AFTER THE DELUGE:
AN ACTION NOTEBOOK FOR A RESPONSIBLE SOCIOLINGUIST

Udaya Narayana Singh
Faculty of Arts, Amity University, Gurugram, Haryana,, India

ABSTRACT – *In this paper, we begin with inevitability and cyclicity of pandemic during the last two centuries. The problems seem to be coming back to us again and again through Small-pox, Tuberculosis, Plague, Influenza, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and now COVID-19. The 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic and the Avian Influenza resulted in establishment of WHO protocols and awareness. However, as we consider the people at the Bottom of the Pyramid in developing and poor countries, the problem of survival of ethnic groups and their languages appear to be more acute. We know that 96% of India's mother-tongues are spoken by only 4% of the population. But as India houses 3592 numerically weak mother tongues (spoken by 705 tribes or ethnic groups and 1284 castes scattered all over our rural landscape), with high degree of poverty combined with social hierarchies based on caste, religion and ethnicity, the shape of our population pyramid is relatively flat and bulging at the bottom making the problem of the survival of mother-tongues and learning in other-tongues complex. Our problem is that these ethnic groups and speakers of indigenous languages are fast losing their grip over their respective mother-tongues as they have to survive in an urban cauldron. It is this group that faced/faces the COVID-19 crisis more than anyone else, and it is this group that was seen walking back from urban centres to their villages. But those who stayed back in villages are also vulnerable to the pandemic. The effect of COVID-19 on our indigenous groups could be dangerous. After defining and describing 'Danger', we argue that the creativity of these indigenous language speakers is facing a grave threat. This is not only a matter of survival or production, but also an issue of printing, publishing, being read, translated, and sold. After discussing a few theoretical positions, from Ethnologue to Fishman and others, a list of tasks of Responsible Sociolinguistics is enlisted here. Then a detailed comparison is held between Biological and Linguistic Endangerment. What lessons could be learned by sociolinguists and language planners is discussed. The kind of tensions existing as real threat to survival are discussed in terms of systems theory and power-conflict theory. We argue that Linguistics should be used for healing of the wounds and injured pride of the smaller speech groups.*

Key words: *Sociolinguistics, COVID-19, pandemic, ethnic languages, mother tongues, Linguistic Endangerment*

To provide a directionality to the ongoing and future studies under the Centre for Linguistic Justice and Endangered Language, National Law University, Delhi, I thought of speaking on the role a responsible sociolinguist could play given the uncertain COVID-19 scenario, and what her 'Action Notebook' would be like. I began with the lessons learnt during the earlier epidemic and pandemic outbreaks – Small-pox, Tuberculosis, Plague, Influenza, HIV/AIDS, Ebola, and now COVID-19, during the last two hundred years when each one of us came closer to each other, in search of 'the Unknown'. The unknown causes, unknown fear and unknown solutions were all important for us. As we travelled and expanded our knowledge as well as our kingdoms, we faced different flora and fauna, food-habits, culture and climate that had become a challenge, until we learned how to ride the elephantine problems of settling in a new place. The fear of danger and death could never stop us, as explorers and warriors, ever ready to grab that extra piece of land that might rightfully belong to some other groups. We were exposed to different kinds of illnesses, and infectious diseases that had the power to expose us to increase our morbidity and mortality.

There exist tales and stories in both public memory as well as in writing about these experiences. Eventually, we lost/ might lose more of our best talents, causing a significant economic, social, and political damage. I have been wondering if these disasters in our public life have been of our own making. One needs to investigate the responsible factors that led us to the worldwide crises. A few could be easily identified. A major reason has been a spurt in urbanization where the green rural belts are giving way to a forest of concrete structures – It was

like the 'colourless ideas' that were once upon a time 'green'. Then, there had been numerous criss-cross (and avoidable) inter-regional and international travel which has been another factor. It seemed to the academic voyagers that the more exotic the destination, the more valuable it was for them. Integrated living and exploitation of nature also contributed to the endangerment.

