

Two Perceptions of Endangeredness

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Abstract

The paper contrasts two perceptions of a language being "endangered".

On the one hand, there are the academic and administrative definitions of various stages of "endangeredness" - on the other hand, there are the perceptions of the speakers themselves.

- The "UNESCO red book" definitions, for instance, include three categories of being "endangered", from (1) "seriously endangered" to (2) "endangered", and (3) "potentially endangered". Categories such as these are widely being used.

- What the speakers themselves perceive about the future of their language may, however, differ from the status that tends to be assigned to the language from an academic or administrative perspective.

The paper illustrates such differences with samples from the survey of little-known languages of Ethiopia. The focus however, will be on the status of Beja, a N.E. African "major" language which constitutes a "minority" in three countries.

1. Perceptions of Endangeredness

Terms like "endangered", "threatened", "ill", and "dying" still coexist, and in this paper, the term "endangered" will be used without reference to any emerging theory,¹ as if it were a synonym of the terms just mentioned.

This paper is one of the attempts at bridging the gaps between linguists and speech communities - in this case, the gap of different perceptions.² In the following table, the two perceptions will be presented as opposites.

1.1 Perceptions by Linguists	1.2 Perceptions by the Speakers
Linguists (and administrators) weigh the different factors which constitute the status of a language and its vitality, such as: number of speakers, sociolinguistic climate, speakers' attitudes. On this basis, they arrive at a calculated perception. The result is stated in terms of language vitality or "endangeredness".	The speakers themselves behave and live according to their perception of their language and its vitality, and their choices such as which language to use, schooling for the children, etc. follow from this perception. Their perception about the vitality or "endangeredness" of their language guides them in their choices.
For this perception to be true and objective, the linguist is <i>expected not to</i> express political or emotional biases, <i>expected not to</i> be guided by his or her pre-conceived opinions.	For the expression of this perception to be valid and believable, the speaker is <i>expected to</i> display political and emotional attitudes, <i>expected to</i> be guided by his or her "pre-conceived" opinion.
This is a matter which must be assessed in detached way - the <i>more</i> detached, the more objective - the <i>cooler</i> , the more convincing.	This is a matter which need not be presented in a detached way - the <i>less</i> detached, the more believable - the <i>hotter</i> , the more convincing.

¹ Cf. Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer 1992 p. 26: "Extinct - in a process of extinction - threatened by extinction". Sasse 1992 p. 9 points out "As yet, there is no theory of language death". Crystal in 2000 p. 93 similarly states, "Studies of endangered lggs. are at a stage where they use widely different frames of reference and terminology", "Even the subject as a whole has no agreed name".

² "Bridging the gap between academic linguistics and community wants and efforts is surely one of the major challenger of the linguistic profession as it faces the situation of endangered languages at the turn of the century" Crystal 2000 p. 161 supports this statement by Colette Grimevald 1998, p. 143

2. Internal and External Factors

For the assessment of linguistic endangerment, linguists have divided the decisive factors into "external" and "internal" factors, or "environmental" and "speech community" factors.³

2.1 Internal factors

The average citizen may not have any interest in "language" as such - but when one's "own language" is at stake, discussions tend to get emotional. Perceptions about one's own language are part of one's identity - and often a very sensitive part of one's identity.⁴

The internal language "attitude" determines the language choices.

2.2 External factors

Opinions and feelings about one's language may very personal and "internal", but they will be affected by external factors. Not only job opportunities and schooling, even the general sociolinguistic climate of a country will affect the way people feel about their language. The perception may change when there is an administrative change in language policies.

Examples can be adduced from this country:

Example Ethiopia

A survey was carried out from July 1992 to July 1995, and during this time there was a noticeable change in the sociolinguistic climate. This was recorded as follows:⁵

"During the first months of the survey, a question like 'Would you like to see your language developed to writing?' would sometimes be answered '*Why?*' or '*What is the use of it?*'. During the last months of the survey, the answer became predictable: '*Yes!*'"

Through this change of the overall "linguistic climate", the interest in one's own language was heightened. Suddenly its future was not part of the inescapable fate - but a task to be taken in one's own hands. (In some places, fatalism changed to fanaticism.)

