

Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation
Prof. Bornini Lahiri and Prof. Dripta Piplai (Mondal)
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
IIT Kharagpur
Week-01
Lecture-02

Lecture 02 : Language Endangerment

Hello. Welcome to second lecture of Tools and Technologies of Language Documentation. In my previous lecture, I introduced you to the concept of language endangerment and I also talked about the various causes of language endangerment. Today I am going to talk little bit about factors of language death, stages of language endangerment and degrees of endangerment as marked by UNESCO. I will also quickly introduce you about accessing language endangerment. So by now you know what is language endangerment and what can cause language endangerment and language death.

But this process of language endangerment or language death is not a quick process. It takes time. It goes through stages before a language dies. So, it is not a particular time when a language dies as you can always guess from the causes that I talked about.

So, we cannot say that this is the pinpoint, this is the exact time when a language actually died, because it has a lot of stages and factors. Now, when can we say a language died? There can be various factors related to it. One of them is locus of language death. That means from where actually the speakers are shifting. That means where we see the lack of use of that particular language, if there is a shift within the family.

I have already talked about language shift in my previous lecture. So, you know that the speakers actually shift from their own native language to the other language. The shift can be there in the public domain, in the different domains like education, entertainment, but when we see that shift already inside the home domain where the parents are not talking in their native language with their children or the spouses are not using their own language within themselves, then we know that a language is endangered because within the home domain also, the native language is not being used; it is replaced by another

language. And in this case, most of the time what we see is that children cannot learn their native language because their parents are not using the language. They are not using the language with the children, they are not using the language among themselves and in those cases, the language can get endangered.

Degree of proficiency in the language. So, sometimes what do we see in these cases where another language has already entered the home domain and the native language is not being used within the home domain. Then the parents might know their language, but then they are not using it. So, sometimes what happens because they do not use it they forget lots of words of that language. So, the proficiency level slowly decreases.

Maybe the grandparents are using the language and the children have heard the language, but they are not fluent speakers. In some cases you will see that the children can understand certain language, mainly their native language, but they cannot speak in that language. For many smaller languages we have seen this type of cases, where the children can say that we understand our native language, but we cannot speak in that language. So, there the proficiency level actually decreases and of course, when they cannot speak their children will not be able to know the language, because their parents would not be able to speak it, though they can understand little bit, but they cannot speak. And this leads us to the other point where we see that the language is not used as a vehicle of communication.

So, there is some other language which is used for communication, but not the native language. So, maybe the grandparents are talking in the language in their own language within the home domain, but with their grandchildren they are using other language with the they are using some other language. So, what happens that the means of communication becomes some other language not the native language. And again you can see the fourth point is related to all these where children do not get exposed to their own native language and that is why there is no transmission of the language from the parents to the children, because mainly children learn the language when they talk to their parents in the language, when they listen to the language, because children get exposed to the language within their home domain for the native language. But when they are not exposed much to the native language, when they are not using the language with their parents or grandparents within the home domain, then of course, the language will get endangered because the new generation is not learning it.

And when they are not learning they would not be able to pass it on to the again coming generation. And so, these all factors together can lead to language endangerment. And you know how all these factors are interrelated. We cannot look at one factor in isolation. mostly all these factors are closely related.

One actually leads to other and we can see that they are interrelated very closely. So, when we talk about death of a language we see that there can be times when there are only 4 or 5 members of a speech community are left. So, what happens is that only these 4 or 5 members can talk in that language and of course, eventually they die and what happens with them dies the language. So, recently in 2001 what we saw was that Licho was the last speaker of Sare language which is a great Andamanese language family and there, when she died, Licho died, with that the language also died. So, there were four members living and then slowly each of them died and she died quite early because of some disease and then there was no one to speak the language.

So, when there are only 4 or 5 speakers left they can talk among themselves in the language, but then of course, with time they also die and with them dies the language. But what we see is that again this process is not very sudden. People may die out. The speakers of the language they die, but then there are others who have listened to the language. So, they might not be very fluent in the language, but they remember certain words or they might remember certain folk tales, some proverbs.

So, that those people are called rememberers. So, they can actually remember fragments of the language, like certain words, certain stories that they have heard from the native speakers. So, though they are part of that community, but they cannot speak their language, but little bit they know about the language, they know certain words, they know certain songs or something. So, those at times we have seen that those can be the cases. So, there are also certain examples where you can see that some data was collected from these type of rememberers, who actually were not the speakers of the language, they could not speak the language fluently, they only could remember certain words or certain songs.

