charter for regional and minority languages, protecting the rights of minority languages (the Charter became effective on March 1, 1998; it has, however, not yet been ratified by several European countries). Language policy is also becoming a sensitive issue in the Russian Federation. In the United States two Native American Languages Acts were passed (in 1990 and 1992), promoting and guaranteeing the rights of Native Americans to use and protect their languages. A number of Latin American countries now also have started to protect the rights of their native languages. Within UNESCO the problem of endangered languages has received much attention<sup>2</sup>; the World Languages Report is housed at the organization's Basque centre. Various national and international centres and websites for the documentation, study and support of endangered languages have been created; the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages is based in Tokyo<sup>3</sup>.

The aim of the present paper is to offer an elaborate definition of two key concepts in the study of language endangerment, viz. language obsolescence and language death, and to offer a characterization of the conditioning factors and the various facets of their manifestation.

### 1. Language obsolescence

Language obsolescence is the process by which a language ceases to be actively used and is abandoned by its native speakers in favour of another language/other languages.

---

\* This study is dedicated to Mitja Skubic on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

<sup>1</sup> In view of the increased general interest in the problem of language endangerment and given the crucial importance of immediate access to data, it seemed appropriate to add an Appendix containing useful information on organizations dealing with linguistic ecology and language endangerment.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the volume edited by Robins & Uhlenbeck (1991) under the auspices of UNESCO.

<sup>3</sup> The volume edited by Matsumara (1998) results from an initiative of the Tokyo International Clearing House for Endangered Languages.

*1.1. Definition.* The term “language obsolescence” — other terms used as near(-synonyms) are: language decay, language decline, language regress(ion), language attrition/atrophy, language loss — refers to the process by which a language, which at one time was normally used as a vernacular language within a linguistic community, loses (part of) its range of uses within the community, mostly owing to pressure from one or more competitor languages, or to massive migration or decimation of the native speech society (which may either be indigenous or have settled down at some time in history). The decay of the recessive language affects the speech community as a whole; however, from the demographical and social points of view, the loss is increasingly manifest from the older to the younger generations, and from the socially more peripheral to the socially more central or more mobile speakers. Language decay therefore often does not show a very homogeneous pattern within a community: there are generational, social, and often also person-bound factors that affect in divergent ways the phenomenon of language obsolescence and, eventually, language extinction. A general feeling of linguistic insecurity<sup>4</sup> is often observed with speakers whose native language has entered the stage of obsolescence.

Globally, language obsolescence can be characterized as a critical phase in the evolutionary trajectory (or ‘life cycle’)<sup>5</sup> of a language, which — unless the threat is reversed, with a sufficiently strong commitment of the community and efficient political and socio-economic support — is bound to die out, a well-known phenomenon in the history of languages and a particularly threatening prospect for several hundreds of languages in the 21st century<sup>6</sup> (cf. Dorian 1981; Dorian ed. 1989; Fishman 1991).

Language obsolescence may have environmental (geographical, biological), political, socio-economical, demographical and ideological causes; it is primarily reflected in the endangered status of the language, which can be gauged, statistically, from the (often spectacular) decrease in the number of (competent) speakers, and, linguistically, from the loss of language proficiency among the members of the linguistic community, from the regress of functional uses of the language, the erosion of (parts of) the language system, and the overriding presence of another language (either a local or national competitor or, very often, a major international language). The competitor language(s), also called “dominant” in contrast to the recessive obsolescent language, may be aggressively promoted (or imposed), but in some cases language loss results from the spontaneous, or at least not overtly imposed, abandonment of a speech system which is felt to be a hindrance for social and economical advance<sup>7</sup>. Obsolescent languages are not necessarily languages spoken by small groups of speakers; examples are known of languages with a (once) large number of speakers that have become obsolescent or are seriously weakening (this is, e.g., the case of Breton, a Celtic language spoken in the North-West of France and most closely related to Welsh and Gaelic or Irish, which had over a million of speakers at the beginning of the 20th century and is now seriously threatened; presently, the Quechua language, a major indigenous Amerindian language, is also receding in South America).

<sup>4</sup> For a definition of this notion, see Swiggers (1994).

<sup>5</sup> For the use of the latter term, see Dorian (1981).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Dorian (1981; ed. 1989) and Fishman (1991).

<sup>7</sup> The two types of situations have been designated, somewhat misleadingly, by the terms “language murder” and “language suicide”.

