PROTECTING, PROPAGATING AND REVIVING CARIBBEAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Aims

This report, within the framework of the contract and UNESCO's programme to promote language diversity in cyberspace, seeks to

i. examine the extent of the endangerment of the traditional languages of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, with specific reference to Guyana, Belize, Dominica, St Vincent & the Grenadines, and Suriname,
ii. identify the most endangered languages and make recommendations for the use the world wide web and appropriate information and communication technology (ICT) to aid in their protection, propagation and, where appropriate, their revival, and
iii. prepare a proposal for the ongoing collection, storage and analysis of Caribbean indigenous language data, and for making this widely available through the hosting and management on a regional basis of a website which contains extensive and authoritative written, spoken and multimedia material in and about these endangered languages, using all existing technologies for the storage and dissemination.

International Context

Based on the 14th edition of *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000), the number of languages spoken in the world is variously estimated at between 5,000 and 7,000. Maffi (1998) quotes statistics by David Harmon (1995) which suggest that half of the world's languages are spoken by communities of 10,000 people or fewer. In turn, communities of 1,000 speakers or fewer speak half of these. When we put together figures for 'small' languages having 10,000 or fewer speakers, 8 million people (that is, less than 0.2% of the world's population) speak one-half of the total number of languages.

Justification

The indigenous languages of the Caribbean and the cultures which they transmit have taken thousands of years to develop. These languages have been threatened in a variety of ways. The traditional threat has been through the physical extermination of their speakers in the wake of European colonisation. In modern times, this threat has receded to be replaced by new ones. The first of these involves formal and informal discrimination by the state and non-indigenous communities against speakers of indigenous languages. More insidious, however, has been an acceptance by members of indigenous language speech communities that their ancestral languages represent a barrier to economic and social advance. This produces unwillingness amongst older members of the community to

transmit these languages to the young and/or unwillingness amongst the young to acquire and use these languages.

One assumption made here, based on research on this issue, is that indigenous languages of the Caribbean do not present a barrier to economic and social advance and access to modern information and technology. Access to communication outside the community of speakers of indigenous languages can be had in two ways. Material from languages of wider communication (LWCs) such as English, Spanish and French, can be translated into the community language. In addition, members of the indigenous language speech community can develop multilingualism, involving their native languages and LWCs learnt as second and third languages. The general consensus of research on the issue is that bilingualism or multilingualism in a community language and languages of wider communication (LWCs) does not have a negative effect on competence in LWCs. In fact, bilingualism and multilingualism seem, when formally promoted by the education system, do give a slight advantage to bilinguals and multilinguals using LWCs, by comparison with monolingual speakers of these LWCs.

Another assumption is that indigenous languages and the cultures which they transmit have evolved over thousands of years and represent an important aspect of the heritage of mankind. What is involved is not simply the preservation of things past but of maintaining bodies of knowledge, technology and beliefs which can prove useful to humanity in the present and the future. Maffi (1998) suggests, in keeping with existing research on this question, that there is a close relationship between linguistic diversity and biological diversity. Large land masses having a wide variation in terrain, climates and eco-systems, tend to have great biological diversity as well as large numbers of species endemic to the locale. Tropical climates tend to produce high numbers and densities of different species. It so happens that the areas of the world with the highest levels of biodiversity, e.g. tropical South America, Central Africa, and Papua-New Guinea, are also places of enormous linguistic diversity.

Maffi (n.d.) proposes that the link between biological and linguistic diversity is the result of human communities co-evolving with their local eco-systems. Over the centuries, these communities interacted with their local environment, modified it and developed a detailed knowledge of it. They encoded this knowledge in language and used their languages to transmit this knowledge to new generations within their communities in order to ensure group survival. Indigenous language communities constitute a network of communication amongst people who have devised ways of occupying a particular ecological niche, becoming the most efficient users of this niche. They have specialised knowledge of these niches and ways of sharing this knowledge with others through the community language.

