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Language

SIMON SUSEN

City, University of London, UK

THE DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

The concept of “language” refers to any system of symbolically mediated – notably, spoken or written – communication used by actors to establish a meaning-laden relationship to the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of their existence. Etymologically, the term *language* has Indo-European roots and derives from the Latin word *lingua*, meaning “language,” “tongue,” or “speech.” The term *natural language* is usually employed in relation to a language that is mastered and transmitted by ordinary actors capable of speech and action. The term *formal language*, by contrast, is commonly used to describe artificially constructed communication systems, designed to provide a set of signs, codes, and ciphers allowing for the encoding and decoding of information.

Different theories of language place different emphasis on different features of language. It is generally agreed, however, that all human languages can be studied in terms of the following – constitutive – components: *morphology* (structure of words); *vocabulary* (variety of words); *semantics* (meaning-ladenness of words); *syntax* (arrangement of words in sentences, clauses, and phrases); *grammar* (set of rules governing the composition of sentences, clauses, phrases, and words); *phonetics* (sounds of human speech); and *pragmatics* (use of language in particular contexts).

THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE

Linguistics is the discipline that is concerned with the scientific study of language (see, for instance, Matthews 2003). Historical linguists widely believe that the systematic examination of language began more than 2,000 years ago, notably in ancient India. Among the most influential examples in the history of the study of language are the following: *Pāṇini*, who was a *Sanskrit grammarian* from ancient India in the fourth century BCE; *Antoine Arnauld* and *Claude Lancelot*, who developed what is known as the (French) *Port-Royal Grammar* in the seventeenth century; *William Jones* and *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, famous for advocating a *comparative linguistic method* in the eighteenth century; *Ferdinand de Saussure*, the founding figure of *structural(ist) linguistics* in the early twentieth century; and *Noam Chomsky*, promoter of the *generative theory of language and transformational grammars* in the late twentieth century.

In the modern context, various types of linguistics can be distinguished, notably the following: *descriptive linguistics*, *theoretical linguistics*, *sociolinguistics*, *neurolinguistics*, *cognitive linguistics*, *historical linguistics*, *applied linguistics*, *educational linguistics*, *anthropological linguistics*, *geolinguistics*, and *ethnolinguistics*. What these research traditions have in common is that they rest on the assumption that linguistically structured communication is the default modality for the production of symbolic forms and interactions in *all* human societies.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF LANGUAGE

Just as there are different types of linguistics, there are different types of language. First, there are *human languages* and *nonhuman languages*, that is, those used by humans and those used by animals. Second, there are *natural languages* and *artificial languages*. The former are spoken or signed; they are acquired by most human beings on the basis of their daily exposure to and involvement in one or more linguistic communities. The latter are invented or fabricated; they can be employed for several – especially, transcultural and technological – purposes. In principle, *all* languages can be encoded into secondary media using auditory, visual, or tactile stimuli. Third, there are multiple modes of language, notably *spoken languages* (auditive modality), *written languages* (typographic modality), *sign languages* (visual modality), *body languages* (corporeal modality), and *braille languages* (tactile modality) – to mention only the most significant ones.

THE FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE

All human languages possess at least four fundamental anthropological functions: first, owing to their *assertive* function, they permit actors to raise *constative* validity claims in relation to the *objective* dimensions of their existence; second, owing to their *regulative* function, they permit actors to raise *normative* validity claims in relation to the *intersubjective* dimensions of their existence; third, owing to their *individuative* function, they permit actors to raise *expressive* validity claims in relation to the *subjective* dimensions of their existence; and, fourth, owing to their *intelligible* function, they permit actors to raise *communicative* validity claims in relation to – in principle – *all* dimensions of their existence.

