

Linguistic diversity and biodiversity

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Abstract

The paper provides a detailed description of the relationship between linguistic diversity and biological diversity (biodiversity henceforth). For the sake of ease of the presentation the paper has been organized into sections. Each section begins with a question. In Section 2 that follows the Introduction, diversity and its various types have been described. The third section deals with attitude, in general, toward diversity. Section 4 compares linguistic diversity with biodiversity, while Section 5 compares the pace of extinction *between* language and living organism. Sections 6 and 7 discuss linguistic diversity across the world and in India, respectively. Linguistic landscape in India has been discussed with reference to diversity in language and script and features of Indian multilingualism. The next three Sections 8–10 attempt to answer the questions, such as – why linguistic diversity occurs, how is it assessed and how languages are lost? Consequences of language loss and concern for language revitalization have been discussed in the last two Sections 11 and 12 of the paper.

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Just as the ‘information age’ has commenced, two of the world’s great stores of information, the diversity of biological organisms and of human languages are imperiled.

(Brush, 2001:517, cited in [Skutnabb-Kangas, 2002:7](#))

1. Introduction

In the age of globalized world and open market, more of the human issues like – the issues of language endangerment, language loss and language extinction got pushed further to the margins, which already were on the periphery. Very few, even among linguists, raised their concern and expressed their anxiety over the loss of language and erosion of linguistic diversity. The books like *When Languages Die: The Extinction of the World’s Languages and the Erosion of Human Knowledge* by K. David Harrison (OUP, 2008), *Saving Languages: An Introduction to Language Revitalization* Lenore A. Grenoble & Lindsay J. Whaley (CUP, 2006), *Endangered Languages of the Andaman Islands* by Anvita Abbi (Munchen, Germany, 2006), *Language Death* by David Crystal (CUP, 2000) and *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World’s Languages* by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine (OUP, 2000) and many others not only reflect a positive change, but these publications also have helped a great deal in creating awareness about this very pertinent issue of language

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endangerment. The academicians and scholars have begun to express their concerns because of which the issue of language loss has come to occupy some of the space of the current discourse.

Cultural invasion leading to loss of language and cultural heritage, which may be 'Narmada' for us or destruction of forests in Malaysia, has now attracted attention of several individuals and community of the speakers of endangered languages. A documentary film, *The Linguists*, featuring David Harrison and Gregory Anderson, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2008, alludes to the interest raised regarding extinction, loss and endangerment. Linguistics had never featured in a major motion picture. Perhaps the only exception is Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's 167 min Canadian documentary *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (1992), which is based on a similarly titled book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (N. Chomsky and Edward S. Herman), exploring the political life and ideas of Chomsky and examining the *New York Times'* coverage of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor. *The Linguists* made headlines around the world and generated immense publicity to raise public awareness about endangered and disappearing languages and the consequent threat to linguistic diversity.

Today both individuals and speakers of the endangered languages have become conscious of and sensitive to the loss of linguistic and biological diversity. Several organizations are working with threatened or endangered languages, either describing or cataloging them or providing support for their maintenance and/or development. Some of the organizations working for endangered language in India are:

- Center for Endangered Languages & Mother Tongue Studies, University of Hyderabad.
- Linguistic Data Consortium for Indian Languages (LDCIL), CIIL, Mysore.
- Scheme for Protection and Preservation of Endangered Languages Project, CIIL, Mysore.
- Centre for Endangered Languages Studies, IIT Patna, India (under-process).

Apart from these institutes, there are departments in Central & State Universities wherein scholars are undertaking work on minor languages. In recent times, a good number of PhDs are awarded on works on minor/lesser known languages of India. In addition, a few major/minor projects are being undertaken in some of the Central/State Universities of India. Apart from the above mentioned Indian Institutes, following are the major centers from across the world working on languages and their protection:

- The Endangered Languages Fund, Dept. of Linguistics, Yale University, USA.
- Foundation for Endangered Languages, UK <http://www.ogmios.org/>.
- Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages, Salem, Oregon <http://www.livingtongues.org/>.
- Arbeitsgruppe bedrohte Sprachen (Work Group on Endangered Languages), Institut für Sprachwissenschaft, Universität Köln, Germany.
- Linguistic Society of America, Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CELP), USA.
- Permanent International Committee of Linguists, University of Leiden, The Netherlands.
- UNESCO International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH), Grants for the Study of Endangered Languages, France.
- Fellowships in Urgent Anthropology, Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI) and Goldsmith College, University of London, London.
- Terralingua, a nonprofit organization devoted to preserving world's linguistic diversity, investigating links between biological and cultural diversity and developing partnerships for linguistic and biological diversity.

2. What is diversity and what are the various types of diversity?

India has always been a multicultural, multiethnic, multiracial and multilingual country. Some historians say that at least, six racial¹ elements have contributed to the formation of India's population. Following are the six ethnic groups² widely agreed upon in the context of racial composition of India (Majumdar, 1964:16, cited in Chaudhary, 2009:2):

- A. The Negrito, immigrants from Africa.
- B. The proto-Australoids, who came from the west.

¹ Majumdar had used the word 'race' and its derivative 'racial'. We are conscious of the discomfiture associated with 'race'. Hence the term 'ethnic group' is preferred.

² Although 'race' and 'ethnic groups' are sometimes used interchangeably, there is a slight difference. In the paper authors have preferred to use the term 'ethnic groups', despite the fact that in the cited text original authors have used the term races or racial elements. The authors did so primarily because race denotes to 'genetically distinct population' whereas ethnic group indicates to 'cultural identity of a given geographical region'; and in the context of the paper, the indication is to the sociological/cultural identity of a group not that of genetic one.

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