

Virtualization as a mean of endangered languages revitalization

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Abstract

Normal existence of any language is possible only if language can change itself freely and naturally, but isn't restricted by an artificially created traditional culture. As far as normal development of indigenous languages (endangered languages are mostly languages of indigenous people) in real life meets many obstacles we suppose that virtualization can be helpful. Virtualization means that main platform of language use is web and virtual worlds; virtualization can provide good field for language use and also can restrict negative influence of New Age and 'frowning elders' (i.e.: those indigenous people who are against any invention of new items and any changes). Virtualization also suggests serious revision of such concepts as ethnic identity and native tongue: ethnic identity should be determined not by genetics/physical anthropology, but by language; the concept of native tongue should be thrown out and attention should be paid to actual communicative ability only.

Key words: endangered languages; language revitalization; virtualization

1. Problem introduction

When they speak about endangered languages revitalization or endangered languages at all, then immediately appears discourse about so called traditional culture. As far as so called endangered languages are mostly languages of indigenous people so there is a presupposition that existence of indigenous languages is closely connected with so called traditional cultures.

The concept of traditional culture denotes culture that doesn't change itself, doesn't elaborate any new practices, but just transmits itself in an unchangeable form. Needless to say that really such cultures don't exist anywhere since any culture (even a very conservative and backward one) always supposes possibility of some changes and elaboration of new issues. Also should be noted that any culture even a very newly made has certain traditions, and no culture can be without traditions, i.e.: without certain regularly repeated practices.

(Also should be noted that term traditional culture is extremely inaccurate since any culture is actually based on some traditions.)

However, among hippies, among environmentalists, among adepts of New Age and among certain anthropologists is rather widely spread mythology that considers all cultures of indigenous people as traditional cultures. In reality it usually leads to creation of different artificial cultures which consist mostly of exotic items taken outside of due historical and cultural context. (So called traditional cultures often are means of escapism from boring routine of everyday life. This trend seems to have originated from Rousseau's ideas about noble savage:

savageness is better than culture, and so called traditional cultures are better than modern cultures.)

Normal existence of any language is possible only if language can change itself freely and naturally, but isn't restricted by an artificially created traditional culture. For example: in Chinese, English, Japanese, Russian or Spanish cultures there are a lot of items that can be parts of so called traditional cultures, but besides them there are a lot of modern items; spheres of use of corresponding languages are not restricted by any artificially created traditional cultures (i.e.: we don't need to wear kimono if we are going to speak in Japanese).

If sphere of use of certain language is restricted by 'traditional culture' it means the language has no real functioning. A language that is considered to be alive should be able to describe not only 'traditional items' but also anything we can see around us, for instance: planes, cars, computers, cell phones and so on. Best way to save and revitalize a language is to make it develop freely and naturally but not to restrict it by some artificially created 'traditional culture' (Nonno 2015: 53).

As far as so called indigenous languages are human languages so the same laws should be applied to them, i.e.: for natural existence of a language sphere of its use should not be restricted by any artificially created 'traditional culture'. However, natural and free development of indigenous cultures often met certain obstacles.

Main obstacles are the following: transformation of indigenous cultures into a kitsch and ethnographic theatre/'culture of airport' (this trend is especially supported by so called New Age); from the other hand inertia and conservatism of indigenous people (this trend is usually supported by a group that can conventionally be denoted as 'frowning elders'). New Age simply wants to maintain mythology about enigmatic 'traditional cultures' so it is against any positive changes in indigenous cultures. 'Frowning elders' are usually guided by the following ideas: 1) indigenous languages are usually associated with lower social status so they think that the less a certain person of an indigenous community would know about corresponding language the better would be career of the person; 2) 'frowning elders' simply fear any changes and invention of new issues and want just maintain the issues they know well.

Both above described trends usually are not considered as serious obstacles for revitalization by anthropologists/linguists; however, we suppose that these both trends are root of problems that arise when they try to revitalize a language. Thus, in order to revitalize an indigenous language we should do quite paradoxical issues at first sight: 1) restrict the influence of New Age on certain culture/language; 2) free language from so called traditional culture. However, it can be somehow hard to follow these recommendations in real world and in contemporary conditions. That's why virtualization (i.e.: use of web and virtual worlds as main platforms for revitalization) can be recommended as a powerful mean.

