

Teaching Kids about Language Change, Language Endangerment, and Language Death Kristin Denham

Every time I tell students in my classes about language death and language endangerment, they are surprised and shocked, not only at the information itself, but that they had never heard about it before. Here in Washington state, we are surrounded by scores of Native American tribes with endangered or dead languages, yet public knowledge of these languages and the languages' status is nearly nonexistent.

Students should have such basic knowledge about language change, language endangerment, and language death well before they happen upon that information in a college classroom. In this chapter I argue that the study of language change and language death is important for every child to know. Although ideally linguistics should be taught as its own subject in the public schools (see Denham 2003), making that sort of change is a longer, more difficult process. (But see Hudson, this volume; Mulder, this volume.) We can effect change now, however, by working within the system and acknowledging the existing standards and benchmarks set by schools and administrators and then determining how linguistic knowledge can help meet those standards. For example, the Washington state standards—and likely that of most other states—require discussion of both national and global “native” cultures. Discussion of language death, language endangerment, and language revitalization can easily become part of those discussions, and the information can form the basis for issues related to cultural and linguistic diversity, colonization and imperialism, intellectual history, and other topics that I mention below. I first offer some background information on language change, which could be part of language arts or English classes in various forms. It is gratifying that more and more education programs are requiring coursework in linguistics. Such courses are typically offered through English programs and when K-12 teachers with this preparation do incorporate the information into their own classrooms, it is most often in a language arts curriculum. And though much of the information about language study can rightly be incorporated into lessons on reading, writing, or communication, some of the information discussed in the latter parts of this chapter might be of broader value when placed within a social studies curriculum. The background information and the discussion points introduced below provide teachers with some launching pads for discussion of linguistic issues that are not only interesting and relevant for their students, but also help teachers and students to meet the curriculum standards.

First, examples of language change

What evidence do we have that English has changed? One need only look at a page of text from *Beowulf* to see that it is not possible for a speaker of modern English to read it without prior study of Old English. And though Chaucer, written in the 1300s in what we now call ‘Middle English’ is a bit more recognizable, we still need a hefty dose of footnotes and grammatical explanation. Shakespearean English is much easier to read and finally seems like our own language, though footnotes are necessary here too. We have quite a lot of evidence that English has changed in its phonology, morphology, and syntax, and that the meanings of many words have changed as well. We even have evidence of language change in progress. For example, it is now very rare to hear *whom* in spoken language—a morphological change. We also seem to be losing the phoneme /ʌ/ in American English. This change is not one that is restricted to a particular geographic region or class, but largely a generational distinction. That is, many (most?) people over, say, 50 still have the /ʌ/;

that is, they have a distinction between the words *which* and *witch*, while most speakers under 50 no longer have this distinction and do not have the phoneme /w/ at all in their consonant inventories.

It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish language variation from language change, but basically, the majority rules. When a substantial number of speakers have adopted the variation as their own accepted pronunciation or grammatical form, then we say that the language has changed. Some changes are incorporated into the written language (mainly, morphological and syntactic changes), some are not (pronunciation changes).¹

And why is it that languages change?

It is useful to be reminded of why languages change in order to reduce our tendency to think of change as degradation. Because the acquisition of language is an innately-determined behavior, the same patterns of change will emerge in all languages. One of the primary motivations for sound change is ease of articulation; that is, phonetic and phonological changes come about as a result of making certain sequences of sounds easier to say. Some sound changes that took place before our spelling system was standardized are reflected in the spellings of the words. The prefix on words such as *impossible* and *illegal* used to be the regular prefix *in-* meaning ‘not’. However, this *in-* changed in certain words in order to make the sound sequences easier to say. So *in + possible* → *impossible* or *in + legal* → *illegal*. This process of assimilation—making one sound more like a neighboring sound in some way—is one of the most common processes in language change and language variation. Another very common reason for language change is *regularization* or *analogy*. For example, in Old English, there used to be many different ways to form the plurals of nouns. (See Curzan (on spelling), this volume.) Those words which we now think of as having “irregular” plurals (*oxen, geese, mice, women*), were members of larger groups of nouns that formed their plurals in the same way. Gradually, by analogy and because of the tendency to regularize, the *-s* plural became the dominant form and other kinds of plural endings dropped out (for the most part).

