Stephen R. ANDERSON, *Languages: A very Short Introduction*

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REFERENCES

Stephen R. Anderson
Languages: A Very Short Introduction, Oxford University Press, London, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-19-959059-9, Price: £7,99, 152 pages

1   Divided into eight chapters, *Languages* provides information about some of the political and social issues in the study of languages, understood as means of communication between human beings. The case for animal languages is not made here, nor does the book introduce artificial or computing languages. It is based on discussions and debates from a symposium entitled 'How Many Languages Are There in the World?' organised in Seattle in 2004 by the author Stephen R. Anderson, Professor of Linguistics at Yale University. Though it is impossible to answer the rhetorical question that is thus raised by providing a number, the book sheds light on the issue of whether counting languages can be similar to a census count. Issues such as the survival, development and disappearance of languages are also addressed in this volume.

2   The first chapter gives the reader a general introduction to the diversity of languages, their social and political roles, the changes that occur as a result of contact between speakers of the same or of different languages and introduces languages as being forms of expression or metaphors. Throughout the history of the study of languages, the identification of languages has been compared to the identification of biological species. So there are different ways in which one could classify languages for studies: based on their morphology, based on their genealogical ancestors, based on their offspring, or based on their genetic set. As with the study of living organisms for the biologist,

linguists face similar challenges in defining and enumerating languages due to the innate complexity and diversity reflected in human languages.

3   Regarding the question addressed in the second chapter about the number of languages in the world, Anderson refers to the set of data collected by *Ethnologue* ("the most extensive catalogue of the world's languages", p. 10-11), which counted up to 6,909 languages in 2009. Languages are not evenly distributed around the world, and one may find that the groups or families of languages do not always dwell in close vicinity; they travel with their speakers or users, allowing for their survival. In some ways, according to the author, languages could be compared to living, biological organisms because of the very transformation they undergo, sometimes even to the point of extinction due to non-transmission to the younger generation of speakers or the lack of a younger generation in the linguistic community.

4   One could also argue for a common ancestor for languages as is the case for living organisms, which is the point made in the third chapter on Phylogenetic linguistics. It explains how and why variations occur, how similarities and regularities can be observed in changes, with references to American linguists such as Leonard Bloomfield (a pioneer in the development of structural linguistics) and William Labov (a pioneer in the sociolinguistic study of forms in everyday language and speech) as also to the fundamental observation of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure on the independence of form and meaning in language, which he designated as the 'arbitrariness of the sign'. Disappearance of human groups and therefore of linguistic diversity is bound to occur with time, and that is why this decline is an issue of concern.

5   The fourth chapter goes on to explain the practical, cultural and scientific aspects of why and how languages become endangered. When speakers of more than one linguistic community live or work together, some of the consequences of the 'competition' between the languages in presence (local/global; minor/major), ranging from language shift to language maintenance with processes of hybridization, borrowing and blending or bilingualism are all duly explained.

6   The fifth and sixth chapters discuss multilingualism and the difficulties involved in counting languages: for instance, how to distinguish a language and a dialect, how to identify a language as being distinct from another which is dependent on political and social factors rather than on scientific criteria? It is even harder to determine exactly how many people speak or understand a language, given the fact that people may declare themselves as being 'native' speakers of a language while being fluent in other languages they speak as well. The sixth chapter takes up the distinction between language as an external 'object' and language as an internal, subjective idiom – as in languages not just as means of social communication, but also as means of subjective expression. Counting 'actual' languages is therefore rendered complex; the task before the linguist is an arduous one when it comes to determining and distinguishing languages, identifying dialects, and the way a speaker designates his/her language(s), which may differ from one place to another even if, objectively, two speakers may seem to speak the same tongue.

7   When it comes to signed languages, William Stokoe was among the first researchers to carry out a serious analysis and state that these communication systems were comparable to 'natural' human languages. The seventh chapter is devoted to explicating the diversity of signed languages. It wipes away some of the prejudiced constructs of deaf and signed languages as being a homogeneous whole. Though research provides useful distinction between Village signed languages used by insular or restricted number of users in an area

and Deaf Community signed languages used by a larger community of users which results in differences in linguistic architecture, it is again difficult to determine the exact number of signed languages as is the case with 'natural' languages (the *Ethnologue* criteria distinguished at least 130 signed languages). Village signed languages come into use from largely shared social and cultural backgrounds and so full linguistic architecture is slower to develop in these languages as compared to Deaf community signed languages where individuals are brought together by their deafness. Anderson gives a very interesting example (p. 93-94) of a special education programme in Managua (Nicaragua) in 1977 where 50 or so children were brought together and even before the basic teaching in Spanish began, the children had developed communication through manual gesture which rapidly grew with interchange and with subsequent school-goers adding to the already existing gestures, giving rise to a complex sign language.

8   The eighth chapter concludes this 'very short introduction' with some reflections on the unity of human language. Compared to animal communication systems which are innate rather than learned with fixed sets of messages emerging involuntarily, human languages are characterised by their voluntary use, and what Charles Hockett refers to as the 'duality of patterning': individually meaningless sounds make meaningful words, and provide for an unbounded range of expression. Humans are born with this biological capacity for language, but it develops in different ways in different individuals depending on their environment and experiences.

9   Maps and tables provide illustrations and data to comprehend the linguistic diversity in the world we live in and bring to light the significance of maintaining all these social practices. Examples include multilingualism (India), political conflicts (Serbo-Croatian), survival, development or endangerment of languages (example of indigenous languages from the north-west coast of North America) from different settings across the world. References at the end of the book give clues to further reading for those interested in delving into language-related issues through various introductory titles, surveys and studies. *Languages* gives useful insights to the reader and lives up to the promise of the 'very short introduction' series of providing 'stimulating ways in to new subjects'.

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