

The Effects of Cultural Assimilation on the Loss of the Tuvan and Seri Languages

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ABSTRACT

The modern pressure to learn dominant, mainstream languages such as English, Spanish, and Mandarin increases connectivity and communication across different societies. However, when members of society succumb to cultural pressures of assimilation, they often abandon native tongues in the process (Crystal, 2002). Cultural traditions are lost when languages are lost, and indigenous cultures die. In fact, it is estimated that one language dies every two weeks, and more than a thousand languages today are listed as critically or severely endangered (Rymer, 2012). Some academics such as Wang (2007) suggest that the convergence of cultures and languages can promote integration and harmony. However, most academics view the deterioration of indigenous languages to be a negative phenomenon. In fact, Crystal (1999) asserts that diversity is a key to evolutionary success and that increased uniformity threatens the long-term survival of the human species. Diversity allows for a species to survive across different environments. This paper will review how the rise of dominant languages such as Chinese and Spanish has led to the erosion of the Tuvan and Seri languages and ultimately, the loss of identity—the loss of culture, traditions, and customs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The modern pressure to learn dominant, mainstream languages such as English, Spanish, and Mandarin increases connectivity and communication across different societies. However, when members of society succumb to cultural pressures of assimilation, they often abandon native tongues in the process (Crystal, 2002). Cultural traditions are lost when languages are lost, and indigenous cultures die. In fact, it is estimated that one language dies every two weeks, and more than a thousand languages today are listed as critically or severely endangered (Rymer, 2012). Some academics such as Wang (2007) suggest that the convergence of cultures and languages can promote integration and harmony. However, most academics view the deterioration of indigenous languages to be a negative phenomenon. In fact, Crystal (1999) asserts that diversity is a key to evolutionary success and that increased uniformity threatens the long-term survival of the human species. Diversity allows for a species to survive across different environments.

The study of dying languages can help shed awareness and bring more attention to this problem of waning linguistic diversity. At particular risk of extinction are the Tuvan dialect of Russia and the Seri language of Mexico. Within the academic world, a great deal has been published regarding the implications associated with dying languages (Hagège, 2009; Crystal, 2002; Harrison, 2008; Batibo, 2005; Dorian, 2016; Walsh, 2005; Mufwene, 2002). However, this review of literature will provide a comprehensive review of two of the world's most threatened languages. This paper will review how the rise of dominant languages such as Chinese and Spanish has led to the erosion of the Tuvan and Seri languages and ultimately, the loss of identity—the loss of culture, traditions, and customs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. English, Chinese, and Spanish as “Lingua Francas”

A lingua franca can be defined as a common language between two speakers who differ in native tongues and national cultures (Seidlhofer, 2005). Recent research suggests that English has adopted the role of a lingua franca as it is a

common communicative medium for individuals of different origins and tongues (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Melitz (2018)'s comparative analysis across different linguistic influences on bilateral trade creates a convincing argument: the use of universal languages such as English or Chinese pose economic benefits as it can stimulate dialogue between different countries and ultimately strengthen diplomatic relations. Conversely, it is also frequently stressed in the academic world that English is a language with an economic, military, political imperialist history, and that its spread ultimately generates more harm than good (Meyer, 2004). House (2003) goes as far as calling English a "language killer," claiming that its newfound role as a lingua franca is a serious threat to multilingualism.

While English is considered to be the current dominant lingua franca, academics have also studied the implications associated with the rise of other common languages such as Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi. Upon reviewing the influence of different Chinese dialects, namely Mandarin, Wu, Min, Yue, and Xiang, Li (2006) contends that Mandarin Chinese is the lingua franca in Greater China. Plumb (2016) utilizes research findings from different regions and focal points to argue that Mandarin Chinese has the potential to replace English as a lingua franca due to its recent increase in use.

Other forms of literature have insisted that Spanish must be reviewed as an influential lingua franca. Godennzi (2006)'s research article in the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* Spanish argues that Spanish should be considered a lingua franca because it historically was used as a communicative medium in Afro-American settlements among those living in colonized and ethnically diverse territories, across regular migrators, in territories colonized by the Spanish, and even in the Americas today. Another research paper published in the *Global Advances in Business and Communications Conference & Journal*, Steven (2017) cites a study that assessed workplace language use within the American agribusiness sector, avowing that Spanish is in fact more commonly used than English in the agricultural sector. Spanish's influence is particularly evident in the rural northwestern U.S. community and thus, Steven (2017) claims, gives Spanish ground to be considered a dominant lingua franca.