The socio-psychological dimension of the process resides in the loss of prestige of the language, especially as it is experienced by its own speakers, in the fading of the feeling of solidarity with the language as the vehicle of a people's culture and identity, and in the attribution of social and economical advantages to the competitor language(s).

*1.2. Relevance.* The relevance of language obsolescence is threefold.

(a) From the point of view of language history and current linguistic situations, obsolescent languages are a frequently attested phenomenon in the history of human languages, especially in the modern periods of colonialism and post-colonialism. Extensive field work and applied linguistic research has been carried out on obsolescent languages in Europe, the Americas (cf. Swadesh 1948), Australia (cf. Dixon 1984, 1998) and Asia; initiatives are to be taken urgently for languages in Africa (cf. Brenzinger ed. 1992) and Papua New Guinea (cf. Kulick 1992)<sup>8</sup>. Since the 1990s there has been a growing awareness, among linguists and those involved in language and culture programs, of the endangered situation of several hundreds of languages — about a quarter of the approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world have less than 1000 speakers —, and various local, national and international initiatives have been taken or are under way. The Tokyo International Clearing House for Endangered Languages has compiled the “Red Book on Endangered Languages”.

(b) From the point of view of professional commitment to descriptive and applied linguistics, the process of language obsolescence has been studied in great detail by linguists interested in historical processes affecting languages (cf. Dressler 1981), by sociolinguists and ethnolinguists interested in the social and cultural functionality of languages (cf. Hill 1983), and by linguists pursuing practical goals such as the development of teaching materials, or the training of native speakers as instructors or language specialists.

(c) From the methodological point of view, situations of language obsolescence have been studied by linguists interested in language acquisition and language pathology (one important research topic is whether language loss follows the reverse path of language acquisition, and whether it can be compared to processes involved in language disorders), by linguists interested in language contact (a major research issue being the difference between processes of obsolescence and processes such as pidginization and creolization), by linguists interested in language creativity (is the creative power of the language faculty somehow preserved in the process of language loss or regress ?), and by (theoretical) linguists interested in the definition of notions such as “linguistic competence”, “communicative” competence, “grammaticality (judgments)”, “rules of grammar” and their relevance for speakers of obsolescent languages<sup>9</sup>.

*1.3. Characterization.* Linguistic obsolescence (as a gradual process) is characterized by a “proficiency continuum”: higher proficiency is attested in the oldest members of the speech community, while the younger generations show (at times extreme) code-switching and transition towards another language. The scalar effects on the proficiency

<sup>8</sup> For a recent worldwide survey, see Wurm (ed. 1996).

<sup>9</sup> For examples of such methodologically oriented studies see Dorian (ed. 1989; 1999) and Mithun (1990).

continuum can be coupled with relative scores referring to higher/lesser fluency, and perfect/imperfect (or “full”/“weak”) mastery of phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and stylistic levels. From a sociolinguistic point of view, these scores can in their turn be correlated with parameters such as age, sex, social extraction, education, professional environment, social mobility (providing always for the possibility of atypical cases, owing to personal history, geographical isolation, social marginalization). As to the determination of scores, language obsolescence can be measured in terms of deviations or changes with respect to a(n ideally extreme) conservative local norm; a major issue here is to distinguish between a deviation due to (natural) evolution — what can be called common historical change —, and a deviation due to language obsolescence or loss. To make the distinction it will be necessary: (1) to proceed to longitudinal sampling (ideally, across several cohorts of test persons followed over a longer time period), (2) to examine the general extension and the abrupt or gradual nature of the changes, and (3) to determine their place within the general linguistic system as it evolved in the last generations. The respective scores of speakers are often correlated with rough characterizations in terms of language mastery; they range from “full” (or “healthy”) speakers to “semi-speakers”<sup>10</sup>, “terminal/last speaker(s)” and “language rememberers” (the latter having only a fragmentary, and only purely passive or repetitive knowledge of the language).

Structurally, language obsolescence is most often characterized by reductions and losses in the phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical subsystems (cf. Austin 1986; Silva Corvalán 1994; Van Ness 1990); language contact and the presence of a dominant language usually lead to blends, alternations, and hypercorrections, all typical of the general process of linguistic hybridization. Obsolescent languages may, however, retain features of structural complexity<sup>11</sup>; moreover, they sometimes show interesting phenomena of linguistic innovation and creativity (cf. Aikhenvald 2000). At the functional-stylistic level language obsolescence is most visible in the reduction of functional registers (or speech styles), and in the pervasiveness of code-switching and contaminations due to (unequal) language contact<sup>12</sup>.