THE FEATURES OF LANGUAGE

Although not without controversy, it is widely assumed that “human language” can be distinguished from “animal language.” This conceptual differentiation is founded on the conviction that the former contains a number of species-constitutive features that cannot be found when examining the composition of the latter. Arguably, among these – distinctly anthropological – characteristics of human language are the following:

- the combination of its *morphological*, *terminological*, *semantic*, *syntactic*, *grammatical*, *phonetic*, and *pragmatic* elements, all of which constitute both relatively *independent* and relatively *interdependent* components underlying the production, reproduction, and transformation of human language;
- the combination of its *assertive*, *regulative*, *individuative*, and *intelligible* functions, enabling human actors to raise *constative*, *normative*, *expressive*, and *communicative* validity claims in relation to the *objective*, *intersubjective*, *subjective*, and *immersive* dimensions of their existence;
- an unparalleled degree of *complexity* in terms of the development of the aforementioned *elements* and *functions*, playing a pivotal role in the unfolding of *human history* in general and of *human evolution* in particular;
- an unparalleled degree of *complexity* in terms of the development of the *physiological underpinnings* of human language, notably the Broca’s area and the Wernicke’s area of the *human brain*.

THE ORIGIN(S) OF LANGUAGE

The question regarding the origin – or, rather, the origins – of language has been an object of discussion for a long time. In

this respect, several prominent examples are worth mentioning. *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* and *Johann Gottfried Herder* traced the origin of language to *emotions*, arguing that, in its primary variants, it was intimately interrelated with creative symbolic forms, such as music and poetry. According to the rationalist accounts provided by *Immanuel Kant* and *René Descartes*, the development of language is inextricably linked to the development of *reason*: actors capable of speech and action are cognitively sophisticated entities able to make judgments based on contemplative processes of critical reflection. In the eyes of the later *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, language games emerge in relation to particular *life forms*; on this view, symbolic representations cannot be dissociated from the sociohistorical conditions in the context of which they come into existence. Furthermore, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, philosophical problems are essentially linguistic problems; on this account, the study of philosophy requires the study of language.

Irrespective of the theoretical perspective that one may favor when attempting to shed light on the origins of language, most contemporary linguists maintain that human beings possess an *innate drive toward language acquisition*. This is reflected in the fact that healthy children – insofar as they are exposed to and participate in the everyday interactions of at least one language community – are equipped with the capacity to acquire language without formal instruction. Perhaps one of the most distinctive – and existentially empowering – features of human language is that it permits subjects capable of speech and action to engage in processes of *displacement*, by means of which they can refer to states of affairs that are spatiotemporally remote from the particular situation or sociohistorical context in which they find themselves immersed. Arguably, nonhuman forms of language lack this species-distinctive

characteristic. Different theories about the origins of language draw upon different assumptions concerning the nature of language. In this regard, two currents of thought are particularly influential:

- *Continuity-focused* approaches (e.g., Steven Pinker) affirm that, in light of its evolutionary complexity, language has *gradually* evolved from prelinguistic ways of communication developed by our prehuman ancestors.
- *Discontinuity-focused* approaches (e.g., Noam Chomsky) assert that, considering its anthropological uniqueness, language is an incommensurable component of the human – and only the human – world, representing a species-constitutive feature that *suddenly* emerged during the historical transition from prehominids to hominids.

The former tend to emphasize the fact that language stands for a communicative system that is *culturally constructed* and, thus, absorbed and reproduced through social interactions. The latter tend to conceive of language as a product of an *innate faculty* that – as illustrated in human actors' communicative competence – is cross-culturally present, neurologically predetermined, and genetically encoded. Notwithstanding the respective merits and limitations of each of these explanatory frameworks, linguists tend to agree that the era of spoken languages is at least between 60,000 and 100,000 years old: primitive language-like systems may have emerged between 0.6 million years ago (*Homo heidelbergensis*), 1.8 million years ago (*Homo erectus*), and 2.3 million years ago (*Homo habilis*) – that is, *before* the Upper Paleolithic revolution less than 100,000 years ago (*Homo sapiens*).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LANGUAGE

The wider significance of language – or, to be exact, the anthropological centrality of human language – concerns 10 key levels of analysis (see Susen 2007: 283–287).

