

# The Learned and the Sago-sago: Intralinguistic Misconceptions and Extralinguistic Politics

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**ABSTRACT.** Endangered language speakers are often regarded as primitive and ignorant by speakers of dominant languages. Much of this negative portrayal is misguidedly attributed to their language, and the practices and cultural knowledge encoded within it. The paper attempts to refute these commonly misguided linguistic beliefs, suggesting that the linguistic and political understanding they exhibit is in fact rather ignorant in itself. The paper concludes with the urgent need to develop public awareness towards and understanding of language death phenomena, and emphasizes the role and responsibilities of linguists in this essentially political process.

## 1 Introduction: The Learned and the Sago-sago

*“Ignorant: a state of not knowing what a pronoun is, or how to find the square root of 27.4, and merely knowing childish and useless things like which of the seventy almost identical-looking species of the purple sea snake are the deadly ones, how to treat the poisonous pith of the Sago-sago tree to make a nourishing gruel, how to foretell the weather by the movement of the tree-climbing Burglar Crab, how to navigate across a thousand miles of featureless ocean by means of a piece of string and a small clay model of your grandfather, how to get essential vitamins from the liver of the ferocious Ice Bear, and other such trivial matters. It’s a strange thing that when everyone becomes educated, everyone knows about the pronoun but no one knows about the Sago-sago”* (Pratchett, 1997: 220).

Pratchett’s witty and humorous definition of “ignorant” succinctly captures the quite dismissive tone that frequently accompanies the discourse on endangered languages and linguistic minorities. Endangered languages are often portrayed at best as exotic linguistic specimens and at worst as primitive jargons. These languages, so holds this frequent view, have little value or importance in themselves and to their speakers, let alone to the wider society in general. And while we might be sympathetic with speakers of Basque, Occitan or Mohawk, we have no good reason beyond mere sentimentalism to care about the possible death of their languages.

This view could be generally rendered into two complementing arguments: first, a *utilitarian* argument, according to which endangered languages are essentially not useful. As distinct entities they are deemed primitive as mechanisms of

communication and their encoded knowledge-systems are dismissed as vastly inferior to modern science. The second argument is of a *political* nature, claiming that endangered linguistic communities are essentially inferior -technologically, socially and sometimes morally - as cultures to modern western society. Thus the Sago-sago mentioned by Pratchett, for example, is deemed “childish”, “useless”, “primitive” and incomparable with modern food preparation, just as its consumers and their cultural practices are deemed “primitive”, underdeveloped and inferior to their modern, western and above all *learned* counterparts.

Unfortunately, while such a view has no empirical grounds, it is nevertheless quite popular. Equating technological development (at least of a certain type) with the developmental level of languages and linguistic communities is a common practice for citizens of the modern, developed world. Accordingly, they tend to think of themselves as educated and learned, while ascribing titles such as “ignorant” to residents of third-world countries, aboriginal clans and small hunter-gatherers tribes. Such ascribing, however, is fundamentally flawed. Based on misconceptions of the nature of language and a non-critical reflection on the politics of linguistic prestige, this paper will argue that this is in fact not a learned observation but rather an *unlearned* one, if not altogether ignorant.

## **2 The Age of Information? Traditional Knowledge Systems and Modern Science**

While estimates concerning the rate and precise extent of linguistic erosion might slightly differ, it is commonly agreed among linguists that roughly 50% of the world’s languages will die be lost by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Should we care about language death, and if so why? The answer to this questions lies on a more fundamental question, namely what is being lost when a language dies.

Equating the relative technological development of a certain culture with its language seems to be a very common practice. Thus English or German are elaborate and sophisticated, so the argument often maintains, while tribal languages such as the Australian Mati-Ke, Native American Mohawk or Ryūkyūan Kikai are primitive and under-developed. English grants its speakers access to modern culture and science, while speakers of Mati-Ke, Mohawk or Kikai have – at best – access to primitive and even rather ignorant knowledge of the world. Endangered languages, in short, fail to match the technological supremacy of English, German, Spanish or Chinese, and are therefore not useful. This, of course is a highly misguided belief, although regrettably quite common. Modern science and technology may rightfully pride themselves on a lengthy list of discoveries and achievements, but it might be quite a grave mistake on their

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<sup>1</sup> Crystal, 2000: 19.

part to dismiss endangered languages as not useful. In fact, a closer examination seems to suggest precisely the opposite.

