Third General Assembly (GA3)

Defining minority language status

Research Report

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"Out of this world"

Forum: Third General Assembly (GA3)

Issue: Defining minority language status

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Introduction

Language is one of the important aspects of human life and a contributor to the building of cultural identity; it uniquely lenses how communities view the world. Minority languages hold a special place in this cultural tapestry: they are spoken by relatively small groups and encapsulate ways of thinking, traditional knowledge, and expressions peculiar to each linguistic community. However, with the advance of globalization, technological development, and the spread of dominant languages such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish, many of the world's estimated 7,000 languages are under threat. According to UNESCO, about 40 percent of the languages in the world are in danger, with some disappearing every two weeks. (UNESCO, 2021). The disappearance of any minority language is more than the disappearance of mere words—it's an erasure from the pages of history, the culture, and an enrichment of human diversity.

Languages are associated with identity, and the survival of minority languages is associated with dignity and self-identity among speakers. The erosion of one language ordinarily means the erosion of cultural practices, oral traditions, and indigenous knowledge. For example, the rich linguistic diversity of Indigenous communities of the Amazonian Basin contains information pertaining to unique plants, animals, and medicinal features that are not reported in any dominant language (Maffi, 2005). Preserving these languages is now not only a matter of cultural diversity but has become one of the ways to safeguard human rights. Linguistic diversity is increasingly understood as a characteristic fundamental to a successful global society, where each language contributes to a better understanding of human experiences and knowledge.

The role of the United Nations

The United Nations plays a very important role in the promotion of linguistic diversity and the protection of minority language rights. Key initiatives in this respect include the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples—UNDRIP, 2007, which stress the right of communities to use, maintain, and develop their languages. These declarations explicitly bring to light the fact that for equality and dignity among all peoples to be guaranteed, the rights of languages must be observed. Furthermore, the UNESCO-led International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032) brings languages in peril even more into the spotlight by developing policies and programs in favor of linguistic diversity around the world (UNESCO, 2021). That is a ten year plan that will look to achieve broad, sustainable language preservation goals with an impact on education, policy reform, and community engagement.

Definition of Key Terms

Minority language:

One spoken by a smaller, often marginalized group within a larger population or nation is termed a minority language. These languages lack institutional support and are more prone to decline or death. For example, the Quechua language in South America is vulnerable because, even though the number of people speaking it runs to several millions, it does not get much government support and faces competition from Spanish (Hornberger, 2006).

Endangered language:

An endangered language is one whose number of speakers is decreasing and it is threatened with no longer passing on to the following generations. UNESCO has degrees of language endangerment, from "vulnerable" to "extinct" (UNESCO, 2012). For instance, languages such as Ainu spoken in Japan and Yuchi in North America have been classified as critically endangered with a number of speakers estimated at fewer than 100 speakers (Crystal, 2014).

Language rights:
These rights are with regard to the use, maintenance, and development of a language in all domains of life, such as education, government, and media. There is arguably no more important milestone in this vein than the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which stated that indigenous peoples have the right to "revitalize, use, develop and transmit their languages to future generations" (UN General Assembly, 2007).

Cultural heritage:
It includes practices, representations, knowledge, and skills deemed by communities to be part of their shared heritage. The loss of language means the disappearance of historical narratives, traditional knowledge, and community identities; language is an important element of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2012).

Linguistic discrimination:
This is the discriminatory treatment of people or groups based on their language. Linguistic discrimination most often targets minority language speakers; it excludes them from access to education, employment, and other social services. This kind of discrimination creates social stigma and eliminates the use of the language in public; thus speeding up language decline (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Revitalization efforts:
Revitalization is an attempt to stimulate and promote the continued use of an endangered language through, for instance, bilingual education programs, language immersion, digital resources, and promotion of intergenerational transmission of the language. For example, New Zealand's "Kōhanga Reo" movement succeeded in increasing the number of speakers of Māori by immersing young children in the language (Fishman, 1991).

General Overview

The importance of Preserving Minority Languages
It is the preservation of minority languages that plays an essential role in cultural continuity and identity formation within communities. Language carries a group's history, social values, and knowledge, including environmental insights and cultural practices unique to that language group (Crystal, 2014). For example, indigenous languages often contain specialized vocabularies referring to local flora and fauna and traditional medicine. When a language dies, this embedded knowledge can also disappear without retrieval.

The importance of Preserving Minority Languages
Preserving minority languages is key for cultural continuity, social cohesion, and identity formation within a community. A language carries the history of a group, its social values, and knowledge, including environmental insights and cultural practices unique to that language. It is quite common for indigenous languages to have specialized vocabularies with regard to the description of local flora, fauna, and medicinal knowledge that are lost with the disappearance of the language. For example, Indigenous knowledge encoded in the Tlingit language in Alaska contains specific terms for ecological phenomena that become useful in environmental management and conservation (Maffi, 2005).

In addition, language rights are human rights. The individual dignity and self-expression are linked with using one's own language freely. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN General Assembly, 2007) restates the linguistic rights by recognizing the minority languages as

being important for the cultural and historical perspectives. Denying these rights might lead to social exclusion and even conflict, as the language is a strong tool for the assertion of cultural and political identity.

