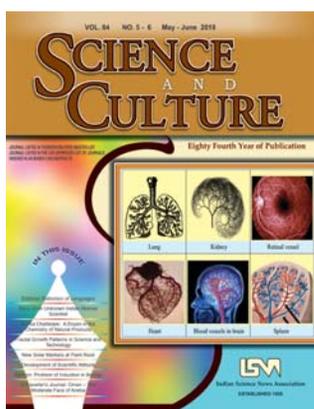


EXTINCTION OF LANGUAGES



Over the last two years, I travelled to Chennai several times and sometimes faced serious problems in communicating with the locals. English being a common language in India, connecting people of multi-language native Indians starting from the time of British Raj, communication is not much of a problem in the cities but the language may become an impediment in suburban areas. That leads me to the thought - why can't all the people of the world speak in the same language. That will be so much simpler and will make us more powerful.

Immediately the story of the Tower of Babel came to my mind. In Chapter 11 of the Book of Genesis, it is said that the descendants of Noah spoke a common language after the aftermath of the great flood, migrating towards the east and finally reaching a place called Shinar. There they started building a city and a tower tall enough to reach the heaven. Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Bible, got very annoyed and displeased on observing this city and the tower. In order to reduce the power of their collective strength, Yahweh fragmented them into many groups, each speaking a different language. This

created a lot of confusion among the people in terms of communication and understanding and the project failed. And that was the beginning of speaking in different languages. Interestingly, according to the Bible, the city received the name Babel from the Hebrew word *balal*, meaning confusion or jumbled up. Whether the story is true or not is not known but it is definite that the writer of this narrative knew the power of a common language. Some people say that the British made a blunder by teaching English to Indians which helped them to unite, communicate and made them powerful enough to dislodge the British from India.

But world-wide, the number of languages is rapidly declining. Mother tongue of about half of the people of the world belongs to the pool of ten most spoken languages and language diversity is more threatened today than that of birds and animals. The 25th July 2010 issue of The New York Times reported a story of the three children of Paulina Sugiarto, an Indonesian, playing together at a mall, but chatting not in Indonesia's national language, but in English. Their mother confessed

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“They know they're Indonesian. They love Indonesia. They just can't speak Bahasa Indonesia. It's tragic.” As we all know, this is not an isolated case of Indonesians; it is true for Indians as well.

This is not unnatural or unexpected. When people migrate, there is a pressure to shift from their mother tongue

to the more dominant language spoken in the country where they live in order to capitalize the social and economic advantage. In the process, the first generation migrants become bilingual, the next generation has a weaker grasp of their mother tongue and the third generation may no longer speak or understand their grandparents or great-grandparents at all, resulting in the shift from one language to a larger, dominant language. English has currently 340 million native speakers and more than 1.2 billion second language speakers and surely some more children will learn English as their native language. English, therefore, will grow compared to the other languages. Will it be true for 178 million second language Mandarin speakers or for 120 million second language Hindi speakers.

About 7000 distinct languages are presently spoken as mother tongue. But these languages are shrinking very fast. There is an interesting mathematical model published in the February 2017 issue of The Economic Journal which forecasts the extinction of 40% languages with less than 35,000 speakers within 100 years. By extinction it is meant that the languages will no longer be spoken as mother tongue, or as the principal language. In essence the diversity of languages is shrinking with time and will come down to less than 7000 distinct languages soon.

An Index of Linguistic Diversity (ILD), the first of its kind, has been introduced recently to understand quantitatively the trends over the past 30 years in the number of mother-tongue speakers of the world's languages. ILD can not reverse or change the decline of languages but can send out a cautionary note about the decline of languages. ILD observed that globally, linguistic diversity declined by 20% over the period 1970-2005. Regionally, indigenous linguistic diversity declined over 60% in the Americas, 30% in the Pacific including Australia and almost

20% in the Africa. But calculating the index over only a sample of certain number of languages, say 1000 languages, out of 7000 languages over a period of time is not correct because the world's population is also increasing. For example, during the period 1970 to 2005 when the index of linguistic diversity was calculated, the world's population almost doubled. This means that there were increased number of speakers of many of the languages just due to population growth. The index actually tries to understand the distribution of speakers among the world's all spoken languages and what has been found is that the distribution is becoming more and more uneven with time.

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So what we are seeing is that more and more of the world's population are getting squeezed into just a few dominant languages at the expense of several smaller ones. This is resulting in a loss of linguistic diversity where finally some languages are becoming extinct. Language is not only a vehicle for communication, for expressing ideas,

emotions etc. but it also carries cultural values and indigenous knowledge. Extinction of languages therefore results in reduction of cultural diversity and increase of cultural homogenization.

We are very concerned about biodiversity in the biosphere. We are concerned about loss of species in the biosphere. In a similar way, we can think of different languages as distinct species in the *linguasphere*, if we can call it so. Any loss of language is not only a loss of linguistic diversity but together with it goes cultural variations, opinions, views and knowledge. We need to give a serious thought to it and try to evolve ideas to arrest the decline on a large global canvas. □

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