One part of modern science where endangered languages are fundamentally indispensable is, of course, the field of linguistics. The world's languages exhibit an overwhelming diversity of linguistic properties – from vowel and consonant systems to syntactic structures. Every new language that is being studied has the potential to reveal yet another interesting, previously unknown, feature. These might be the elaborated 80 consonant system of Ubykh<sup>2</sup>, the apparently unique Nigerian Eleme use of verb reduplication to denote *negation*<sup>3</sup>, various noun classifiers in Japanese, Chinese and Australian languages such as Diyirbal (such as those discussed in Lakoff's *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*), evidentials (as in Brazil and Columbia Tuyuca<sup>4</sup>) and their likes. Every language that disappears unstudied from the face of the earth diminishes our ability to understand better the nature and complexity of human language<sup>5</sup>.

Historians and archeologists, too, belong in an academic field where endangered languages need to be heeded: as Harrison points out, linguistic evidence could support and supplement archaeological and genetic research. Examples are the cases of Polynesian borrowings in southern Californian languages; singular features common only to Siberian language Ket and Native Alaskan languages Tlingit, Eyak and more remotely Navajo<sup>6</sup>; or the intriguing typological similarities between the genetically unrelated Celtic and Hamito-Semitic languages. The diminishing of endangered languages could well mean the blockage of indispensable channels for the investigation of the past.

But it is not only humanities and social science academics who might find endangered languages useful. Scientific fauna and flora taxonomy, for example, as employed by modern biologists is said to account for as little as 13% of existing plants, fish and animals. The substantial remaining 87% of this data is readily encoded in the folk taxonomies of endangered languages<sup>7</sup>. Folk taxonomies, of course, are by no mean restricted to aboriginal clans and small hunter-gatherer societies in Papua New Guinea. Yet the high correlation between biodiversity and linguistic diversity as well as their highly disproportional geographical distribution makes the study of endangered languages an almost certain path for the discovery of new species and their understanding within global ecosystem.

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<sup>2</sup> Crystal, *ibid*: 56.

<sup>3</sup> Harrison, 2007: 216.

<sup>4</sup> Crystal, *ibid*: 59.

<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth account, see Crystal, *Ibid*: 54-67; Harrison, *ibid*: 205-236.

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, *ibid*: 233-235.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, *ibid*: 15, 23-55.

This link between biodiversity, the environment and language gives rise to yet another matter in which traditional knowledge systems, as encoded in language, might be able to benefit modern science and society: while modern agriculture and industry have undoubtedly benefited many by maximizing productivity, they have nevertheless in many cases been quite exploitive and harmful to the natural resources (such as the usage of polluting fertilizers, stretching seasonal and cyclic agriculture to an all-year round farming, deforestation, transition from multicrop farming to monocrop farming and replacement of native crops with crops that are not part of the ecosystem). With sustainability increasingly becoming a major global concern, traditional farming knowledge offers modern science and industry some sustainable solutions<sup>8</sup>.

Finally, this intimate connection between language and the environment might prove promising in the ever hopeful quest for treatment for illnesses such as heart diseases, AIDS and cancer. One celebrated example where traditional knowledge has been in such use is the case of Taxol, the commercial name of a substance extracted from a Pacific yew tree in a forest north of Packwood, Washington. Taxol is now being used to treat breast, lung, head, neck and ovarian cancer. With rapid linguistic erosion, the danger that the knowledge of other such substances is slipping away is very much real. The Sago-sago might turn out to be the cure for AIDS, but as long as we treat the traditional knowledge of which it is part as primitive and unlearned, it is us who run the risk of remaining ignorant on our own expense.

Unfortunately, the promising potential of endangered languages study in each of these cases is in direct negative correlation with the actual amount of data available on most of the worlds' languages. Too little is known of languages other than English, German, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese or any other languages that enjoy significant linguistic prestige. The linguistic properties of thousands of endangered language, as their historical path, folk taxonomies, traditional knowledge systems and their usages remain virtually unknown to us. Indeed, the sheer extent of what is yet to be discovered could only be hypothesized. Thus it appears quite an unlearned act to dismiss endangered languages as unuseful, if only because we are so used to think of our modern times as "the age of information"<sup>9</sup>.

### **3 Silent *Sikileoso*: Marginalizing Linguistic Minorities**

Useful as languages may be, however, making just the utilitarian argument in response to the question "why should we care about language death" is at best

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<sup>8</sup> Excellent accounts and illustrative examples of this particular point can be found in Nettle and Romaine, *ibid*: 156-166 and Harrison, *ibid*: 163-166. For an in-depth introduction to the field of ecolinguistics, see Fill and Mühlhäusler, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, *ibid*: 159.

rather partial. It was already suggested that prejudices about language often result in prejudices about speakers, and vice versa. Linguistic minorities, just like their languages, are commonly dismissed as technologically inferior to modern society and more often than not as culturally and morally inferior as well.

