Do we really understand the issue? Media coverage of endangered languages

Languages are declining or dying at a pace that will see at least half of the world’s languages become extinct within this century. How does the international media portray the situation?

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I am interested in how the media ‘frame’ issues related to culture and science and how those media frames link to public understanding and policy making in those realms. By ‘frame’ I am referring to the media’s power to select, highlight, and exclude information. I am referring to how media presentations can define societal problems in ways that privilege some solutions over others.

Research has demonstrated, for example, that the media’s tendency to simplify complex issues related to the environment, economy, or political conflict can limit public understanding of those issues – and by extension, constrain policymakers’ ability to deal effectively with societal problems.

Today, I wish to present the first results in a much larger project that investigates the global discourse surrounding the issue of cultural and linguistic diversity. This study focused on international news media and how they portray the issue of endangered languages.

The basic statistics are relatively easy to find in the media. Linguists estimate there are around 6,800 languages in the world today, yet 90 percent of the world’s population speaks the 100-most used languages. Languages are declining or dying at a pace that will see at least half of the world’s languages become extinct within this century.

Often people can recall ‘reading something about this’ in their newspaper or in a magazine. All too often, however, the media merely capture the last gasp of a language’s life. The articles tend to profile ‘one of the last speakers’ of obscure language X or Y along with some academic or local effort to record what phrases remain of the once vibrant language -- now doomed to extinction. Worse, is when the ‘cause’ of the language’s death is presented simply as the fact that not enough people speak it any longer. Not only does this type of media portrayal mistake the final in a long line of symptoms of language death for its cause, but it implies that the language suffered a ‘natural’ death as its speakers grew old and dwindled in number.

I wish to point out here that languages – from the beginning of time – have appeared and disappeared. However, they did so in a state of what linguists call ‘linguistic equilibrium’ – that is, roughly for every language that was lost, another was born. In the last 500 years, however, the equilibrium that characterized much of human history is now gone. And the world’s dominant languages -- or what are often called ‘metropolitan’ languages -- are now rapidly expanding at the expense of ‘peripheral’ indigenous languages. Those peripheral languages are not being replaced.
This study asked the following questions: How do the media frame the issue of language endangerment? Do the media create a barrier to our understanding of this issue? How might media framing of this issue link to public perception -- and ultimately -- to policies regarding the preservation of indigenous languages?

To assess how well the media portray this issue it is important to first identify the kinds of facts that could be covered in the media regarding endangered languages. According to scientists, what should the media be telling the public and policymakers?

**What is lost when a language is lost?**

Linguists, researchers, and cultural activists have, in fact, already answered this question from a scientific perspective. With each language extinction a unique way of viewing the world is lost. As such, linguists and cognitive scientists lose valuable data from which to pursue their theories of language and how the human mind works. In addition, in many locations indigenous languages and their speakers possess a rich source of information about local plant and animal species and their biological habits -- much not yet documented by scientists. That knowledge is also lost.

Medical science loses potential cures. Resource planners and national governments lose accumulated wisdom regarding the management of marine and land resources in fragile ecosystems. In the realm of cultural and human rights, when languages falter their speakers, as a group, suffer a loss of cultural continuity and social cohesion necessary to maintain meaningful cultural identity. Unique forms of art and aesthetic vision also die with their purveyors... and more.

Language extinction may be triggered in any number of ways ranging from dramatic population loss caused by disease or war to more gradual ‘language shift’ as dominant groups force or encourage the abandonment of minority languages through the promotion of certain policies. The process of language shift, as it’s called, may take centuries or decades depending on the situation.

What has become most interesting to me during the preliminary research for this project was to discover that researchers today make an important link not just between linguistic diversity and the cultural and intellectual health of our planet, but between linguistic diversity and the environmental health of our planet.

Linguists Nettle and Romaine (2000:14) state that, “Languages are like the miner’s canary: where languages are in danger, it is a sign of environmental stress.” In other words, when the habitat and socioeconomic system that once supported a vibrant indigenous culture disintegrates, that community starts to disperse – and along with it goes their language. Because of this relationship, the current pace of language loss around the world is seen by scientists as a critical -- and urgent -- indicator of the rapid pace of global environmental decline.

The reverse, they say, is also true. The strategies to successfully save languages and cultures from extinction are -- in effect -- the same actions needed to save the global environment: the promotion of cultural and ecological sustainability.

Advocates of language protection and revitalization efforts emphasize that this is not an argument for ignoring the advances of modern science, or denying indigenous groups access to economic prosperity or to knowledge, or simply ‘looking backward’ in an attempt to protect traditional ways of life. Rather, it is an argument for empowering all cultural groups to use local resources in sustainable ways, to interact with global partners using a repertoire of necessary languages (i.e., embracing bi- and multilingualism as a normal aspect of life), and to understand linguistic diversity as part of a larger ecological system.

I am not here, however, to argue that all languages should be preserved – I leave each of you to your
own opinion. I state this information, however, to give you a sense of what could be found in the media about this issue that would offer the public a more comprehensive understanding of the language endangerment issue.

This study I refer to today analyzed the media discourse and frames found in international wire service reports around the world. I looked at all international wire service articles available from major news databases from 1996 to early 2004. While the study collected an array of information from each article detailed in the paper, it essentially looked at how the media discourse answered the following questions: What is the cause of language loss? Who is affected by this problem? What, if anything, should we do about it?

How the media frame the issue of endangered languages

Between 1996 to early 2004, the issue of endangered languages appeared on some international news wire, on average, 1.5 times a month. In other words, the visibility of this issue is very poor in international media. To make the news, the issue of endangered languages tends to require a precipitating action or event -- such as a new report released by UNESCO, a new university project being funded, or a conference or event that took place. In general, the articles that do appear tend to be neutral to sympathetic to the plight of language loss. No article stated that language extinction was a good thing.

