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The Fate and Role of Indigenous and Minority Languages During the Pandemic



The Covid-19 Pandemic (2020) brought many challenges to indigenous communities and their languages, once again reminding us of the tragic consequences of colonisation. For several centuries the New World suffered from fatal diseases that were brought by Europeans and decimated an enormous number of local populations together with their languages. Will history repeat itself and what can be done? Here, I will briefly present and illustrate the on-going discussion on the topic, which has been taking place on different media platforms, in particular on the UNESCO website devoted to the International Year of Indigenous Languages.¹

Most importantly, the pandemic threatens the physical survival of indigenous communities, many of which speak endangered languages with only a few, typically elderly, speakers. These speakers, who because of their age belong to a high risk group for coronavirus, are often not only the last language experts but also the treasurers of traditional culture and knowledge. At the moment, one of the most precarious situations is observed in the Amazonian region, which is the ancestral home of one million Native Americans divided into 400 indigenous groups, each with their own language.² In Europe, one of the regions hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic is Lombardy, where the threatened Lombard language is still spoken in different varieties by around 3.5 million people. The language has been constantly losing speakers and is currently spoken predominantly by the grandparent generation³, who are most affected by the pandemic.

Another major concern is how to make information about the coronavirus available

in indigenous and minority languages. In order to solve this issue, linguists and activists have launched various initiatives⁴, among which the largest one was put forward by the Endangered Languages Project (ELP). The project offers written, audio and video materials in more than 500 languages.⁵ As it turned out, the compiling of trustful and comprehensive information on measures for preventing the spread of coronavirus poses various kinds of problems, especially when the question is about a community, where social distancing is seen as culturally unacceptable and offensive. The linguists emphasize that the information distributed to indigenous and minority groups should contain not only general, but also culturally salient data. Thus, in approaching the Hasidic community, who speak the endangered Hasidic Yiddish language and appear to have been exceptionally vulnerable to the pandemic, it was important to attract attention to such specifically Jewish issues as a prohibition on going to mikveh, attending synagogue services, etc.⁶

Quite unexpectedly, the pandemic, lockdowns and forced staying at home have also led to some positive developments, such as more active use of social media and various other means of communication for maintaining and reviving endangered languages. One encouraging example is the newly formed WhatsApp group for studying the genetically isolated and severely endangered Nivkh language in the Russian Far East.⁷ The group has gathered more than 60 active followers from various locations, including even some foreign students.