*1.4. Perspectives.* The current international linguistic scene shows the worldwide spread of situations of linguistic obsolescence; many of the communities concerned show a strong sense of commitment to the preservation of their language, but worldwide there is still insufficient awareness of the extent and the dramatic nature of language extinction. Further empirical studies are urgently needed in order to gain control over the linguistic and extralinguistic variables that are at play in the process of language decay; specifically, more work has to be done on the sociolinguistic awareness of, and reflection on language obsolescence, and on the coexistence of recessive languages with various dominant languages. However, in view of the importance of languages as structural, semiotic and cultural entities (which are in no way interchangeable), and for reasons of respect for linguistic and cultural identity, the most urgent task lies in the

<sup>10</sup> On this notion, see Dorian (1977).

<sup>11</sup> As shown by Dorian (1981), East Sutherland Gaelic, an obsolescent (Celtic) language, retains at least part of its complex morphology in the process of extinction (and erosion by English).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., the case of the Uto-Aztecan languages, receding before Spanish and English, in Meso-America and the United States, analysed in Hill (1983).

field of “applied” linguistic work, viz. the elicitation and recording (= “documentation”) of obsolescent languages, the development of maintenance and survival programs, linguistic solidarity efforts, and other initiatives which may ensure the continuity of linguistic diversity. Realistically speaking, obsolescent languages can only be rescued if they are still in a relationship of more or less stable bilingualism (i.e. a bilingualism with secured complementary roles) with respect to the dominant language; this is, e.g., the case of Guaraní vs. Spanish in Paraguay; unfortunately this case is rather the exception, obsolescent languages being mostly relegated to peripheral uses. Languages are not recognized as an interesting subject from an economical and political point of view; revitalization and maintenance programs for languages are easily dropped in periods of economic depression and of priority given to military concerns. Language policies in favour of endangered languages only stand a good chance if they are backed by a context of economic justice, political and cultural respect, and equally shared moral standards; in the short run, they have to be sustained with strong financial support. In sum: the fate of linguistic and cultural diversity is in the hands of humanity.

## 2. Language death

Language death is the terminal stage of a process of linguistic extinction, the duration of which is variable and dependent on the number, role, weight, and interaction of a number of external factors. Generally, language death is the endpoint of a process of obsolescence; in some cases, language death occurs suddenly.

*2.1. Definition.* The term “language death” (other terms used as synonyms or near-synonyms are: language/linguistic extinction, language loss) refers to the process of the disappearance of a language. A language which is no longer used as a vehicle of communication within a society can be called dead or extinct (a dead language can be kept in use, artificially, for specific purposes: compare the case of Latin used as a liturgical language well into the 20th century). In some cases the disappearance of the language is due to the sudden extermination of the speech community, but mostly a language is abandoned in favour of another language, and this process of language shift, which generally has political, socio-economical and cultural causes, may take one or two generations only or may extend over a longer period. Major changes in the political, socio-economical and cultural organization of countries and whole continents have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century; their combined effects constitute a serious threat for the majority of the world’s languages, which are highly endangered at the beginning of the third millennium<sup>13</sup>.

Well-known historical cases of language extinction are Egyptian, Elamite, Etruscan, Gothic, Hittite (and other Anatolian languages), Old Prussian and Sumerian, languages (of diverse genetic affiliation) which once had considerable political and/or cultural importance. Since the colonization of the Americas, several hundreds of native American languages have died out, and the great majority of the remaining languages are now on the

<sup>13</sup> On the critical state of the situation worldwide, see Hale (1992) and Krauss (1992). Hale (1992) and Krauss (1992) form part of a collection of informative accounts on endangered languages and on language revitalization programs, but are listed here separately because of their broad geographical coverage, their theoretical interest and their highly relevant admonitions.

verge of extinction. Worldwide the threat of language extinction has taken a much more aggressive dimension, affecting specifically the languages of migrant populations and minority groups, but also languages spoken by relatively large numbers of speakers who are exposed to the pressure of major international languages. The alarming situation of language endangerment at the end of the second and the beginning of the third millennium has aroused growing awareness in the communities concerned, among linguists<sup>14</sup> and also outside linguistic circles, of the urgency of language maintenance and language revitalization programs. From the ecolinguistic point of view, the problem of language endangerment is of critical importance, urging well-targeted and adequately supported language policies while appealing to the ethical responsibility of all those interested in linguistic and cultural biodiversity. Apart from its central place within an ecology of language<sup>15</sup>, the study of language death and endangerment is of direct relevance to various linguistic approaches: geolinguistics, language classification, language typology, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, psycholinguistics, anthropological linguistics and theoretical linguistics<sup>16</sup>.