- 1 As an *anthropological specificity*, it is embedded in human nature and, in terms of its unparalleled complexity, intrinsic only to the human, and not the nonhuman, world.
- 2 As an *anthropological invariant*, it constitutes an integral part of all human life forms, irrespective of their spatiotemporal or sociocultural specificity.
- 3 As an *anthropological ground*, it is not only inherent in, but also fundamental to, the human social, that is, it determines the nature of human coexistence in a constitutive, rather than tangential, sense and is anchored in the lifeworld.
- 4 As an *anthropological field*, it represents an ensemble of relationally structured conditions the existence of which is necessary for the emergence of social order.
- 5 As an *anthropological competence*, it represents a fundamental capacity that permits human actors to participate in the meaning-laden construction of the social world.
- 6 As an *anthropological driving force*, it can be regarded as an engine of social evolution that substantially shapes the historical development of the human species, including the conditions of its existence.
- 7 As an *anthropological need*, it is vital to human life, that is, its existence is a precondition for the subject's self-fulfillment, and its repression is a source of the subject's alienation.
- 8 As an *anthropological resource*, it is both a motor and a vehicle of social struggle, representing a source of both human

harmony and human conflict, that is, the struggle over its control is a struggle over empowerment and disempowerment.

- 9 As an *anthropological world relation*, it defines the way in which we relate to (a) the natural world, (b) the social world, and (c) our subjective world.
- 10 As an *anthropological telos*, it possesses a quasi-transcendental teleological orientation, which consists in reaching mutual understanding and which pervades every subject's ordinary engagement with the world.

THE PARADOX OF LANGUAGE

Unless they are hindered by severe physiological or psychological illness directly affecting their speech ability, humans are equipped with a linguistic competence, that is, with the capacity to communicate with their fellow human beings by mobilizing their language-specific resources. One of the curious paradoxes of human language can be described as follows: as a *universal* resource, language constitutes a *species-distinctive* medium to the extent that, in principle, all actors capable of speech and action have access to it; as a *particular* resource, language constitutes a *species-divisive* medium to the extent that, in practice, all actors capable of speech and action are socially separated by it. All human languages are *united* by the fact that they are based on morphological, terminological, semantic, syntactic, grammatical, phonetic, and pragmatic elements; yet, all human languages are *divided* by both the personal and the cultural contingency – and, hence, variability – of each of these dimensions. In other words, *language varies both from person to person and from culture to culture*.

The challenge of exploring, identifying, and classifying the world's languages

resembles the task of studying, recognizing, and categorizing the world's biological species: both investigative endeavors grapple with fundamental existential issues such as *genesis, development, survival, competition, differentiation, production, reproduction, transformation, evolution, and extinction*. Regardless of their abundant idiosyncrasies, however, all languages share a number of essential properties, which – in their totality – both reflect and shape the constitution of symbolically mediated interactions as they are performed by linguistically skilled members of humanity.

By definition, human language is uniquely human. Not only are we a “knowing species,” *Homo sapiens*, but we are also a “talking species,” *Homo loquens*. Our cognitive ability to relate to, to act upon, and to attribute meaning to the world by means of rationality is inextricably linked to our linguistic capacity to raise claims to objective, normative, or subjective validity by engaging in communicative – and, if necessary, discursive – processes oriented toward mutual intelligibility. Our immersion within and dependence upon language are so profound that, when scrutinizing its nature, development, and functions, we cannot but start as insiders, that is, as native representatives of a speaking species. Owing to our linguistic capacity, we undertake every form of critical analysis from a particular sociocultural position, which we occupy as members of a given linguistic community.

Ever since hominid life history began to detach itself from the evolutionary line of chimpanzees, approximately 5–8 million years ago, the development of gradually more complex forms of *Verstand* (reason) was intimately interrelated with the unfolding of increasingly sophisticated modes of *Verständigung* (communication). Notwithstanding the question of whether one favors biological or sociological, biogenetic or

sociogenetic, essentialist or constructivist, universalist or particularist frameworks of analysis, the human capacity to acquire and to use language cannot be explained without reference to the role of *both* prenatal faculties and postnatal experiences – that is, *both* nature and nurture, *both* innate and environmental factors – in shaping the human ability to establish a symbolically mediated relationship with the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of worldly realities.