2.3 Spread of Linguistic Metaphors

The socio-linguistic climate of a country will affect the perception which citizens have about their own language. It seems that along with this new awareness, certain socio-linguistic concepts are now spreading, too. The metaphor of "language death", for instance, now has spread into the globalized pool of language concepts - it is familiar even to non-linguists, and possibly more widespread than linguists are aware of.⁶

Example Beja

The Beja may appear to be isolated, but the isolation only works in one direction, it does not block relevant information from the Beja people themselves: They have always been known to depend on - and excel in - reliable long-distance information. They are very conscious

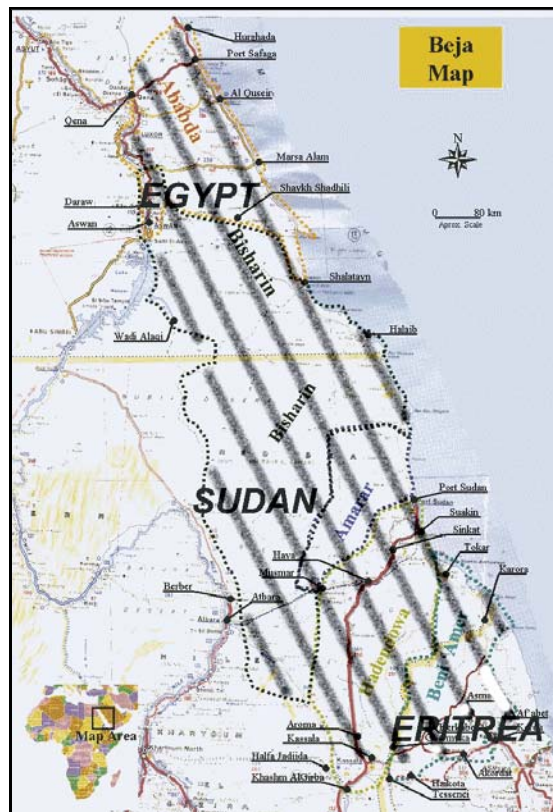
³ Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer 1991 p. 20 distinguish (1) "environmental" factors vs. (2) "speech community" factors such as perceived "prestige". Hagège 2000 distinguishes (1) "causes physiques ... économiques et sociales - politiques" (2000 pp. 131ff) vs. "perte de prestige - purisme - abandon volontaire" (pp. 154ff.)

⁴ Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer p. 35f. adduce examples where the preservation of "identity" is independent of the preservation of "language".

⁵ Wedekind, Klaus, 1995, S.L.L.E. linguistic Report No. 33, pp. 5ff.

⁶ For obvious reasons (statistics, research policies), the speakers of an "endangered language" are more likely to act as informants (even "professional informants") than others. And the frequent encounters with researchers will, of course, contribute to a heightened awareness about the status of their language. Crystal 2000: 96ff. sees the profit and the problems that casual talks about languages "dying" may halt or hasten the process.

about their traditional information system which is termed "sakanaab"⁷. Relevant information spreads very fast in the Beja culture, and information about their language is highly relevant indeed. Thus, the administrator of a settlement near the Sudan border in a speech recently referred to his own language as "a dying language".⁸



Map of ethnic Beja areas

3. Differences of Perception

The perceptions of linguists - even when they are based on solid evidence - can be quite different from the perceptions of the speakers themselves.

3.1 Linguists' Pessimism vs. Speakers' Optimism

There are cases where linguists would be pessimistic about the future of a language, but the speakers would not.

Example Xamtanga

One example from this country is the fate of Xamtanga. Based on the information available at that time, linguists predicted its decline 1 or 2 generations ago. Following this track, there now is a web page which claims Xamtanga is "extinct". (The web page erroneously quotes Heine and Brenzinger as the source of this claim.)⁹

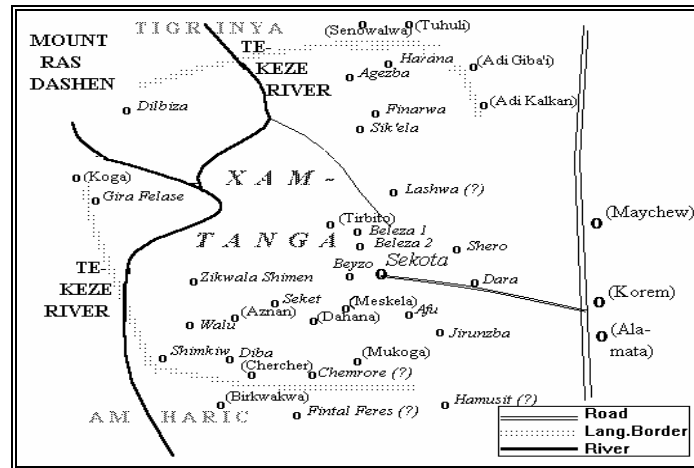
⁷ A word about the Beja information system "*sakananaab*" seems in order here: Beja males are fast and reliable in spreading relevant information among themselves. The speed and accuracy are in fact remarkable and this has been noted in the literature (Roper 1928) The reason is obvious: For a pastoral people like the Beja, truthful and fast spread of news always was vital to their survival. Traditionally this includes news about rainfall, grazing areas, or job opportunities. The information is, however, a one-way system: "*Sakanaab*" does not imply that Beja people are talkative or submissive to foreign influence - to the contrary.