2.2. *Current situation.* In order to realize the magnitude of the problem of language death and endangerment, the following numerical data are indispensable<sup>17</sup>.

- (a) At the beginning of the third millennium, some 6000 languages are spoken in the world (estimates range from 5000 to 7000 languages, a fluctuation which is owing to the difficulties inherent in the distinction between languages and dialects, as well as to the lack of accurate information on linguistic diversity in some areas).
- (b) Of these, some 3000 languages (= 50 %) are spoken in Asia and the Pacific Ocean, some 1900 in Africa (= 31 %), some 900 in the Americas (= 15 %), and only 275 in Europe and the Middle East (= 4 %). More importantly, around 5000 languages are concentrated in 22 countries; countries and areas with a high concentration of languages are: Papua New Guinea (850 languages), Indonesia (670), Nigeria (410), India (380), Cameroon (270), Australia (250), Mexico (240), Congo (210) and Brazil (210).
- (c) There are some 180 independent states in the world; if all of these were to decide on a single “national” language, this would result in a maximum of 180 different national languages. Such a maximum is, however, purely theoretical: one has

<sup>14</sup> See especially the articles contained in Ostler (ed. 1998).

<sup>15</sup> The ecology of language (a concept introduced around 1970 by Einar Haugen; see Haugen [1971, 1972]) is the encompassing field of the study of the various aspects of languages in their ‘natural’ environment and their socio-economic and political setting, in relation to their history, their speakers, and their cultural manifestations. On the increased interest in linguistic ecology, see Haarmann (1980), Finke (1983), Enninger & Haynes (eds. 1984), Weinrich (1990), Strohner (1991), Alexander, Bang & Døør (eds. 1993), Mühlhäusler (1996), Fill (ed. 1996), and Swiggers (to appear); useful introductions to linguistic ecology are Fill (1993) and Trampe (1990, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> For recent overviews of past and present situations, of the nature and causes of language death, of prospects and challenges, see Crystal (2000), Grenoble & Whaley (eds. 1998), Matsumara (ed. 1998), Hagege (2000), Nettle & Romaine (2000), and Brenzinger (ed. 2007).

<sup>17</sup> For up-to-date information, see the website of *Ethnologue* (referred to in the Appendix). *Ethnologue* gives population figures for some 6000 languages. Of these, 55% are spoken by fewer than 10 000 speakers, and 28% by fewer than 1000 speakers; 83% are restricted to single countries, and 10 major languages are the mother tongues of 49% of the world’s population.

to reckon with the linguistic imperialism exerted by the major international and (ex)colonial languages, and by the (once) imposed languages of union states. At present English is the/an official language in some 45 states, French in some 30, Spanish and Arabic each in some 20, and Portuguese in 6.

- (d) More than 3300 languages have less than 10 000 speakers; if one takes 100 000 speakers as a reasonable threshold for survival perspectives, only 600 languages (i.e. 10 %) meet this requirement.

Given these facts, the following balanced estimate of prospects can be made:

- (1) Only ca. 600 languages, all of them national and/or official languages with more than 100 000 speakers and continuously transmitted to the younger generations of speakers, can be labelled "safe".
- (2) Hundreds of languages are moribund (as a matter of fact, some 50 languages are registered with only one speaker left at the beginning of the third millennium). Moribund languages are languages that are no longer learned by children in the community. Of the 900 American languages, at least 300 are moribund; in Australia more than 200 of the 250 indigenous languages are no longer learned by children (the situation is even worse in Papua New Guinea); in Africa, at least 200 languages are moribund.
- (3) The remaining languages are all endangered: they have less than 100 000 speakers, are not dominant in their own country, and do not enjoy the same public support as their competitor language(s).

Pessimistic estimates predict the extinction or doom of 90 % of the world's languages in the first century of the third millennium; even optimistic prospects reckon with the loss of 50 % of the world's languages in the 21st century (i.e. 3000 languages vanishing in 1200 months). Language revitalization programs are underway for various languages in North America and, especially, Meso-America; worldwide, numerous indigenous communities are investing time and energy in the transmission of their language and culture. The situation is extremely critical for most of the indigenous languages of Australia, Papua New Guinea and the Americas, and for hundreds of languages in Africa and Asia.

