Language obsolescence and language attrition: an introduction

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Overview

- Notions (How do we talk about the phenomenon?)

- Perspectives

- Typology

- Related but different phenomena

- How is this different from language change in "healthy" languages?

Notions

- We use metaphors:

    - *Language death*

    - *Language shift*

    - *Language obsolescence*

    - *Language decay*

    - *Language attrition*

    - *Language loss*

    ... *death* highlights the terminality of the process, *shift* its successive character.

    NB! From the point of view of the language user her language neither dies nor is she shifting to another language. All s/he does is optimizing her expression in order to be successful in communication.

Perspectives to the phenomenon

1) <u>collective vs. individual</u>:

– COLLECTIVE: What happens to a group of speakers? – focus on linguistic communities and on linguistic PERFORMANCE (*language death*, *language obsolescence*, *language shift*)

- indigenous communities

- immigrant communities (*heritage language research*)

   We focus on indigenous Uralic communities.

– INDIVIDUAL: What happens to the language of an individual speaker and her COMPETENCE? (*language loss*, *language attrition*)

<u>NB!</u> We adopt the collective perspective (NB! Virve who will look at the process from the point of view of individual speaker).

2) <u>sociological vs. linguistic</u>:

– SOCIOLOGICAL (or SOCIOLINGUISTIC): vanishing communities; language is part of the vanishing culture of a vanishing community (*endangered languages*, *linguistic vitality*, *language obsolescence*, *language extinction*)

  • What are the extralinguistic factors causing the extinction of languages; sociolinguistic setting: living conditions, compactness of settlement, attitudes, etc.?

– LINGUISTIC (or STRUCTURAL): Manifestations of the decreasing use of the language in its phonology, morphology, and syntax (*language decay/contraction/reduction*, *language attrition*)

<u>NB!</u> We look at both, but we are primarily interested in linguistic structure (grammar)

- I will conventionally speak about language death (LD):

    - disruption of intergenerational transmission

    - a breaking point beyond which a language is no longer being learned as a mother tongue. (Crystal 2007: 20)

Types of language death

- Classification based on:

    - speed

    - stimuli

    - direction (across social groups)

– Speed (Campbell & Muntzel 1989; Sasse 1992; Wolfram 2007):

- sudden death (*linguicide*):

  – the language suddenly disappears because its speakers die, resp. are killed (Tasmanian);

  – often involves monolingual speakers

- radical death:

  – abrupt, but speakers do not die;

  – they shift to another language in order to avoid repression or genocide,

  – or they are torn out from their natural environment; memory gaps
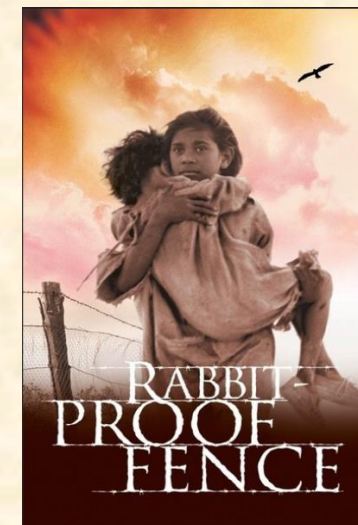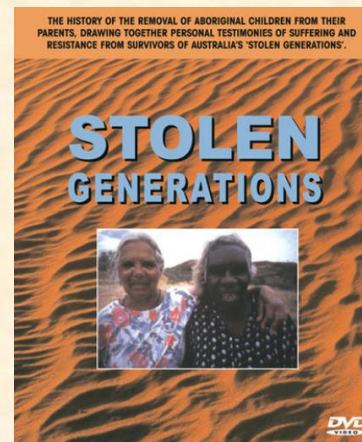
- gradual death:

    - gradual shift to the dominant language in a long-term contact;

    - the most common type worldwide

    - proficiency continuum among speakers, which correlates with birth cohorts.