I believe that these trends are likely to continue and intensify as we fail to act officially as well as individually, and socially. It is not a matter of international organizations or leadership of countries alone to decide on how to decide on a 'limit' for each action and what should be our 'Pandemic policy plan.' The 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic and the Avian Influenza forced many countries to devise pandemic plans; e.g. US Dept of Health and Human Services 2005. The WHO and the International Health Regulations (IHR) become a matter of great debate then. The framework emphasized a more coordinated global response during the 2009 influenza pandemic.

As we look at the bottom of the economic and social pyramid in developing and poor countries, the problem of survival of ethnic groups and their languages appear to be more acute. We know as linguists that 96 % of India's mother-tongues are spoken by only 4 % of the population. India houses 3592 numerically weak mother tongues, spoken by 705 tribes or ethnic groups and 1284 castes are scattered all over our rural landscape here in 736 districts and 5,924 sub-districts. Even if we leave out 30.91% of urban Indians, our villages house 69.09 % people (See Singh, 2009). With abject poverty and hierarchical society, the shape of our population pyramid is relatively flat and bulging at the bottom – making the problem of survival of mother-tongues and learning in other-tongues complex.

These ethnic groups and speakers of indigenous languages are fast losing their grip over their mother-tongue as they have to survive in an urban cauldron. Their children quickly give up the family language and assimilate with the local majority. It is this group that faced the COVID-19 crisis more than anyone else. It is this group that was seen walking back to their roots. Those who stayed back in villages have also become vulnerable. In this context, what could a responsible sociolinguist do? What is the source of danger for languages and cultures? Is language endangerment a matter of scale? There are many unresolved questions like this.

The US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention Report of June 25, 2020 (Cf. Moore, Jazmyn; Ricaldi; Rose; Fuld et al., 2020) say that prolonged health and social inequities have pushed the racial and ethnic minority groups at increased risk of getting COVID-19 or experiencing severe illness, regardless of age. In particular, the following facts are important to note:

- Non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native persons have a rate approximately 5 times that of non-Hispanic white persons,

- non-Hispanic black persons have a rate approximately 5 times that of non-Hispanic white persons,

- Hispanic or Latino persons have a rate approximately 4 times that of non-Hispanic white persons.

Given this situation in a developed country such as the USA, the effect of COVID-19 on our indigenous groups in less developed and under-developed countries could be worse. The only saving grace seems to be that we remain blissfully unaware of their problems as there are very few case studies. As 'Responsible Sociolinguists', we need to pay close attention now to elucidating oral/recorded/ video speech data of members of these speech communities. We need to understand how dangerous in their perception is this Pandemic? What are the ground realities?

Talking about the Grammar of Marginalization, one often hears some say: 'Why worry about what you can't have?' Some may ask other unkind questions, whenever one talks about marginalization of our bhasha traditions. As such, these communities are always down in the 'number game.' Therefore, several questions arise:

- Who will publish the authors from marginalized speech groups, even if they write? The Pandemic would badly hit the print world in any case.

- Who will read them (in the absence of universalization of education and literacy), even if a publisher is found or funded?

- How will their voice reach from the scattered segments in undefined and difficult terrains to the world outside the rural landscape?

- What could be the role of Visual Media?

In short, how will the literary traditions in smaller languages survive in the cruel market economy where big traditions dominate? Will their texts come alive in translation into languages where books sell (See Singh, 2017a)? One still lacks clarity as to what is exactly meant by 'Endangerment' of languages, and what are its levels. The best yardstick is language behaviour across generations.

- If not more than 10–30 per cent of children are able to speak in their 'mother-tongue' or language of their tradition and culture, the language is potentially endangered.

- If there are only few speakers left, and if the youngest good speakers are young adults, their language is endangered.

- If the youngest good speakers are largely past middle age, the language is seriously endangered.

- If only a handful of mostly old speakers are left who can speak the language, the rest having shifted to a neighbouring tongue, the language is moribund.