2.3. *Causes.* The causes of language death and endangerment are well-known, but hard to eradicate. They include:

- (a) Factors affecting the biological and physical integrity and safety of the speech community: natural catastrophes; epidemics, infections and diseases; famine and drought; genocide; war; repression; slavery; destruction of the habitat (e.g. desertification, deforestation, total irrigation).
- (b) Factors affecting the social and demographical structure of the speech community: endo/exogamy; ethnic mixture; birth regulation practices; resettlements; metropolitan societies; social disintegration; kin structure and patriarchal/matriarchal organization; possibilities of social promotion; the phenomenon of social outcasts.
- (c) Factors affecting the economic situation: globalization; open market economy; industrialization; work patterns; perspectives of economic advancement.
- (d) Factors affecting the culture and the collective psychology of a community: mobility; tourism; mass media; religious practices; cultural assimilation

(acculturation); feeling of ethnic identity (or loss of it); strength or weakness of the solidarity and intimacy feelings with one's language; degree of cultural prestige; centralization and language policies.

- (e) Factors relating to the language system, or to its perception by the speakers: it is sometimes claimed that a language losing parts of its structure and of its communicative potential can accelerate the process of its proper extinction<sup>18</sup>; the language system may be seen — by other speakers but also by its own speakers — as “inadequate”, “poor”, “backward” or “uselessly complicated”, so that its common use (or its use in the public sphere) is being discouraged or stigmatised.

Often within a language community factors contributing to language survival will coexist with factors responsible for language endangerment. Also, depending upon the attitude and general cultural and political context, the same type of factor (religious, political, ...) may in one case enhance the maintenance prospects and in another case weaken the position of the language.

*2.4. Characterization and typology.* Language death and language endangerment can be characterized in terms of “diasystemic” aspects, i.e. aspects relating to the language as a vehicle of communication and relating to the speech community, and in terms of “intrasystemic” features, i.e. involving the structural levels and units of the language system.

The diasystemic characterization comprises a threefold typology, with reference to three distinct focuses:

- (1) *The rate of disappearance and the possible vestigial retention of languages:* the typological scale extends here from cases of *sudden/radical language death* (the sudden extinction of the language together with its speakers, massacred or killed by a natural catastrophe), over cases of *bottom-to-top language death* (the vanishing language lives on in highly formal, often purely ritual contexts; e.g. the case of Ge'ez [Classical Ethiopic] as a liturgical language in Ethiopia) and *intimate retention* (the disappearing language is kept only for in-group purposes, and often only for special occasions or for specific speech acts, thus taking the status of a “jargonized language”; this is what is happening now with Nahuatl and Quechua in many parts of Latin America), to *gradual language death* (the gradual abandonment of the language in favour of a competitor). Gradual language death runs through a stage of bilingualism or multilingualism, during which the endangered language progressively loses its comprehensive range of functional uses, and is less and less employed by the younger generations of speakers.
- (2) *The viability status of a language,* with reference to the number of fluent speakers and to speech registers and communicative functions. Here a typological scale can be established ranging from *healthy* (or “safe”) languages, over *weakly endangered/receding* languages, *seriously endangered/disintegrating* languages, to *moribund/vanishing* languages (languages on the verge of extinction) and

<sup>18</sup> The claim has been the object of much controversy; anyhow, the factor is in the first place already itself the result of language attrition.

*extinct* (dead) languages. Endangered languages in general are called “threatened” or “unhealthy”, in contrast to “healthy” (or “safe”) languages<sup>19</sup>.

For the purpose of diagnosing language weakening, Joshua Fishman (1991) has designed the “Graded intergenerational disruption scale” (*GIDS*), which allows the measuring of the maintenance prospects of a language network or community. Eight stages of increasing viability are identified on the scale: 8. most vestigial users of language L are socially isolated old persons and L needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories; 7. most users of L are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but are beyond child-bearing age; 6. attainment of intergenerational informal oral exchange and its demographic concentration and institutional reinforcement; 5. L enjoys literacy in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement; 4. L is used in lower education meeting the requirements of compulsory educational laws; 3. L is used in the lower work sphere involving interaction between speakers of L and speakers of another language; 2. L is used in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either; 1. some people use L in higher level educational, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence).

