



What is language loss?

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An issue of major importance to heritage language communities is language loss. Language loss can occur on two levels. It may be on a personal or familial level, which is often the case with immigrant communities in the United States, or the entire language may be lost when it ceases to be spoken at all. The latter scenario has become an all-too-common threat in indigenous communities in the United States, because their languages are not spoken anywhere else in the world. (See the Heritage Brief: *What is the difference between indigenous and immigrant heritage languages in the United States* for more information.)

Reasons for language loss

Although the United States has no official language at the federal level (some individual states do have official languages), the de facto national language is English. The use of English is reinforced through government and educational institutions, television and radio, and private business. Economic and social forces converge to make English a very valuable commodity, often to the exclusion of other languages. Though many of these forces appear benign, Henze and Davis (1999) point out that language loss is often associated with oppression. Indeed, in the realm of education, the United States has a history of suppressing the active use of non-English languages for the purpose of promoting assimilation of the speakers.

The first serious efforts at mandating English-only classrooms were made by the antebellum reformers in the late 19th century. In their push for centralized Common Schools that espoused the values of white Protestant America, the reformers effectively eliminated many of the non-English community schools that were common at the time. Their efforts were aided by the public's fears that new immigrants would change America's identity, and schools were regarded as excellent means for assimilation (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990; Kaestle, 1983). For example, MacGregor-Mendoza (2000) chronicles the experiences of Spanish-speaking immigrants in schools, where some teachers would punish them for speaking even a word of their home language. Her informants came to feel that Spanish was inappropriate or inferior (some were told explicitly that it was "dirty"), and many reported that they abandoned it when raising their own children.

Native American students provide perhaps the most infamous example of assimilation to English. Beginning in the late 1800s, mandatory boarding schools were established for the purpose of eradicating Native American languages and cultures. The founder of the boarding school system, General Richard C. Pratt, is famous for saying of his schools that they would, “kill the Indian to save the man.” Students were kept away from their families and communities for years and were punished, often harshly, for speaking their home languages (Child, 1998). As a result of their experiences, many Native American parents refused to teach their children their heritage languages to protect them from similar hardships.

Results of language loss

Individuals living in the United States and undergoing loss of a language other than English tend to have simplified grammar and gaps in their vocabulary. They may attempt to paraphrase their speech or borrow words and morphosyntactic structures from English. Depending on the strategies they use, people can be slowed down considerably in their attempts to communicate, and may eventually give up entirely due to linguistic insecurity (Anderson, 1982). In families where members of older generations have limited abilities in English, individual loss of the non-English language results in communication rifts between family members and may also cause a great sense of cultural loss for the individual (Hinton, 1999).

When a shift to English occurs in indigenous populations, the indigenous language itself may be lost. Indigenous language loss has been given a lot of attention in the field of linguistics in recent years. Linguist Michael Krauss has predicted that 90% of the world’s languages are likely to be gone within a century (Hale et al., 1992), and most of the United States’ remaining 175 indigenous languages are likely to be lost in that time as well (Krauss, 1996).

Fishman (2001) describes the cultural devastation that can accompany language loss, stating, “A traditionally associated language is more than just a tool of communication for its culture... [It] is often viewed as a very specific gift, a marker of identity and a specific responsibility *vis-à-vis* future generations” (p. 5). Furthermore, as discussed above, language loss often occurs as a result of oppressive measures, and it is therefore regarded by some as a human rights issue (see Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). As Crawford (1995) states, “Language death does not happen in privileged communities” (p. 35).

Reversing language loss

While language loss can be devastating to a community, it need not be inevitable. Many dedicated people throughout the world have undertaken the challenge of reversing language loss in their communities. While these efforts vary in size, resources, goals, and results, they share a dedication to specific heritage languages so that they may be spoken by future generations. The Alliance for the Advancement of Heritage Languages is dedicated to promoting language development in heritage language programs, and the Alliance website contains many resources for individuals and programs involved in these efforts.

In the United States, hundreds of programs exist to revitalize indigenous languages. Hinton (2001b) describes the many different methods that such programs use, from informal gatherings, to bilingual classes in schools, to immersion programs in schools and camps. (See also Pease-pretty On Top, n.d. for a description of indigenous immersion programs.)

In some cases, when only one or two elderly speakers of a language survive, they team up with a learner to create their own immersion environment in what is called a Master-Apprentice program. This program exists formally through the [Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival \(AICLS\)](#), which has sponsored more than 65 teams, but many teams have utilized this method informally throughout the United States (Hinton, 2001a). In other cases, no speakers of a language remain, but there is sufficient documentation for people to piece the language together until it can be spoken again. Such languages are called *sleeping* languages (Leonard, 2008).

Language revitalization programs face a number of common challenges, mostly related to lack of resources. For example, it is impossible to pick up a catalogue and order a textbook for Kiksht (an endangered language of the Northwestern United States), so language program developers have to design all of their own materials. Human and financial resources must also be considered. (See Grenoble & Whaley, 2006, for discussion of these issues.)

Nonetheless, there have been a number of exciting success stories throughout the world. Perhaps the most famous is Hebrew, which went from being nearly obsolete to being a national language with the rise of the state of Israel. Catalan, a language of Spain that was prohibited under the rule of the Franco regime, has gained tremendous ground since Franco's death in 1975 (Fishman, 1991). In New Zealand, the indigenous Māori language has experienced a reawakening through *te kōhanga reo* ("language nests"), in which the youngest generation of children learn from remaining elderly speakers. This program has expanded to immersion language schools, bilingual classes, and classes for adults (King, 2001). Because community goals vary widely, success can be measured in a number of different ways, from being able to say a prayer in a language that has not been spoken for many years, to producing a new generation of native speakers. What these and the many other heritage language programs throughout the world show us is that language loss is not irreversible with the dedicated effort of a community of speakers and learners.

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