THE CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

The *critical sociology of language* is concerned, above all, with the *power-laden constitution of symbolic forms* in general and of *linguistic forms* in particular. The following ten features of language are crucial in this respect (see Susen 2013a, 2013b).

- 1 Language is *social*. As a *socially constructed* force, its existence is contingent upon the *collective production* of linguistic utterances; as a *socially embedded* force, its existence is dependent upon the *collective framing* of linguistic utterances.
- 2 Language is *dialectic*. (a) On the level of *competence* and *performance*, it owes its existence to subjects who are both in *principle* and in *practice* capable of speech and action. (b) On the level of *grammar* and *pragmatics*, it owes its existence to both symbolic *structures* and symbolic *processes*. (c) On the level of *commonality* and *singularity*, it owes its existence to both *shared* points of cultural reference and *unique* sources of lived experience.
- 3 Language is *interpretive*. Humans attribute meaning to reality by virtue of language. Insofar as every language creates a particular view of the world, it makes those who use it see certain

things and not see other things, that is, it permits them to see some things and precludes them from seeing other things in a *particular* way.

- 4 Language is *doxic*. Inevitably, when mobilizing our linguistic resources, we impose symbolically mediated *background* assumptions upon the world. As linguistic beings, we are prejudgmental entities: all our foreground utterances are embedded in background traditions.
- 5 Language is *discursive*. Human actors produce different discourses in different social realms. Language is the principle vehicle of these discourses.
- 6 Language is *legitimacy-dependent*. Legitimate languages are reflected in legitimate *representations*, situated in legitimate *contexts*, embodied in legitimate linguistic *capacities*, materialized in legitimate *authority*, and imbued with legitimate *normativity*.
- 7 Language is *ideological*. By definition, it serves either to sustain or to undermine specific sets of ideas – that is, conceptual representations – about particular aspects of reality. To the degree that every language creates its own view of the world, every *Sprachanschauung* constitutes a form of *Weltanschauung*.
- 8 Language is *contestable*. In principle, the validity of every linguistically raised claim to truth, rightness, or sincerity can be called into question. Struggles over languages – and, thus, over the validity claims raised within and through them – are struggles over how to attribute meaning to the world.
- 9 Language is *commodifiable*. In stratified societies, it functions not only as a marker of identity but also as an indicator of social status. The interplay between linguistic fields, linguistic habitus, and linguistic capital permeates every economy of linguistic exchanges.

Human actors need to participate in linguistic fields, cultivate a linguistic habitus, and acquire linguistic capital, in order to contribute to the linguistically mediated construction of reality.

- 10 Language is both a source and a medium of *symbolic power*. To the extent that all linguistic relations are social relations and all social relations are power relations, our daily immersion in language involves our complicit participation in the exercise of symbolic power.

Sociologists of language draw on sociolinguistics. In essence, *sociolinguistics* is the study of the relationship between *language and society* (e.g., Edwards 2013). The most obvious sociological variables that shape (a) linguistic fields, (b) linguistic habitus, and (c) linguistic capital are class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability. The importance of each of these dimensions is context-dependent, in the sense that different sets of circumstances involve different dynamics of social positioning and also different sets of opportunities, limitations, and expectations.

The relationship between language and society has been an object of enquiry in a number of influential twentieth-century *social theories*. In this respect, the following explanatory approaches are particularly worth mentioning: Michel Foucault's (1975) theory of power; Pierre Bourdieu's (1992) theory of symbolic power; Jürgen Habermas's (1981a, 1981b) theory of communicative action; Axel Honneth's (1994) theory of recognition; Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot's (1991) theory of justification; Jacques Derrida's (1967) theory of deconstruction; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's (2001/1985) theory of hegemony; Terry Eagleton's (1991) and Slavoj Žižek's (1989) respective theories of ideology; and Judith Butler's (1990) theory

of performativity. Although these conceptual frameworks differ on several counts, they share the assumption that language is, by definition, a *relational* state of affairs. On this view, language is – always and unavoidably – history-laden, context-laden, situation-laden, value-laden, meaning-laden, perspective-laden, tension-laden, interest-laden, and power-laden.

