



TITLE

What are the birth, the evolution and the extinction of languages?

KEY IDEA

Languages change over time.

CONSPECTUS

1. Introduction: Languages change over time
2. Key idea: Humans change and so do their languages
3. Reasons: Languages are a product of humans
4. Consequences: What causes language birth, evolution, and extinction?
 - 4.1 Human change
 - 4.2 Government policies
 - 4.3 Migration
 - 4.4 Cultural power
 - 4.5 How do we know about language evolution?
5. Conclusions: humans can influence the change of languages

REFERENCES

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OBJECTIVES

You can **recognize** in what stage of evolution is your language: birth, change or extinction?

You can **list** the reasons why languages get weaker over time and finally become extinct.



You can **list** what actions could help your language(s) to become more powerful and not to become extinct.

FULL TEXT

1. Languages change over time

Over time, languages **change**. Small changes happen constantly and, after a long time, a language can have changed a lot. If for example you would like to talk to the grandparents of your grandparents, you most certainly will have difficulties to understand each other.

It is possible that a new language is born during this transformation over the years. Another possibility of a new language to be **born** is, when speakers of different languages come into close contact and have to find a way to communicate to each other. They might create a new language to be able to do so.

A language can also **die**. This happens when it is no longer used by people and over time the language disappears.

2. Humans change and so do their languages

During millions of years our planet has changed a lot. With the planet, also humans, plants and animals have changed. Humans and animals, for instance, have changed their shape (from short to tall), their movements (from crawling to walking on two feet), what they eat (from raw meat to spaghetti bolognese), the things they are able to build (from fur coats to cocktail dresses), where they live (from huts in villages to villas in cities). Humans continuously adapt to new conditions, for example they adapt to climate change. Also, they contribute to the making of new conditions (they pollute so the climate change faster).

Humans do not only change on the outside, but also in the inside. If compared to the first man on earth, humans' brain became bigger; their nails became weaker; their hair on the body reduced; their vocal chords specialized in producing more complex sounds; their hands became able to grab objects and to move with extreme precision.

Along with all these changes, also the way humans interact has been transformed over time. The words and the signs have been modified. Some new ones have taken the place of the old ones. The order of words and signs has changed as well.

People moved from one place to another and influenced the language they found in their new village. Slowly this led to have different languages in different parts of the world.

3. Languages are a product of humans

Humans need languages to be able to communicate with each other. Through communication, humans can make friends, families. Using sign and spoken languages



exactly as humans do is something that animals and plants cannot do. Therefore languages are a product of humans. As humans change, also their product changes.

4. What causes language birth, evolution, and extinction?

When people start using a new language, we speak of **birth** of a language. When talking about the changes of a language during time we talk about **evolution** of a language. When a community no longer uses the language and neither understands it, we call it the **extinction** of a language. Birth, evolution and extinction of languages can happen for different reasons.

4.1 Human change

As new things happen, we need new signs and words to name them. We can decide to create the new sign or word from scratch. Another possibility is that of taking an existing one, used by other people, and modifying it. Even the order of the signs and words can change in time: which one to start with, what follows, which one to end my speech? These little changes, over time, can create a big transformation in the language.

4.2 Government policies

People often move to other lands. They move to look for better climate conditions, to run from a war, to conquer other territories. In the course of history many populations have been conquered by others. The conquerors' language often has mixed with the language already existing on the territory or substituted it. For example, the Roman empire covered most of the Mediterranean area. After taking the territories, the Romans installed there their governors. Groups of Latin speaking citizens moved to the new provinces. The influence of Latin can be still found in many of the languages of that area (Spain, France, United Kingdom, Germany, etc.).

Governments often promote the use of one language instead of the many local varieties. Language can also be used for retaining power. It still happens in many East African countries. It happened during the Soviet Union government in the 1950's. The Russian government forced children to learn Russian, hoping that this way they would feel more Russian and less attached to their local minority. Maybe, when becoming adults, those people would be more likely to fight alongside one another. They would not look at the differences in social class, age, or native land.