- And, if no speakers seem to be left, the language is extinct.

Thus, language endangerment is a matter of scale, rather than belonging to an all-or-none category.

All these indicate that for many unsung languages, death is not an option but an inevitability. In this context, Dorian (1998) says: 'It might be said with certain metaphoric license that languages are seldom admired to death but are frequently despised to death.' It is rare to expect a human language to achieve a position where the ordinary people will be in awe to speak it, or claim to speak it, and distance themselves from it.

The language custodians preventing the ordinary people from using it is a rare thing as in Sanskrit, Latin, Coptic Egyptian. On the contrary, it is often seen that a language has become so exclusively associated with the masses of low-prestige people that the gentry and the potentially creative people begin to distance themselves from it and adopt another, a more prestigious language, for both creativity and identity. It could soon become a trend among the new generation. Ostler (2005) says that cultural erosion begins in this manner. Likewise, extinction of living organisms is happening routinely.

Because these languages are losing out in the number game, one could say that Disappearance of languages or linguistic bases are happening at an alarming pace. We are all aware of Pagel's or Crystal's predictions. Death of a speaker is understandable. Wiping off an entire culture or ethnicity is painful. In many cases, the elders in the speech community are able to speak their languages in all contexts, but not the younger people who often migrate into the Language(s) of Power.

But as responsible sociolinguists, we need to use Linguistics for Healing. It is a common perception that in all our sciences, and Linguistics is not an exception to this general trend, there is a tendency to learn from 'the Nature' whenever a disease is to be tackled, or an engineering problem to be solved, or a product design is to be given shape. History of Science is full of such stories as to how and why discoveries were made and modelled after commonly known phenomena. In resolving language endangerment in a post-Covid world, the speech communities as social systems, or social products must be helped to learn the ways of tackling these situations.

Language Planning and Management may not have a mechanism in place to protect/ promote minor & endangered languages. I can identify at least six tasks before us:

- The first task is to come up with grammars, search engines, metadata designs, and broadcast quality visual documentation.

- The second possible task could be formulating scripts and codes with UNICODE compliance, with Type-Designs & Script grammar

- The third set of activities could include preparation or Upgradation of Pictorial Glossaries for both print and web-versions.

- Fourthly, dictionaries (General/ special-purpose, Mono- & Bi-lingual, Inter-dialectal) and School Grammars.

- Fifthly, preparation of Graded textbooks (+ practice and Testing materials) with location-based relevant illustrations/ concepts.

- Sixthly, help these threatened languages so that they could begin to use their language to bring out little magazines, occasional publications, weeklies, fortnightlies, folios, etc. (See Singh & Singh 2017b for more details).

We look at the endangered species index in terms of a bio-diversity map. The threat to multilingualism is similar to the threat to biodiversity, not just because most languages are like disappearing 'species', but also because there is an intrinsic and causal link between biological diversity and cultural diversity. Like plant and animal species, endangered languages are confined to small areas. As we know, more than 80% of countries with great biological diversity are also the places with the greatest number of endangered languages. When people adapt to their environment, they create a special stock of knowledge about it, which is mirrored in their language, and is available only in such languages. As they die, they also take with them all the traditional knowledge about the environment. Many languages die out because of lack of state support.

In this context, I would like to draw your attention to the 'Danger Theory.' I would like to pay attention to the ongoing research of Matzinger (1994) in Biology to understand the way our 'Immune Systems' work. Like theories of 'Self' and the 'Other', many immunologists begin with a 'Self / Non-self' distinction. This in Immunology is also known as the 'Danger Theory'. The theory is not complete, and debates are on as to how much it actually changes behaviour and/or structure. This allows the 'Artificial Immune System' practitioners to draw lessons from the analogies.

Aickelin & Cayzer (2002) provide a good overview and talk about three levels where the immune system is perceived as working:

(i) external barriers (skin, mucus),

(ii) innate immunity and

(iii) the acquired or adaptive immune system.