Another major reason for language change is language contact—one community of speakers comes into contact with speakers of another language. This can result not only in borrowing of words (as in the huge number of words English borrowed from French following the Norman Invasion of England in 1066), but in changes to the phonology, morphology, and syntax of a language. For example, English acquired a phonemic /v/ due to the influence from French (which had a phonemic /v/) after the Norman Invasion. And American English acquired the names for many plants and animals (such as *squash, raccoon, hickory, persimmon, moose, skunk*) from various Native American languages, primarily languages of the Algonquin (or Algonquian) families of the East Coast.²

¹ Why are pronunciation changes not incorporated into the written form of the language? Largely because our spelling system is not a reflection of our pronunciation anyway. There is not a one-to-one correspondence between our spelling symbols (alphabet) and our pronunciation. Also, of course, there is much more dialectal variation for pronunciation than for other grammatical differences.

² The influence on English from Native American languages, however, was quite minimal—not surprisingly, since they were conquered peoples—and all of the borrowed words are nouns, indicating a lack of any true mingling of cultures. Place names, including the names of 28 states, are from Native American languages (including one from Inuit and one from Hawaiian).

Today's language is just going down the tubes

Despite the naturalness of language change and its pervasiveness throughout the history of any language, change is generally regarded by those living through it as a bad thing, as language degradation. (See also Dunn and Lindblom, this volume.) Some of the reasons for this attitude have to do with the standardization of English, with mass literacy, and simply with the notion of “otherness”. (See Lobeck, this volume.) If we hear an unusual word or linguistic structure, we tend to think that it is “wrong” or “bad”; the way we have learned it and the way we see it in print must be the “better” and “right” way. However, looking again at the historical record can help put these attitudes in perspective, allowing us to see that our attitudes about language change are based on what is familiar, not what is “correct”. For example, if someone today says *bringed* instead of *brought*, it might be viewed as quite “incorrect” according to some standard form of English. However, in older English, up through the 15th century, the accepted past tense of *work* was *wrought*; this form was viewed as the more “standard” form of the word. Now, of course, it is more accepted to use the regularized *worked*, though one can imagine the parents and teachers of the day cringing when their children said *worked*, as some may do now when they hear *bringed*. What started out as a quite patterned example of language variation, likely viewed as language degradation at the time, eventually became accepted by the people in positions of power and thus became the so-called “standard” form.

An additional example illustrates another kind of pattern regularization. Many dialects use the form *you was* rather than *you were*, and though this may not be the standard form any more, *you was* used to be quite standard in speech and showed up frequently in literature until it was condemned by prescriptivists in the late 1700s. The chart below summarizes how the use of *was* regularizes the pattern.

standard				nonstandard			
person (singular)	<i>to be</i>	person (plural)	<i>to be</i>	person (singular)	<i>to be</i>	person (plural)	<i>to be</i>
I	was	we	were	I	was	we	were
you	were	you	were	you	was	you	were
he/she	was	they	were	he/she	was	they	were

Using *was* for the second person singular *you* regularizes the pattern, making all of the singular subjects take *was* and the plurals *were*. Though this is a logical pattern that serves to make the system more regular, it is now stigmatized and considered by most speakers to be nonstandard.