The most striking finding, however, is that the ‘problem’ of vanishing languages -- while treated sympathetically -- is defined as a problem that affects only two groups of people: the indigenous culture home to the endangered language and academics who prosper from their study. In other words, the media ‘contain’ this problem to two obviously self-interested groups. The media portrayal gives no sense that the loss of indigenous languages is an indicator of trends, environmental or otherwise, that will affect the general public in any way.

One paradox in the findings is that, although the news articles often present the statistics regarding the rate of language loss around the world, they manage to do so with no sense of urgency that this is a problem that needs to be solved. Part of this may relate to how the statistics are presented: a loss of half of the world’s languages over the next century likely sounds more urgent to linguists and environmentalists than to the general public.

When actions to ‘save’ or ‘slow’ the death of a language were mentioned in the news – and these included activities such as the creation of language databases and dictionaries and language training – they did not include the need to empower cultural groups and to link the issue more clearly to the cause of environmental sustainability and human rights. The rapid pace of vanishing languages is definitely not portrayed in the international media as the “miner’s canary,” indicating the diminishing health of our planet.

If we look more closely at how the media framed the cause of the problem -- who or what is at fault for the language extinction -- then it becomes more apparent why this is not considered an urgent problem in the media. I found that there are three primary causal frames that dominate the media portrayal.

Frame 1: The cause of the problem rests within the community

As mentioned earlier, this frame tends to define the problem and its cause within the confines of the endangered language community itself. This media frame implies that language loss is ultimately a choice. It suggests that speakers choose to take advantage of economic opportunity by adopting more dominant languages. It is does not refer to the societal or economic pressures that may force
this choice. Unfortunately, the logical remedy to this definition of problem and cause is, from a policy perspective, to do nothing. It is what people choose.

Frame 2: The cause rests with the injustices of history

This second media frame, also common, points to the events of history or the policies of prior governments as the primary cause of language extinction. It is this frame that most clearly acknowledges the pressures and punishments brought about by more powerful cultural groups on indigenous peoples throughout history. This frame links present day language extinction to past wrongs associated with colonization, forced assimilation, monolingual education policies, disease, war, or displacement from traditional lands.

While this frame rightly underscores how policies of inequality have historically affected indigenous groups in harmful ways, it does not evaluate present-day policies that might perpetuate such inequalities between groups.

Frame 3: The cause stems from ‘inevitable’ global forces

The third media frame looks more to the future and places the fate of languages within a broader context of evolving global forces: globalization, demographic changes, modernization, and the diffusion of western products and media programming. It implies that minority languages and traditional ways of life are no match for the powerful forces of global change. Many articles, for example, mention the prevalence of English, Spanish and Chinese as increasingly dominant, and essential, languages associated with the global business economy.

This frames implies that language extinction, while a loss, is inevitable. This frame makes reversing the language loss trend, through government policy making or grassroots efforts, seem futile in the face of these powerful forces.

The overall finding of the media coverage of endangered languages is that international news sources present the issue of endangered languages in a way that does not ask for public attention. The issue is not presented as a problem that society needs to solve. More broadly, the media framing of the issue of endangered languages is similar to that of many complex scientific issues. It doesn’t give the public, or politicians, enough information to base sound policies on.

The Media and Endangered Languages: a case of ‘Benign Neglect’

While there are certainly disagreements among language experts about how actively, if at all, governments should be involved in the promotion and protection of endangered languages, most express a common frustration that the public is ill informed about both the plight of the world’s languages and the merits of language diversity. Nettle and Romaine suggest that the position they most often confront is that of ‘benign neglect.’ The ‘benign neglect’ position sees language extinction as a fact of modern life and most revitalization efforts as ‘too late’ or unrealistic in the face of globalization. This view sees language shift as a choice made by groups seeking economic progress and a better life. It also tends to argue that monolingual education within a society is preferable to bilingualism due to the belief that linguistic differences support conflict rather than cooperation and hamper economic development, although there is no historical evidence that either is true as a rule. My study supports these observations. International media do, in fact, tend to promote a perspective of ‘benign neglect’ in regard to endangered languages.

Why are the media a barrier to our understanding of this issue? The results of this study are familiar to those who study the media on a regular basis. The reasons can be summarised in five key
points.

1. The media tend to simplify complex problems for easy reading or viewing.
2. The media prefer to focus on events – with a beginning, middle and end. This makes it difficult for ‘issues’ – of long term concern – to make the news.
3. The pressures of the commercial media market prefer stories that are short and human interest oriented and fall into patterns of common story formulas that don’t lend themselves to new ways of thinking about issues. (One formula found in this study, for example, was for the media to profile the last speaker of a language.)
4. The media have an urban focus. So, in this case, they rarely have the time or budget to venture into the rain forests of Brazil, the highlands of Papua New Guinea or aboriginal lands of Australia to write about the role of language diversity.
5. Finally, there is a general unwillingness of the part of corporate media to challenge ideological systems – represented by schools, governments, and businesses – that may promote systemic inequality between groups and languages.

While the findings of this initial study do not offer much encouragement regarding the role of media in public understanding of the issue of endangered languages, I’d like to end with a statement of hope. I have noticed, at least, in my own country that the media are trying to tackle, more seriously, issues related to the environment and to create media formats more amenable to the presentation of scientific issues. If language diversity advocates can successfully make the link between the need for linguistic diversity and environmental health, then perhaps this issue will ultimately find a media framing that points to the need for action.

References


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