INTRODUCTION

LANGUAGE DEATH AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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It has been estimated that more than half of the world's languages have disappeared in the last 500 years (Sasse 1990). Of the remaining 6,809 languages listed in the latest printed edition of the *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) more than half are believed to be in danger of disappearing in the present century. According to one pessimistic view, only 600 languages stand a fair chance of surviving in the long run (Krauss 1992). The conclusion is inescapable: languages are dying at an alarming rate all over the world.

Leaving aside such cases as restricted languages (otherwise dead languages used exclusively in restricted domains, e.g. liturgical languages such as Latin, Coptic or Geʿez) and residual languages (otherwise lost languages preserved in isolated words, phrases, songs or sayings to mark group membership, particularly in minority groups), a language is dead when it no longer has any speakers. Language death is defined by Campbell as "the loss of a language due to gradual shift to the dominant language in language contact situations" (1994:1961).[1] Such situations involve an intermediate stage of bilingualism in which the subordinate language is employed by a decreasing number of speakers in an equally decreasing number of contexts, until it ultimately disappears altogether. The process is typically accompanied by a gradual attrition of the subordinate language along a continuum determined mainly by age (although attitude and other factors may play an important part).

Languages in the process of dying are endangered languages. Wurm (this volume) distinguishes five levels of language endangerment. A language is *potentially endangered* if the children start preferring the dominant language and learn the obsolescing language imperfectly. It is *endangered* if the young-

[1] There are of course cases of abrupt language death caused by genocide, natural disasters or epidemics.

est speakers are young adults and there are no or very few child speakers. It is *seriously endangered* if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age. It is *terminally endangered* or *moribund* if there are only a few elderly speakers left. A language is *dead* when there are no speakers left at all.

The factors determining language death are typically "non-linguistic" (Swadesh 1948:235). A long list of such factors can be found in Campbell (1994:1963). The most commonly cited are socioeconomic and sociopolitical. Socioeconomic factors include lack of economic opportunities, rapid economic transformations, on-going industrialization, work patterns, migrant labor, resettlement, migration and so on. Among the sociopolitical factors are official language policies, discrimination, stigmatization, repression, war etc. Official language policies can be and have been a particularly decisive factor in language death. Western colonialism has proven extremely efficient in this respect, as can be gathered from the use of the term "glottophagie" in Calvet (1974). Another term frequently encountered in this context is "linguicide", a concept analogous to genocide (Skuttnab-Kangas & Phillipson 1996:2212). The classic example is the "English Only" policy of the United States government in the 19th century, designed to force Native Americans to learn English (still echoing in the "English Only" amendment adopted in 1988 in Arizona and the proposed "English Only" bill in Utah). Many modern parallels can be adduced, such as the repression of Kurdish in Turkey, Albanian in Kosovo or Aromanian in Greece.[2] The official status of languages crossing borders may vary according to the statutory laws of the various countries. Catalan and Basque, for instance, have official language academies in Spain, but not in France.

As much as linguicide and linguistic discrimination may add to language death, they are at the same time powerful forces in the reawakening of ethnic identity feelings among speakers of endangered minority languages, which appears to have become a global trend from about 1970 onwards. Ethnic identy is often accompanied by an increased interest in language maintenance. This was, curiously enough, matched from 1970 onwards, by a switch of negative, or very negative, governmental policies towards minority languages in their orbit to positive, or very positive, ones in many countries such as Australia, Japan, Taiwan, Canada, Scandinavia, Russia after the collapse of communism, Papua New Guinea, and others. This has led to the maintenance and revitalization of many endangered languages in parts of the world, and even to the revival of some extinct languages, e.g. among Australian Aborigines. Other countries switched at least to neutral attitudes, whereas some, such as the USA,

[2] Other cases are discussed in Skuttnab-Kangas & Phillipson (1995).

most African countries, some countries in South America, a few European and Middle Eastern countries, Indonesia etc., still adhere to their negative attitudes.

Language death is of course not a new and not even a recent phenomenon. Let us start with a well-known myth of language birth in the days of yore. According to the biblical story of the tower of Babel, the whole world had at one time "one language and a common speech" (*Genesis* 11. 1). When man tried to build a tower that would reach to the heavens, God decided to "confuse the language of the whole world" and to "scatter the people over the face of the whole earth" (*Gen.* 11. 8). The peoples that eventually spread out over the earth after the flood were named after Noah's sons: the Japhethites, the Hamites and the Semites (*Gen.* 10. 1-32).