Another change that can help students see how their attitudes about language aren't necessarily rational is the pronunciation of words that have an “al” or “ol” followed by another consonant. For most of these words, the /l/ is not pronounced by most speakers: *half*, *calf*, *walk*, *salmon*. According to Pyles and Algeo (1982), this /l/ before a consonant had disappeared across the board by Early Modern English (1500-1800). However, the /l/ has returned in some Modern English speakers' pronunciation because of what we call a “spelling pronunciation,” an effect of seeing the /l/ in the word in print. (This has also happened with the /t/ of *often*, which used to not be pronounced, but now is for some speakers.) Some words with an *l* + consonant have two standard pronunciations, so you may hear *folk* or *psalm* with or without the /l/, though other /l/s are not pronounced, as in *yolk*. And though most speakers do not pronounce the /l/ in *half* or *calf*, those same speakers might pronounce the /l/ in *wolf* and criticize those who do not have an /l/ in *wolf*. It is a useful exercise to

have students consider other words that contain an /l/ before a consonant and discuss their own pronunciations and attitudes: *salve, calm, talk, golf, Rudolph, elf, shelf, myself*, for example.

Perhaps it is just human nature to resist change and with language change that resistance is quite evident. However, acknowledging the naturalness and inevitability of language change, as well as its systematic and rule-governed nature, reminds us that the attitudes about language change (and variation) come not in response to the language itself, but in response to society's attitudes towards the *speakers* of that language variety.³

So it would indeed be an oddity, if not an impossibility, for a language not to change. At least when we view language change from a distance (of either space or time), we seem to understand and accept that languages do affect and influence each other—no one would argue that French or Spanish should become Latin again—and such influence is not necessarily regarded negatively. However, when we are talking about our own language in the present, there is widespread resistance to change and to influence. Consider, for example, the *Academie Francaise*, France's language academy which charges itself with “fixing” the language and resisting outside influences, or consider the negative attitudes towards different dialects of English. Our language becomes part of our identity and so we resist any sort of change or variation. We need to keep in mind how closely we guard our own language (or dialect) when we consider cases in which language contact has led to complete obliteration of a language.

Everyone is likely aware that languages die, but some of the languages mostly commonly thought of as “dead” languages didn't die, they simply morphed into other languages. Latin, for example, is often called a dead language, though it simply developed into Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Romanian; much as Old English changed into Modern English. And Ancient Greek did not die, but changed into Modern Greek. When a language has no descendants, however, then it can more accurately be called a dead language. Even ancient Hebrew, though it was not spoken for about 2,000 years, was able to be revived and modified, resulting in Modern Hebrew; however, because of all the written records and because it remained alive in religious contexts, there was a great deal of materials (as well as a unique political and social situation—and a lot of sheer will), enabling the language to again become a language spoken by children as a first language.

What's real language death?

If Latin and Greek are not examples of dead languages, what are? Which languages have left no descendants and why? Michael Krauss (1992a) has proposed that, in this century, as many as 95 percent of the estimated 6,000 languages currently spoken in the world may become extinct and that they are dying out at the highest rate ever. Krauss also claims that the remaining 5 percent will belong to at most 20 language families, and over half of the remaining languages will belong to just two families, Indo-European and Niger-Congo. What is causing this forecasted rapid decline? How do languages die? Speakers of a language have all died from disease or genocide, as happened with some Native American tribes upon contact with Europeans. Such scenarios have been uncommon,

³ Perhaps it's also human nature to seek out differences to give definition to one's clan/tribe/class, and language certainly provides an effective platform for this kind of societal behavior. This desire to belong to a group is why speakers of particular language varieties maintain their own way even when they know it is nonstandard and stigmatized by the social elite.

however; as James Crawford (01) notes: “More often language death is the culmination of language shift, resulting from a complex of internal and external pressures that induce a speech community to adopt a language spoken by others. These may include changes in values, rituals, or economic and political life resulting from trade, migration, intermarriage, religious conversion, or military conquest”(3).

Discussion points

With the above background information in hand, the K-12 teacher and students can tackle the following set of discussion points which are organized as a series of questions and answers, the questions being those raised by hypothetical students, the answers being some suggestions for the kinds of topics that the questions could lead to. I have organized it this way so that a teacher can pull out questions and answers for different kinds of classes, age groups, and focuses. They also can be read together as a unit on language change and language death.