The conclusion is that indigenous languages of the Caribbean are not historical relics standing in the way of the modernisation and development of the groups which traditionally spoke them. Rather, these languages and the communities which speak them represent an accumulation of communal knowledge of how to interact with Caribbean environments in a sustainable fashion. The endangerment of Caribbean indigenous languages ultimately endangers the chances of Caribbean people surviving and prospering in the geographical spaces they currently occupy. Protecting, preserving, promoting and even reviving Caribbean indigenous languages is, therefore, of importance to all Caribbean people, whether they are themselves of indigenous origin or not, and to mankind as a whole.

This approach is one which has been adopted by UNESCO (2003) which, at its General Conference adopted the

International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. ‘Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage, the performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, as well as knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship, now benefit from an international legal instrument to safeguard intangible heritage through cooperation’ (UNESCO, 2003).

The convention proposes to create national inventories of cultural property that should be protected, and to set up an Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It also proposes to have drawn up a Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity and another list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

To the first list would be added the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, named by UNESCO. One of these twenty named masterpieces of Latin America and the Caribbean is ‘the Garifuna Language, Dance and Music’ named by UNESCO in 2001 (UNESCO, 2003). Garifuna is an Arawakan language, formerly spoken in St. Vincent and now mainly used in Central America, notably Belize, by the descendants of the Garinagu or Black Caribs, deported from St. Vincent by the British after an uprising in 1796. Another is the Maroon Heritage of Moore Town in Jamaica, named by UNESCO in 2003. As we shall see, all or nearly all of the other indigenous languages of the region are eligible to be put on the second of the two lists, i.e. that of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

Survey of Caribbean Indigenous Languages

The Statistics

In the table below is presented data on the indigenous languages linked to Belize, Dominica, Guyana, St. Vincent and Suriname. It has been relatively easy to get statistics about the numbers of people who are members of the ethnic group linked to these languages. The figures for these have, in the main, been derived from Ethnologue (Grimes, 1997). Much more difficult was finding out how many people actually spoke the language, with what level of competence and the extent to which the language was being passed on to children. *Ethnologue* (Grimes 2000) was sometimes helpful, but had to supplemented by several additional sources, the *UNESCO Redbook on Endangered Languages* (2003), as well as notably Forte (2003) and Melville (2003) for Guyana, by Carlin & Boven (2003) and Carlin (2002), by Taylor (1977) for Dominica, St. Vincent and Langworthy (n.d.) for Belize.

Language	Country	Fam.	Ethnic Nos.	Speaker Nos.	5+	40+	60+
Akawaio	Guy./Ven.	CRB	4,300	4,300	+	+	+
Akurio	Sur.	CRB	40	40	-	-	+
Arawak	Guy., Sur	ARK	15,000	15,00	-	-/+	+
Garifuna	G./H./Bze./SV.	ARK	98,000				
	Bze.		20,000				
	SV.		6,000	0			
Kalihna	Guy./Sur./Ven.	CRB	10,000	?	+	+	+

	Guy.		2,700	475	?	?	?
	Sur.		2,390	?	?		
Karifuna	Dom.	ARK	3,400	0	-	-	-
Kekchí	Gua./ES./Bze.	MYA	421,300	421,300	+	+	+
	Bze.		9.000	9,000	?	?	?
Macushi	Guy./Bra./Ven.	CRB	13,000	13,000	+	+	+
	Guy.		7.000	7.000	+	+	+
Mopán Maya	Bze./Gua.	MYA	10,350	?	?		
	Bze.		7,750	?	?		
Patamona	Guy.	CRB	4,700	4,700	+	+	+
Pemon	Ven./Bra./Guy.	CRB	5,930	5,930	+	+	+
	Guy. (Arecuna)		475	475	+	+	+
Sikïïyana	Suriname	CRB	40	40	-	-	-
Trio	Sur./Bra./Guy.	CRB	1,130	1,130	+	+	+
Tunayana	Sur.	CRB	40	40	-	-	+
Wai-wai	Bra./Guy.	CRB	7,700	7,000	+	+	+
	Guy.		200	200	+	+	+
Wapishana	Guy./Bra.	ARK	10,500	10,500	+	+	+
	Guy.		9,000	9,000	+	+	+
Warao	Ven./Guy./Sur.	-	19,700				
	Guy.		4,700	100	-	-	
Wayana	Sur./Bra.	CRB	600	?	-		
Yucatán	Mex./Bze.	MYA	700,000	?			
	Bze.		5,000	2,000	-	+	+

Key

Countries Key: Bze = Belize, Dom = Dominica, ES = El Salvador, Guy = Guyana, Gua = Guatemala, Hon = Honduras, SV = St Vincent,
Ven = Venezuela,

Language Family Key: ARK = Arawakan, CRB = Cariban, MYA = Mayan.

