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## PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

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Diversity is the natural state of the world (Harmon 2001). It is the quintessence of the evolutionary process as found in the natural world in the multiplicity of flora and fauna called biological diversity and in the constructed world in its multiplicity of cultures called cultural diversity. Language diversity is part of the co-evolution of humans with ecological diversity comparable with the evolution of biological diversity. It is the core component of the ecologically evolved cultural diversity that enables representation and transmission of the fundamental aspects of cultures for acquisition by the succeeding generations of the community and for interaction with other contemporary communities. It is natural for cultural diversity to emerge and sustain itself through language diversity. It is established empirically (Harmon 2002) that the diversity in nature and culture are integrally related and they are connected with the development of ecosystems and with their sustainability. This has given rise to the concept of bio-cultural diversity as a unified phenomenon. The specialists in the respective fields of study of nature and of culture and the common people seem not to be aware of the connection between diversity in nature and culture. The awareness of the common people of the connection between culture and language is more socio-political and psychological and less philosophical in nature. One piece of evidence is that an increasing number of minority linguistic communities transplanted in the midst of a dominant linguistic community ask the question whether they can maintain their culture without their language.

The awareness of, and scientific enquiry into, biological diversity transformed into concern and activism for the preservation of that diversity, renamed in the 1980s as biodiversity (Wilson 1988), when the people saw the loss of diversity to be coupled with environmental degradation instigated by human behavior. It is not that extinction of biological species did not occur before in paleo-historical times. It has occurred five times in a massive scale, each separated by millions of years, extinguishing together more than ninety per cent of species that ever lived (Heywood 1995). But the earth regenerates itself every time with new species. The impending sixth extinction feared by specialists will be the first one after modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) came into existence 250-200 thousand years ago and the human language emerged sometime after this evolutionary happening and before the modern humans migrated out of Africa 100-70 thousand years

ago. The sixth extinction, if it happens, will be the one caused by humans and it may include the human species. It will be the one that includes extinction of languages. Even if there is no total extinction as feared, there is loss of language diversity now directly attributable to human action.

But there is no concern about the loss of language diversity even to the extent of concern about the loss of biodiversity. There are initiatives at the community level to preserve and revitalize languages (Fishman 2001, Hinton and Hale 2001), but they are marginal in comparison to the magnitude of threat and their chance of success is unpredictable. The community efforts are supported by non-profit organizations and professional linguists. The professional interest in preserving language diversity is recent, as instanced by the formation of a special Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CELP) by the Linguistic Society of America in 1992; the active participation of linguists in preservation remains, nevertheless, peripheral to the discipline. The initiatives by private Foundations are primarily for documenting endangered languages, which is to record language diversity, but not to prevent its loss. Inclusion of language diversity in the research and action programs relating to environment and conservation in international instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (Maffi 2001:8) is influencing the agendas of international bodies like World Conservation Union (IUCN, formerly International Union for the Conservation of Nature), World Life Fund (WWF); UN bodies like United Nations Environment Project (UNEP) alert the governments of the member states and civil societies about the rapid language loss; UNESCO documents like the so called Red Book (Wurm 2001) are beginning to create some awareness at different levels. The response, however, of the common people speaking the major languages to the loss of language diversity remains largely to be one of indifference.

Crystal (2003) in an informal survey finds that seven out of ten people are unaware of the threat to the survival of the majority of languages of the world. (Nearly extinct languages make up between six and eleven per cent, according to one estimate (Harmon 1995), of the total of 6000-7000 languages in the world today, half of which are spoken by less than 10000 speakers; 90 per cent of all the languages, according to a projection (Krauss 1992), will disappear before the end of this century). A larger percentage of common people, on the other hand, are aware, at least superficially, of actual and potential extinction of biological species. He further points out that mention of language death is negligible in the media and nil in the art forms of pop culture. This state of affairs reflects the public ignorance of the significance of language diversity for the survival of the ecosystem in its natural state and of the humans as a part of it. Their unconcern could be discerned in the absence of social or political movements and manifestos in favor of language diversity, as there are, for example, in support of claims of territory for a language or in opposition to a language that exercises political or economic control over them (Annamalai 1979). These socio-political movements premised on language are for replacing the dominance of one language by another, and not for diversity for its intrinsic value. The reasons for such public indifference to language diversity are political and philosophical.

There is a view among the intelligentsia (NYT) that the disappearance of 'weaker' languages is inevitable in the process of natural selection or is similar to desirable discarding of a non-functioning cultural institution. The fallacy of this argument is manifold. First, the weakness of a language is externally imposed; there is no inherent weakness in any language. A language may become 'weak' when the ecosystem including the socio-cultural underpinning of that language is transformed or destroyed by encroachment. The transformation or destruction is so sudden and massive that the language does not get any opportunity or the time needed to adapt to the changed circumstance. In other words, the language is denied natural selection. Further, a uniform ecosystem everywhere pushed by the dominant language(s) does not have room for ecological niches for more languages to survive and thrive. In other words, the fault of inability to survive lies not with the language concerned but with the language(s) usurping its place and meaning. Second, language is not one of the many cultural artifacts of a community: it is the most fundamental of the cultural institutions that is instrumental in representing and transmitting other cultural creations. Discarding this cultural institution would mean losing every kind of cultural creativity. Furthermore, it would entail losing for ever all knowledge and values accumulated and codified in the threatened language. Their retrieval is impossible for the lost oral languages. Even when retrieval is possible with the lost written languages through specialized efforts, there will be no scope for modifying and enriching what was already codified and for making them relevant to the changing life by the speakers of the lost language. In spite of the fallacy of the claim of naturalness and inevitability of language loss, there is no evidence to show that the popular view is different from this view of the intelligentsia. The popular view may or may not have been informed by the articulated view of the intelligentsia.

