LINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE OBSOLESCENCE

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ROAD MAP

INTRO

> **Questions around language death**

>> Why do speakers stop using a language?

>> Under what circumstances does language death occur?

>> What happens when a language ceases to be spoken?

>> **What happens to a language when it is *in the process* of being spoken less and less?**

INTRO

> **Language obsolescence**

>> **the process of a language being spoken by progressively fewer speakers**

>> **a relatively new area of study**

>> **an area of study that centers around minority and endangered languages**

INTRO

> **language change**
>> **every living language is constantly changing**
>>> new words (e.g., "stan")
>>> new uses for existing words (e.g., "it slaps")
>>> new syntax (e.g., "because [noun]")
>> **the linguistic study of language obsolescence is a study of language change**

INTRO

> **Defining terms**
>> **language death:** the point at which the language in question is no longer used
>> **language obsolescence:** the process of a language being spoken by progressively fewer speakers
>> **language attrition:** the individual process of losing fluency in a language
>> **language revival:** the process of creating more speakers of a language from zero speakers

RECAP: THEORIES OF LANGUAGE DEATH

> **sudden death:** a language ceases to be spoken due to natural disaster or genocide killing all speakers

> **radical death:** a language ceases to be spoken due to severe repression; members of the cultural group may survive, but, in order to survive, do not speak their language

> **bottom-to-top:** language no longer used in everyday situations, but still used in particular, ritual contexts

> **gradual death:** a language ceases to be spoken as it is gradually supplanted by another language over the course of generations.

THE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF OBSOLESCENCE

> **"Sociologic Notes on Obsolescent Languages"** (Swadesh 1948):

- **examples** of language obsolescence.

- obsolescence as a **worthy field of study**.

- proposed **research framework**

  - **speaker attitudes** and **language ideology**

  - which parts of the language **change first**? which are **resistant to change**?

THE LINGUISTIC STUDY OF OBSOLESCENCE

> **Early in-depth studies**

> **Nancy Dorian – East Sutherland Gaelic (1970s)**

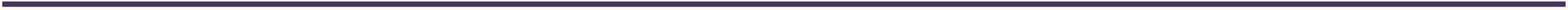- Specifically analyzing linguistic changes in an obsolescent language

> **Annette Schmidt – Young People's Dyirbal (1980s)**

- Examining the difference in language between two generations of speakers

WHAT HAPPENS TO A LANGUAGE AS FEWER PEOPLE SPEAK IT?

EFFECTS OF OBSOLESCENCE

> **East Sutherland Gaelic (Scotland)**
>> **gradual loss of certain features, e.g.:**
>> **grammatical gender**
>> **case marking**
>> **passive constructions**
> **Dyirbal (Australia)**
>> **incorporation of more English vocabulary and more English-like grammatical structures**
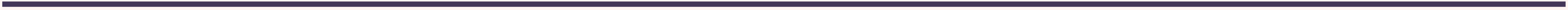
EFFECTS OF OBSOLESCENCE

> No unified theory, but trends based on studies of individual languages

> Language change occurs more quickly

> Variability in the types of change

> Loss of infrequently-used lexical items

> Tendency toward simplification

EFFECTS OF OBSOLESCENCE

> **Some theoretical frameworks**

> > **dissipation model** – structures and functions reduced

> > **concentration model –** overgeneralization of distinct features

> > **pidginization model –** vast simplification, includes elements from multiple languages

> > **deacquisition model –** process of losing a language is the reverse of learning it

CASE STUDY: TUNICA

- Linguistic isolate whose historical range was in the Lower Mississippi Valley
- Heritage language of the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe of Louisiana
- Last known native speaker died in 1948
- Longtime language revival efforts by individual families
- Tribal support since 2010 (Tunica Language Project)
- Tunica-Biloxi Language & Culture Revitalization Program (2014)
- How can we examine obsolescence when the language no longer has native speakers?

TUNICA DOCUMENTATION

> Three different linguists, working with three different speakers, documented Tunica during its obsolescence

> Albert Gatschet and William Ely Johnson (1886)

> John Swanton and Volsin Chiki (1907–1911)

> John Swanton and Sesostrie Youchigant (1930–1931)

> Mary Haas and Sesostrie Youchigant (1933–1939)

Linguist	Speaker	Year(s)	Number of texts
Albert S. Gatschet	William Ely Johnson	1886	8
John Swanton	Volsin Chiki	1910	2
John Swanton	Sesostrie Youchigant	1930	2
Mary Haas	Sesostrie Youchigant	1933–1939	76

HOW WELL DOES A SPEAKER SPEAK THE LANGUAGE?

"I would like to consider here the evaluation problem which faces the investigator in the terminal language community: how is he to gauge the completeness and intactness of the version of the language which he receives from his informants?"

"The most difficult case is surely a lone last speaker of some fluency, where there is neither a comparison available nor a markedly deficient manner of delivery."

Nancy Dorian (1977)

EFFECTS OF OBSOLESCENT CHANGE IN TUNICA?

> How much did the Tunica language change in its obsolescence?

> Which features of the language changed the most? Which changed the least?

> Does Tunica's language change during obsolescence fit into any of the theories?

EFFECTS OF OBSOLESCENT CHANGE IN TUNICA?

> **dissipation model**
>> **grammatical gender**
>>> **arbitrary gender in the singular and dual; invariably feminine in the plural**

> **concentration model**
>> **evidential *-ani***
>>> **not used by William Ely Johnson (1886)**
>>> **Volsin Chiki (1910) used it often but not in every sentence**
>>> **Sesostrie Youchigant (1933) used it in every relevant sentence**

BENEFITS OF STUDYING OBSOLESCENCE

> **Who benefits from the the study of language obsolescence?**

>> **Historical linguists**

>> **Speech communities and heritage language communities**

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