- (3) *The competence and performance levels of the speakers*. In direct correlation with the vitality status of the language, the proficiency range of the speakers can be measured; the scale will range from (still) *fluent/healthy* speakers, over *weak(er)* speakers, *semi-speakers*, *(pre)terminal* speakers and *last* speakers, to *language understanders*, *language rememberers*, and *ex-speakers*. Other terms used to refer to one of the intermediate stages in the process are “passive bilinguals”, “partial speakers/learners”, and — with reference to particular language attitudes — “language loyalists” or “language abandoners”.

The intrasystemic features of language death raise interesting methodological issues: are the phenomena universal or generalizable, or are they idiosyncratic; are they comparable to processes observed in the pidginization and creolization of languages; do they show the reverse operating of principles of language acquisition? A more basic theoretical problem concerns the distinction between normal language change (and contact) and change in an endangered language. As a matter of fact, the phenomena are similar or identical in both cases, but changes in an obsolescent language are more drastic, less patterned, and generally take less time; they are concentrated in the time-span of one or two generations. The intrasystemic changes occurring in the process of language death and endangerment affect the various levels of the language system: phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon and semantics, discursive styles. The types of processes that occur are: (a) reduction of contrasts or oppositions and of meaningful differences; (b) loss of rules and general principles; (c) overgeneralization and/or undergeneralization of features (and rules); (d) free alternations and contaminations; (e) a tendency towards decomposition and analyticity; (f) loss of semantic distinctions and reduction of polysemy; (g) loss of native vocabulary, replaced with borrowings; (h) reduction of style registers

---

<sup>19</sup> See the section on “Language Obsolescence”.

and discursive genres. Changes are often uncontrolled, “unsystemic”, and the spread of alternating forms leads to confusion (and to linguistic insecurity). If simplification and reduction seem to be the overall tendencies in the process of language death, the most apt term to characterize its (often chaotic) nature is “de-regula(riza)tion”.

### 3. Conclusion

In the contemporary context of world-wide language endangerment, of linguistic imperialism and regression of minority languages, it is of vital importance to take initiatives for the maintenance and protection of linguistic biodiversity. Languages that become extinct are a major loss, not only for the communities concerned but also for humanity in general. The role of linguists should not be confined to documentation and recording of threatened languages, but should be extended to policies aimed at the revitalization of languages in the process of obsolescence and extinction, and to programs for stimulating language awareness and language cult. Although practical work and immediate political interventions remain the most urgent tasks, there is also need for a theoretical discussion on the value of language maintenance and preservation. It is important to define adequately the basic concepts to be used in discussions, as well as in scholarly and “bureaucratic” writings in the field of language endangerment. The aim of the present paper has been to clarify the concepts of ‘language obsolescence’ and ‘language death’, with an eye at offering a general characterization and typology of both phenomena. Accurate information on the causes and contextual factors involved in language obsolescence and language death can help to elaborate a theoretically coherent frame for construing open-minded language policies and for arousing a widespread feeling of respect for the linguistic rights of speech communities, however small and unprotected they may be.

### References

- AIKHENVALD, Alexandra Y. (2000), “Areal Typology and Grammaticalization: The emergence of new verbal morphology in an obsolescent language”, in: S. GILDEA (ed.), *Reconstructive Grammar: Comparative Linguistics and Grammaticalization*, 1-37, Amsterdam, Benjamins.
- ALEXANDER, Richard, BANG, Jørgen Ch. & DØØR, Jørgen (eds. 1993), *Ecolinguistics: Problems, Theories and Methods*, Odense, Odense University Press.
- AUSTIN, Peter (1986), “Structural Change in Language Obsolescence: Some eastern Australian examples”, *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 6, 201-230.
- BRENZINGER, Matthias (ed. 1992), *Language Death: Factual and theoretical explorations with special reference to East Africa*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.
- BRENZINGER, Matthias (ed. 2007), *Language Diversity Endangered*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.
- CRYSTAL, David (2000), *Language Death*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- DIXON, Robert M.W. (1984), *Searching for Aboriginal Languages: Memoirs of a Fieldworker*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- DIXON, Robert M.W. (1998), *The Rise and Fall of Languages*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- DORIAN, Nancy C. (1977), “The Problem of the Semi-Speaker in Language Death”, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 12, 23-32.
- DORIAN, Nancy C. (1981), *Language Death: The life cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press.
- DORIAN, Nancy C. (ed. 1989), *Investigating Obsolescence*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- DORIAN, Nancy C. (1999), “The Study of Language Obsolescence: Stages, surprises, and challenges”, *Langues et Linguistique* 3, 9-22.

