



UDC 811

**TO THE QUESTION OF ENDANGERED
LANGUAGES***Goncharova Y. L., Shutov D. S.*Don State Technical University, Rostov-on-Don,
Russian Federationjl.goncharova@gmail.comsafik95.ru@gmail.com

The paper considers endangered languages. Much attention is given to the analysis of Scottish Gaelic and Northern Khanty as endangered languages. Reasons of their extinction are listed and the possible ways of preventing their extinction are stated. The authors suggest creating such conditions under which bearers of such languages would have a chance to transfer their knowledge to the following generations.

Keywords: endangered languages, Scottish language, Northern Khanty language, linguistics, languages policy, languages in Russia, language extinction

Introduction

An endangered language is a language that is at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language. A language becomes extinct when there are no more speakers left. As a result, it becomes a “dead language”. Nevertheless, it is still possible to study that language using writings and speech recordings, but the language remains dead unless there are fluent speakers [1, p. 11]. Languages have died out quite often throughout the course of human history, but in recent years this process had started to speed up due to the reasons of globalisation and neocolonialism.

The main consensus is that there are now about 6000 – 7000 languages spoken in the world, and it is possible that between 50% - 90% of them may go extinct during this century [2, p.2]. Interestingly, the 20 most spoken languages are used by more than 50 million speakers each, which is nearly 50% of the population of our planet. However the majority of the languages are only spoken by 10,000 people or less.

The relevance of this paper is explained by the fact that this issue is unjustifiably ignored in the mass media, as well as in the research papers of modern linguistic scientists. It is necessary to pay more attention to the problem of the endangered languages, because it is ambiguous and requires more detailed consideration. Due to the process of globalization, many languages are dying out, which entails significant cultural losses. Thus, this article has a scientific novelty and represents a contribution to the popularization of the topic of the disappearance of rare languages.

Though there are no certain factors that allow us to identify the language as endangered, a document issued by UNESCO in 2003 outlines nine factors for determining language vitality. They are:

УДК 811

**К ВОПРОСУ О ЯЗЫКАХ,
НАХОДЯЩИХСЯ ПОД УГРОЗОЙ
ИСЧЕЗНОВЕНИЯ***Гончарова Ю. Л., Шутков Д. С.*Донской государственный технический
университет, Ростов-на-Дону, Российская
Федерацияjl.goncharova@gmail.comsafik95.ru@gmail.com

Статья посвящена языкам, находящимся под угрозой исчезновения. Большое внимание уделяется анализу шотландского и северно-хантыйского языков. Приводятся причины вымирания языков и возможные способы предотвращения их исчезновения. Авторы видят решение проблемы в создании условий, при которых носители таких языков смогли бы передавать их знание последующим поколениям.

Ключевые слова: вымирающие языки, шотландский язык, северно-хантыйский язык, лингвистика, политика в отношении языков, языки в России, исчезновение языков.



1. Intergenerational language transmission
2. Absolute number of speakers
3. Proportion of speakers existing within the total (global) population
4. Language use within existing contexts and domains
5. Response to language use in new domains and media
6. Availability of materials for language education and literacy
7. Government and institutional language policies
8. Community attitudes towards their language
9. Amount and quality of documentation

Nevertheless, many languages are spoken by a large group of people but they are still considered to be endangered due to the fact that children do not keep learning them. This signifies that these languages may still be in use, but there is no chance of transferral between generations.

Though, there is no definite threshold for identifying the language as endangered, they can still be separated in 6 groups. These groups are as follows [3, p. 8]:

Table 1

Language Safety Classification

STATUS	DESCRIPTION	
	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Safe	The language is used among all generations. There are no problems with transferring the language further.	English, Arabic, Spanish, German, Russian, French
Unsafe	The majority of children do use the language, but the use of it may be somehow limited (for example, the language is spoken only whilst at home).	Adyghe, Bashkir language, Belarusian, Chuvash language
Definitely endangered	The language is not studied by children as a native one.	Walloon, Yiddish, Newar (Newari), Lombard language, Romani language (Gypsy)
Severely endangered	The language is used solely by older generations; parents can understand this language, but it is not used in communication between themselves and their children.	Breton language, Kashubian language, Crimean Tatar language, Nanai language
Critically endangered	The youngest bearers of the language are old men. They use the language only partially and rarely.	Votic language, Dahalik language, Duruwa language, Orok language, Tofa language
Extinct	The language has no living bearers.	Dalmatian language, Kamassian language, Kerek language, Obispeño language (also known as Northern Chumash).

Therefore, to determine the group to which a language may belong, one should find out how this language is transferred through generations. According to the Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger there were nearly 2,500 endangered languages in 2009 (in 2001 there were only 900).

Every language reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries, including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival not only of its speakers, but also of countless others. Why, then, do languages go extinct?

Endangered languages. Reasons for going extinct.

The reasons for language extinction are vast. But, in general, they can be separated into a few groups, considering the main problem that leads to their extinction. However, these categories are subject to change and new ones can be added.

