

Vanishing voices: The endangered languages across the globe. SALONEE PRIYA, (Ed.).
Hyderabad, India: ICFAI University Press, 2008. (vi, 197)

It is commonly believed that until the 15th century the number of languages and varieties in the world was increasing, but that subsequently, as a consequence of the continuously increasing massification of economics and concomitant cultural exchange, the number of languages has declined. The ten articles in this volume examine language endangerment by addressing specific cases in which languages are threatened. The authors are situated to offer unique insights into their topics as they speak with the eloquence of their special knowledge and convictions.

The outlook of this volume is expressed in the epigraph of the introductory article, “Endangered Languages: Retracing the Footprints” (1 – 9) by the editor, “In the galaxy of languages, every word is a star” (1). This at once projects indefatigable optimism and reminds us of what is lost when a language dies out. Information from sources including UNESCO, the SIL, and the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project (online at hrelp.org) draw a picture of language endangerment potential across the globe.

Lic. Edgardo Civallero, in “Vanishing Identities, Saving Information: How Libraries can Recover Indigenous Languages through Oral Tradition” (10 – 36), points out that oral history and ethnography programs preserved in libraries can be indispensable tools to document languages and preserve the special knowledge, myths, history, chants, legends, epics, personal anecdotes, medicine, cooking, etc., coded in indigenous tongues without a literary tradition as he reports his experience with Qom, Moqoit, Pit’laxed, and Wichi.

In “Language Documentation and Language Preservation in India” (37 – 52), Shailendra Mohan offers an introduction to the linguistic diversity of the great Sprachbund that is South Asia and India. In India are represented languages from the Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-

Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman, and Andamanese taxa, some of whose speakers number fewer than 100 (43). Great Andamanese, a language that extends to pre-Neolithic times in Southeast Asia with a reported 45 speakers (48), is in serious danger of extinction. Endangered tongues are found in each of the language taxa in India. Aural and video recordings provide the means to document these languages and preserve what is known by those who speak them.

Andamanese is revisited again in “Humane Face of Language Documentation: A Great Andamanese Experience” (53 – 64) by Abhishek Avtans, in which he documents his experience on Strait Island where live the last remaining speakers of Great Andamanese, which has been pushed to the edge by the reduction of the tribal community on the one hand and the inroads of Andamani Hindi on the other. The efforts of his group to document the language appear to have inspired the indigenous community to a renewed reverence for their tongue and the culture it communicates; mothers spoke to their children in Great Andamanese, and scolded them for not knowing the words. Dugout canoes were exhumed to catch turtles in the sea, and the young men showed off their prowess at hunting and fishing (60 -61). The author concludes, with Suzanne Romaine, that language preservation means preserving the community that speaks it.

Walt Wolfram requires no introduction to students of dialectology and language variation. In “When Islands Lose Dialects: The Case of Ocracoke Brogue” (65 – 82) he discusses the case of Ocracoke Island, a barrier island off the coast of North Carolina which is one of the longest-duration English-speaking island communities in the United States, where a insular dialect has tradition been spoken. A tourist boom has exposed the island to mainland speech varieties on a massive scale, and a new population of seasonal residents who have brought needed financial resources to the island threaten the native variety, especially features that are “ sensitive to gender and social group” (74). This situation is significant unto itself, but all the more

fascinating in that it challenges the ‘canon’ of endangerment by reason of its status as a threatened dialect, albeit one of a powerful world tongue.

Vidunda, the subject of “Vidunda G38) as an Endangered Language?” (83 – 100) by Karsten Lagère, is a variety spoken in Tanzania, a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation, where are recorded 120 ethnonyms and, as of 2005, 128 languages and glossonyms. The 2007 Languages of Tanzania survey added 80 to that total (83, 4). The region has come under the influence of Swahili, the regional *lingua franca*, a situation which has limited the role of native varieties. The Vidunda Ward of the Kilosa District in central Tanzania is a geographically, but not socially isolated mono-ethnic mountain community of about 9,800 speakers (86, 7). Under the UNESCO criteria, the variety is endangered, but the research shows that at present it enjoys sufficient vibrancy that while it may be somewhat in retreat, it is not threatened.