2. Some general notes on virtualization

As it has been said above virtualization means that main field of usage of a language is web and virtual worlds. We suppose that virtualization can be extremely helpful in order to avoid influence of New Age and 'frowning elders', since in virtual worlds people can freely create anything they want and not to be restricted by some artificial 'traditions'. And thus a field where a language is used freely and naturally can be created. Then issues from virtual reality can step by step permeate into real life as far as real life and certain issues of virtual reality are quite closely connected. (For instance use of a language in 3D virtual world or in a social network

obviously can be helpful, but much more helpful would be setting an academic journal where certain articles could be published in a certain ‘indigenous’ language.)

Also should be noted that virtualization supposes some serious revision of such concepts as: ethnic identity and native tongue.

In classical positivist anthropology ethnic identity was determined mostly on the base of data of physical anthropology. Later with the development of constructivist trend in anthropology they started to pay more attention to self-identification of described people. However, nowadays we again can see a raise of positivist trend that is determined by successes in genetics. Genetics obviously is a useful and powerful tool when the object is migration of certain populations, but genetics hardly can be base of cultural identity.

What is culture in our times? What is culture in modern world? What we mean when we say word “culture”? Nowadays when globalization increases when anthropological differences¹ between cultures disappear fast, when almost all cultures use the same technology what can be the basis for identification a person as a member of certain ethnic group? What can be the root the backbone of a certain cultural tradition (Akulov 2015: 20)?

Culture is not things, is not wearing. Culture is a way of thinking, way of behavior. And as far as way of thinking and way of behavior are expressed by language so language is the root of any culture (Ibid: 22).

Language can be represented as ordered pair of the following view: $\langle A; \Omega \rangle$ where A is a set of certain phonemes/morphemes/concepts, and Ω is a set of distributions determined upon A . Culture also can be represented as $\langle A; \Omega \rangle$ pair where A is set of concepts/memes and Ω is a set of distributions. Then it is possible to say that culture is nothing else, but pragmatic level of language: when we learn pragmatic level of a language we actually learn culture and when we learn about certain culture we learn pragmatics of corresponding language.

That’s why language should be the key of ethnic identity. And that’s why should be seriously revised concept of native tongue and concept of native speaker.

Even if we turn to ancient epochs we can see that language but not genetics was root of cultural identity, for instance: we can speak about Proto-Indo-European culture (or cultures) but we can’t speak about Indo-European DNA.

Who can be considered as a speaker of X language? To answer this question we should first of all seriously think of what does it mean “to speak”. “To speak” means “to produce spontaneous utterances in language X ”. A person is a speaker of X if he or she can produce spontaneous utterances in X . And it should be specially marked that there is absolutely no matter how he or she got the ability of speaking in X i.e. it doesn’t matter whether was X mother tongue of a certain person or it was learned in adulthood. If a person can produce spontaneous utterances in X this person is a speaker of language X (Akulov 2015: 4).

Usually we can see the following: there are people who are of indigenous origin genetically, they used to speak certain indigenous language in their childhood as mother tongue, but later they forgot it and switched to another language; these people are considered as native speakers according to classical approach and most of efforts on revitalization and maintaining of certain language were concentrated around such people. Those ‘native speakers’ can keep in mind and

¹ Over here anthropological differences mean differences observed by physical anthropology.

retell quite long texts, but their communicative ability is extremely poor, and obviously they hardly can be considered as speakers anyhow and obviously such people hardly can help revitalization.

From the other hand there are people who don't belong to X ethnic group genetically, but they are enthusiasts of X language and have rather good speaking ability of X and want to use it and develop it.

What group should be considered as people of X culture? The first group that genetically is X but demonstrates poor ability of speaking X and low interest in use and development of X? Or the second group that shows good ability of speaking X and high interest in X use and development? We suppose that the second group evidently should be considered as people of X culture; and any efforts on revitalization should be oriented on people of the second group first of all.

That's why we also suppose that it's possible to give up use of such terms as native tongue and native speaker at all. It doesn't matter how a person learnt certain language: in childhood from his parents/ancestors or in adulthood by learning certain regular grammar manuals. We suppose that attention should be paid to actual communicative ability of certain person: if a person has fluent command in X language, then this person should be considered as speaker of X language and as a representative of X culture. (When people learn language they usually learn also corresponding culture; people who know two or more languages in fluent level usually also know corresponding cultures, i.e.: it is possible to say that when they speak different languages they make switch to corresponding culture.)

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