⁸ The International Rescue Commission (IRC), Press Release 16. Sept. 2004

⁹ The survey report of 1995⁹ states that the language is spoken in 45 "Kebeles". Brenzinger (o.c.) presently lists this language as having 5000 speakers.

The speakers themselves, however, are optimistic: They have vigorously invested in the future of their language. (I remember a phone call from Sekota to Addis in 1995, when a group of speakers planned to do something about the future of their language, immediately after the survey encounters.)

In the meantime, so the rumour goes, Xamtanga is even being used in formal education.

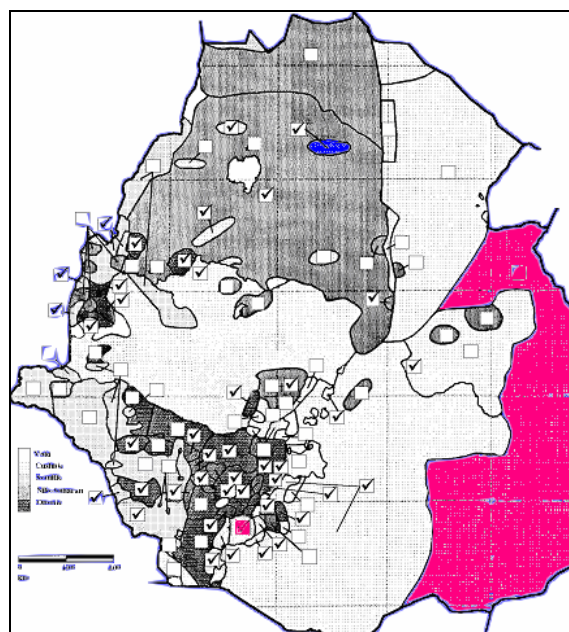


Map
Khamtanga speaking areas (italics)
(S.L.L.E. Linguistic Reports, 23, p. 8)

Example Bayso

Another example is the fate of Bayso,¹⁰ a sister language of Somali and situated far away from its sister.

This tiny group of speakers must have split off from Somali a long time ago, and if it is true that this little group lived on their small island because they were dependent on hunting hippos, then this was a situation where linguists should have predicted "language death" many generations ago.



Map, Location of the sisters Bayso and Somali, and Xamtanga¹¹

¹⁰ Cf. Sommer p. 313f. on Bayso, and Brenzinger 1995 p. 5

¹¹ Map from Wedekind 1995 p. 7

However, the group has survived till today. It is small - unlikely to survive - but Bayso nevertheless keeps on surviving.

These are extreme examples of pessimism on the linguists' side vs. optimism on the side of the speakers.



From Brenzinger 1995, Map of "The Islanders"
S.L.L.E. Linguistic Report No. 26

3.2 Linguists' Optimism vs. Speakers' Pessimism

There are cases where, vice versa, linguists are not pessimistic about the future of a language, but the speakers are.

Example Beja

One example is Beja.

As far as the linguist's perspective is concerned, given the number of more than 1 million speakers,¹² and given the conservative traditional Beja culture where foreigners and foreign influence are shunned, it would appear that there is no danger of language shift or language death.

However, as far as the speakers are concerned, it is surprising to hear that in a public meeting late 2004, a local leader identified this language as "a dying language".

He actually perceived of it as "dying", while for linguists of all schools of thought, a language of that size would hardly be classified that way. What is interesting - or alarming - is that one of the well-informed speakers of this language did, however, perceive of Beja as "dying". He could have said "decreasing", but the term he chose was not just statistics: "Dying" is a metaphor laden with emotional overtones.

¹² Brenzinger, Heine and Sommer 1991 p. 25 adduce the example of Bagamogo in Tanzania, a language which had 173,518 speakers in 1959 - and presently only old-age speakers have remained. Concerning figures of speakers, Crystal 2000 p. 93 warns that the "The widely encountered metaphor of *critical mass* has not been operational."