THE DIVERSITY OF LANGUAGE

Inevitably, languages evolve and diversify over time and in different contexts. The developmental and diversifying nature of language is reflected in the emergence of language families. *A “language family” can be defined as a group of languages that can be shown to be genetically related to one another in terms of a common ancestry.* The main language families that exist in the contemporary era can be classified as shown in Table 1.

A “living language” can be defined as a language that is used as a primary vehicle of communication by a particular group of people existing in the contemporary era. It is generally accepted that, in the present world, the number of living languages amounts to 6,000–7,000 – an estimate that varies depending on how “language,” as opposed to “dialect,” is conceptualized. In 2009, the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) identified 6,909 living human languages.

Although the distinction between “language” and “dialect” is fairly arbitrary, it normally rests on political and cultural criteria – such as distinctive writing systems, degrees of mutual intelligibility, and symbolic representations. The stereotypical – and, arguably, erroneous – representation of these two speech forms can be synthesized as follows: “languages” are spoken by nations; “dialects” are spoken by tribes, towns, regions, or other “sub-national” groups. “Languages,” then, are often associated with issues such as statehood, markets, literary traditions,

Table 1 Classification of language families.

<i>Family</i>	<i>Languages</i>	<i>Speakers</i>
Niger-Congo (e.g., Swahili, Zulu, Shona, and hundreds of other languages spoken throughout Africa)	1,510	382,257,169
Austronesian (e.g., Indonesian, Malay, Tagalog, Malagasy, and hundreds of other languages spoken throughout the Pacific)	1,231	353,585,905
Trans-New Guinea (e.g., Melpa, Enga, Western Dani, Ekari)	475	3,334,267
Sino-Tibetan (e.g., Mandarin Chinese, Cantonese)	445	1,259,227,250
Indo-European (e.g., English, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Hindi)	426	2,721,969,619
Afro-Asiatic (e.g., Arabic, Amharic, Somali, Hebrew)	353	359,495,289
Totals	4,440	5,079,869,499

Source: see Anderson (2012: 20; table 1: Families with over 200 languages); data from the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009).

and widely accepted writing systems, but also with symbols and structures of power, authority, legitimacy, and culture. Thus, merely linguistic considerations play a relatively insignificant role in the construction of modern “languages.” In fact, from the point of view of linguistics, the distinction between “language” and “dialect” is blurred and fuzzy, lacking universal scientific criteria that would allow for a straightforward and unambiguous conceptual differentiation between these two categories.

The *criterion of mutual intelligibility* for defining a “language” can be summarized as follows: “if the speakers of *A* can understand the speakers of *B* without difficulty, *A* and *B* must be the same language” (Anderson 2012: 67). Ultimately, however, this criterion fails to account for the messiness of linguistic diversity; in some cases, it may be harder to communicate between different versions of the same “language” (e.g., High German [*Hochdeutsch*] and Swiss German [*Schweizerdeutsch*]) than between different languages (e.g., Russian and Ukrainian).

Far from representing a merely analytical – let alone descriptive – endeavor, the task of identifying human languages – and their corresponding language families – constitutes a profoundly *normative* challenge. For most linguists, all languages – *irrespective of* their cultural, political, economic, ideological, and demographic status and influence – are precious. Yet, owing to their varying degrees of status and influence, the development of languages and language families cannot be properly understood without examining the underlying *power mechanisms* that shape – if not determine – their destiny.

Perhaps it will never be possible to give a conclusive answer to the question concerning the origin(s) of human language. In this respect, two main scenarios can be distinguished. In accordance with the principle of *monogenesis*, it may be assumed that,

once upon a time, there must have been an “original” form of language, from which all subsequent linguistic traditions are directly or indirectly derived. In accordance with the principle of *polygenesis*, by contrast, it may be posited that several “original” forms of language emerged more or less simultaneously in different places and then *either* died out *or* survived by constantly developing and adapting to changing environmental conditions.