Analysis

In the statistics above, there is not always a direct correlation between the ethno-cultural group associated with a language and speakers of that language. A glaring example is that of the Arawaks, the largest indigenous ethnic group in Guyana, making up 33% of the indigenous population. No more than 10% of the group, however, are reported to be speakers of Arawak (Lokono), the historical language of the group.

Another feature of the above statistics is that of languages which straddle international boundaries. Of the 19 languages listed above, only 5 are listed as spoken within the boundaries of one country. One of these, Karifuna, is

listed as extinct. Three others, Tunayuna, Akurio and Sikïïyana, have fewer than a hundred speakers. This means that, in general, efforts to protect the indigenous languages of the area has to take place in a transnational context.

The pattern for many languages such as Arawak, Kalinya and Kekchi is that they are spoken across two or more neighbouring countries. Potentially, therefore, a language which is endangered in one country may not be in another. The relative strength of a language in one country might even serve to support its use in the country where it might otherwise have been endangered. The fact, however, is that the indigenous languages of the Caribbean are all relatively low status languages. They are spoken in countries where a European language, Dutch, Spanish or English, is the sole official language, the major language of wider communication and the dominant language of education. Efforts by members of indigenous linguistic groups to engage with the wider society almost inevitably lead to transitional bilingualism at the community level, with the dominant language replacing the indigenous language in two or three generations.

In all cases of indigenous languages still in use listed above, the number of persons identifying themselves as members of an ethnic group is significantly larger than those who speak the language of that group. In addition, even though some languages appear to be being transmitted to children, invariably the proportion of the children acquiring the language is falling with each passing generation. All of the languages listed above, therefore, can be considered to some degree endangered. However, with the relatively large population of speakers of Yucatán Mayan and Kekchi in Mexico, these can be regarded as the least threatened of the languages.

If we ignore Yucatán Mayan and Kekchi for the moment, Garifuna would appear to be the healthiest of the remaining languages. However, some estimates suggest that only about half of the ethnic Garinagu speak the language. Also, even though the language is being transmitted to children, this appears in the case of Belize, to be happening in only one of the five Belizean ethnic Garinagu communities (Langworthy, n.d.). In Hopkins, the one community where transmission is claimed to be taking place, children are bilingual in Belizean Creole and Garifuna. However, my observation on two field trip visits to Hopkins in 2001 and 2002 is that Belizean Creole is the language of choice of the playground in the community primary school. This is in spite of the fact that the vast majority of the children are ethnically Garinagu.

If we move along the scale of levels of endangerment, there is the case of Arawak in which only 10% of the ethnic Lokono (Arawak) community is estimated to be able to speak the language. Again, however, the level of endangerment varies from community to community. In Tapakuma, on the West Coast of the Essequibo in Guyana, for example, out of a population of several hundred, only 5 persons, all over 65, could speak the language. In another community up the Wakapau Creek on the Pomeroon, much more remote than Tapakuma, persons over the age of 50 invariably were speakers of the language in 2003 (Ian Robertson, p.c.). Because of this variation in the level of attrition across the largest indigenous ethnic group in Guyana, surveys need to be done in order to identify the communities where the chances of arresting and reversing language loss are greatest, i.e. where there is the greatest concentration of relatively young speakers. Language attitudes, of course, also play an important role in this process.

There are finally those cases of endangered languages where speakers number in the tens rather than hundreds

and are all over 60. These are potentially the most difficult cases in which to conceive of any successful effort to reverse language loss. Here, the focus has to be on a complete and thorough documentation of the language.