So Tasmanians, you can see in their cases, five words and one sentence was collected because that is what they could remember and these were two people only who could actually remember the language. And about the other language also, Buluguyban, you can see that it is spoken in Palm Island and there only 40 words and a dozen of phrases and a story and the story was narrated in English. So, it was not narrated in the language. But, they know the theme of the story and then they could narrate that. So, certain words, certain stories, certain phrases were retained with some of the community members.

They could recall that they might have heard from someone like their grandparents or great grandparents and they could remember that and that much is only left in the language. So, nothing else is actually left in the language. So, we do not know about the other words of that language. We do not know about the other proverbs, syntactic

structure. We do not know anything.

We only have that much, if the language is not documented. So, it is stated that a language must be regarded as dead as soon as it stops developing. So, why is it said? Because when we use language, continuously language is actually evolving. Now, if you think about Old English or Middle English and then you compare it with Modern English that we use today, you will find lots of differences. In fact, it is very difficult at times to understand Old or Middle English, but that does not mean that Old or Middle English has died because it has evolved into the Modern English which we use today.

So, language is actually continuously evolving as like our surroundings and environment. We see development in technology, in all the other domains of life and similarly, that is also well reflected through our language. So, you know that lots of new words are coined, some of the words get new meanings like the words 'mouse', 'wave'. So, all these words have got new meanings. So, sometimes we see semantic range actually broadens up, lots of meanings are added to the existing words, sometimes they also narrow down.

So, a word which has lots of meaning can actually get down to only one meaning. Sometimes there are semantic bleachings where the original meaning is lost and the word may gain some new meaning. So, there can be various process involved in evolution of a language. So, that does not mean that the older form has actually died, but what happens is that the older form evolves and takes the new form and every moment actually language is changing. Code mixing, code switching are also process which actually contributes to that.

So, when a language is living that means, it also changes with the time. It incorporates the change which is happening in the surroundings, but when we see that that is not happening, a language has become it has or it has freezed in a particular position then that means, the language is actually becoming endangered. Because you can imagine if there is a language through which we cannot talk about modern technology, modern means of entertainment or various other things which are surrounding us, then how can we communicate using that language. So, if we cannot communicate what is happening in our surrounding using the language then we will not use that language. We will shift to some other language where we can very conveniently use the language to describe about our surroundings and all the developments.

And that is why it is said that when a language stops evolving that means the language is in the process of dying. So, that is there. So, when we also see languages like Sanskrit, some people sometimes ask that whether it is a dead language, but it is not so, because

Sanskrit is one used in certain domains like in lots of Hindu rituals only Sanskrit is allowed, so, it has a particular domain where it has to be used. Secondly, if you look at lots of technologies, you will find Sanskrit. You will find lots of words, new words which are coined to show the newer technology or other means.

So, we see that there are lots of development in the language. So, it might not be used on a regular basis by lots of people, but when we see that there is some development in the language. So, now coming to the stages of endangerment. Now, as I mentioned that this process takes time it does not happen in one night or one year.

It is a slow process. So, an extinct language is a language which has no longer any speaker left. However, when a language becomes extinct, it passes through several stages. So, these are the five stages which you can see. A language initially becomes potentially endangered, followed by endangered, then seriously endangered, moribund and extinct. So, these are the levels which can be given to the language looking at its vitality status.

So, what is potentially endangered language? When a language is potentially endangered, it faces strong external pressure, but the language is still passed on to the younger generation. So, in my last class I talked about this external pressure, how there can be indirect pressure to shift looking at the neighboring languages. So, when there is a dominant language and all the facilities are available in this dominant language, then one might feel like shifting to that dominant language. So, there is that indirect external pressure. And for the native language, there is no books or there is no means of entertainment, no facilities available.

So, in those cases we can see that there can be an external pressure. But in those cases also, for many of the languages we will see that those languages are less resourced, yet they are maintained in the home domain, also sometimes within the neighborhood. So, people talk in the language with their neighbors, with the shopkeepers, local people they use the language in their home domain, but when they have to go for education or for entertainment or for say job interviews and other things, then they are forced to shift to other language. So, in those cases we can say that the language is potentially endangered. Then the next step comes that is endangerment or endangered languages, where we see only a few people speak the language and children are no longer learning the language.