- DRESSLER, Wolfgang (1981), "Language Shift and Language Death, a Protean challenge for the Linguist", *Folia Linguistica* 15, 5-28.
- ENNINGER, Werner & HAYNES, Lilith M. (eds. 1984), *Studies in Language Ecology*, Wiesbaden, Steiner.
- FILL, Alwin (1993), *Ökologische Linguistik. Eine Einführung*, Tübingen, Narr.
- FILL, Alwin (ed. 1996), *Sprachökologie und Ökologische Linguistik*, Tübingen, Stauffenburg.
- FINKE, Peter (1983), "Ökologische konstruktive Linguistik", in: P. FINKE (ed.), *Sprache im politischen Kontext*, 44-75, Tübingen, Niemeyer.
- FISHMAN, Joshua A. (1991), *Reversing Language Shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- GRENOBLE, Lenore A. & WHALEY, Lindsay I. (eds. 1998), *Endangered Languages: Current issues and future prospects*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- HAARMANN, Harald (1980), *Multilingualismus. 2. Elemente einer Sprachökologie*, Tübingen, Narr.
- HAGÈGE, Claude (2000), *Halte à la mort des langues*, Paris, O. Jacob.
- HALE, Kenneth (1992), "On Endangered Languages and the Safeguarding of Diversity"; "Language Endangerment and the Human Value of Linguistic Diversity", *Language* 68, 1-3, 35-42.
- HAUGEN, Einar (1971), "The Ecology of Language", *Linguistic Reporter*, Suppl. 25 to vol. 13 (1), 19-25.
- HAUGEN, Einar (1972), *The Ecology of Language*, Stanford, Stanford University Press.
- HILL, Jane (1983), "Language Death in Uto-Aztecan", *International Journal of American Linguistics* 49, 258-276.
- KRAUSS, Michael (1992), "The World's Languages in Crisis", *Language* 68, 4-10.
- KULICK, Don (1992), *Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self, and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinean Village*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- MATSUMARA, Kazuto (ed. 1998), *Studies in Endangered Languages*, Tokyo, Hituzi Syobo.
- MÜHLHÄUSLER, Peter (1996), *Linguistic Ecology. Language Change and Linguistic Imperialism in the Pacific Region*, London, Routledge.
- NETTLE, Daniel & ROMAINE, Suzanne (2000), *Vanishing Voices: The extinction of the world's languages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- MITHUN, Marianne (1990), "Language Obsolescence and Grammatical Description", *International Journal of American Linguistics* 56, 1-26.
- OSTLER, Nicholas (ed. 1998), *Endangered Languages: What role for the specialist?*, Bath, Foundation for Endangered Languages.
- ROBINS, Robert H. & UHLENBECK, E.M. (eds. 1991), *Endangered Languages*, Oxford/New York, Berg.
- SCHMIDT, Annette (1985), *Young People's Dyirbal: An example of language death from Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- SILVA CORVALÁN, Carmen (1994), *Language Contact and Change: Spanish in Los Angeles*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- STROHNER, Hans (1991), "Für eine ökologische Sichtweise der Sprachverarbeitung", *Zeitschrift für Phonetik, Sprachwissenschaft und Kommunikationsforschung* 44, 758-770.
- SWADESH, Morris (1948), "Sociologic Notes on Obsolescent Languages", *International Journal of American Linguistics* 14, 226-235.
- SWIGGERS, Pierre (1994) "L'insécurité linguistique: du complexe (problématique) à la complexité du problème", in: M. FRANCARD (ed.), *L'insécurité linguistique dans les communautés francophones périphériques*. vol. I (= *Cahiers de l'Institut de Linguistique de Louvain* 19: 3-4), 19-29.
- SWIGGERS, Pierre (to appear) "Ecology of Language" [To appear in *Encyclopedia Americana*, revised edition]
- TRAMPE, Wilhelm (1990), *Ökologische Linguistik. Grundlagen einer ökologischen Wissenschafts- und Sprachtheorie*, Opladen, Westdeutscher Verlag.
- TRAMPE, Wilhelm (1991), "Ökologie der Sprache. Eine ökologische Perspektive in der Linguistik", in: E. KLEIN et al. (eds.), *Betriebslinguistik und Linguistikbetrieb. Akten des 24. Linguistischen Kolloquiums*, Bd. I, 605-611, Tübingen, Niemeyer.
- VAN NESS, Silke (1990), *Changes in an Obsolescing Language: Pennsylvania German in West Virginia*, Tübingen, Narr.
- WEINRICH, Harald (1990), "Ökonomie und Ökologie in der Sprache", *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 100, 213-223.
- WURM, Stephen A. (ed. 1996), *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*, Paris, UNESCO Publishing.