The Challenges Faced by Minority Languages

Globalization and dominant
Globalization has accelerated the spread of dominant languages through international media, business, and education, with English, Mandarin, and Spanish being some of the examples (Nettle & Romaine, 2000). While these languages facilitate cross-cultural communication, they can overshadow minority languages, pressuring speakers to abandon their native tongues for economically advantageous ones.

Political and economic constraints
Minority languages are exposed to political and economic pressures in many instances. A single official language is sometimes adopted by government policies with the intention of national unity, which in effect diminishes minority languages. This is because many governments fund only educational materials in the dominant language, thereby limiting resource availability for speakers of minority languages (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2017).

Social stigma and discrimination
Most of the minority languages face social stigma that discourages using their languages in public. There is an intergenerational decline in the use of the languages since younger generations normally shy away from them in preference to dominant languages that are relatively free of social and economic penalties (Crystal 2014). This dynamics accelerates language endangerment and cultural erosion.

International efforts and limitations
The international community has created standards that protect linguistic diversity. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992) obligated its members to support the use of minority languages in Europe; however, no one ensures these commitments are fulfilled. UNESCO and the UN have also started programs toward enhancing language diversity globally.

Such initiatives are limited in enforceability and resources, generally left to national governments that may lack the political will or the funding necessary for creating specific actions (UNESCO, 2021).

Case Studies

Catalonia, Spain
Catalonia's bilingual education policy provides a model for language preservation within a politically complex environment. The regional language, Catalan, is supported in educational and governmental institutions but still has a hard time being recognized nationally. Nonetheless, Catalonia has managed to significantly rise in the number of speakers of the Catalan language, thanks to special programs, though full linguistic autonomy is still complicated by ongoing political tensions (Kraus, 2008).

Sami Languages, Scandinavia
The Sami are an indigenous people found in Norway, Sweden, and Finland. The challenges they face in maintaining their languages are unique. Efforts at reviving the Sami languages include Sami language education and legal recognition, but resource constraints and discrimination persist. Some regional governments have created supportive policies for Sami language use, though these are very limited compared to support of national languages (Lane, 2011).

Indigenous Languages, Canada
In Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought to the public eye recommendations concerning indigenous language revitalization, which increased funding and programming. While Canada has taken steps toward integrating indigenous languages into school curriculums, the impact is mixed, and access to language resources varies greatly by region. Another challenge is to ensure that the language programs themselves are both culturally appropriate and led by Indigenous people (Battiste, 2013).

Major Parties Involved

UNESCO
Leading projects like the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger and the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (UNESCO, 2021).

European Union (EU)
The EU, through the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, encourages member states to protect and promote regional languages (Council of Europe, 1992).

Indigenous Organizations
Indigenous organizations, such as the Assembly of First Nations in Canada, are actively involved in language rights and the revitalization of the languages under threat (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

China
The Chinese government policies toward minority languages, such as Tibetan and Uighur, reveal a convoluted balance of allowing limited utilization of the language while enforcing national language policies (Dwyer, 2005).

SIL International
Involved in linguistic documentation, SIL International works on research and advocacy for minority languages. In the past, SIL has collaborated with UNESCO and local governments to promote literacy and education in indigenous languages—a big contribution to preserving linguistic diversity. (SIL International, 2018).

Timeline of Events

1992	The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages is adopted
2001	UNESCO establishes International Mother Language Day
2007	The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognizes language rights
2010	UNESCO declares the International Year of Indigenous Language
2021	The UN launches the International DEcade of Indigenous Language

Possible Solutions

Education Support Programs:
Furthermore, the models of bilingual education give due place to the support of minority languages. For example, the bilingual schools in Bolivia teach both Spanish and Quechua to promote both linguistic diversity and economic mobility. Online platforms like Duolingo and Memrise have introduced courses in endangered languages, thus expanding accessibility to language learning (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

Technology integration:
Digital technological tools, like language learning apps, online dictionaries, and AI-driven language translation tools, revolutionized the preservation of languages. The Māori language revitalization movement in New Zealand is the example that best explains how digital tools have been able to reach younger audiences. In tandem with this, documentation and promotion of endangered languages is made easy through social media platforms, developing virtual communities for speakers of minority languages (Hinton & Hale, 2001).

Legal and policy protections:

However, to bolster language rights, a legal framework is needed that will guarantee access to education, media, and government services in minority languages. For instance, the Māori Language Act in New Zealand, by recognizing Māori as an official language, provides one model of legally protected language rights. Such legal safeguarding may be effective in establishing linguistic equity, but extending this form of legal safeguarding requires both consistent funding and political will (Fishman, 1991).

Community engagement and revitalization:

With community-based projects, much can be done to achieve sustainable language preservation. Programs like the Cherokee Language Master Apprentice Program involve a native speaker training younger ones to ensure intergenerational transmission. Cultural events and festivals further promote language pride and encourage use within the community. Local media, such as radio stations in indigenous languages, can strengthen language visibility and utility (Hinton & Hale, 2001).

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