What’s so bad about language death?

It’s a common public belief that we would be better off if we all spoke the same language—such linguistic homogeneity would mean that we could all understand each other and consequently all get along, right? Some would argue that having multiple languages results in lack of communication and, therefore, lack of cultural understanding. The teacher should lead the class in a discussion of the practical problems of getting everyone in any given community of speakers with more than one language to speak the same language. It simply won’t happen. And if it is attempted by force, it is rarely effective, and rather than promoting mutual understanding and respect, can have the opposite effect. It may be useful to introduce the term *lingua franca* (a language adopted as a common language by speakers who do not share a common native language) and to discuss the role of English as a global language. Even if the students agree that a lingua franca is useful, it should be pointed out that multiple languages are also useful and that most people in the world can speak more than one language. Also, discussion of imposing a language by force could naturally lead to a discussion of English Only laws (legislation which seeks to make English the official language) and can provide a platform to talk about the dangers and constitutional questions of outlawing public use of immigrants’ languages and, in effect, legalizing discrimination against minority languages. Also, such questions can lead to a discussion of how language and identity are so closely intertwined; people are not willing to simply give up their language for another, especially when that other language is one spoken by a more powerful (economic, social, racial) group. Discussion of English Only legislation is a good one for high school students since many may assume that English already is the official language of the country. Having students investigate which states have English Only laws and what the (quite varying) effects of those laws are, is a useful and informative activity. See the *Important Resources* at the end of this chapter for more information.

Also, language loss is tragic because it is a scientific loss (for linguists and for others) and a loss of diversity, in a broad sense. Hale (1992a) argues that linguistic diversity—having a wide variety of languages and language types—is very important to human intellectual life, not only for the amount and variety of data that such diversity provides to linguists, but “also in relation to the class of human activities belonging to the realms of culture and art” (35). Hale adds that “some forms of verbal art—verse, song, or chant—depend crucially on morphological and phonological, even syntactic, properties of the language in which it is formed” (36). In such cases, the art cannot exist in the same way without the language. There has therefore already been profound loss of culture due to the deaths of the hundreds of languages in North America alone.

Isn't it just the "natural" way for some languages to die and others to be created/born?

While it is true that new languages are being born as creoles, they are not emerging at nearly the rate that other languages are dying out. (See Wassink, this volume, for more on pidgins and creoles.) It is important to discuss the idea of what is "natural" with respect to language change. Language change is "natural"—that is, languages do it and to try to prevent it is nearly always futile—but the kinds of external influence that result in language change are quite varied. For example, if communities with different languages come together by choice (migration), that can result in those languages affecting, changing, each other. However, when there is colonization, forced assimilation, or some other prohibition against a community's language, there will be a "natural" reluctance—or even overt resistance—to let go of a language. Understanding the reasons behind language death, especially the language death in the United States, provides perspective on and an understanding of the effects of colonization and the resulting power of English worldwide. See the *Important Resources* at the end of this chapter for more information.

What's stopping language maintenance?

Many may wonder why, if a group of people does not want their language to die, they don't they just start speaking it more. In most cases, language loss results from assimilation of one culture to another more powerful or dominant culture. Along with that assimilation comes loss of a language. What we are seeing now in many Native American communities is a desire to bring back a language that no one speaks (at least fluently) anymore. The challenges these communities face in that task are enormous. In some communities, there are no speakers left. Some have only a few elderly speakers. The languages vary somewhat in how much material has been documented, but they often lack a dictionary or grammatical description of the language. And the ones that do have those materials may not have educational materials that have been developed to make the often quite technical linguistic description and explanation useful for the classroom. So while there may be a desire by the community to have their children speak the language, it is not as easy as that. In many discussions of imperialism and colonialism, language is not typically discussed, and, as a result, "folk knowledge" persists. For example, many people assume that there is a single Native American tribal group and/or a single Native American language. Discussion of the current plight of Native languages, discussion about the residential schools and the punishment endured by Native Americans in such schools for speaking their native languages, discussion of the challenges of being a non-native speaker of English in our country, among other topics, could be effectively incorporated into social studies units on native cultures, though it is typically not. See the *Important Resources* at the end of this chapter for more information.

