

LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND LANGUAGE ECOLOGIES

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Abstract

Most of the 6,000-7,000 languages spoken across the world are under threat. In some cases, the few remaining speakers are elderly and the languages are not being transmitted to new generations. In other cases, the speakers are shifting to dominant languages. The result of these events is a crisis in linguistic diversity leading many scholars to predict that between 50%-90% of all the world's languages will be extinct by the end of this century. Although various approaches have been developed to examine the issues underlying this crisis, no one has yet proposed a unifying framework. To address this gap, this paper proposes an ecological framework through which the processes of language attrition, shift and extinction can be examined and evaluated.

Ever since ecological approaches were introduced to sociolinguistics by Einar Haugen in 1971, they have found broad application in the field. Various interpretations have been developed: for example, in terms of correlations between the niche-width of languages and latitude (Mace & Pagel, 1995), or biodiversity and linguistic diversity (Gorenflo et. al., 2012), or between rainfall and density of social networks (Nettle, 1999); or approaches from the perspective of population genetics (Mufwene, 2006). While each of these studies has its merits, an ecological framework that both serves to function across both time and space, and provides a basis to explain the multitude of processes within its purview has yet to be developed.

This paper proposes a typology of language ecologies based on a consideration of the relative impact of bottom-up factors (e.g., biogeography, cultural practices such as exogamy or multilingualism) and top-down factors (e.g., institutional policy, linguistic nationalism). Two prototype ecologies are identified: stable and competitive. Stable ecologies are best characterized as bottom-up systems in relative equilibrium influenced principally by local conditions, whereas competitive ecologies are top-down systems associated with punctuation events and influenced predominately by external conditions. The framework is useful because it not only succeeds in indicating successional stages from one ecological type to another from a chronological perspective (thus being broadly explanatory across time and space), but related considerations of morphological complexity (Trudgill, 2011) and semantic development (Halliday, 1990) can also be integrated into the framework.

For example, stable ecologies typically comprise languages with comparatively small speaker populations, low areal coverage, and little contact with other language communities (Lupyan & Dale, 2010); these languages also tend to have high levels of morphological complexity. Within the context of endangered languages, the focus of this paper, the framework is especially productive because it suggests fresh perspectives on the processes that either sustain or undermine language diversity, and in particular, language shift, attrition, and extinction.

Keywords: Language, Language endangerment, Ecology, Extinction.