

Language Vitality: Understudied in Evolutionary Linguistics

Salikoko S. Mufwene
The University of Chicago

Evolutionary linguistics is not just about the evolution of structures, it is also about language vitality, an umbrella term about language birth, vibrance, resilience, endangerment, and death. It conjures up population movements and language contact within specific population structures, with the latter rolling the dice not only on how forms and structures are selected from a joint feature pool into and out of new language varieties but also on which languages prevail, remain vibrant or resilient, or vanish in particular social ecologies.

In the face of linguistic diversity, we probably will never know how many languages were spoken among humans by the time of the Exodus out of Africa. On the other hand, the known history of human migrations, including imperial/colonial expansions, has made obvious that language birth and death have occurred repeatedly. This history makes it imperative for us to investigate the ecological conditions under which these processes have occurred and to assess the current claim that the number of languages has been dramatically decreasing compared to earlier stages of human history.

Thinking of languages as technologies can we explain why some populations give up their languages and whether users or the situations leading them to such shifts should be blamed or pitied for doing so? Is language shift maladaptive? Is it different from other kinds of technology shifts, including religion, health practices, diets, and clothing, among a host of other folk technologies?