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Northern Minority Languages

Problems of Survival

Edited by
Hiroshi Shoji
Juha Janhunen



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and

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1997

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Conclusion

Although there are many possible approaches to the problem of linguistic endangerment, and many specific problems connected with various actual languages, the participants of the Taniguchi Symposium on Northern Minority Languages, and the authors of this volume, all share a certain basic point of view. In the background of this point of view there lies a realization of the fact that the existence of languages, both generally all over the world, and particularly in the northern parts of the globe, is today seriously threatened by a multitude of external factors. It seems that these factors are mainly connected with the globalization of the world, a trend that is also responsible for the related processes of cultural and environmental endangerment. However, when we compare the degree of endangerment affecting languages with, for instance, that affecting wildlife, we see that the current loss of linguistic diversity has no parallels in other areas of life.

Also, all the contributors to this volume share the view that the loss of linguistic diversity is regrettable and should be met with active resistance. Just how this is to be done is one of the questions that was discussed at the Taniguchi Symposium, and, as a positive sign of active awakening, it is also being discussed in many other similar conferences currently conducted both in Japan and in other parts of the world on the problem of linguistic endangerment. There is no question that native language is, for any single individual and community, a crucial foundation for all intellectual and cultural activity. After the collapse of the universalist ideology in Anglo-American linguistics, even most professional scholars of language now dare to recognize that every language is different and reflects a different view of the world. The loss of any actual language means, consequently, the loss of a distinct philosophy which, if preserved, might at some time prove essential for the survival of all mankind.

The most dangerous aspect of globalization threatening languages today is the division of the world between nation-states, each one of which is supposed to have a national language of its own, and only one. Against the 6,000 or so languages still spoken today in the world, the number of separate nation-states is less than 200. While a few nations are essentially monolingual, most have a population speaking at least several languages, and some states have hundreds of different forms of speech. In the system of international communication, each state jealously protects its own linguistic rights as far as its national language is concerned, but very few states take an interest in their non-national linguistic diversity. What is still worse, any interest shown from the outside in the linguistic diversity of a nation is invariably considered as interference in its internal affairs.

Estimates as to how large a proportion of the world's languages is endangered today vary, but the basic situation is that it is a suppressed and powerless majority that is being threatened by a powerful and aggressive minority. For most practical

purposes it is sufficient to make a distinction between four kinds of languages, which may be characterized as (1) viable, (2) endangered, (3) moribund and (4) extinct, respectively. Again, opinions differ as to where to draw the boundaries between these categories, and how to estimate their mutual proportions, but at least in some regions, and especially among the languages of the so-called Northern Minorities of both the Old and the New World, it is the category of moribund languages that dominates the statistics. It is illustrative to note that there is no difference in this respect between countries representing different political ideologies or economic systems.

The fact of linguistic endangerment places us before two different tasks. On the one hand, there is the urgent but rather depressing task of studying and documenting, as thoroughly as possible, all those languages that are already doomed to disappear with the death of their last extant speakers. We might compare this task with the role of an undertaker. On the other hand, there is the equally urgent but potentially much more rewarding task of trying to help those speech communities whose languages, although endangered, may still have the chance of survival. This task corresponds to the role of a doctor who identifies an illness and suggests the proper cure or medication. Professional linguists are, however, not in the position to force surgical operations or costly medication to be applied. This is the task of the political decision-makers, both at the national and at the international level. It is, consequently, a matter of primary importance to spread positive information about linguistic diversity to all those who have the power to do something in order to save this diversity.

One such positive thing about linguistic diversity is the global potential of multilingualism, much discussed in the Taniguchi Conference. We have to recognize that the monolingual approach to the world, as represented by the majority populations of a few big nations, creates an intellectual vacuum that is both dangerous and unproductive. Huge monolingual masses, as represented in the North by the speakers of colonial languages such as Han Chinese, Russian, Japanese and English, are typically ignorant of and insensitive to the details of local history and culture. By contrast, the small indigenous communities, who are invariably fluent in two or more languages, have not only a superb knowledge of their traditional environment, but also an innate sense of cultural relativity that places them in an intellectual class of their own. Through a proper policy of local language enhancement, these intellectual benefits of multilingualism could be made available for both the majorities and the minorities.

An aspect of multilingualism that is still controversial among specialists involves the roles of minority languages. The main question is whether minority languages should be developed in a framework of standardization similar to that of state languages. Obviously, it is impossible to create the same material resources for all languages, which means that languages will always inevitably remain in some respects unequal. However, this does not mean that minority languages which lack material resources, such as the money and people necessary to create native

literature and education programmes, should be left dying, for they can well continue their existence within the specific spheres of life in which they are used. It is these spheres of life, such as the indigenous economic and social patterns as well as the physical territories of native communities, that should be protected in the first place. Questions concerning the increasing of the functional roles of an endangered language are also potentially important, but they should only have a secondary place in language policies.

Experiences from language planning in the North vary considerably. There are examples of successful standardization that has allowed languages such as Greenland Eskimo and Northern Sami to reach a functional status close to that of the dominant state languages. The main external background of this success seems to have been the model of Nordic democracy. On the other hand, there are dozens of examples of unsuccessful language planning, especially in the former Soviet Union, where considerable resources were wasted on the artificial creation of literary languages without any corresponding support to their oral continuity. Like the entire Soviet experiment, this specific policy of language planning had fatal consequences, in that it concealed the underlying reality of linguistic deterioration. The situation may be compared with that prevailing in the Northern parts of China, where many languages survive relatively well at the level of oral communication, although no serious efforts to raise their functional status have ever been made.

For the time being, most work on language preservation in the North should obviously be concentrated on the most basic aspects of linguistic survival. Any language is fundamentally a means of oral communication, and it is oral communication that is also the presupposition of its future continuity. Modern technology offers many new ways of oral communication, including radios and mobile phones, which are readily available to support the use of endangered minority languages without necessitating any standardization at the level of writing. Even the artistic dimensions of minority languages typically reach their highest quality in oral folklore, a quality often much superior to that of the written literatures supported by political states for their national languages.

On the other hand, the future of any language is in the mouths of its youngest speakers. After several decades of disinformation, both from governments and from scholars, concerning the alleged dangers of what used to be known as semi-lingualism, we now know that any child has the capability of learning as many languages as it is exposed to. Since, however, education and economic progress in the modern world often requires the knowledge of dominant and even international languages, local minority languages can have a future only if they are transmitted to children as first languages, to be complemented later by a gradually increasing number of secondary tongues. A child has no innate bias against any language. Any language, irrespective of the absolute number of its speakers, will survive if its future users are not bereft of the right to learn it.

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