Moral Language Endangerment

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the concept of moral language endangerment by which is meant the unnoticed danger that a language is exposed to in what makes its identity at stake. It comes as an offspring of certain mechanisms the unfolding of which is the main concern of this work. Thus, the paper starts with defining the concept of physical language endangerment and showing its strategies, then defining its counterpart, i.e. moral language endangerment by comparing it to the former spotting Arabic as a case under scrutiny. Finally, a number of conclusions and recommendations are listed.

1. Introduction

Language is identity. This is globally agreed upon and no two people can dispute about it. Yet, there are cases where a language is not viewed as identity-mirroring; it is considered as a requirement whose fulfillment is not mandatory – it is a second-degree means of communication, as it were. That is, if someone can speak a specific language, then it is good; if s/he cannot, it is equally good (if not better in certain cases for some people). What are the reasons for such cases, what are the solutions and more are presented in this paper. Thus, it starts with defining language endangerment in its physical sense, showing its types and degrees, and then discussing the case of moral language endangerment taking Arabic as an example and citing some live supporting examples. Finally, a number of conclusions and recommendations are given.

2. Physical Language Endangerment

How can a language be physically endangered? Is there some specific tool used to do this? What is physical language endangerment in essence?

Janse (2003: 1) and Carmichael (2008: 9) look at language endangerment as the case whereby languages are in the process of dying when they for whatever reason lose speakers without gaining any in return.

Janse (ibid.) mentions five levels or types of language endangerment:

1. **Potential Endangerment:** if the children start preferring the dominant language and learn the obsolescing language imperfectly.

2. **Endangerment:** if the youngest speakers are young adults and there are no or very few child speakers.

3. **Serious Endangerment:** if the youngest speakers are middle-aged or past middle age.

4. **Terminal Endangerment or Moribund:** if there are only a few elderly

speakers left.

5. **Death:** a language is dead if it has no speakers left at all.

Carmichael (ibid.: 15-7), in her turn, adopts a different classification of the stages of language endangerment depending on other factors that make languages liable to extinct. However, she (ibid.) invokes the classification of two organizations (Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), respectively):

1. **Critically Endangered:** very few speakers all 70 years old and older, great grandparent age.

2. **Severely endangered:** speakers are only 40 years old and older, grandparent age.

3. **Endangered:** speakers are only 20 years old and older, parent age.

4. **Eroding:** speakers are some children and older people. Other

children do not speak it.

5. **Stable but Threatened:** all children and older people are speakers, but few in number.

6. **Safe, Not endangered:** language expected to be learned by all children and all others in the ethnic group.

She (ibid.) states that the UNESCO has come up with a more in-depth form of classification, setting out nine factors for each of which a language can rate from one to five, with five representing the highest level

of vitality:

1. Intergenerational Language Transmission : 3

The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children at home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

2. Absolute Number of Speakers : 2

Languages with lower absolute populations of speakers are considered at higher risk than larger speech communities.

3. Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population : 2-3

When the community consists of people whose ages is averaged, that is, people are of near averages: for instance a community consisting of most people over age fifty and a number of speakers aged twenty to fifty.

4. Trends in Existing Language Domains : 3

The non-dominant language loses ground and, at home, parents begin to use the dominant language in their everyday interactions with their children, and children become semi-speakers of their own language (receptive bilinguals). Parents and older members of the community tend to be productively bilingual in the dominant and indigenous languages: they understand and speak both. Bilingual children may exist in families where the indigenous language is actively used.

5. Response to New Domains and Media: 1-2

This factor refers to whether or not the minority language is appearing in newer domains such as radio, television, and interne-t.

6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy: 3

This refers to the case where a language is taught in school, yet it is not the local variety being used in interaction. The following example is given: in Louisiana, many children are exposed to French in school; however it is not the local variety of French. Moreover, the teaching of Modern European French (MEF) in Louisiana schools "amounts to the promotion of an external French standard in Louisiana rather than to the preservation of regional varieties of French." An additional problem is that there is no accepted orthography for Louisiana Regional French (LRF); however most frequently LRF is represented using MEF orthography, once again promoting the MEF standard.

7. Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies,Including Official Status and Use: 4

Carmichael prefers to illustrate the remaining factors by invoking French as an example. PACIT French and other varieties of Louisiana French are in theory well represented in government by the state-run agency CODOFIL. Especially after the Cajun Renaissance in the 1960's, Louisiana's French heritage has been capitalized upon for purposes of tourism. However, tourists were quite positive in their reactions to hearing Gaelic spoken, the condescension inherent in their view of Gaelic as quaint or charming could hardly have escaped local residents."

8. Community Members' Attitudes Toward their own Language: 2

As could be noticed in a few quotes from speakers of PACIT French, there is still a certain amount of shame and embarrassment about speaking French. Although there are some staunch advocates of PACIT French, many PACIT French speakers expressed indifference over language revitalization and maintenance efforts.

9. Amount and Quality of Documentation: 3

There have been a number of works, descriptive as well as sociolinguistic in nature, on French in the region.

Whatever the classification is, there is one thing which all these various taxonomies agree upon: language death does not come on the spur of the moment. There are certain signals sent that must not pass unnoticed concerning the conditions of languages that are at the stake of endangerment.

One last things needs to be mentioned to close down the discussion on language endangerment. Černý (2010: 52), following Fishman (1991: 88–109), proposes a graded division of languages according to their endangerment. Černý (ibid.) comments on the following figure by stating that Stage One languages are the least threatened, with higher levels of government and education institutions employing the language. Stage Eight languages, on the contrary, are the most seriously endangered, having only a few fluent speakers left. The remaining six stages rank between these two poles:

Stage One	Used by higher levels of government and in higher education.
Stage Two	Used by local government and the mass media in the community.
Stage Three	Used in business and by employees in less specialized work areas.
Stage Four	Language is required in elementary schools.
Stage Five	Language is still very much alive and used in community.
Stage Six	Some intergenerational use of language.
Stage Seven	Only adults beyond child bearing age speak the language.
Stage Eight	Only a few elders speak the language.

Figure (3) Adaptation of Fishman's Scale for Threatened Languages (Following Černý, 2010: 52).

2.1 Two Concluding Questions

After knowing what is meant by language death, its main causes, and how languages become nominated for death (that is, being endangered), the time has come now to ask two important questions:

1. Why should we care about language death?

2. What should be done to prevent it?

Crystal (2000: 27, 32-65) answers the first question by giving five reasons "all answering in different ways the question 'Why should we care if a language dies?'":

1. **The Need for Diversity:** Linguistic diversity is a prerequisite for successful humanity, as such its preservation is essential due to the fact that language lies at the heart of what it means to be a human. By the same token, if the development of multiple cultures is important, then the role of languages becomes critical because cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written languages. Accordingly, when language transmission breaks down, through language death, there is a serious loss of inherited knowledge.

2. **Language Expresses Identity:** Identity and diversity are two facet of the same coin. By association with diversity, everyone in this world cares about their identity. Crystal (ibid.: 36) summarizes this by invoking a Welsh proverb:

 'A nation without a language is a nation without a heart'

He continues discussing this point by believing that the loss of languages is tragic precisely because they are not interchangeable, precisely because they represent the distillation of the thoughts and communication of a people over their entire history. He, eventually concludes that identity is what makes the members of a community recognizably the same. It is a summation of the characteristics which make it what it is and not something else – of 'us' vs. 'them', i.e. language is the primary index, or symbol, or register of identity[1].

3. Languages are Repositories of History: Languages are the pedigree of nations. Pedigree, then as now, refers to ancestry, lineage, or descent. A language encapsulates its speakers' history, i.e. languages are the archives of history, as it was once thought. They do this, most obviously, by expressing, through the grammar and lexicon of their texts, the events which form their past.

