

Lesson Three : Language Shift -Language Death

Linguistic genocide = Linguicide

- These notes briefly introduce some key concepts of language shift and loss leading to language death. Language death inevitably brings up issues of linguistic human rights, since it typically occurs in situations of cultural pressure, including but not limited to discrimination against linguistic minorities.
- **1. Language shift**
- **Language shift:** when a community who share a native language abandon it, and collectively shift to speaking another one instead. This goes also for dialect:
- **dialect shift** is a case of language shift.
- Language shift is always preceded by **multilingualism**: you can't shift to a new language unless you learn to speak it.

Caribbean Creole languages developed within a century, even less, from African and European languages. Most **African languages** were lost in 1-2 generations under the catastrophic conditions of slavery, though traces of a few remained for 350 years until the late 20th C.

Language shift is not a new phenomenon. It has been going on for all of recorded history. Whenever two cultures/populations with different languages come in intense contact, shift is a possibility.

Typically those who shift are the weaker group, but sometimes it is the more powerful one who shifts.

2. Language Death

Language shift leading to language death is the problem nowadays. **Language death** is the extreme case: the complete disappearance of a language. Most commonly a gradual process spanning several generations. Sometimes a result of **genocide**, the sudden elimination of an entire population.

Example of language death by genocide: Australian Aboriginal languages

Over 350 languages were spoken when Capt. Cook landed in 1770 – perhaps twice that number!.

200 years later, **only 90** survived as viable languages.

70 of those are threatened by extinction in the near future.

Something is known of another 100 or so.

Only 10% of Aboriginal people still speak native languages.

Only 8 languages have more than 1,000 speakers

45 languages have only **10 to 100 speakers** – not enough to ensure survival

3. Linguistic genocide = Linguicide

- Sometimes too, massive killing takes place but survivors remain, who feel forced to abandon their language/culture because it is dangerous to be identifiable as a group member. Several languages once spoken in El Salvador & Honduras fit this category—Cacaopera, Pipil, Lenca. The indigenous speakers were persecuted and killed by death squads.

Thank You