Aren't unwritten languages more primitive?

Many people might think that if a language is not written, that that is evidence that it is a "primitive" languages. However, it is important to understand our biases as a literate society. Our society takes it for granted that to be "educated" is to be literate, so it can be hard to understand the different ideas about education, intelligence, and culture in people such as the Penan (Davis 1999), the Lardil (Hale 1992a), the Salish, or hundreds of other communities with oral rather than written literary traditions. Many Native American languages were not written down until relatively recently, but the oral traditions in many of these communities is very complex and sophisticated. There is an emerging new study of the literary principles and qualities of oral literature, its narrative structure, and literary

patterning, based on examples from many such communities. Such formal analyses show these oral traditions in the context of the world's literary heritage and seek to represent the texts in a way that reflects how the stories were appreciated and understood by members of the cultures from which they came. (See Bierwert et al, 1996 and references cited there.)

Also, Mufwene (1998) points out that some languages with very prestigious literary traditions, such as ancient Greek and Latin, have nonetheless ceased to be spoken. Mufwene decries the claim that lack of a writing system is a contributing factor to the death of a language at all. See the *Important Resources* at the end of this chapter for more information.

Now, it is unfair to suggest that a culture should remain static. Any living tradition changes. Hale (1992a) says, "...It is...the development of new traditions which is most consonant with the human purpose And it is precisely where local languages are viable that new traditions develop. Thus, for example, in the Southwest of the United States, beside the continuing traditions of sung verse, a new tradition of poetry is developing, in Papago, Pima, Yaqui, Navajo, and Hualapai, for example, in the context of the growing use of the written form of these languages" (41). Attempts to preserve and revitalize language do not mean that the community may not adapt, change, or even assimilate, but rather that diversity should be safeguarded.

Conclusion

It is my hope that even a brief discussion in the K-12 classroom of some of the issues raised here will begin to result in a "linguistic literacy" for our students. Understanding the forces behind language change and the consequences of language death can help students to better understand and appreciate our multilingual, multidialectal, and multicultural society.

Important online resources and links

- <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD>
James Crawford's website contains information on endangered languages, English Only (Official English), language rights, bilingual education, and much more.
- <http://archive.aclu.org/library/pbp6.html>
The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) briefing paper on English Only answers questions frequently posed by the public about "English Only" issues.
- <http://www.cal.org>
The Center for Applied Linguistics' (CAL) website contains a wide range of linguistic information. "CAL is a private, non-profit organization: a group of scholars and educators who use the findings of linguistics and related sciences in identifying and addressing language-related problems. CAL carries out a wide range of activities including research, teacher education, analysis and dissemination of information, design and development of instructional materials, technical assistance, conference planning, program evaluation, and policy analysis."
- <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/01/indian/resources.html>.
The Library of Congress's Learning Page website on "Indian Boarding Schools: Civilizing the Native Spirit" includes many links to other sites and papers as well as to lesson plans.
- <http://www.fathom.com/feature/122144>, <http://www.fathom.com/course/21701718>
These two online seminars "Lost Tongues and the Politics of Language Endangerment" and "Creoles, Pidgins and the Evolution of Languages" respectively, are by linguist Salikoko Mufwene of the University of Chicago. Mufwene's "Goodies" link also has other useful

information on pidgins and creoles and language endangerment:
<http://humanities.uchicago.edu/faculty/mufwene/goodies.html>.

Other References and Suggested Readings

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