fluent speakers
> *forgetters*
> *semi-speakers //*
✝
// > rememberers
> *(substrate)*

Kehayov 2017: 107

- Stimuli (Dixon 1997):

  - LD due to population loss

  - LD due to enforcement: using the language of a minority group is prohibited (by the majority group)

  - LD due to "voluntary language shift"; speakers "choose" to abandon the language;

    - trans-generational or intra-generational

    - typical for immigrants

  - LD due to "involuntary language shift";

    - considerable imbalance in the prestige of the languages;

    - speakers have no choice but to switch the language (e.g. lack of an alphabet necessary for elementary education).

NB! But voluntariness is a precarious issue:

– Coercion (hidden pressure)

– Sometimes collective linguistic rights go against individual will; this is especially relevant to the Uralic languages (and communities) of Russia

  • inter-language discrimination, but also intra-language discrimination

  • The assumption that the collective aims of a linguistic minority group are uniform is problematic.

– Direction (Hill 1983):

- top-to-bottom LD (the usual case)

  – Upper classes cease to speak their non-prestigious language

  – The language is gradually flushed down the social hierarchy, until only lower classes speak it privately ("kitchen language")

- bottom-to-top LD

  – the language disappears in the opposite direction; the last speakers belong to a closed (typically clerical) elite

  – The last retreat of the language are formal registers (Coptic in liturgy)

Related but different phenomena

- There have been discussions on the relationship & similarities between LD, on the one hand, and pidginization, development of mixed languages, and heritage language attrition in immigrant communities.

    – All these share extensive structural reduction.

- What are the differences between LD in indigenous communities (Ingrian, Komi-Yazva, Kildin Saami, Irtysh Khanty) and heritage language attrition by immigrants (Hungarian Ohioans, Michigan Finns)?

Different sociolinguistic setting

	Heritage language (*Ohiói magyarok*, Michigan Finns)	**Indigenous language (Ingrian, Komi-Yazva, Kildin Saami, Irtysh Khanty)**
Time factors	Abrupt changes in the exposure to L1 and L2 during one's lifetime	Exposure to L1 and L2 tends to be constant
Settlement	dispersed (-> individual language attrition)	compact (-> collective language shift)
Information value	news from far away; news from public sphere	information value only in the immediate environment; face-to-face communication
Attitudes	pride in national (linguistic) background	???

NB! But we still need comparative studies to show whether these extra-linguistic differences are reflected in linguistic differences.

Language change in "healthy" languages vs. language change in receding languages

- Major principles

  - reduction with compensation vs. reduction without compensation

- Mechanisms

  - rule vs. rote

  - analogy

- Reduction

  - In vital languages, if a linguistic form is lost or a rule simplified, this loss & decrease in complexity is compensated by gain & increase in complexity elsewhere.

    - Finno-Ugric languages are pro-drop languages; the person/number of the subject is shown on the verb (Hun. *fut-ok*, Fi. *juokse-n*). But if one day the person/number agreement is lost or reduced (e.g. 1SG begins to coincide with 2SG), expressing the subject by a pronoun would be necessary.

      ☞ Decrease of morphological complexity is compensated by increase of syntactic complexity.

  - In receding languages, reduction (loss of complexity) in one part of the system often remains uncompensated.

    - Karelians from Kolvitsa village (Kola Peninsula) often produce cardinal (*seičemänkymmentäkuuvešša*) instead of ordinal numbers (*seičemänkymmentäkuuvennešša* 'in 76th').

      ☞ The loss of the distinction between ordinals and cardinals is not compensated in anyway (although speakers tend to produce Russian numerals, when they need an ordinal).

