2. Degree of language endangerment

2.1. Introductory notes

Language endangerment is a matter of degree. While the world’s languages constitute a continuum, with fully thriving and viable ones at one end and extinct ones at the other, it is useful to classify languages discretely in terms of the degree of their endangerment or, conversely, the degree of their viability. Such a classification is important for the purpose of surveying the endangerment situations, as we shall see in Chapter 3. The present chapter looks at the proposed classifications in 2.2.

Various terms are used in these classifications, e.g. (i) endangered languages, weakening languages, dying languages, and (ii) language death, language loss, and language endangerment. In 2.3 they are listed and then classified, and the way they will be used in the ensuing chapters is shown.

2.2. Previous classifications

A fair number of such classifications have been proposed. Most of them appear to employ one or more of the following criteria:

(a) number of speakers – in particular, of fluent speakers or mother-tongue speakers (or first language speakers);

(b) age of speakers – in particular, of fluent speakers or mother-tongue speakers;

(c) transmission of the language to children, i.e. whether or not the children are learning the language, and;

(d) functions of the language in the community/society.

Most of these factors will be further discussed in 6.2. In addition, the factor (d) will be examined in some detail in 7.2. The concept of “first language speaker” is discussed in 9.3, and that of fluency or proficiency in 9.5.

Strictly speaking, the criterion (c) should be included under the rubric of the criterion (b). However, it is convenient to set it up as a separate criterion, for the survival of a given language crucially depends on whether or not the children learn it.

The proposed classifications vary regarding the number of degrees, ranging from three to as many as nine. Selected examples of these classifications follow. They will be arranged in terms of the criteria employed.
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[1] Krauss (1992: 4, 6, 1997: 29–30, 1998: 102, 2001: 22–23) puts forward three very similar classifications, which may be combined as follows. They are mainly concerned with (c) “transmission to children”.

(a) Safe languages: they are most likely still to be spoken by (at least some) children in the year 2100.

(b) Endangered languages: they will cease to be learned by children during the 21st century.

(c) Moribund languages: they are no longer learned as mother-tongue by children or no longer spoken by children.

((d) Extinct or dead languages: this category is not explicitly mentioned by Krauss.)

Similarly, Brenzinger (1999: 4) proposes a classification that mainly concerns (c) “transmission to children”.

In addition, Krauss (1996: 17, 1997: 25–26) sets up classifications that are based on (c) “transmission to children” to a limited degree, but largely on (b) “age of speakers”.

[2] Fishman (1991: 87–109) proposes the following classification, which is to a large extent concerned with (d) “functions of the language”. It consists of eight stages, as characterized below. (The term “Xish” stands for the name of any language, the term “Xmen” refers to the members of that community, and the term “Ymen” to the members of some other community; see Fishman 1991: 11.)

Stage 1: some use of Xish in higher level education, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence).

Stage 2: Xish in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either.

Stage 3: use of Xish in lower work sphere (outside of the Xish neighborhood/community) involving interaction between Xmen and Ymen.

Stage 4: Xish in lower education that meets the requirement of compulsory education laws.

Stage 5: Xish literacy in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement of such literacy.

Stage 6: the attainment of intergenerational informal oralcy and its demographic and institutional reinforcement.

Stage 7: most users of Xish are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age.

Stage 8: most vestigial speakers of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults.
In order to make the scale complete, we would need to posit Stage 9, at which no speakers remain.

As is indicated by the title Reversing Language Shift: Theory and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages, Fishman (1991) furnishes advice for language maintenance and revival. It is due to this that the characterization above includes phrases such as “attainment of ...” and “needs to be ...”.

In terms of Fishman’s scale, all of the languages the writer worked on in North Queensland, Australia, in early 1970s, were already at Stage 8 at that time (and have since become extinct). Among the languages that the writer has been working on in Kimberley, Western Australia, only Jaru (also spelt Djaru) (cf. Tsunoda 1981) can be said to be at Stage 7, and the rest are at Stage 8, at best. But even Jaru is in a precarious state. This shows that a large portion of Fishman’s scale is irrelevant to the situations in North Queensland and Kimberley. No doubt, the same applies to many other areas in Australia and elsewhere. Fishman’s proposal will be further discussed in 11.3.2.1.

Bamgbose (1993) (cited by Brenzinger 1998a: 92–93), Kibrik (1991: 257), and Sasse (1992a: 21) each propose a classification that is based mainly on (d) “function of the language” and, to a lesser extent, (a) “number of speakers”.

[3] Dixon (1991a: 237) sets up the following five stages in the loss of Australian Aboriginal languages, which are being replaced by English. This classification is in the main concerned with (a) “number of speakers”, but refers to (b) “age of speakers” and (d) “functions of the language” as well.

Stage 1: language X is used as the first language by a full community of at least some hundreds of people and is used in every aspect of their daily lives.

Stage 2: some people still have X as their first language, but for others it is a second language.

Stage 3: only a few old people still have X as their first language. For most of the community, English is the dominant language.