These groups include:

- 1) Natural reasons, disasters, famine, disease. Any of these reasons, if strong and dangerous enough, can easily wipe an entire population of language speakers, which will eventually lead to the partial or complete disappearance of their language.
- 2) Wars and genocide. During our history there have been many wars, which have led to the endangerment or even complete disappearance of languages. For example, the indigenous peoples of the North American continent, who were nearly wiped out during colonisation and then placed in reservations, where they continue to disappear even now.
- 3) Political repression. This takes place when the government of a country is trying to force the use of a certain language on its territory without paying attention to other languages that are already spoken. We can observe this process on the territory of Ukraine, where Russian language speakers are not welcomed and this language is officially prohibited on the territory of the country. It is, however, impossible to predict how the government of any country will act, if they want to only have only one specific language on their territory, but the results can be deplorable for minority languages that are not widely spread and become prohibited.
- 4) Globalisation and urbanisation. These factors have appeared in recent history, but they can affect languages and native speakers even more than previously existing ones. Due to the process of globalisation that takes place in our world, many borders have disappeared and it has become possible for different cultures to exchange information, knowledge and culture. This exchange may eventually lead to a moment when a stronger culture will forcibly drive out a weaker one, destabilising the position of the language attached to it. Additionally, urbanisation is also a significant factor of language extinction. Together, these factors may lead to a situation, in which people are forced to learn the language of the nearby country, which has a more stabilised economy, more beneficial places of work and more possibilities for development.
- 5) Inter-marriage. This is also an important factor, especially considering the previous one. When cross-cultural marriage takes place it often results in only one language being used mostly within the family, leading to the endangerment of the second language, if considered on a bigger scale.

All in all, these reasons do not represent all the possible causes for the language extinction, but they classify these reasons into the biggest groups of such causes. In order to further examine the causes for language extinction, we may consider the endangered languages Scottish Gaelic and Northern Khanty. Why are these languages in the position of being endangered, and can they be saved? Is the loss of these languages a purely natural process, or does it connote the loss of connection with an inherent cultural heritage, as exacerbated by external factors?



Scottish Gaelic and Northern Khanty.

Scottish Gaelic and Northern Khanty languages belong to different language groups but are in a similar position. Both of them can be considered endangered because: Scottish Gaelic is used by 20,000 – 30,000 people worldwide and more than 50,000 claim knowledge of the language. Northern Khant is spoken by nearly 10,000 people worldwide.

Scottish Gaelic is a language traditionally spoken in Scotland. Though the language is considered endangered, the situation is in fact improving with every passing year. One of the reasons for this is that every council across the country is bound by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act, which was passed by the Scottish parliament in 2005 with a view to creating a sustainable future for the language by raising its status and profile [4]. As a result, in 2014 Gaelic had reached the point where the number of Gaelic speakers had in fact started to grow.

The number of native speakers has started to decline in recent years, due to the fact that the overall amount of schools where children can learn this language had exceeded 2,900. Many parents now, even those who do not speak Gaelic themselves are opting to send their children to Gaelic - medium schools. According to researchers, as time passes, these young Gaels may revitalise the language.

Additionally, many children now learn English together with Gaelic which helps to preserve the language and also makes children bilingual, which improves mental agility, leads to a faster learning of tertiary languages, and protects against age-related memory loss. Furthermore social programmes aimed at revitalising the language, have been established. For example, according to one BBC article, conversations in Gaelic are helping dementia sufferers in Inverness [5]. Native Gaelic speakers with dementia are being helped to recall memories through conversations in their mother tongue with school children. The project, run by the Cameron House Care Home in Inverness, aims to boost the wellbeing of the older people and help youngsters improve their Gaelic and social skills.

Furthermore, the process of Brexit may give rise to a renewed support for the Gaelic language. The separation of the United Kingdom from the EU may in turn lead to the separation of Scotland from United Kingdom, subsequently laying the foundation for the development of the Gaelic language. With a deeper connection to their own land and cultural heritage, the desire to differentiate such a culture through language use can appear. Gaelic may become the official national language, which would see it shift from its current state as an endangered language to the state of a safe language.

Moreover, a similar process is now taking place now in Ukraine. Over the last couple of years, Ukraine has started to separate itself from Russia, and one such separation was made in terms of language. Until 2012, Russian had been the official language of multinational communication. Only when the process of active separation from Russia began, the Government of Ukraine started to exclude Russian from all spheres of everyday life. Now the only official language of the country is Ukrainian, but many people still speak using Russian. This process can eventually lead to the development of Ukrainian of the whole territory of the country.

The situation with Northern Khanty is, by contrast, getting worse over time. The Khanty language, previously known as Ostyak is the language of Khanty people. It is spoken in the autonomous okrugs, Khanty–Mansi and Yamalo-Nenets as well as in the Aleksandrovsky and Kargosoksky districts of the Tomsk Oblast in Russia. According to the 1994 Salminen and Janhunen study, there were 12,000 Khanty-speaking people in Russia. Though often considered to be a single language, Khanty is actually a group of three mutually unintelligible conglomerations of dialects that may well be counted as separate languages. [6]The Khanty language has a large number of dialects. The western group includes the Obdorian, Ob, and Irtysh dialects. The eastern group includes the Surgut and Vakh-Vasyugan dialects, which, in turn, are subdivided into thirteen other dialects. Southern Khanty is possibly extinct to this moment. These dialects differ significantly from one another in phonetic, morphological, and lexical



features to the extent that the three main "dialects" (northern, southern and eastern) are mutually unintelligible. Thus, based on their significant multifactorial differences, Eastern, Northern and Southern Khanty could be considered separate but closely related languages.

