

Interviewing Dr. Marva Spence on Language Endangerment

By

Prof. Petra E. Avillan-León, PhD

2019

Dr. Marva Spence, University of Costa Rica
1. Do the existing typologies on language endangerment and the evolutionary process of language suffice for understanding the language situations today? If yes, why? If no, why not?
Language endangerment, shift and death As globalization increases so does the death of human language. In the same way, that species and habitats are being eradicated languages and cultures are vanishing at an unprecedented rate today. It is said that by the end of this century half of the 7000 existing languages will have died. I personally think that to understand the fate of endangered languages, there should be a coming together of different disciplines: linguistics, anthropology, sociobiology, psychology, history just to name a few. The answer is not and cannot be one-dimensional at all.
2. What role do the universities and linguists as experts play in relation to languages that are endangered, language revitalization programs and language maintenance or planning efforts?
The most important role that universities should play is by making a great effort of documenting the languages, not just by analyzing the inner structures, making dictionaries but also documenting its pragmatic and conversational rules. It is important to point out that even, if one stays within the confines of the field of linguistics, there should be collaborative approaches and the pulling of resources across the different subfields of linguistics.
3. How do the speakers of so-called endangered languages feel about the possibility of losing their language? How important is this for them as a decision-maker?
There is no answer one answer fits all. The fieldwork of language attitudes and use needs to be done for the endangered language group.
4. Is the perception of threat on the part of the speakers of endangered languages an important factor to be considered by experts? If so, which are the consequences or advantages of considering this?
Success will be achieved through the resolve of the endangered language group. They are the ones that can make their language endure the threats and thereby continue to grow. The will of the people to preserve their language and identity is key.
5. In order to better assess language endangerment situations what would you recommend that universities teach new linguists?
They can make them become aware and sensitive to the issues of endangered languages, but it's important to also include those in the dominant culture and the government. Attitudes toward the endangered language are a huge threat. We should remember that the negative attitudes stem from both communities: the mirror effect.

6. Do you think that the assessment scales used to determine the health of a language reflect the reality? What would you recommend to improve them?

So many language have gone already without leaving a trace. There is nothing known about their typology or the social context that impacted their demise. The scale is a valuable guideline, but it's not exhaustive. Each case should be analyzed from the social context within which it is immersed to understand what is pushing it towards shift or demise.