4. Languages Contribute to the Sum of Human Knowledge: To explain this reason well, it seems necessary to use Crystal's (ibid.: 44-5) exact words. He says that identity and history combine to ensure that each language reflects a unique encapsulation and interpretation of human existence, and this gives us yet another reason for caring when languages die. It is a motive that is more self-serving than altruistic, though no less worthy. We should care – because we can learn a great deal from them. The view that languages other than our own provide us with a means of personal growth, as human beings, is a recurrent theme in literature, at various levels of intellectual profundity. The message is clearly that there is much to be learned and enjoyed in experiencing other languages. And the corollary is that we miss out on this experience if we do not avail ourselves of the opportunity to encounter at least one other language. Everyone who has travelled has felt this limitation, to at least some extent. Otherwise s/he voluntarily makes himself a great baby, – so helpless and so ridiculous. He finally deduces that 'The world is a mosaic of visions. With each language that disappears, a piece of that mosaic is lost'.

5. Languages are Interesting in Themselves: Crystal's (ibid.: 54) point of departure for this reason is that "The aim of linguistics is to define the nature of the human language faculty, comprehensively and explicitly". By so claiming, he supports the opinion that each language manifests a fresh coming-together of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary to form a system of communication which, while demonstrating certain universal principles of organization and structure, is an unprecedented event and a unique encapsulation of a world view. He terminates his discussion here by affirming that "The more languages we study, the fuller our picture of the human linguistic options will be".

In an attempt to answer the second question, Crystal (ibid.: 130-41) enumerates six 'gate-keeping' factors which might save an endangered language. He thinks that an endangered language will progress if its   speakers:

1. Increase their prestige within the dominant community.

2. Increase their wealth relative to the dominant community

3. Increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community.

4. Have a strong presence in the educational system.

5. Can write their language down.

6. Can make use of electronic technology.

3. Moral Language Endangerment

After getting an idea about physical language endangerment, it is suitable now to present and clarify what the moral counterpart means. By moral language endangerment is meant the 'unnoticed' danger which a language is exposed to in what makes its identity at stake. Two words need more illustration in this definition: unnoticed and identity. The former means that the endangerment is not meant purposefully to threaten a particular language; it comes as an unexpected offspring of certain mechanisms followed by both government and people on an equal basis for purposes other than endangering their mother language. Let's take Arabic in the Arab Homeland, in general, and Iraq, in particular. United Arab Emirates is cited as an example on the case of some Arabic countries. It is well known that in the UAE the system as a whole hinges upon English as the main language of communication, even more basically than Arabic, to the extent that a person's qualifications are only taken into consideration if s/he can master English and so can get better jobs. In the Iraqi educational system, by contrast, English has been taught as the main foreign language in schools, and this actually presented a problem for many generations along the years. Nevertheless, due to the influence of globalization, mass media, and the new policies of education, the case has changed gradually yet drastically. For example, the governmental policy, nowadays, for the schools of the most distinguished students is that the basic subjects are taught in English. So, let's suppose that half of the materials are given in English, with the passage of time that student will prefer speaking a variation which is a mixture of both English and Arabic, with a tendency towards English. Let's also admit that the percentage of the most distinguished students is much less than the non-distinguished ones, yet the latter are also prone to prefer English owing to the effect of media, requirements of job market, and seeking better opportunities of jobs. Hence, when a graduate likes to get a good job with a decent income, the basic requirement is to have good English spoken and/or written.

A more seriously important example is reading the Glorious Quran. The majority of the youth today do not know how to read from the Glorious Quran correctly in spite of the all the inflections

written. Why? This is mainly because the educational system does not give Arabic its due attention as required, the matter which has its repercussions on other major issues like this. Arabic is taught as a mandatory subject without drawing learners' attention to its aesthetic aspects, its richness and its magnificent history. As a result of this, its young speakers do not feel proud as native speakers of such a kept-by-God language. And that is why the standard Arabic is now viewed as very difficult if not impossible to speak, to the extent that if we happen to meet someone speaks this variation we feel as if we speak to an alien as we cannot understand much of what is said.