In the current context, the *greatest number of speakers* – that is, approximately 2.5 billion in total – can be found among the 450 *Indo-European languages*. By contrast, the *Niger-Congo and Austronesian families*, which are sustained by approximately 350 million speakers each, reveal much greater linguistic diversity – with at least 1,500 languages in the case of the former, and nearly 1,300 in the case of the latter. An example of an extremely elevated degree of linguistic diversity is Papua New Guinea, with an estimated 832 languages spoken by a population of around 3.9 million. If we consider the bigger picture, the distribution of living languages in the contemporary world looks roughly as follows, according to the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009):

- Europe: 234
- Asia: 2,322
- Africa: 2,110
- Americas: 993
- Pacific: 1,250
- Total: 6,909

The uneven distribution of languages and language families represents a curious feature of the contemporary world. Comparable to the irregular distribution of plant and animal species across the planet, some places or regions are highly, and others hardly, diverse in terms of living languages.

Living languages are incessantly changing. In terms of their morphological, terminological, semantic, syntactic, grammatical,

phonetic, and pragmatic composition, languages are in a constant state of flux. Languages change as their speakers invent (and reinvent) new ways of speaking. Linguistic traditionalists tend to be skeptical of language changes, considering them as, at best, an expression of unnecessary or rushed modernization or, at worst, a sign of civilizational decay, mental enfeeblement, and collective hebephrenia.

However one may wish to assess both the causes and the consequences of linguistic developments, language change is inevitable. In fact, openness to change and transformation is built into the very nature of language, since a living language, in order to survive, needs to prove capable of adjusting to constantly altering circumstances and requirements. Indeed, variation is one of the most noticeable linguistic constants. There are both *external factors* and *internal factors* for language change: the former are *exogenous* (e.g., social, cultural, political, economic, geographic, environmental); the latter are *endogenous* (e.g., pronunciation difficulties, terminological or grammatical ambiguities).

Given the changeability inherent in human linguisticity, language cannot escape the power of spatiotemporal contingency. For instance, even if – hypothetically – there were a moment in time at which every human inhabitant of this planet spoke one and the same language (e.g., Esperanto), within a few decades – if not years or months – significant linguistic differences would emerge, reflecting dissimilarities in the social conditions of cultural production.

THE HIERARCHIES OF LANGUAGE

Both in terms of *distribution* and in terms of *status and influence*, languages are situated on an *uneven – global – playing field*. Perhaps the most striking statistical reality in this

regard is the fact that *a relatively small number of languages (389, that is, 6 percent) with over one million speakers account for the vast majority (94 percent) of the world's speakers* (Anderson 2012: 19). The imbalanced worldwide distribution of “majority languages” can be categorized as follows:

- 1 *Chinese*: ~1,213,000,000 speakers.
- 2 *Arabic*: ~221,000,000 speakers (of Arabic dialects).
- 3 *Spanish, English, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, German*: “the over 100 million speakers club.”

To be sure, given that it encompasses a massive internal ethno-linguistic diversity, the concept of “Chinese” as a single language, spoken by one homogeneous speech community, may be misleading. Yet, even if we confine it to “Mandarin” (which barely represents a significantly more homogenous ethno-linguistic group of people), the corresponding figure of approximately 845,000,000 speakers puts this language in first place in the global league table.

In contrast to this focus on the world's majority languages, it is worth noting that, in the contemporary era, there are *6,520 languages with under one million speakers (94 percent)* and that these are *spoken by only about 6 percent of the world's population*. Put differently, *94 percent of all existing languages are spoken by only about 6 percent of the world's population*. To put it crudely, it appears that, on a global scale, the “small languages” are being systematically marginalized by the cultural imperialism of the “big languages.”

Unsurprisingly, in a global context, the counting of languages is far from straightforward. To begin with, linguistics-specific statisticians are confronted with the controversial question of where to draw the line between a “language” and a “dialect.” In this

respect, the late Max Weinreich's famous aphorism according to which "a language is a dialect with an army and a navy" is of little use value, taking into account that there are various "languages" to which this definition does *not* apply (consider, in particular, languages of "stateless nations" – for example, in Spain, with Basque and Catalan).