- On linguistic complexity

  - Structural complexity

    - Complexity of strings of linguistic matter (Fi *päättämättömyyttäme* 'our indecisiveness (PART)' is more complex than *päättää* 'decide')

    - Complexity of rules and their application (The rules of object case assignment in Finnic are very complex, more complex than in Hungarian; Mordvin languages cross-reference the subject and the object on the verb in a very complex way)

    or

    - SYNTAGMATIC COMPLEXITY: complexity of linear strings

    - PARADIGMATIC COMPLEXITY: complexity of paradigms (Finnish has a complex paradigm of morphological prohibitive forms; Mordvin languages have the most complex grammatical mood system in Finno-Ugric)

  - Conceptual complexity (Fi *päättämättömyyttäme* 'our indecisiveness (PART)' is conceptually more complex than *päättää* 'decide')

- Rule and rote

  – Full (fluent) speakers of a language build words, phrases, clauses, and sentences by applying grammatical rules.

  – In LD, rules are deactivated, the linguistic repertoire is kept intact by repetition. Semi-speakers store language and produce speech in chunks of memorized syntagms: rote phrases

  Ingrian has the verb *jaksā* 'can, be able; be capable; may', which is inflected for person/number. In epistemic contexts, it occurs in 3SG (cf. *He must be driving now*.)

  The last speakers of Soikkola Ingrian do not treat *jaksā* in epistemic contexts as a verb; its inflection is not active anymore; the 3SG form has been reinterpreted as a particle:

  (1) *Jaksā*   *hä*   *on*   *koiš*.
      may(.PRS.3SG)   s/he.NOM   be.PRS.3SG   at_home
      'Probably she is at home.' (Soikkola Ingrian, Kehayov 2017: 202)

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- Analogy

  – Analogy is a mechanism of language change in all languages;

    - Finnic languages which have consonant gradation use the strong grade of the comparative suffix in the Nominative form of adjectives, and the weak grade of the comparative suffix in other case forms:

      Fi. *korkea-<u>mpi</u>* 'higher.NOM' : *korkea-<u>mma</u>-n* 'higher-GEN', *korkea-<u>mma</u>-lla* 'higher-ADE' etc.

    - But in Standard Estonian, the weak grade has been analogically extended to the Nominative:

      kõrgem 'higher.NOM' : *kõrgema* 'higher.GEN', *kõrgema-l* 'higher-ADE' (Laanest 1975: 185).

– The role of analogy grows in LD; the last speakers of endangered language are insecure in the application of rules and tend to analogically generalize forms (Kehayov & Kuzmin, forthcoming).

Regular inflection in Karelian Proper		Analogical change in vanishing Kolvitsa Karelian	
vuoši 'year' (NOM.SG)	*vuuvet* 'years'(NOM.PL)	*vuoši* (NOM.SG)	*vuožet* (NOM.PL)
niken 'nobody.NOM'	*niketä* 'nobody:PART'	*niken* 'nobody.NOM'	*nikentä* 'nobody.PART'
se 'this.NOM' *tuo* 'that.NOM'	*siitä* 'this:ELA' *tuošta* 'that:ELA'	*se* 'this.NOM'	*sistä* 'this:ELA'

NB! Analogical change tends to decrease the morphological complexity of forms.

- More specific manifestations of LD in linguistic structure:

  – GENERALIZATION and PARADIGMATIC LEVELLING (e.g. the generalization of the 3SG form of the Estonian Conditional mood in other person/number slots)

    ☞ The paradigm of the Conditional is being levelled out (*ma loeksin, sa loeksid, ta loeks* 'I/you/s/he would read' > *ma loeks, sa loeks, ta loeks*)

- ICONICITY **and** MORPHOTACTIC TRANSPARENCY

  - ONE-MEANING-ONE-FORM principle (abandoning portmanteau marking, loss of allomorphy, analytic instead of synthetic structures):

    - The Nominative form of 'mother' in South Estonian subdialect Seto is *imä ~ emä*. The Partitive form is *immä ~ emmä* (with a strong grade of the inlaut consonant). The most common overt exponent of the Partitive in other declensional classes is the suffix *-t/-d* (*uulits* 'street' > PART *uulitsat*, *miis* 'man' > PART *miist*)