This view, once again, is quite misguided. For starters, this has nothing to do with language. No language of course is “better” or “more developed” in absolute terms. Each language equally enables each member of its speaker community to lead a full social life in it, and grants access to all complexities, subtleties and sophistication he or she requires. Since a native language is closely and intimately woven into virtually all aspects of the life of its speakers, its death inevitably harms them substantially. Consider the following quotation from Marcel Cohen, lamenting his native language, Ladino, as he witnesses its death in front of his eyes:

*“You can’t imagine, Antonio, what the death agony of a language is like. You seem to discover yourself alone, in silence. You’re sikileoso (sad) without knowing why”<sup>10</sup>.*

And he goes on –

*“Antonio, to rediscover my words I have to close my eyes, and many expressions come back to me without my quite knowing how. What can I say to you with la yaka – “the cucumber’s ass” (“that doesn’t come to la yaka”, my grandmother used to say), which made us burst into laughter, or with the expression “son of a mamzer” and all the things that make you “lose your mind”... Words stampede. They vanish as quickly as they arise. But what else can we expect of them? Really, they only tell us about smells, the distant sweetness of dondurma, of keftikas, of all those home-cooked delicacies. Ultimately, they just reflect nostalgia and the tragedies of the past. As soon as I glimpse them, words escape and die far away, like clouds in the sky.*

*The mother tongue: that’s what we called what we spoke at home. Will this mother ever die, Antonio? In her, our past grows old; in her, we are completely present to ourselves. And, if words are our true domain, how could they not also be part of our future? How could we imagine that we could one day become mousafires to ourselves in our own tongue? In our deepest beings we know very well that things don’t die, or at least not the feeling that we have for them.*

*But when, day by day, this language crumbles, Antonio; when, in its death throes, it slowly dilutes in the mabul, and, alone, in your room, you have to close your eyes to exhume a few scraps; when there is no longer anything to read in this tongue and no friends to speak it with; when the woman you live with looks at you like a sick man who is slowly losing away what remains of his sanity, and you feel obliged to forget a little more of yourself; when, staring at her on certain days, the past coming back at you in fits and starts, you feel like a complete stranger, having never really*

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen, 2006: 27.

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*shared a roof with her because an ocean separates the two of you; when, despite all your efforts, you are unable to reveal more than a part of yourself – then, Antonio, you must admit that death speaks through your mouth”<sup>11</sup>.*

The deep sense of loss expressed by Cohen is now shared by millions of people around the world. With the death of a native language, something invaluable for the human condition and existence of its speakers is lost. And since language ties so strongly with one’s identity (both individual and collective) it is inevitably deeply affected when the language is lost. Indeed, language shift can and does happen, but languages and their tying identities are not simply interchangeable. Inevitably induced by the death of a native language, this shift will always involve a deep and agonizing loss, as is so heartbreakingly exemplified by Cohen.

But it is not only an unlearned *intralinguistic* misconception that guides this unfounded ascribing of titles such as “primitive” and “ignorant” to minority languages, their cultures and speakers. It is also directed by a rather uncritical reflection of the role of *extralinguistic* politics in the power relations between languages, cultures and speakers’ communities. Languages differ in their prestige not because of some inherent features in either the language or its speakers that make it – and them - worthy of more or less respect; rather, they differ because political power relations between speakers’ communities of different languages vary, often as a result of superior technology employed in the usage of military campaigns or economical expansion.

Proponents of the view that regards linguistic minorities as primitive and “unenlightened” often point to alarming correlations between linguistic minorities and higher figures of unemployment, alcoholism, domestic violence, criminal activities and/or suicide rate. These correlations, unfortunately, seem to feature in quite a large number of cases, from Native Americans in the United States to Aboriginal people in Australia. However, the attribution of any of these behaviors to a certain distinct culture is quite mistaken. Looking for causal relations, it is best to observe the socioeconomic status of these minorities: both as individuals and communities, they are more prone to be socioeconomic disadvantaged than speakers of majority language, for obvious reasons: low or partial linguistic skills in the dominant language are tightly related to fewer opportunities for high-paying jobs and thus to lower social mobility and higher unemployment figures. Other reason might be the difficult transition from traditional community lifestyle of nomads, hunters-gatherers, and clans to a modern, industrial and centralized bureaucratic state. Traditional and local communities may become quite vulnerable in such a rapidly-changing and dynamic setting, thus further being unable to provide their members with social solidarity and a stable sense of belonging.

