Chapter 3
Language Endangerment in Africa

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to lay a foundation so as to consider the issue of language endangerment in the world. Approximately 30 years ago, various scholars stated that in the worst-case scenario, 90%–95% of the present living languages of the world would become defunct by the end of the 21st century. The assumption of this argument was that minority languages may become defunct easily. However, in this chapter, this thesis is questioned by taking into account the language situations in Africa where most languages, whether small or large, are vigorously spoken. In African countries, people do not impose majority languages on other people. More importantly, African people in general esteem others because they understand their value to them.

INTRODUCTION

When the author began to study linguistics approximately 50 years ago, it was believed that between 800 and 1,000 languages were spoken in Africa.[1] In 1976, the author visited Africa for the first time to conduct fieldwork. During this time, he studied Tembo, a language spoken in the eastern part of the then Zaire, country which has since been renamed Congo. At the time little was known about Tembo and the language was confused with other languages. Guthrie's *Comparative Bantu* (1967-71) listed Tembo as *Nyabungu (Tembo)*. Nyabungu is a pejorative name neighboring ethnic groups with the exception of the Havu employ to designate the Shi. The Shi refer to themselves as Shi. Although Tembo and Shi vary from each other, this confusion was the result of citations and is occasionally still evident.[2]

However, currently, our knowledge of African languages has increased significantly. *Ethnologue*, SIL international's database (Lewis et al., 2015), lists 2,138 African languages. According to the database, 7,102 languages are spoken in the world. Thus, approximately30% of the world's languages are spoken in Africa, which may be regarded as a non-negligible percentage. Therefore, whatever happens in Africa may have a direct and global impact on the world's language issues.

THE THESIS OF MICHAEL KRAUSS

The purpose of this chapter is to cast doubt on the American linguist Krauss' thesis of language endangerment. He argued that, in the worst scenario, between 90%–95% of the world's languages may disappear by the end of the 21st century (Krauss, 1992, 2001). One may ask what the grounds for his argument are. His argument is based on limited evidence. The issue of language endangerment is examined in this chapter by considering African languages.

The reason Krauss argued that between 90%–95% of the world languages may disappear by the end of the 21st century in the worst scenario is two-fold. The first involves a timeframe of 100 years. Although some people live to be a 100 years, this is scarcely in the scope of most individuals' imagination. Krauss stated that 100 years is sufficient time for moribund languages, that is, languages which children no longer speak to become defunct. The second reason is related to the number of speakers. An overwhelming majority of the world's languages are minority languages, which may be more likely to become defunct according to him.

Because most of the world's languages are minority languages, Krauss stated that in order for a language to be safe, that is, to still have some speakers at the end of the 21st century in spite of political and economic persecutions, it must have a certain number of speakers. Krauss added that a language needs at least one million speakers in order for it not to become defunct even though there is no special evidence thereof. Krauss cited the cases of Breton of France, Navaho of America, and Ryukyu of Japan. Breton that once had one million speakers is on the verge of extinction under the influence of French. In other words, languages with one million speakers may only have a few speakers in one hundred years.

According to the 14th edition of SIL *Ethnologue,* there are 6,818 languages in the world of which 330 are spoken by more than one million people. Thus, 4.84% of the world languages are safe. Krauss' calculation is simpler. If there were 6,000 languages, which may be calculated as one millionth of the world population of six billion, and 300 languages had more than one million speakers, 5% of the world's languages would be regarded as safe.

The latter explanation deals with the number of speakers. Krauss expressed the view that the social and economic situations of languages are related to their maintenance. Languages, which are classified as national or official as well as regional official languages of Russia and India, are regarded as safe. For example, Icelandic with only 280,000 speakers is safe. Greenlandic and Faeroish are exceptionally safe with less than 100,000 speakers because they are regional languages. In Asia and Africa, various vernacular languages are maintained even though they are not national languages or the lingua franca. Therefore, it is possible that 600 and not 300 languages may survive the 21st century. Those are the grounds on which Krauss pronounced that 90%–95% of the world languages might disappear by the end of the 21st century in the worst scenario.

BRENZINGER'S ARGUMENTS

Krauss' arguments and figures were easy to understand and quite alarming and thus, many people followed and cited them. They had wings though the evidence thereof was flimsy.

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