Stage 4: nobody now knows the full or original form of X. Some members of the community speak a modified version of X, with simplified grammar.

Stage 5: everyone in the community speaks in English.


(a) Strong languages: the traditional language is still the main, first language for everybody, including children.
(b) Sick languages: they will pass away soon if they do not receive treatment. Young people may understand a sick language when it is spoken in a simple way and may be able to say only a few words.

(c) Dying languages: no young people are learning them.

(d) Dead languages: they are no longer spoken.

[5] The following classifications each deal with all of (a) "number of speakers", (b) "age of speakers", (c) "transmission to children", and (d) "functions of the language": Krauss (forthcoming), Schmidt (1990), and Wurm (1998). Schmidt's (1990: 54) classification is the following.

(a) Healthy languages: all generations actively use the language in a wide range of activities.

(b) Weakening languages: they are usually spoken by older people, but not fully transmitted to the younger generation.

(c) Dying languages: only a few speakers remain.

(d) Extinct languages: no speakers remain.

The classification by Krauss (forthcoming), which is the most recent of his classification, is as follows.

(a) Safe languages: they are not only being learned as mother-tongue by children as the norm, but, we predict, will still be being so learned for the foreseeable future, i.e. throughout this new century, still having at least a viable community, critical mass, of children speakers in the year 2100.

(b) Endangered languages.

(b-i) Stable languages: they are still being learned as mother tongue by children. (Presumably they are not so safe as safe languages.)

(b-ii) Languages in decline.

(b-ii-i) Instable and eroding: some of the children speak the language.

(b-ii-ii) Definitely endangered: the language has passed the crucial basic threshold of viability, is no longer being learned as mother-tongue by children, and the youngest speakers are of the parental generation.

(b-ii-iii) Severely endangered: the youngest speakers are of grandparental generation and parents cannot teach the language to their children.

(b-ii-iv) Critically endangered: the youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and are also very few.

(c) Extinct languages: they are no longer spoken or even potentially spoken (remembered) by any one, and no new documentation for them can be obtained.

Other proposed classifications include that by Bauman (1980: 10) (cited by Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer 1998: 59), and that by Craig (1997: 258). (Bauman's classification will be discussed in 11.3.2.1.)
Among the classifications listed above, the type of four-degree classification that is proposed by Hudson and McConvell, cited in [4], and by Schmidt, cited in [5], seems the most convenient for practical purposes, and it will be adopted for the present work, together with the labels such as the following:

(a) healthy, strong, safe, flourishing
(b) weakening, sick
(c) moribund, dying
(d) dead, extinct

The term “endangered languages” is used by different authors in different senses, but in the present work it will be used to refer to both weakening and moribund languages. (See Figure 2-1.)

2.3. Terms employed

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We shall use “language decay”, “language decline”, and “language obsolescence” interchangeably. These terms refer to a state of languages that includes both weakening and moribund languages. Also, we shall use “language death”, “language extinction”, and “language loss” interchangeably. They refer to the stage where the language becomes extinct. As noted above, “endangered languages” contain both “weakening” and “moribund” languages.

We shall use the term “language endangerment” to cover the stages from “weakening” to “extinct”. This use of the term “language endangerment” is in agreement with Krauss’ (1998: 102) view that “Language endangerment’ is probably the best choice for the general subject”.

Now, it is important to look at endangered languages from two different, though related, viewpoints: reduced use of the language (see Chapter 7) and structural changes – mainly in the nature of simplification and reduction – in the language (see Chapter 8). If there is any need to distinguish between these two aspects, terms such as those listed below may be used as follows. (The term “language disuse” has been coined for this book.)

(a) Regarding the use:
   (a-i) nouns: language contraction (Campbell 1994: 1961), language obsolescence, language disuse;

(b) Regarding the structure:
(b-i) nouns: language attrition (Abbi 1995: 178; Craig 1997: 257; Dorian 1999a: 107), language degeneration (Craig 1997), language decay;

In passing, we note that Matisoff (1991: 201, 224) proposes the Greek-based terms thanatoglossia (roughly, ‘death-tongue’) and necroglossia (roughly, ‘dead-tongue’) to refer to language death. He adds: “In a perhaps unseemingly haplological vein we might call the branch of study that deals with such languages perilinguistics. (This term has the advantage of a fortuitous association with the Greek prefix peri ‘around’, suggesting languages which are on the periphery, not in the mainstream.)”

2.4 Summary of Chapter 2

Language endangerment is a matter of degree, and it will be useful to classify the world’s languages in terms of the following four degrees of their viability: (i) healthy, strong, (ii) weakening, sick, (iii) moribund, dying, and (iv) dead, extinct. The term “endangered languages” refers to both weakening and moribund languages, while the term “language endangerment” is reserved for the general subject. Terms such as “language disuse” and “disappearing” may be used regarding reduced use of languages, while those such as “language attrition” and “decaying” may be employed for the structural changes observed in such languages.