The historical reality behind the story can of course be seriously questioned, as well as the rough correspondency with the Indo-European ("Japhethic") and Afroasiatic (Hamito-Semitic) language families. Yet even a quick glance at the number of extinct Indo-European and Afroasiatic languages should suffice to give an impression of the extent of language death in ancient times. Among these are a number of major literary languages such as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Ancient Hebrew, Ancient Aramaic, Ancient Egyptian and the Ancient Greek dialects. Other languages are less well-known such as the following from the Indo-European language family: Pahlavi, Sogdian, Khorasmian, Khotanese Saka and Tumshuqese (Middle Iranian), Luwian, Palaic, Lycian, Lydian, Carian, Sidetic and Pisidian (Anatolian), Faliscan, Oscan, Umbrian, Paelignian, Marrucinian, Vestinian, Venetic and South Picene (Italic), Gaulish, Lepontic and Celtiberian (Celtic), Thracian and Dacian, Illyrian and Messapic, Phrygian, Ancient Macedonian and still others. All of these are known from written testimonies, but other extinct languages are known by name only and probably even more are not and will never be known at all.

One of the better-known linguistic "killing fields" is Asia Minor (Janse 2002:347-359). Practically all the indigenous languages of Asia Minor became extinct under the pressure of Hellenization: Hatti, Hurrian, Hittite and the other Anatolian languages, Phrygian, Galatian, Gothic, and a number of other languages known by name only such as Mysian, Lycaonian, Cataonian, Cilician, Bagdaonian and Cappadocian.[3] The prestige of a politically and culturally superior *lingua franca* was such that in the Persian Empire of the Achaemenids Greek language and even constitutional forms were adopted by satraps such as Ariarathes I of Cappadocia and Mausolus of Caria (both 4th c. BC). Hellenism was used by the Romans to impose their own authority in Asia Minor. The

[3] Ancient Cappadocian is not to be confused with the Modern Greek dialect of the same name (Janse 2002:352-355).

Pontic geographer Strabo, who died shortly after the Roman annexation in 17 AD, noted that "under their reign most of the peoples had already lost both their languages and their names" (*Geography* 12. 4. 6).

The case of Greek in Asia Minor shows that socioeconomic and political circumstances are neither sufficient nor necessary causes of language death (Dressler 1988:190-191). Neither the Persians nor the Romans were socioeconomically and politically inferior to the Greeks, yet both adopted Greek language and culture for their own purposes in Asia Minor. In this respect it is particularly interesting to note that the Persians chose the Aramaic language for communication in other parts of their empire, while the Romans naturally used Latin in the western provinces.

The imposition of Greek in the East and Latin in the West did not lead to abrupt language death. Most, if not all, of the indigenous languages went through an intermediate stage of bilingualism (Adams, Janse & Swain 2002). The classic example is Thucydides' "bilingual Carian" (*Histories* 8. 85). Bilingualism inevitably leads to borrowing and according to Campbell language death is an extreme case "where an entire language is borrowed at the expense of another" (1994:1960). There are, however, cases where the bilingual stage does not lead to language death *stricto sensu*, but where the subordinate language is maintained and subjected to what Thomason and Kaufman call "heavy borrowing" (1988:50). In its most extreme form the linguistic result of heavy borrowing is what Thomason calls a "contact language", defined as "any new language that arises in a contact situation … identifiable by the fact that its lexicon and grammatical structures cannot all be traced back primarily to the same source language" (Thomason 2001:158). Contact languages are also called "mixed languages" (*ibid.*). According to Strabo, Carian would qualify as such: "it has extremely many Greek words mixed up with it" (*Geography* 14. 2. 28).[4] Strictly speaking, the original language has not died, but has been transformed into a new language.[5]

The linguistic differences between dying languages and mixed languages are important. Dying languages generally exhibit morphological and syntactic reduction (Dressler 1988:184-188; Campbell 1994:1962-1963), whereas mixed languages, with the notable exception of pidgins and creoles, generally retain and often combine the complexities of the source languages.[6] Language death, in other words, is normally characterized by attrition, leaving in the final stages

[4] The notion of mixed languages is well attested in antiquity (Janse 2002:333-334).
[5] Examples of contact languages can be found in Thomason (1997).
[6] Compare, for instance, the grammatical complexity of Michif (Bakker & Papen 1997) or Media Lengua (Muysken 1997).

only "forgetters" and "rememberers" (Campbell 1994:1960-1961).[7] Needless to say, the degree of attrition will have serious consequences for the description of the language, especially if it has never been described before.

The description of endangered languages is an urgent task for various reasons. First, every language expresses thoughts and ideas in unique ways, both grammatically and semantically. The quest for universal grammar tends to obliterate the diversity of natural languages, even though studies of hitherto undescribed languages tend to reveal "same but different" structures time and again. The study of such languages is therefore of the utmost importance for our general understanding of the sum total of the possibilities of the formal and semantic expression of human thought patterns. Second, the study and description of endangered languages saves them from oblivion after the death of their last speakers. This is not only of interest to future linguists, but equally importantly, it may enable the descendants of the last speakers to acquaint themselves with and even to relearn their ancestral language. A good example is the Aboriginal Kaurna language: its last speaker died in 1927, but the language has been revitalized on the basis of earlier descriptions (Wurm, this volume). Third, every language is the guardian of its speakers' history and culture and its extinction represents "the irretrievable loss of a portion of our own humanity" (Campbell 1994:1966). The conservation of oral traditions in endangered languages will help us understand more about human values, culture, world view, verbal art, oral literature, and much more.