What is known, however, from a number of studies, is that it is common for the minority linguistic communities to believe in the devaluation of their language materially and to view it as a liability for their economic progress and social mobility. It is very likely that this belief is shaped by the view of the intelligentsia. It is reinforced by the life experience of the speakers of minority languages, which is not in their control, but stems from the technologically driven, socially stratified and centrally administered social system conducive to language homogeneity. The road roller effect of the emergence of this kind of social system in the modern period does not offer any choice of a different life experience. The negative view of the minorities about their language is not out of any deliberate choice of life experience from among the many possible social systems. This manufactured view serves the interest to control of the opinion-making intelligentsia from whom the decision-making elite is constituted by sustaining the modern social system through the promotion of language homogeneity. The acceptance this view by the affected contributes to their passivity about the loss of language diversity.

Language loss comes in two ways from the communities that are dominant economically and politically through their control of resources and the technology to exploit them. Their dominance gives them control of social institutions such as schools and the media and the ability to use their language in them. Their economic and political supremacy is transferred to their language, and an ideology of progress associated with their language is developed and promoted through the social institutions in their control.

This language ideology is inimical to language diversity, as it leads to devaluation of other languages as unsuitable for progress. To break this chain of causation, it is essential for the speakers of minority languages to have some control over the social institutions. This, however, will be a challenge to the total control of these institutions by the speakers of majority languages and so will be rejected, resisted or reduced by their elite. Unless the challenge is successfully and substantially (not just symbolically) carried out by minority languages, it is difficult to arrest the loss of language diversity. Promise of successful challenge can be expected to change the attitude of fatalism about language loss.

The other source of language loss is indirect, but is also from the economic and political dominance of a group. To consolidate and expand their dominance, the group increases its access to resources and one of the ways to do it is colonization. This process leads to destruction of habitat or displacement from it of communities living there speaking their languages. With the loss of habitat goes out a way of life and the language that sustains it. Land alienation invariably leads to language alienation; the language built on talking about the land, its contours and its composition is less usable when it is deprived of the land or is shifted to another land. Mega-development projects of national governments have the same effect as colonization. It is colonization by the urban upper stratum of the society in the name of public good. It is claimed that language loss is more direct and more extensive due to loss of habitat and loss of control over it than due to imposition of majority languages through major social and political institutions (Muhlhausler 1996). The positive evaluation of external as well as internal colonization as instruments of modernization and of locally destructive development as a means for common good presents language loss to be yielding compensatory gain and thus makes it acceptable to people.

The indirect effect of political and economic dominance on language loss is through the language of the dominant group.. Language shift towards the dominant language instead of bilingualism is reported widely from all parts of the world. Shift is not adoption of merely a language, but is adoption of the world view coded in the core of the language and inculcated through that language as it is used by its new speakers. The cosmopolitan language or the language shaped by a different ecology changes the way the new speaker mediates the world. The western languages, which embody the philosophical position of subordinating nature to the quest of human progress, facilitates a way of speaking and thinking that values reduction of diversity as the means to progress through increased efficiency. This position is clearly evident in the globalized market forces of the present times. Nature in the western philosophical tradition of Nominalism becomes a human construct (Wollock 2001) to be deconstructed at will, and this philosophy in the teaching of science in schools replaces the alternative philosophical view of the traditional societies that the nature shapes the humans and their language. This view is reconstructed by a minority in biology and philosophy (Wilson 1992, Harmon 2002), but has not found a place in main stream education. The prevailing 'modern' view of nature and its relation to language is disseminated through the educational content modeled after the industrialized societies' world view, deceptively called universal by the dominant group(s), and through their language(s), which code the educational content among other contents such as the media content.. These languages

become the medium of life of the learners by the virtue of their use as the medium of education. It is then not surprising that the common people have the belief that many languages are redundant for mediating the world they live in and so are a liability. Nor its corollary that their own languages are dispensable.

The observed unconcern of the common people about the threat to language diversity is more than lack of awareness of its happening on their part. It is not simply a matter of time lag between the alarm sounded by specialists and the people grasping its message, as the period of a decade or two the warning of biologists in the 1980s took to get into people's consciousness about the loss of biodiversity and its consequence to life on earth. One cannot take comfort in the fact that linguists' warning about the loss of language diversity was in the 1990s and so there is time for the people to catch up. It is not the impact of the Christian religion, which gives contrasting messages through the legends Noah's Arc and Tower of Babel. The unconcern has more fundamental and structural causes in the modern political, social and educational system. Systematic devaluation of language diversity in all these systems must be addressed to for changing the indifferent public perception of language diversity.

The public concern about the loss of bio-diversity is local as well as global in the sense that it extends from saving species in people's immediate environment to the global context of biological extinction. Creating public concern about the loss of language diversity must start by necessity with the local. That is, with the loss local languages- with smaller communities whose own languages are at a greater risk and with the larger communities about the small languages in their neighborhood. To move from the specific to the generic loss of language diversity and from the personal loss of language to humanity's loss of availability of multiple-cultural options to cope with any potential crisis of human survival must be a logical progression..

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