Adeleke A. Fakoya, in “Endangerment Scenario: The Case of Yoruba” (101 – 122), tells the story of the case of Yoruba, a tongue of more than 22 million Nigerians, which fact ought to ensure its survival (101). But the reality of competing with a world language like English and other major regional languages, Hausa, a language of broadcasting and Igbo, a prominent language of government, on a day to day basis in an environment where large segments of the speaker population have migrated away from the ancestral home to urban areas has resulted in separating its speakers from the discourse traditions, the rich lore, and the fecund stock of proverbs and maxims that constitute the soul of the language. Fakoya’s excellent report raises the question, under these conditions, for how many generations can the variety persist.

In “The Outlook for Taiwanese Language Preservation” (122 – 140), Deborah Beaser provides an excellent summary of the history of Taiwanese, the variety that developed from the Min (Fujianese, or Hakkan) language brought to the island by the first wave of Chinese

immigrants during the seventeenth century, and outlines the scenario — its suppression during the long Japanese occupation, evidenced by still current loans like *takushi* ‘taxi’, and its marginalization under the wave of Northern Chinese speaking immigrants beginning in the late 1940s — for its potential endangerment. She provides very useful information about the role of the languages in contemporary culture. Interestingly, during the Japanese period, two generations of residents of the island did not learn Northern Chinese; they spoke the vernacular Taiwanese at home and in the marketplace, and learned Japanese at school. This reviewer has met some of the last of them.

Beaser’s pessimism does not seem supported by the situation, though. The language is spoken by 75% of the population as a vernacular, and over the last 15 to 20 years Taiwanese appears as code mixing in entertainment television and provides the preferred slang of the island, as she notes. Regardless of the younger generation’s perceptions of national or cultural identity, an odd thing happens when young people grow a little older and have children of their own—such things matter a lot more. It is more likely that this variety, like local vernaculars everywhere, will prove a difficult weed to eradicate.

The case of Canadian Aboriginal languages provides a fascinating field of study. Mary Jane Norris, in “Aboriginal Languages in Canada: Emerging Trends and Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition” (141 – 156), reports on 50 languages belonging to 11 families; 10 languages are documented as having disappeared over the last century or so. Today, about one in four Aboriginal persons speaks or understands an Aboriginal language (142), and a drop from 29% in a 1996 survey to 21% in 2001 (*ibid.*) indicates accelerating erosion. On the other hand, the number of speakers was greater (239,600 compared to 203,300), a result of Second Language teaching and learning (*ibid.*). Data provided that reports the numbers of speakers of dozens of

languages according to age group demonstrate the existence of more of the youngest speakers than the eldest, but the latter are mother tongue speakers, the younger second language speakers. This study does find that parents strongly support acquisition of the heritage language in their children. The situation of these Aboriginal languages probably predicts the fate of indigenous or traditional languages which have gone into precipitous decline as its speakers assimilate more fully into a culture borne by a dominant language: preservation and revitalization efforts involving second language learning as a heritage tongue.

The language reported in “West Damar Language or Damar-Batumerah, an Isolate in South-Eastern Indonesia” (157 – 193), by Svetlana F. Chlenova & Mikhail A. Chlenova, Damar-Batumerah, spoken on Damar Island in the Malay Archipelago, is a very little studied variety. Its situation leads to the default assignation among southwest Maluku languages (158), but a close comparison of the list of 513 words compiled and compared to Indonesian words leads to the conclusion the authors draw, that the language may well be an isolate. Given the radical phonetic discontinuity between Damar-Batumerah and other Southern Maluku languages (160), it is more plausible to account for the overlap in vocabulary as the result of borrowing from its island neighbor, East Damar (Damar-Wulur), which fits into the Maluku group. In addition the article provides data to demonstrate the syntax and morphology of the language.

The book represents the result of an effort to tell the story, in individual cases and situations, of languages in decline around the world. The results of these studies offer insights into the factors that result in threats to a language and offer solutions for preserving and revitalizing minority languages and the wealth of cultural resources they carry.

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