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<sup>11</sup> Cohen, *ibid*: 28-30.

Indeed, it is precisely this breakdown of communities and social disintegration that correlates with higher chances for their members to be involved in alcoholism, domestic violence, criminal activities and higher suicide rates. This, of course, has much less to do with the intrinsic properties of their language and culture, and much more with problematic accommodation policies on the state's behalf<sup>12</sup>. In other cases, of course, the government itself might not be at all interested in the welfare of these minorities or even actively seek to harm them. Measures such as land expropriating, forced resettling and harsh assimilation policies – linguistic and others – are regrettably more often than not a characterizing feature of government-minorities relations<sup>13</sup>.

This socioeconomic disadvantaging and marginalization of linguistic minorities, once again, has nothing to do with their language or even, in most cases, with their culture. Rather, this is the product of political processes which foster a misguided conception of a presumed natural “hierarchy” of languages and cultures. Yet there is nothing natural about this. Being unaware of that, proponents of such view are yet again risking the title “unlearned”.

#### **4 Who's Afraid of Politics? Beyond Sociolinguistics**

Language beliefs and ideologies, particularly in regards to the unusefulness of endangered languages and their intrinsic inferiority to modern science and society, are unfortunately most often highly misguided. Yet this misgiving is quite understandable when the minute extent - if any - of proper linguistic education in most educational institutions is taken into account. Language classes, both native and foreign, tend to focus on prescriptive grammar and only rarely explore the field of linguistics. Indeed, language teachers themselves are surprisingly very rarely trained in linguistics. It is no wonder, then, that such aforementioned misconceptions seem to be common sense among public and non-linguistics professionals alike.

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to suggest, of course, that cultural coexistence is always an easily-achieved, harmonic matter: contemporary political theory is filled sometimes very heated debates as to the ethical dimension of controversial cultural practices such as the *Sati* (self-immolation of widows) or female circumcision, particularly when proponents of such practices seek to accommodate them within liberal political communities. But while these practices remain hotly debated, it is nonetheless clear that dismissing the entire Indian or Somali cultures on this basis will be just as (un)reasoned as dismissing the Chinese or American cultures on the base of their widespread usage of death penalty.

<sup>13</sup> More elaborated discussion of this point, including and case studies, can be found in Nettle and Romaine, *ibid.* See also, for example, Tollefson, 2001. Less systematic study but nevertheless rather empirical an account can also be found in Abley, 2005.

Unfortunately, this linguistic ignorance has important and urgent real-life repercussions not only in public opinion but also in the form of misguided language policies in education, law, state administration, media and their likes. The normative evaluations of these policies by professional political theorists are regrettably not much better informed. Proponents of communitarian, egalitarian or multicultural theories still stumble along, either uninterested or unaware of the importance of language in contemporary politics<sup>14</sup>. Meanwhile, endangered languages and linguistic communities are facing dwindling economic and linguistic resources, and are running out of time awaiting properly informed policymakers.

Consequently, it is not political scientists or activists but rather sociolinguists such as R. M. W. Dixon, David Crystal and Suzanne Romaine who have found themselves in a position of ad-hoc policy advisors and indeed accepted the challenge. Stepping beyond the boundaries of “classical” linguistic descriptivism to linguistic activism, they have put forward a number of operative suggestions, including the reinstating of fieldwork on endangered languages in graduate studies, various local strategies for linguistic sustainability and raising public awareness towards and understanding of the considerable repercussions of language death<sup>15</sup>.

Carrying out fieldwork, of course, has been a traditional linguistic practice. Likewise, advising linguistic minorities has been an ongoing practice since the work of sociolinguists such as Joshua Fishman with postcolonial nation building projects in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet both, it seems, are rather reluctant to face directly the political process that governs language politics, as “politics” still strikes many linguists as a synonym for nothing but egoism, manipulation and corruption. Sociolinguists, too, are often reluctant to acknowledge the fundamental political nature of their field. But it is politics where decisions are being made and policies are being devised. Avoiding the political life only diminishes the possibility of devising better, more informed policies, which are ultimately the basis for a change in the public and governmental standpoint towards language issues. Much more could be achieved if linguists will acknowledge their important role and responsibility in educating the public by going political, that is seeking to extend their professional contribution and participation in the political process and public life. It is thus that we could try to ensure that language beliefs and consequent policies will cease to be so frustratingly unlearned.

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kymlicka and Patten, 2003; May, 2003; Schmidt, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Dixon, 1997; Crystal, *ibid*; Nettle and Romaine, *ibid*.

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