4.3 Migrations

The migration of few people, can also have consequences in the language of a country. An example of this happened with French and American sign language. When Gallaudet met Abbe Sicard, Jean Massieu and Laurent Clerc in France, he decided to stay and learn the teaching methods for the deaf students. When Gallaudet was ready to travel back to America, he asked Clerc to accompany him. Clerc agreed and joined Gallaudet on his journey. Together they founded the first American School for the Deaf. A first Deaf community with a common sign language was born and from that moment



on ASL could develop fast. More and more deaf people were using the same sign language. Lots of signs from French Sign Language remained in ASL.

4.4 Cultural power

The economic, cultural and political power of one large community, can cause a shift in the language of small communities. Small communities slowly let the culture and the language of the big city to prevail on theirs. This, for example, is the case of some deaf communities in small villages. They slowly start using the language of the big city nearby. It happens, for example, with Ban Khor sign language variety, used in a Thai village. The national variety of Thai Sign Language is associated with more educational and professional opportunities, and it is slowly replacing the village variety. The sign language of the larger cities, in fact, might be more recognized and spread throughout the whole territory. The village sign language variety slowly disappears. This change does not happen fast. It takes generations to lose completely the original language. At first people's sons and daughters will be able to use both the city and the village sign language. The ability to use the village sign language will decrease. The same will happen to the ability to connect to the village culture. The process of extinctions of the village language is completed when the younger born children will only know the city sign language and will feel more attached to the city culture.

4.4 Death of large number of people

Sometimes a language (or a variety of a language) dies because the community which speaks it dies. A war, a natural disaster (like a tsunami, an earthquake, a volcano explosion), the spread of a disease: these events can wipe out communities and their languages. For example, by the time of exploration, some diseases (for example smallpox) had been common in Europe for centuries. In Europe people could not be sick of those diseases anymore. When the Europeans travelled to the Americas, they took the diseases with them. They infected those communities already living in there. Disease and genocide weakened the various Native American groups, who were eventually politically overwhelmed by English speakers.

4.5 How do we know about language evolution?

Thanks to writing, people can put the words on paper. Spoken language can be somehow "frozen" and shared with others. Writings can last for centuries. We can still read very ancient texts, for instance the Egyptian inscriptions date thousands of years ago. Old languages can be compared with more modern versions. When texts are very ancient, it can be really difficult to understand their meaning.

In the case of sign languages, they could be drawn on paper or described with written words. Nowadays video-recording helps a lot in "freezing" signs so that in the future someone will be able to see them. For instance, video-recording made it possible for people from all over the world to witness the birth of a new sign language in Nicaragua, in Central America. Until the 1970s deaf people in Nicaragua received little or no education in sign language and many of them lived isolated without the ability to communicate with others. After the revolution (1979), a vocational school for the Deaf



was founded in Managua. Soon hundreds of deaf students enrolled in the school. Students slowly created their own sign language. Linguistics researchers from America have travelled to Managua and studied the language. They took videos and spread the news on television. That sign language is now the official Nicaraguan Sign Language.

5. Conclusions

People need languages to communicate with each other. Language is a product of the human body: brain, hands, face, speech organs (tongue, lips, teeth, etc.). As humans change (evolve), also their languages change. In millions of years humans have developed the ability to express their thoughts through a complex system of signs or words.

Small little changes keep happening continuously, and they can lead to a big change in a language. If you compare the languages of today with those used one hundred years ago, of course, you will find differences and similarities.

When people start using words or signs that had never been used before, a whole new language arises. Other languages cease to be used, instead. When a language disappears, it is like when an animal species disappear, it becomes extinct.

Human evolution is not the only reason for language changes though. Amongst the other reasons, the governments can influence the use of the languages spoken in their country into one or another direction. Recognition of a language as an official language can have a great impact on the life of the language itself: it can spread more easily and increase its cultural value. Another reason for language change is that people can migrate to another land. When people move, either to conquer it or simply to live in the new land, they bring along their language. The slow integration of the new community in the larger one can have effects on what language is preferred, which signs or words are used instead of others. Language and culture are deeply connected. When the culture of one community prevails on another, also the language does.

We are able to see that languages have changed during time because we have written recordings of them dating different periods in history. People have transcribed spoken messages into written texts and signed messages into drawings or written descriptions. Since the beginning of video-recording (the very first television camera was devised in the 1920s; television spread in the 1950s), also videos allowed us to capture bits of spoken languages and sign languages.

What will it be of the language we are using now? How will it change in the future? What will people say about the videos we upload now on YouTube? Only time can tell us.