The question of language maintenance and revitalization is too complex a matter to go into in detail. It has been discussed most extensively by Wurm (1997; 1998; 2002). Suffice it to mention some key factors. On the community level, language endangerment can be reversed if the children are encouraged to relearn the language with the help of the surviving speakers in playing situations. Literacy programs and mother tongue education are of course essential as well, especially if they are backed up with language attitudes such as ethnic identity awareness. The success of such programs depends in no small measure on national and international language policies such as official language status and linguistic human rights in general (Skuttnab-Kangas & Phillipson 1995).

Although language death is not new, its study is fairly recent. Apart from pioneering works like Cust (1899), Vendryes (1933; 1951; 1954), Swadesh (1948), Terracini (1951), Ellenberger (1962) and Pande (1965), language death started drawing serious attention in the 1970s, culminating in a special issue of

[7] A note of caution is in order here, as dying languages can experience both generalization of unmarked features and overgeneralization of marked features (Campbell 1994:1962).

IJSL (Dressler & Wodak-Leodolter 1977), the first and definitely not the last collective volume on the subject. The 1980s witnessed the start of a veritable explosion of workshops, conferences and publications on language death, including a recent encyclopedia of endangered languages (Moseley 2001), a specialist journal to be published by Mouton de Gruyter and the first "popular" books on the subject (Crystal 2000; Hagège 2000).

These were followed, in the 1990s, by the establishment of the first committees, societies, and foundations such as the Linguistic Society of America's Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation, the German Society for Linguistics' Society for Endangered Languages (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen), the British Foundation for Endangered Languages and the International Clearing House for Endangered Languages (ICHEL) of the University of Tokyo. A bibliography on endangered languages is maintained on the website of the ICHEL. The LINGUIST List is currently setting up its own Endangered Languages Homepage and many linguistic areas in the world have their own list on the internet.

At the 15th International Congress of Linguists, held in August 1992 at Laval University, Quebec, the Comité Permanent International de Linguistes (CIPL) put language endangerment on top of the agenda. A collective volume was edited by the then president and secretary-general of CIPL in preparation of the plenary session on "Endangered Languages" (Robins & Uhlenbeck 1991) and the same title appeared emblematically on the cover of the proceedings of the congress (Crochetière, Boulanger & Ouellon 1993). During the conference the General Assembly of CIPL approved the following resolution:

> As the disappearance of any-one language constitutes an irretrievable loss to mankind, it is for UNESCO a task of great urgency to respond to this situation by promoting and, if possible, sponsoring programs of linguistic organizations for the description - in the form of grammars, dictionaries, and texts including the recording of the oral literatures - of hitherto unstudied or inadequately documented endangered and dying languages.

With financial support from UNESCO CIPL is now actively involved in the organization and coordination of the survey and study of some seriously endangered languages of the world. This work includes fieldwork, collecting and recording appropriate language material and documentation, linguistic research and other activities. Important publications include UNESCO's *Red Book of Endangered Languages* and the *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing* (Wurm 2001).

As a matter of course CIPL's initiative was extended to its main publication *Bibliographie Linguistique* / *Linguistic Bibliography* (BL): "an important part

is reserved for BL to provide the linguistic community with exhaustive linguistic information on the many endangered languages of the world" (Janse & Tol 1993:vii). Since BLonline, the on-line version of BL, is now, thanks to the generous support of the National Library of the Netherlands, available for free on the internet, we hope to serve the linguistic community even better in this respect.[8]

When BL celebrated its 50th volume in 2000 at the National Library of the Netherlands, a symposium was organized around the theme "Linguistic Bibliography and the Languages of the World". With the exception of the then president of CIPL, Stephen Wurm, the invited speakers were all selected from among BL's contributors, many of whom specialists in endangered languages. The present volume includes some of the papers presented at the symposium as well as a number of invited contributions, three written by former contributors (Newman, Mous and Steenwijk) and two by relative outsiders from BL's point of view (Haruna and Savà). The resulting collection tries to strike a balance between theoretical, practical and descriptive approaches to language death and language maintenance. It is our hope that it will provide a useful addition to the ever-growing body of literature on endangered languages.

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[8] At the time of this writing BLonline provides all the entries of the printed volumes covering the years 1993-1998, plus an ever-increasing number of more recent references. BLonline is updated every month and available at <http://www.blonline.nl>.

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