Regardless of any difference in opinion, one fact is clear: English, Mandarin Chinese, and Spanish are all languages that carry great influence in the world. The next two sections will explore two specific case studies of how the pressures to learn popular languages such as Chinese and Spanish have led to the erosion of certain native tongues.

2.2. Chinese, Russian and the Tuvan Language

Protected by snowy mountains, just east of Moscow, members of the Tuvan tribe are perhaps most famous for their throat-singing and nomadic tendencies. Indigenous Tuvinians consist of mostly Russian and Mongolian settlers (Harrison, 2010). Rymer (2012)'s *National Geographic* article propounds that the Tuvan language is one of the most threatened languages on Earth today with only 235,000 speakers left. Rymer (2012) further expounds—younger members of this Siberian tribe are seduced away from their mother tongue by the Russian and Chinese taught in secondary schools. The pressures to assimilate with the outside world places an expectation on this generation of Tuvinians to speak, read, and write in Russian or Chinese rather than in their native tongue. Anayban (1992)'s research paper, published by UNESCO, supports this claim, insisting that Tuvan-Russian bilingualism emerged in the late 20th century thanks to both the widespread use of media and schools.

Vandehey (2021) explores what is at stake when a language dies in her University Honors Thesis, alleging that when a language is lost, culture is lost too: the community of people who identify with the language can no longer use the language to connect with their culture. Vandehey (2021) substantiates this claim by arguing that crucial information about the Siberian region the Tuvans currently occupy will be lost once the language goes extinct. For example, Vandehey (2021) suggests that the Tuvinians have learned how to survive centuries of harsh winters that reach as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit, using indigenous animals to make clothing and shelter for proper insulation. Information about how to survive these winters will likely die out along with the language, potentially making this region of Siberia uninhabitable.

When a language dies, important information is lost too. Several conservation efforts have recently gone underway in an attempt to preserve the Tuvan language. An example is David Harrison and Greg Anderson's creation

of a Tuvan-English dictionary (Rymer, 2012). Ultimately, however, the most effective method of preservation is the physical teaching and learning of the Tuvan language.

2.3. Spanish: A threat to the Seri Language

Another language at great risk for extinction, the Seri language belongs to a group of nomadic hunter-gatherers from Mexico. According to a statement released recently by Mexico's Centre of Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS), the Seris' declining population has made the language 1 of 21 critically endangered languages in Mexico (Dell' amore, 2014). Rymer (2012) asserts that the pressure to assimilate with the present-day Mexican culture has driven Seris to learn Spanish in lieu of Seri. CIESAS linguist Lourdes de León Pasquel supports Rymer (2012)'s claim, having stated that "migration, social instability, economic and ideological factors" are the main factors pushing Seri speakers to adopt Spanish (Dell' amore, 2014). Also to blame is the spread of the English language, globalization, and national education programs Marlett (2000) affirms in his research article published in the Journal of the Southwest Research.

Some academics believe that the loss of language is inconsequential and that the death of culture should be expected rather than mourned in this age of monoculturalism. In fact, a 1922 *National Geographic* article once claimed, "One need not mourn the Seri Indians too much...It may be that another year will see the last of them" (Marlett, 2000). However, further review of literature suggests that there is much to lose when small languages are lost. Rymer (2012) holds that the survival of the Seri people has been tied to the traits and behaviors of the animal/plant species that they live in close proximity with; the Seris have an intimate relationship with Mexico's desert and sea. Rymer (2012) asserts that the reluctance amongst younger people to learn the Seri language has created a disruption in the transfer of traditional knowledge about medicinal plants, foods, agriculture, navigation and so forth. Pretty soon, he fears that the areas in which the Seri people once lived might become uninhabitable.

Nevertheless, some academics still have hope for the Seris' survival. Dell' amore (2014)'s *National Geographic* article suggests that Mexico is home to many language-revitalization efforts with the financial support and resources of UNESCO, aiming to protect endangered languages such as Seri, and thus the Seri language, though fragile, remains somewhat protected in today's day and age.

3. CONCLUSION

This review of literature concurs: the rise of popular languages such as English, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish has led to the decline of certain indigenous languages such as the Tuvan and Seri languages. There is much that is threatened with the gradual extinction of smaller languages, and thus, the preservation of traditional cultures and languages must be advocated for.

Though the world of academia acknowledges what is at risk when languages die, little has been published about the preservation efforts of these languages. More in-depth research should be conducted by linguistic specialists and anthropologists regarding what must be done to protect these fragile languages and what is already being done to help shelter their survival. Examples include the study of language education programs and the creation of dictionaries among other recorded and printed resources. By publishing work about the preservation of languages, optimism will arise and encourage others to learn threatened languages.

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