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Linguistic Insights

Studies in Language and Communication

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Endangered Languages, Knowledge Systems and Belief Systems

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1. Introduction

In 2012, I visited an enclave language community in the north of Thailand as part of a research visit to the region. The village had been involved in a language revitalization program for a number of years. I heard from village elders in the community of several hundred individuals of their pride in their heritage language, and of their pride in their cultural traditions. I also heard from the elders of the centrality of their spiritual beliefs to their way of life. For this enclave community, efforts to revitalize their heritage language needed to recognize that their language was not an isolated entity, but rather, it provided a means for the community members to retain their knowledge, beliefs and traditional way of life.

This language community and many other minority language communities in Asia, the Americas, Africa, Europe and the Pacific are struggling to retain their traditional way of life, traditional values and traditional customs in the face of threats presented through contact with more dominant languages and cultures. This book reports on some of these communities to highlight the status of the world's endangered languages, and the knowledge and belief systems held within languages.

1.1. Endangered languages

Michael Krauss, the American linguist credited with highlighting the plight of the world's endangered languages, issued a warning in his address to the Linguistic Society of America held in 1991, that "over half of the world's 6,000 languages will not survive our children's generation. Can we protect our cultural diversity?" (1992a: 10).

Krauss was alarmed at the declining levels of intergenerational transfer of indigenous languages, which signaled to him that many of the world's language were on the path to extinction. For some languages, all the remaining native speakers were over 50 years of age, and the survival of the language was tied to the survival of these remaining speakers. This was the case with Eyak, an Alaskan indigenous language which was facing extinction. In the words of Krauss (1992b: 4):

The Eyak language of Alaska now has two aged speakers; Mandan has 6, Osage 5, Abenaki-Penobscot 20, and Iowa has 5 fluent speakers. According to counts in 1977, already 13 years ago, Coeur d'Alene had fewer than 20, Tuscarora fewer than 30, Menomini fewer than 50, Yokuts fewer than 10. On and on this sad litany goes, and by no means only for Native North America. Sireniki Eskimo has two speakers, Ainu is perhaps extinct. Ubykh, the Northwest Caucasian language with the most consonants, 80-some, is nearly extinct, with perhaps only one remaining speaker.

Eyak lost its last native speaker in early 2008. The loss of other languages appears to be inevitable, with no new generations being taught their heritage language. With the loss of each language comes the loss of another language community, and the knowledge and beliefs which once defined its people.

1.2. Language and culture

Since Krauss (1992a) highlighted the plight of many of the world's languages, there has been a rapid growth in research interest in linguistic diversity, language vitality and language revitalization. This recent growth in the body of research builds on a long history of language documentation by field linguists, missionaries and explorers.

The interest in languages is maturing. There is now a body of research linking language knowledge and use with educational opportunities and performance. Links are made between languages and traditional knowledge systems, particularly ecological knowledge

associated with forest conservation and the use of medicinal plants. Links are also made between languages and spiritual beliefs.

Languages are increasingly being viewed in terms of the cultures they evolved in, and in terms of the cultural knowledge they carry and the belief systems they are grounded in. Languages are increasingly being viewed as vehicles for the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next. Attitudes within a language community towards language knowledge and use are increasingly being viewed as indicators of pride in the language, and of community identity.

The link between language and culture is seen in the words of Ken Hale, who wrote the introductory comments to a series of papers on endangered languages which reflected the work of a committed group of linguists at the time: "Language loss in the modern period [...] is part of a much larger process of loss of cultural and intellectual diversity in which politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures, placing them in a condition which can only be described as embattled" (1992: 1).

The efforts of minority language communities to retain their identity in the face of pressures to change, both external and internal, are reported in this book. The intention of this book is to allow readers to appreciate languages as vehicles for knowledge systems and belief systems, and as markers for identity. There is a particular focus on indigenous language groups, on the context of language policy change, and on language revitalization efforts.

1.3. Knowledge systems

Knowledge systems are discussed in this book largely in terms of the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous communities. These knowledge systems reflect accumulated knowledge over time relating to plant species, including use of medicinal plants, animal species, and