Elaborating on the 'pattern matching', Matzinger talks about creating another type of cell, the T (killer). The Classical immunology [Goldsby et al. Immunology] argued that an immune response is triggered when the body encounters something non-self or foreign. It is not yet fully understood how this self, and non-self-discrimination is achieved by the body. But many immunologists believe that the difference between them is learnt by the body early in life. Matzinger differs. The upshot: Our bodies are programmed to distinguish between 'non-self but harmless' & 'self but harmful' invaders into our system. The Central idea in her work and in that of numerous others against the Classical position is that the Immune System does not react to non-self but only to 'danger' by pattern matching.

A question arises as to whether there is a model of the 'perceived' and the 'real' dangers for Endangered Speech Communities here? How do they resolve the issue of which contacts are potentially harmful & which ones one can assimilate? The mechanism seems to be as follows: A cell that is in distress sends out an alarm signal, whereupon antigens in the neighbourhood are captured by antigen-presenting cells such as macrophages. It then travels to the local lymph node and presents the antigens to lymphocytes. Thus, the danger signal establishes a danger zone around itself. Thus, B cells producing antibodies that match antigens within the danger zone get stimulated and undergo the clonal expansion process.

What are the lessons we learn from this situation? There is no need for a planner to attack and keep off everything that is 'foreign', or else, the community will counter-react to the planning attempts, suggesting that the Language Plan is

nothing but a sinister design to keep the community permanently at a disadvantageous position. A simple test – based on 'losses of vital linguistic features' has to be evolved to assess the 'Distress signals' in such speech communities. It is also important for us to understand that 'Linguistic Documentation' of Endangered Languages cannot be an end in itself – howsoever important it may be for a linguistic theoretician or a typologist.

There seem to be THREE kinds of tension one faces here. The first tension is between 'being' and 'becoming' to use Pattanayak's (1986) categorization. There will always be agencies that would like to colour our perception and blur our vision as they may have a stake in continuance of only a few languages as the media of trade, commerce, tourism, education and entertainment. Not only numerical weakness or biological trigger may work. Societies with many members disappear if they decide to change their natural 'being' of bi/multi-linguality to 'becoming' members of a larger entity – for various reasons.

Secondly, the danger comes also because of the 'perception' of one's language universe. The members of a smaller linguistic group will often have to negotiate with these questions: How do you see yourself, and how do others look at you? Which of these two evaluations do you accept and why?

The third type of tension is how a speech group tries to 'include' or 'exclude' other speech groups that may be genetically, genealogically, and culturally related. Endangerment could depend on that.

After the World war II, with the creation of 50 new pluri-cultural nation-states with complicated majority-minority configurations, we can no longer talk in terms of 'prejudices' and in the language of 'victimology.' That is why Schermerhorn (1970) advocates a cross-cultural study of ethnic relations - which aims for macro-sociological generalizations. Schermerhorn claims that two macroscopic theories of society have the greatest relevance for our understanding of ethnic relations: "systems theory" and power-conflict theory.

Systems analysis is concerned with wholes, needs, requisite structures and routine action. The total system is always more than the sum of its parts. System unities bind people together in functional bonds even when the permanent rule is harsh and oppressive. The second perspective, the power-conflict theory, or simply conflict theory, sees society as a stage of competition, rather than an integrated system. Here, members or groups are always competing for scarce common resources, or power, etc. It is the responsibility of the state to bring in an

order and a balance among potentially warring groups. With the passage of time, institutional links develop bringing in a web of interdependence. The instrumental ties linking members of different ethnic groups together at many status levels are informal bonds that hold an over-arching system together. There is thus a dialectical linkage between integration and conflict. There are times when integration can only occur in and through conflict, and conversely, there are other times when conflict is necessary to reach a new order of integration.

We need to move for greater affirmative action so that we could arrest the endangered and heritage languages from disappearing. Many would raise the bogey of Cost-effectiveness – the enormous sums required on printing, publishing, propagating and teaching smaller languages. Or, in attempting to build bridges. Surely, we could think of making use of technologies of the future for documentation, learning and propagation in an easy and inexpensive manner by promoting heritage language computing.