So, now when a language is potentially endangered, then it might be the case, not always of course; So, it might be the case that slowly, the parents are discouraging their children from learning their own language, because there are no books available, there is no means of education, entertainment or any other things available. So, this indirect pressure becomes a real genuine cause for shifting to other language. Children are sent outside the

village in the bigger cities for education. People migrate to bigger cities in search of job and all. So, what happens? Along with this migration, they leave behind their own language and they shift to the major language of the cities.

And then when the parents have shifted, they have adapted the new language, there might be the cases they are not using the language with their children. The young adults they have joined universities and colleges outside their home town and they have again adapted the other dominant language of these cities and then they are not using their own language. In those cases, the young children, the children which is not passed on to them and then the language can become endangered. Now, what is seriously endangered? During this stage, the language is unlikely to survive another generation and will very soon be extinct. So, you know when these children they are not learning the language, there is no one to talk to them in the native language and these children when they grow up, then the language becomes seriously endangered, because now these children have become adults and they do not know their language, they cannot use their language.

They might remember some words or some phrases as I mentioned, but then they are not fluent speakers of the language. And in this condition, if steps are not taken, then the language might die very soon, because there are no users of the language. May be only the grandparents or older people of the community are using the language, but the young people or the children they do not know their language. And then comes the next step, Moribund, where Moribund language is only spoken by the grandparents generation or even older generations. So, what happens in this stage is that the younger people are not using their language, even the parents are not using their language, only older people, grandparents, great grandparents, they are using the language.

And we know when they die with them dies the language, because there will be no one to carry on the language, because it has not been transmitted to the younger generation. And so, when these older people they die, with them dies the language and then that is the final step that is extinction, where the language is no longer used and no one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language. Because the language speakers have died, no one is there to claim the language. No one will come and say that I am the user of the language because no one knows the language. And, then we know that the language has actually totally gone from the earth.

No one is there to speak the language. And with that, all the things which are related to that particular language has also died with the language. So, this is the chart, which you can see, is taken from UNESCO's Atlas of Endangered Languages and they have marked the languages and labelled them depending on their vitality. So, according to this Atlas, at least 43 percent of languages spoken in the world are endangered. And you can see the

index where green color stands for the safe. So, it is safe or they have not got the data, white is for vulnerable and then there is definitely endangered followed by severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct since 1950.

So, these are some of the labels which have been used by UNESCO. And why UNESCO has used it? They have actually measured the vitality through a scale. So, there is a vitality scale. So, depending on that, a language can be labelled, whether it is endangered or not and what is the degree of endangerment. So, these color codings show you what is the degree of endangerment of a language and that can also help us to take steps accordingly.

So, we know about that. So, now you know which languages are safe that was there. So, language is spoken by all generation, inter-generation transmission is there. So, basically everyone is speaking the language, all the generation people are talking, the language is transmitted from parents to children, they are learning the language and then we know that the language is safe or healthy because the speakers are using it. But the language becomes vulnerable when most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains.

So, in my last class I also talked about domains. Domains generally when we look at restricted domain it can be home domain. So, when the language can only be used in home, then it can be vulnerable because might be that today the language is only used within the home domain, but slowly the children will pick.. of course they will be bilinguals, they will learn other languages, but then they will bring those languages in the home domain as well. So, the other language can actually slowly take the place of the native language.

They can be used in the home domain as well and then that will make the scope of the native language narrow and narrower, leading to endangerment. So, if the domains are not wide, then there are chances that the language is vulnerable. If the language cannot be used in several domains then it can be vulnerable. So, we see that a safe language is a language which can be used in multiple domains. Again it might be the case that the language cannot be used in every domain, but then there has to be multiple domains, not only one or two domains or the language is not restricted for a particular domain.

But when the language can be used in multiple domains we know that a language is safe. What is definitely endangered? Children no longer learn the language as their mother tongue in home. So, basically children are not learning their native language. There is no intergenerational transmission and when this is the case, then the language is definitely endangered because when children are not learning it, who will speak it in future because

it is very important for children to learn the native language so that when they become adult they can again pass on the language to their next generation. Then the language becomes severely endangered, when language is spoken by the grandparents and older generation while the parent generation may understand it.

