

Fading Footprints

By

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Abstract

The study, published in *Nature, Ecology and Evolution*, estimates that the equivalent of one language is currently lost within every three-month period and levels of language loss could actually triple in the next 40 years, with at least one language per month disappearing unless measures are taken.

There are 7,000 documented languages currently spoken across the world, but half of them could be endangered, according to a new study. It is predicted that 1,500 known languages may no longer be spoken by the end of this century.

A language can eventually reach a point where it loses all of its speakers. When that happens, the knowledge and traditions that are passed down through it are lost as well.

Linguists' efforts to save disappearing languages include the powerful medium of storytelling.

Parya also known as Asiatic Romany, Afghana-Yi Nasfurush, Afghana-Yi Siyarui, Laghmani, Pbharya, is an endangered Indo-Aryan language spoken by people in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It is extinct in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

This piece offers an insight into Parya along with an original story from the language.

Keywords

Endangered language, threat of extinction, storytelling

Introduction

Research linguists from Australian National University analysed thousands of languages to identify the reason why several languages are at risk. Their findings highlight a link between higher levels of schooling and language loss, as regionally dominant languages taught in class often overshadow indigenous tongues.

A second factor exacerbating the threat to endangered languages is the density of roads in an area. It was found that the more roads there are, connecting country to city, and villages to towns, the higher the risk of languages being endangered. It's as if roads are helping dominant languages 'steam roll' over other smaller languages," said Professor Lindell Bromham, co-author of the study.

"When a language is lost or is 'sleeping' as we say for languages that are no longer spoken, we lose so much of our human cultural diversity," said Professor Bromham.

How does a language become endangered?

A language can, unfortunately, become endangered relatively easily. It happens when fewer and fewer people speak it, especially when children stop learning it as their dominant language. These children are then less likely to speak it at home and teach it to their children.

One main reason the intergenerational passing down of a language can stop is external pressures on a language community that drive some of its members to favour a more dominant language. This often occurs because the more dominant language is perceived or presented as a condition for ensuring quality of life. For instance, having to speak a certain language might be a condition for getting a job, or accessing healthcare or education.

Why should an endangered language be saved?

Language documents carry information about what might be important for a people to survive. Some languages can be traced back thousands of years and the survival strategies of

their speakers are often encoded in a language. In many ways, language is like a map that shows us how humanity has come to be the way it is.

Language endangerment also is associated with human rights issues. Access to healthcare is one example. Many communities around the world have ancestral means to stay healthy, but sometimes they need to seek outside health services. If these services aren't offered in their language, their access to healthcare is restricted.

Saving a language through storytelling

Parya Folktale

Parya is the local language of the Hissar Valley in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. There are about 4,000 known Parya speakers living currently. Probably the greatest desire of the Parya people is to discover their exact origin and the Indo-Aryan language most similar to their own. "The Parya ideas of their history do not extend beyond the memory of one or two generations preceding the oldest speaker who is alive," says Oranskiy.

In 1977 the Russian Linguist named Oranskiy, after surveying the area, wrote a brief history of the language since the 1950s including a language description, a preliminary dictionary and collected dozens of folktales from the Parya people.

Here is one of them....

The shepherd and his wife

Once upon a time, there was a shepherd. The shepherd would care for the sheep in the wilderness, but his wife was unaware of how he worked. Every time the shepherd would come home from the wilderness, his wife would not show him due honour or respect even though the shepherd sometimes shared his experiences.

One day, the shepherd's wife asked, "Take me with you to the wilderness. I also want to take a look around it."

The shepherd looked at his wife and said, “No! That’s not a place for you. This place is better for you. Here you can live in comfort but not there.”

But the woman kept persuading and begging him.

Finally, he agreed and told his wife that he had one condition.

“What is your condition?” his wife asked.

“My condition is that you stay for three days and nights with me in the wilderness,” said the shepherd.

The woman agreed to his condition, and they left the next day for the sheep grazing area. There the wife saw all the hardships that her husband endured in the wilderness. She saw how he prepared food, made tea, how he rushed here and there to take care of the sheep and how he spent his days in the storm, the rain or in the burning sun and she felt compassion for him in her heart.

She realised that shepherds live in the wilderness without a house in the snow, rain, burning sun - always following the sheep so that their children do not go hungry or suffer.

In fact, she regretted that she had insisted on coming. She said to herself, “Why did I come here? One day out here feels to like thirty years to me! I should do something so I can go back home.”

Then she remembered the promise she had made to her husband. “I have to stay here for three days and nights. “After three days I will go back home and get on with my life,” said the woman to herself.

Spending three days in the wilderness actually felt like ninety years to the woman because one day had felt like thirty years.

After returning home, whenever she thought of those three days in the wilderness with her husband, she felt guilty and resolved to do her work the same way her husband did in the wilderness. Under the burning sun she would work in her courtyard cooking, making tea, cleaning, doing laundry. Whatever her husband was out doing in the wilderness she started doing at home.

After several months the shepherd came back to his wife and children. He saw that everything was clean and tidy. He noticed that his wife's manners, behaviour and interaction with him was completely different.

When the shepherd and his wife sat around the table drinking tea, the shepherd asked her,

“What has happened to you? You are acting completely different!”

The woman answered, “Before I went on the trip to with you, I was so happy, but afterwards my regret was immeasurable. Three days with you in the wilderness felt like ninety years to me. I saw with my own eyes all the work and suffering you endure there and God gave me compassion for you in my heart. I also am trying to be like you. Whether at work or at home, we must be equal in life.”

The shepherd became extremely happy when he heard his wife's words.

After that, the woman and her husband developed a mutual respect for the rest of their life and lived happily ever after.

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About the Author

Ms. Neeti Parti is an educationist, a prize-winning poetess and writer, an exhibited artist, an editor.

She has received the LIONS CLUB DELHI VEG WOMEN PRESIGE AWARD 2023, ALSWA EDUCATION ICON OF THE YEAR AWARD at the Women's Alliance Conclave 2022, ASIAN LITERARY SOCIETY INDIAN WOMEN ACHIEVERS AWARD 2021 for LITERATURE among other laurels for education, poetry and prose. She has recently published her solo poetry book VERDANT VERSES & contributed to more than forty anthologies and edited eight.

She is a keen environmentalist associated with many 'green causes' and loves nature photography. She believes: 'When the Universe smiles, a child is born, nature's greatest tribute to itself!'