Then there is 'Shell-Book Technology' from Australian linguists. An example of Tab-based or hand-led device based heritage language computing comes from the projects like the 'Shell-book Technology' used in the Papua New Guinea, developed in the PageMaker® (current) or Publish-It® (older versions) desktop publishing programs.

What we are doing in the UHI-AUH Joint endeavour titled 'Mediating Multilingualism' is yet another model of what could be done. The project is being led by Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin, Director of the Language Sciences Institute, University of Highlands & Islands (UHI), Everness in Scotland (UK) and Professor Udaya Narayana Singh, and the full title is: 'Mediating Multilingualism - in a local community context (A sharing of innovation and expertise between Scotland, Ireland, and India).' The idea is to develop synergies between Soillse (a network of eight institutions in Scotland and Ireland), Island Voices (a EU-funded Innovation project for literate and non-literate learners and users of multiple languages including an endangered speech, to produce multimedia materials in which community members themselves have a crucial creative stake), and Clilstore (a platform to create and access online dictionary resources) have now moved in new directions to be explored in relation to endangered language documentation and open access video ethnography of endangered speech communities in India. The Global Challenges Research Fund encourages UK HEIs to turn their attention to research work 'directly and primarily of benefit to the problems of developing countries', in which any benefit to Scotland or the UK must be a 'secondary consideration'. In this spirit, the present pilot research project focuses on gaining insights into language revival research in the Endangered Culture and Language Context in India by bringing in use of resources from the three Scottish experiences into some sample speech communities here. The primary aim in the First Phase will be to building capacity and capability, through establishing academic partnership, take up interdisciplinary and collaborative research activity, through involving both sociolinguistic and IT/Communication technology expertise, and pump-priming and relationship-building, through network development and pilot project work. The sample survey is followed by a desk-based monitoring, assessment and review in the Second Phase which is now ongoing.

In addition to the Pilot Project, there are exchange visit programmes by the faculty and staff of both institutions involved in endangered languages research for a summative evaluation of the pilot project, and Soillse network presentation sometime in the latter part of 2019-21. As the proposed project revolves around the affordances of online platforms and communication, which are largely cost-neutral, the principal expenditure will be on the costs involved in delivering the pilot project on the ground through sample surveys plus travel, subsistence and meetings etc. The Pilot project is also testing the methodology developed by Udaya Narayana Singh (2018) colleagues at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan for documentation of endangered languages.

There are similar projects being undertaken world-wide – from New Zealand and Australia to PNG and in different parts of Europe, Africa, and Latin America now. One could, of course, ask as to what happens if we do not take any action. It is my understanding that the result of long years of negligence could lead to large-scale dislocation of indigenous language speakers and speech groups. Here, the demographers, Economists and Social Engineers will perhaps tell us that 'displacement' of human aggregates cannot be avoided. It is perhaps in the nature of man and his products (='social formations') to face this constant predicament. However, any unplanned and unbalanced displacement can also kill a literature and culture. Today, forced displacement is on the rise for various reasons. Every year, a significant number of people are forced to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence and look for a space in an alien land. But there is a still larger number who become displaced within their own geo-space, a trend that is growing world-wide. This could have serious consequences such as follows:

- Marginalization of the Speech Group, plus

- Increased mortality

- Chances of morbidity

- Food Insecurity

- Breakdown of values

- Split families

- Social disorganization

- Loss of indigenous languages, and

- Pidginization of speech

It is a common perception that in all our sciences, and Linguistics is not an exception to this general trend, there is a tendency to learn from 'the Nature' whenever a disease is to be tackled, or an engineering problem to be solved, or a product design is to be given shape. History of Science is full of such stories as to how and why discoveries were made and modelled after commonly known phenomena. It is my proposition that in resolving language endangerment in a post-Covid world, the speech communities, as social systems, or social products must be helped to learn the ways of tackling such situations.

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