As such, if Janse's (2003) levels of endangerment listed above are recalled, we can state that, morally speaking, Arabic is potentially endangered because the majority of the grownups prefer English to Arabic.

The question which poses itself now: In the midst of this jumble, where is Arabic? Does it even exist? It is actually there, no one can deny its existence, for after all it is the language of the Glorious Quran that is kept by God. Yet, it is not identity-reflecting as much as required. And here comes the need for illustrating 'identity'.

Though simple and clear it seems, the word 'identity' is a complex amalgam of various aspects. It is a combination of psychological, physiological, social, cultural and even conventional features. All these and more are created and expressed by language hence appears the link between language and identity. Keller (2007: 3) states that all the various aspects of language, i.e. phonetic features, lexical units, syntactic structures, and even personal names are embedded in expressing that link.

Let's take college students as an example. Certain English words they use in everyday communication, maybe unconsciously, to express various meanings without even mentioning the Arabic counterpart even once. Such words as: mobile, mall, diet, hello, OK, video, cream, gel, tag, mention (when talking about facebook) and even the names of shops are written in English; if not the name itself is English in essence. Such use should ring a bell. Since people

find it easier, and actually more educated, to utter these words than using their Arabic peers, this means that there is no attention paid to the mother tongue. What is more important for interactants in such situations is express what they have in mind in a prestigious manner regardless of what code is used. This also implies that, for the majority of Iraqi speakers, to use English words mixed with, or in place of, their Arabic counterparts is more prestigious than using the original Arabic terminology which when used may cause some embarrassment to the persons using it. English now is treated as a scale of a person's education and cultivation.

From what is mentioned so far, the following should be affirmed: moral language endangerment threatens people's identity with making them think that what their use of foreign words is actually a matter of culture and cultivation. What is worse, they begin to judge other people by their use of foreign language, English in our case, so the matter becomes socially spread; it is not a matter of individuals any more and that is why it represents endangerment. When mother tongue use does not make people feel proud when speaking it, when people themselves require mandatorily using a foreign language, in preference to the mother tongue, to get a good job, when the youth prefer to use foreign words in preference to their native peers, all these should ring a bell.

What can be done then? The following may shed light:

1. There must be campaigns led by professional people in getting the whole ideology back to track again. That is, to edify people, of all levels whatsoever, of the importance of their mother tongue.

2. Moreover, people should also comprehend the strong link between their language and their identity as both are part and parcel of each other.

3. More important than the two just mentioned is instilling in children the sacrosanctity, richness, and beauty of their native language. This is done by means of proper teaching methods prepared by professionals who do believe in their language and not just jotting down difficult subjects whom neither the teacher nor the stu-

dents are going to make use of in future. Arabic should be taught according to certain approaches, viz. the communicative approach, on the same par with English whose teaching really occupies the minds of those in charge at the expense of Arabic. If the latter is taught correctly, learners' views will change accordingly.

Conclusions

Moral language endangerment is a serious issue that needs to be taken into consideration. Though farfetched it might seem to some, every language is liable to be endangered when its speakers' are not as aware as required concerning the close link between their identity and their language.

However, it remains plausible that physical language endangerment is more tangible and noticed than the moral one. This is because it is associated with tangible causes the main of which is the number of speakers. That is why languages with larger number of speakers (like English and Arabic) are less prone to physical endangerment.

Moreover, it has been concluded that moral language endangerment has two other dimensions above the social one: economic and political. This is clearly manifested in (ex)colonized countries and in touristic areas whose people are not well-aware of (or might not pay good heed to) the actual dimensions of such an issue. As such, it is the responsibility of the government (especially those in charge of language policies and planning) to pay attention to the various languages and varieties that are constantly used in a country, in order not to allow harmful factors aggravating and drive the whole situation out of control.

References

1- For more details on the relationship between language and identity, see Joseph (2009: 345-61), and Kiesling (2009: 352-8).

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