Whether this perception was heightened by news from outside, or whether this perception had grown from his own observation over the last few years - or from his people's observation over the last few generations - the choices of words indicates serious personal concern, and it was expressed by a person with administrative responsibilities.

4. Beja: Different Perceptions

How can this be explained?

4.1 Reasons for Different Perceptions

There are several factors which make Beja speakers concerned - especially the leaders who feel responsible about reconciling the Beja of today with the world around them:

- One of these is the fact that the speakers are thinly spread over three countries. They are considered a minority in each of them.
- In Egypt, the language is subject to the policy of Arabicization. While other minorities - especially Nubian - have gained some status of recognition, the marginalization of this group is complete: Beja (Bishari) are not even mentioned in most fact books about Egypt. They are practically ignored.
- The Ababda which (ethnically) are the northernmost Beja people in Egypt - have lost their language to about 90 percent. Even culturally they have partly become Arabs ('jabanaat' disappears).
- The Bishari in and around Aswan are in the process of losing the language: When you greet Beja children in their own language, they cannot respond. When you ask their parents why their children don't respond, the parents will proudly reply "Our children go to school".
- In Sudan, although the Beja people have been politically very loud and they have attracted attention even internationally, this does not mean their linguistic desires find support with the Northern Government.
- In Eritrea, even though the multilingual language policy has allowed for the Beja language to be included in the first 6 curriculum years. Beja was the last of the 9 languages to receive the basic text books.
- The news about Ababda having lost their language, and that northern Bishari are in the process of losing their language (Shalatayn and Halayb are intact) is known to Beja people further south, and they perceive this as a potential fate.
- Because of cultural restrictions, higher education tends to create conflict with the traditional ways. Most of the educated elite has therefore fled the Beja area. Several of them are producing literature and making attempts at re-vitalizing the language - from abroad.

4.2 Reconciling Different Perceptions

How can these different perceptions about Beja be reconciled?

For field linguists who are faced with conflicting statements, the rule of thumb is this: "*In case of doubt, the informant is always right.*" Maybe even as socio-linguists we should beware of correcting the speakers in their perception.

4.3 Responding to Concerns

The Atlas of globalization¹³ names three factors which are essential for the survival of a language: (1) Does it have a standardized writing system?¹⁴ (2) Is it capable of integrating loans¹⁵ and modern concepts? (3) Is it ready to function in today's communication systems?

¹³ Atlas du monde diplomatique, quoted from the German version, p. 14

¹⁴ Coulmas 1984: x, says pluralism, not standardization, is desirable from a "humanistic" point of view.

In the case of Beja, the administrator went on to say "they *cured* a dying language" (Press release, IRC, Oct. 2004). The occasion for this encouraging statement¹⁶ was the dedication of a series of books which enshrine the essential lore of his people. The collection had been produced by a team of young Beja men.

In response to the threat of Arabization, and driven by their personal concern and conviction, they had actually accomplished a major enterprise: (1) They took training in field work, (2) They tape recorded 400 hours of folklore (3) They selected and transcribed about 400 pages of it, and finally (4) They trusted one of their own linguists to edit this collection. (5) The same person also produced some school textbooks and gave training to colleagues so that they would complete the task of textbook production. Now there are 5 books, 2 for children and 3 for adults, and this they see only as a beginning. With the decision to have schooling in Beja, the Beja administration have made a step which they do not perceive as a step back to a 'golden past' but towards greater self-regulation or "cultural democracy".¹⁷

The title of one of these books is revealing: "Knowledge which doesn't die."

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¹⁵ Hagège 2000: 188 considers the refusal or inability to integrate loans as conducive to language death.

¹⁶ Compare this with Fishman's question "Why is it so hard to save a threatened language" and his description of language "illness" (Fishman 2001 ch. 1, p.1)

¹⁷ These are the concepts which Fishman links with "linguistic autonomy", 2001 pp. 6ff. - Fishman uses formulae to express socio-linguistic changes. For this change in the Beja culture his formulae would probably be as follows: P/n-P : n-Th / Th > P/n-P : n-Th and Th / Th, where the power functions (P) such as schooling and administration are not only dealt with in the mainstream language (n-Th Arabic or English), but also in the threatened language (Th), while the Beja internal non-power functions (n-P) such as friendship, neighbourhood, community, are dealt with in the threatened language (Th).

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