They do not speak to the language or among themselves in the language, so that is why the language becoming severely endangered. So, the language is there, but again restricted within the older people. So, older people are using it, but the parents are not using it and when the parents are not using it then of course, it will not be passed on to their children and in that cases, the language becomes severely endangered. Followed by critically endangered, when the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak in a language partially and they are infrequent in the language.

So, basically they are not using the language regularly. So, the language is critically endangered when we find only very old people speaking in the language and that also not frequently. So, they are occasionally actually using the language. So, may be when two or three older people are coming together, then only they are talking or using the language, but in their home domains they have to use some other language because their children do not understand it, their grandchildren do not understand it. So, that can be a thing. So, then we know that the language is critically endangered because these speakers will die and then there will be no one to speak the language.

And that is the last step which happens where there are no speakers left and the language becomes endangered. This scale is based on the earlier stages that I showed you, the five stages. Based on that this scale has been created by UNESCO and here you can see that the extinct languages are those languages which are extinct from 1950s. So, the data before that is not there and this is the way how they have actually labelled various languages of the world in the Atlas. I am sure that you have already gone through the Atlas, because in my last class I talked about it.

So, you can explore more and know about the levels and understand how the different languages of the world has been marked. An interesting task will be to look for the definitely and severely endangered languages of India. So, you can see there are how many actually definitely and severely endangered languages in our own country. So, you can explore that. So now, when we talk about language endangerment and you look at the scale we cannot do it just randomly right? So, we cannot say that this language is severely endangered while the other one is definitely endangered.

There are various factors and there is a scale based on which it is measured because by now you know, no single factor alone can be used to access a language vitality or need of

documentation. So, there are various factors which actually can tell us about the exact vitality of a language. The whole process is actually very complex and diverse. Why? Because sometimes it is very difficult to know the exact number of speakers of a language. You know that language and communities they are interrelated very closely.

So, sometimes people may identify themselves with the community, but they might not be speakers of that language. So, that is a very very common phenomena and specially in India, you can find that a lot. So when actually census is taken, they respond something and whatever the speaker response that is what is noted, but then we do not know whether the response is true or false. Sometimes the respondent does not know whether he or she should say the language which they speak or should they talk about the dominant language of the area. Because sometimes the speakers they themselves are confused whether whatever they are speaking is a language or dialect because people have this confusion of language and dialect though as linguist we consider all these variants as language.

But for common people there can be at times confusion. So, in some cases we see that like for example, Mahasui language, which is spoken in Himachal Pradesh, the community members they identify themselves as Mahasui community members, because the community name is Mahasui and also the name of the language is Mahasui. But though they are Mahasui people, but they cannot speak Mahasui. So the younger people they cannot speak the language, but since they are part of the community and they follow other rituals of Mahasui community, they identify themselves as Mahasui community or Mahasui people. So now if you only look at the number of members of the community as Mahasui people, we will get one figure, but if you look at exact speakers of Mahasui speaking people then we might get another figure. So the numbers actually vary and that is why it becomes difficult to know the exact number of speakers.

Again in the case of some languages like Magahi, Angika, you will see that the speakers who speak Magahi from Bihar might say that I am a speaker of Hindi, when asked what is your native language, or when someone speaks Angika might say that we speak Maithili, but actually they are speaking Angika. So, there are various issues like this which is there and that is why it becomes difficult to get the exact number of speakers which is important in looking at the vitality thing of a language. So, now I would like to conclude by saying that there are various factors related to language endangerment and death. And also language death is not a sudden process, it passes through various stages. And depending on these stages, UNESCO has actually labeled various languages of the world.

And how do we know a language is in which stage? We look into it through vitality

scale. Vitality scale will be talked about by Professor Dripta. So, after the loss of fluent speakers, there are some rememberers of the language left. So, that is also a thing. Sometimes a language dies, but then we see little bit of the language is retained in some of the community members.

Language death is a long process and so, if steps are taken in time then it can actually be saved from dying because there are five major steps involved. And that is why when we talk about labeling a language, why do we label a language because so that we can know about the exact vitality status of the language and take steps to save it. And when we talk about taking steps, then the first step starts with language documentation. So, I hope you enjoyed this class. Thank you.