## **Appendix: List of organizations and addresses**

### *Ad Hoc Committee on Endangered Languages*

M366050@er.uqam.ca

c/o Université de Québec à Montréal, CP 888, succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec  
H3C 3P8

### *Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation*

lsa&lsadc.org

c/o Linguistic Society of America, 1325 18th Street NW, Washington DC 20036-  
6501

### *The Endangered Language Fund*

<http://sapir.ling.yale.edu/~elf/study.html>

whalen&haskins.yale.edu

c/o Doug Whalen, Department of Linguistics, Yale University, New Haven, CT  
06520

### *Endangered-Languages-L Electronic Forum*

mrhydwen&@decel.ecel.uwa.edu.au

majordomo@coombs.anu.edu.au

c/o Mari Rhydwen, Graduate School of Education, University of Western Australia,  
Nedlands, Perth WA 6009

### *Ethnologue*

<http://www.sil.org/ethnologue>

c/o Barbara Grimes, Summer Institute of Linguistics, International Linguistics Center,  
7500 West Camp Wisdom Road, Dallas, TX 75236

### *The Foundation for Endangered Languages*

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/depts/Philosophy/CTLL/FEL>

nostler@chibcha.demon.co.uk

c/o Nicholas Ostler, Batheaston Villa, 172 Bailbrook Lane, Bath BA1 7AA

### *Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen*

<http://www.unikoeln.de/gbs>

GBS@uni-koeln.de/phil-fak/ifs/pages/d\_agbs.htm

c/o Hans-Jürgen Sasse, Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Universität zu Köln, D-50923  
Köln

### *International Clearing House for Endangered Languages*

<http://www.tooyoo.L.u-tokyo.ac.jp>

kmatsum@tooyoo.L.u-tokyo.ac.jp

c/o Kazuto Matsumara, Department of Asian and Pacific Linguistics, Institute of Cross-  
Cultural Studies, University of Tokyo, Hongo 7-3-1, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113

*Institute for the Preservation of the Original Languages of the Americas*  
ipola@roadrunner.com  
c/o The Executive Director, 713 1/2 A Canyon Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

*Language Documentation Urgency List*  
ue303bh@sunmail.lrz-muenchen.de  
c/o Dietmar Zaefferer, Institut für Deutsche Philologie, Univ. München, Schellingstrasse  
3, D-80799 München

List Endangered-Languages-L  
<http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/lists/endangered-languages-l/ell-websites.html>  
endangered-languages-l@cleo.murdoch.edu.au

*Network on Endangered Languages*  
coombspapers@coombs.anu.edu.au  
c/o T. Matthew Ciolek, Computer Centre, Research School of Pacific and Asian  
Studies, Australian National University, Canberra

*UNESCO (World Languages Report)*  
<http://www.unescoeh.org>  
unescopv@eurosur.org  
c/o Paul Ortega, Unesco Centre Basque Country, Alameda de Urquijo 60, ppal. Dcha,  
E-48011 Bilbao, País vasco

#### Povzetek

#### DVA KLJUČNA POJMA NEVARNOSTI V JEZIKU: ZASTARELOST IN IZGINOTJE

21. stoletje se bo moralo spopasti z dejstvom, da je jezikovna različnost v nevarnosti. Hitro namreč narašča število jezikov, katerih obstoj je ogrožen in njihova prihodnost nikakor ni spodbudna. Prispevek razkriva posledice dejstva, da je veliko jezikov v nevarnosti, da bo izrinjeno iz kake specifične rabe ali pa docela opuščeno, in skuša osvetliti dva ključna pojma pri obravnavi jezikov v nevarnosti: jezikovno zastarelost in posledično njihovo opuščanje, izginotje. Namen študije je prispevati k teoretični možnosti, da bi lahko pretehtali stopnjo nevarnosti nekega jezika za izginotje in zasnovali nekako politiko za oživljanje jezikov, da bi torej mogli ohraniti jezikovno različnost.