The overall amount of native speakers is rapidly declining. According to researchers, in 1959, with a population of 19,410, 77% of people, considered themselves to be native Khanty speakers. In 1970 this dropped to 68.9% of a population of 21,138, and in 1989 there was only 6.5%. The amount of Khants who use the Russian language as their native or as a second language is also increasing. Between 1959 and 1989 the percentage of such people had increased from 70.3% to 89.4%. According to the statistics, in 2010 the overall number of Khanty speakers was 9584 [7]

Northern Khanty is reportedly still used in many families as a means of internal communication, though Russian is universally learnt as the dominant language; native language skills are, however, often destroyed by the unifying boarding school system, operating in Russian only.

Interestingly, Ethno-rock-band "H-Ural" has songs written in dialects of Khanty language – Shurishkar and Sredneobsky. There are a few other groups and folklore groups who also use these dialects.

Should we preserve endangered languages?

By and large, there are two common opinions concerning this question. The first is - "If the language is nearly extinct, or it has become extinct, then there were no reasons for it to exist". If young people do not want to speak the language, why should people attempt to save it? If the language is on a verge of extinction it means that there are no speakers of this language, which means that there is no need for it. This idea can also be supported by the fact that the world is now undergoing the process of globalisation, which will perhaps lead humanity to unity, both territorial and linguistic. It follows that this unity will leave no place for multilingualism. Therefore, this process is natural and we will one day find ourselves using only one language with other ones being merely a part of history.

The second point of view, as many linguists may hold, is that losing a language is similar to losing a species. It is also a kind of extinction. There are organisations dedicated to preventing this. The National Geographic Society has created an Enduring Voices Project in collaboration with the Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages to help preserve languages, which it sees as a means of preserving culture, ancient knowledge, and ways of thinking. Many endangered languages have no written form, and with their loss we also lose folklore, stories, and the views and understandings of countless generations of humans.

If we decide to preserve endangered languages, there are things that can be done. The most important thing that can be done to keep a language from disappearing is to create favourable conditions for its speakers to speak the language and teach it to their children. This often requires national policies that recognise and protect minority languages, education systems that promote mother-tongue instruction, and creative collaboration between community members and linguists to develop a writing system and introduce formal instruction in the language. Since the most crucial factor is the attitude of the speaker community towards its own language, it is essential to create a social and political environment that encourages multilingualism and respect for minority languages so that speaking such a language is an asset rather than a liability. Some languages now have so few speakers that they cannot be maintained, but linguists can, if the community so wishes, record as much of the language as possible so that it does not disappear without a trace.

Conclusion

To summarise, the preservation of endangered languages is a highly controversial topic. Many people will formulate their own arguments for or against such preservation. Still, languages provide ways



of interpreting the world, and no two are the same. As such, they can provide an insight into the neurological, psychological and linguistic capacities of our species.

We must also pay attention to the fact that many global organisations are attempting to prevent the endangerment and disappearance of languages.

One such organisation is UNESCO which acts on many fronts to safeguard endangered languages and prevent their disappearance:

- In education, UNESCO supports policies promoting multilingualism and especially mother tongue literacy; it supports the language component of indigenous education, and raises awareness of the importance of language preservation in education.
- In culture, UNESCO collects data on endangered and indigenous languages, develops standardised tools and methodologies, and improves the capacity of governments and civil society to implement such tools (academic institutions and speaker communities).
- In communication and information, UNESCO supports the use of local languages in the media and promotes multilingualism in cyberspace.
- In science, UNESCO assists programmes to strengthen the role of local languages in the transmission of local and indigenous knowledge.

The problem of the endangered languages can only be solved by involving a wide range of specialists, including not only linguists, but also representatives of governments of many countries. It is necessary to create conditions under which native speakers will be able to transfer their language to succeeding generations, and eventually the percentage of disappearing languages will decrease.

Only time will show whether or not our endangered languages will be resurrected, but language remains, regardless, a simple means of communication. If we are to consider one such mean as no longer unnecessary then it will still remain in written forms, which can be reconstructed if and when so needed.

References

1. Crystal, David (2002). *Language Death*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 0521012716.
2. Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia (2011). "Introduction". In Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia. *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-88215-6.
3. Language Vitality and Endangerment / UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages – Access mode: <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf>
4. The Courier.co.uk / Gaelic: is it time to let it go? – Access mode: <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/news/local/142622/gaelic-is-it-time-to-let-it-go/>
5. BBC NEWS / Gaelic conversations help Inverness dementia sufferers - Access mode: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-3221804> 0
6. The Endangered Languages Project / Northern Khanty / Language metadata – Access mode: <http://www.endangeredlanguages.com/lang/8550>
7. Russian Federal State Statistics Service – Access mode: http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/population/demo/per-itog/tab6.xls