    - Speakers of Eastern Seto (spoken in Pskov Oblast of Russia) occasionally inflect NOM *emä* : PART *emät*

      ☞ This way the inflection becomes more transparent and iconic with the compositional semantics of the word form: 'word meaning + partitive meaning'

– … analytic instead of synthetic structures:

Finnic languages (used to) have synthetic-agglutinative forms of the Imperative for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person singular and plural (e.g. Finnish *istukoon!* 'Let him/her sit!, Votic *lukegod!* 'Let them read!', Lude *paŋgam!* 'Let us put!').

In Eastern Finnic languages these forms are (by and large) replaced by analytic forms without dedicated morphological markers.

Votic

(2) *Лa pikkẹraizəd   lahzẹd   menne   makkama!*
    let small:PL.NOM   child:PL.NOM   go.IND.PRS.3PLsleep:INF
    'Let the small children go to sleep.' (Kehayov 2017: 244)

Central Lude

(3) *Anda   vuottau   veräjän   taga!*
    let   wait.IND.PRS.3SG   door:GENbehind
   'Let him wait behind the door!' (Kehayov 2017: 244)

- Phenomena specific to heavy contact situations: GRAMMATICAL ACCOMMODATION, including NEGATIVE BORROWING

  – The grammatical system of the language is restructured so that it becomes (nearly) identical to the system of the dominant language; isomorphism with the dominant language.

  – Negative borrowing: a grammatical category is abandoned by the speakers of the receding language because of the absence of a corresponding category in the dominant language (Sasse 1992).

    - The Greek dialects of Asia Minor lost their grammatical gender due to the contact with Turkish, a language lacking grammatical gender (Dawkins 1916: 87).

    - Loss of the Optative mood in Arvanitika (an Albanian dialect spoken in Greece) due to the lack of such mood in Greek – the dominant language (Sasse 1991)

- Speculations about a relationship between LD and language acquisition: the REGRESSION (or DE-ACQUISITION) HYPOTHESIS:

  – The process of language loss mirrors the process of acquisition of the same language (Hyltenstam & Viberg 1993; Wolfram 2007). The order of decay is the reversed order of acquisition; an acquisition hierarchy *a > b > c* predicts the order of decay *c > b > a*.

  – For example, the expression of deontic modality ('permission', 'obligation') is learned earlier than the expression of epistemic modality ('probability') by children (Shepherd 1993; Smoczyńska 1993; Stephany 1993)

  – Indeed, I found out that in receding minor Finnic languages expressions of epistemic modality are lost or changed earlier than expressions of deontic modality (Kehayov 2017)

Conclusions

- Speakers rarely desert their language or change it for another; they only optimize their expression in order to be successful in communication

- Language death begins with a disruption of the intergenerational transmission and ends with the death of the last native speaker.

- The main property (principle) of LD in linguistic structure is the reduction without compensation!

- The last speakers produce linguistic structure by rote.

- Discussion and references in: Kehayov, Petar 2017. *The Fate of Mood and Modality in Language Death: Evidence from Minor Finnic*. (Trends in Linguistics, Studies and Monographs 307.), Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
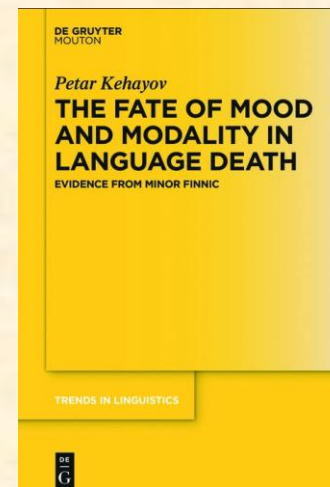
- Further examples in: Kehayov, Petar; Kuzmin, Denis (forthcoming) 2022. The Karelian dialect of Kolvitsa, Kola Peninsula. Mémoires de la Société Finno-ougrienne.