The disappearance of languages – myth or reality?

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There are at about 7,000 to 10,000 languages spoken worldwide, two numbers that seem very different, but that should be no surprise, since there are uncertainties what counts as a language and what is just a dialect. Prominent examples are for instance are Serbo-Croatian that is often splitted into several languages such as Serbian, Croatian, Montenegrin, Bosnian, etc., Romanian that has Daco-Romanian (which is commonly simply known as Romanian or Moldovan), Aromanian, Megleno-Romanian, etc. or the Turkic languages that are all together considered to be dialects of Turkish in Turkey. Language doesn’t share a standard, it is identity!

A popular belief nowadays is that over 50% of the languages that are spoken today will die out within the next hundred years. This popular belief is very widespread and indeed some languages will die out, no need to argue about that, however, the idea that most languages will die out is not only scary but also unrealistic to a certain kind of degree that I want to show in this article to lessen the apocalypse of languages.

An important argument that is always given is the fact that all Top 10 (or Top 20) languages altogether are spoken by at least 80% of the world population. This fact of course is right and needs no proof, but when one takes a glimpse on the Top 10 list, one can see interesting things. The top three languages Chinese, English and Spanish are spoken globally and widespread. Chinese for instance is spoken natively in China, northern parts of Vietnam, in many parts of Myanmar, by most people in Singapore, on the Christmas Islands, and by minority groups in Laos (3%), Thailand (14%), Cambodia, Malaysia (11%), Brunei and Indonesia. English is official in at least 70 countries and Spanish is natively spoken in at least 20 countries. Other top 10 languages such as French are spoken in 30 countries, but Portuguese is not spoken in many countries, anyways, as Brazil has a population of 200 million people, it reaches no. 8 on the list. However, most languages on the Top 10 list are no languages that are on the schedule in Western schools or often studied, and honestly, sometimes even just locally important. However, they have a huge amount of speakers. For instance, Malay and Indonesian (often grouped together) are the sixth most spoken language in the world, Hindi and Urdu (also often grouped together as Hindustani) are even number 3 in Ethnologue 2015 (18th edition). And Bengali, Japanese and Lahnda are even more widely spoken than Italian, Turkish or Vietnamese, to the latter three one might find many language courses in the West.
Even Telugu, Marathi and Javanese (the latter one is spoken in Indonesia) are on the Top 20 list. This is no wonder since India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh belong to the most populous countries in the world making up over 1 billion people. Together with China (the most populous country in the world), Russia and the USA, they make up already 3 of 7 billion people of the world. If we add South America with its Spanish and Portuguese population, we can soon reach almost 4 billion people, in other words: half of the world’s population. Adding French speakers (many of them in Africa) and Arabic speakers, we already reach 60% of the world population.

However, one important fact gets lost. Many languages with a merely small amount of people get lost in that statistics, but their language is stable. Slovenia has a population of 2 million people, and almost everyone is able to speak Slovenian in the country, while only 50% speak English (maybe even less if it goes to fluency). People in Slovenia speak Slovene in any situation, in official situations, at school, in restaurants, in the media, however 2 million out of 7 billion, that’s not much. Even entities in other countries such as Chechnya (in Russia) have a quite stable situation, as over 95% of Chechnya's population is able to communicate in Chechen fluently, although Russian plays a very large role. In fact, countries with a large dominating group and a second language as lingua franca are rarely endangered. For instance, Shona is spoken by 80% of Zimbabwe’s population, although English is lingua franca among other peoples, Somali is spoken everywhere in Somalia, although Arabic and English, and in rare cases Italian (among elderly people) can be used, and 40% of Senegal’s population are Wolofs but Wolof is widely used, while French is used when talking with other ethnicities.

In Laos, 3 million people are Lao, anyways Laotian language is used as a means of communication by the 6 million people living in the country, without any other major language being spoken (except Chinese dialects being used by the Han-Chinese minority), in Cambodia, Khmer is spoken by almost everyone and again there is no second major language (except Vietnamese and Chinese being spoken by the Vietnamese and Chinese minority).

One can see easily that these countries use their languages in everyday life, in every situation, but since they only have a small population, they all count to the 10-20% who do not speak a Top 10 language as native. However, these languages are unlikely to disappear, and English, French or Spanish is only used as foreign language as means of communication or business, but the big languages are not taking over the smaller ones here. Arguing that most languages will die out because the Top 20 languages are spoken by 80% of the world population anyways is no argument as shown above as many persistent languages are spoken in rather small countries, and major languages are only used in business or as lingua franca, or as many
Top 20 languages from India that are on the list, are of no relevance for other countries anyways.

However, the languages that we really have to worry about are not the African or Asian ones (since they are still vividly spoken, and in addition to the global networking are written more than ever before, such as online literature, chat rooms, etc.), but the ones in Europe that are mainly facing death, such as the Sami languages in Scandinavia and Russia; Belarusian in Belarus; Rusyn in Ukraine, Slovakia and Serbia; Limburgish in Germany; Luxembourgish (mainly the variants in Germany and France); Kashubian in Poland; Lombard in Italy; Breton in France; Wallonian in Belgium, and many others for which far too less (for many if anything) is done. Although Kashubian is encouraged by the Polish government and Sami is encouraged by the Scandinavian governments, there is still too less public attention done on the languages (ask anyone in Europe whether he or she has heard of it before). For Luxembourgish, Limburgish and Breton, nothing is done in Germany and French and even Gallo, Occitan and Alsacian are on its way to die out, because of the superiority of French that is still enforced by the government, more or less.

Other languages, such as Aramaic in Turkey and Syria are rather endangered through wars and displacement rather than less usage by the speakers in their home area itself. Many Syrian refugees who speak a minority language only speak Arabic with Syrians (and sometimes also Kurdish), since they hardly find speakers of the same language that they speak at home, which means that they cannot use their own language anymore. In addition, they have to adopt to their new country, and children learn the language of their new home country, of course, which makes their own language rather irrelevant (as they have no one to speak to and no way to use it).

At the same time, everywhere around the world, more and more languages are codified and are taught in schools as well as used in literature or media. Some languages are still almost never written, but always spoken, such as languages in the Pacific. Tahitian language is the mainly spoken language in Tahiti, but when it comes to writing, French is used. However, in official situations and on markets, Tahitian is used. And although Samoan is still no popular language for literature, all instructions in Samoan schools are given bilingually. The teacher has to say the sentence always twice, in English and Samoan. And in daily life, Samoan remains the language of communication.

We can see that the main argument that languages are dying (i.e. major languages are prefered since they are spoken almost everywhere in the world) is not true. Languages that are endangered are rather languages in Europe that are not treasured and labeled as ‘dialect’ or
unimportant, as well as indigenous languages in South America (as a threat of industrialisation). Some languages are endangered because the speakers are displaced mainly though wars. However, thanks to modern media, many languages stay vivid and are used in networks.

Still, all together these do not make up 50% of the languages and therefore it is unlikely that even half of all languages might disappear. Even further, recently only c. 300-500 languages are that severely endangered that they might become extinct soon. Even further, some languages that were seen to be endangered show a rising number of speakers. For instance, Tokelauan was believed to be decreasing, with a number of 1,300 speakers 10 years ago. However, recently it has been discovered that there might be 1,700 speakers (and even newer estimations suggest that there are over 2,000 Tokelauan speakers around the world), some of them in New Zealand and the United Kingdom preserving their language. And even Samoan that was believed to have 300,000 speakers 10 years ago turned out to have 500,000 speakers in the last years. This shows that eventually more and more languages might be saved on the one side, but that many dialects might phase out in favor for a codified standard language.