A further difficulty arises from the fact that an increasing number of people around the world are bi- or multilingual and, hence, speak particular languages as their second, third, fourth, ... language (in some cases, as native or quasi-native speakers; in most cases, as non-native speakers). Thus, the statistical representation of the distribution of living languages will differ depending on whether or not only languages that are spoken as first languages are part of the equation.

In short, analytical distinctions – such as "recognized" versus "nonrecognized," "state-specific" versus "stateless," "official" versus "unofficial," "institutionalized" versus "non-institutionalized," "native" versus "nonnative" – have a significant impact on the ways in which languages are counted, compared, and contrasted.

For instance, the *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2009) provides statistical data on the distribution of living languages in the global context by taking into account *the total number of people who use a particular language as their first language*, irrespective of the place in the world where they may reside. As a consequence, the figure of 328 million for English does not include the more than 167 million people who speak English as a second (or third, fourth, etc.) language.

Over the past centuries, many "national" governments have sought to make the "countries" they claimed to represent linguistically uniform, but often – that is, even in cases of extreme political centralism – with less success than one may assume. Three striking European examples are the United Kingdom,

France, and Spain. In all three cases, minority languages survived decades of systematic attempts to marginalize, if not annihilate, them (*UK*: Cornish, Irish, Scots, Scottish Gaelic, Ulster-Scots, Welsh; *France*: Alsatian, Basque [unrecognized], Breton, Catalan, Corsican, Gallo, Occitan, 40 native languages of New Caledonia; *Spain*: Aragonese, Asturian, Basque, Catalan, Galician, Occitan). In other words, even when the ideal of linguistic uniformity is imposed "from above," the reality of linguistic diversity may continue to be supported "from below." Of course, some states (e.g., Afghanistan, Algeria, Belgium, Canada, Egypt, Spain, Switzerland, and Uganda) openly and explicitly promote bi- or multilingualism as a national policy.

Especially in multicultural settings, the reality of bi- or multilingualism – at the micro-level of the individual, the meso-level of community, and the macro-level of society – remains an issue of controversy. *Defenders* of bi- or multilingualism make reference to its advantages and opportunities, such as the following: enhancement of cultural richness and open-mindedness; fostering of perspective-taking attitudes; increasing tolerance toward, or even acceptance of, difference; elevated levels of cognitive capacity; and stimulation of personal and social creativity. *Critics* of bi- or multilingualism make reference to its disadvantages and pitfalls, such as the following: at the micro-level, lack of a clear cultural identity; at the meso-level, lack of stable normative parameters; and, at the macro-level, lack of cultural homogeneity and interactional predictability.

THE ENDANGERMENT OF LANGUAGE

The issue of *language endangerment*, which has been on the agenda for some time, is inextricably linked to the issue of *language hierarchies*. The notion that some languages are superior or inferior to others has a

long, tension-laden history. Languages fulfill several *sociological functions*: they serve as markers of identity, indicators of social status, vehicles of both inclusion and exclusion – to mention only a few. An obvious example of “language stratification” – or, if one prefers, “language struggles” – is the distinction between “legitimate” and “illegitimate,” “official” and “unofficial,” “standard” and “deviant,” “dominant” and “peripheral” modes of language use.

As critical sociologists are eager to point out, linguistic standards are usually imposed by powerful social groups, whose members have privileged access to dominant forms of symbolic, cultural, and educational capital and who use language to defend and stabilize their hegemonic position in society. Consequently, the exercise of social dominance (not only in the linguistic field, but also in other interactional fields) provides the hegemonic sectors of society with the structural capacity to translate “difference” into “deficiency” and, thus, “nonstandard” into “marginality” and “deviance” into “inferiority.”

Mechanisms of “language stratification” and dynamics of “language struggle,” however, are crucial to normalization processes that operate not only *within* but also *between* languages. Nowhere is this illustrated with more clarity than in the issue of *language endangerment*. Language endangerment comes about when *a language is at risk of falling out of use*, because its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language, or because of a combination of these two developments. People may be encouraged or, in extreme situations, forced to stop speaking their language and, out of convenience or under surveillance, move to speaking an alternative, socially more powerful, language instead.

It is widely estimated that 50–90 percent of the 6,000–7,000 languages spoken at the beginning of the twenty-first century will

have become extinct by 2100. In an era of globalization, characterized not only by unprecedented degrees of interconnectedness but also by neocolonialist and neoimperialist structures of domination, the economically powerful, geographically widespread, and demographically widely spoken languages dominate less influential and, in many cases, relatively marginalized languages. In the current context, the top 20 majority languages, that is, those spoken by more than 50 million speakers each, are spoken by 50 percent of the world’s population.

According to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), there are *five levels of language endangerment*:

- 1 “safe” (spoken by enough people to continue to exist);
- 2 “vulnerable” (not spoken by children outside home);
- 3 “definitely endangered” (not spoken by children);
- 4 “severely endangered” (spoken only by the oldest generations); and
- 5 “critically endangered” (spoken by a few members of the oldest generation, often semi-speakers).

There may be strong arguments for and against the use of a global *lingua franca* (which is now, effectively, English) in order to facilitate communication between actors across the world. Whatever position one may seek to defend in relation to this controversy, however, it is evident that the loss of languages diminishes cultural diversity across the globe. For instance, in North America, over 300 languages were spoken before the arrival of European settlers; at least half of these have died out completely. The picture looks similar when considering other regions, especially those that were colonized by European powers in recent centuries.

In light of the “survival of the fittest” *modus operandi* to which languages are constantly exposed, it is difficult not to draw analogies between *linguistic reproduction* and *biological reproduction*. Just as living species, in order to survive, need to “reproduce,” so do languages. A language is reproduced by ensuring its transmission from a current generation of speakers to a successive – ideally, equally strong, if not growing – generation of speakers. Vital to the realistic survival of a language, then, is the degree to which succeeding generations are learning it – that is, not only using it but also, albeit within limits, constantly modernizing it. Particularly important in this respect is the extent to which young children are acquiring a language, since full mastery of a language is most effectively (if not, as some may argue, exclusively) acquired during one’s childhood. Surely, some “dead” languages can be, at least partially, “revived” (for example, when studying ancient Greek or Latin, or when reconstructing the traces of an extinct language). In this sense, the death of a language may be less conclusive than the disappearance of a species. The survival of a language may depend on various factors: at the micro-level, on individual attitudes, mind-sets, habits, and preferences; at the meso-level, on behavioral, ideological, and institutional norms within communities; and, at the macro-level, on state policies.

Notwithstanding the main driving forces behind the reproduction or disappearance of a language, there are several good reasons why researchers in the humanities and social sciences, in particular, in addition to ordinary actors, in general, should take language endangerment seriously.

First, languages possess idiosyncratic components that are of *objective* significance. The adaptability of their key elements – notably of their morphological, terminological, semantic, syntactic, grammatical, phonetic, and

pragmatic dimensions – is symptomatic of the sociocultural variability of human languages. Linguistic diversity can be regarded as a crucial object of scientific enquiry, illustrating that even the foundational facets of human existence possess significant degrees of arbitrariness and malleability.

Second, languages possess idiosyncratic components that are of *normative* significance. Owing to their value-laden nature, languages make those who use them relate to, attribute meaning to, and act upon reality in particular ways. In practice, linguistic diversity is inconceivable without people’s right to express themselves in their own language and thereby develop a sense of cultural belonging.

Third, languages possess idiosyncratic components that are of *aesthetic* significance. Their main characteristics – such as signs, symbols, structure, sounds, and rhythm – have a distinctly aesthetic dimension. Linguistic diversity, then, implies that different languages constitute both vehicles and objects of aesthetic perception and appreciation.

The ongoing competition between “local languages” and “global languages,” as well as between “minority languages” and “majority languages,” reflects an imbalance in access to material and symbolic resources. Within the discipline of sociolinguistics, the comprehensive analysis of symbolic forms must involve the study of the power-laden conditions under which languages live, survive, and – potentially or actually – die.

SEE ALSO: Bourdieu, Pierre; Communication Theory; Culture; Derrida, Jacques; Evolutionary Theory; Power; Rationality; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Understanding (Verstehen); Wittgenstein, Ludwig

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