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LANGUAGE EXTINCTION – EVIDENCE FROM THE BURYAT LANGUAGE

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The first associations which come to our mind when we hear the terms “endangered” or “disappearing” is in connection with the rare species of animals. However, not only animals but also languages are at the brink of extinction. Statistics on the linguistic diversity is striking and fearful. Today, the population of the Earth speaks on about 7 thousand languages. However, by 2100 more than a half of them might die as every two weeks a language disappears. This process is even faster than the reduction of biodiversity [2].

Language is the heart of a culture since it is the carrier and storage of the knowledge and experiences accumulated by a nation throughout history. It embodies the spectrum of human vision, and its varieties provide unparalleled insights into the diversity of human experience and perception. Moreover, it holds people together and establishes their identity as group. Every time a language dies, we lose part of the picture of what our brains can do.

According to Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing, a language is considered endangered when it is no longer spoken by children, moribund when only a handful of elderly speakers are left, and extinct when it is no longer spoken.

There are various reasons for language endangerment. The major ones are:

– Globalisation and the spread of industrialization. The global economy often forces small, unindustrialized communities to choose between their traditional language and participation in the larger world.

– Economic problems. As the economy develops and more people leave their hometown in search of a better life, the distance is widening between the ethnic minority people and their mother tongues.

– Repressive language policies. In many countries through the history there has been legislation against minority languages in schools and the workplace, and intense governmental pressure to assimilate to the majority language. For example, the USA was repressive in imposing English and Anglo culture on American Indians. East African countries encourage citizens to abandon tribal languages in favor of "unifying" common language as a way of promoting loyalty to new governments [3]. The prevailing trend nowadays is to promote English as a global universal language. Though language restrictions usually target communication in work-related or official domains, households are also implicitly influenced.

Nowadays on the planet there are 5 "hot spots" where most of the endangered languages are concentrated. One of them is Eastern Siberia and the Far East. According to the research carried by UNESCO experts, 120 languages in Russia are in danger, 15 are already found dead. Languages alongside with the peoples of Russia are disappearing [2].

Let us consider the process of language disappearance using the example of the Buryat language.

In the huge database of languages on the Google site there are 3 variants of the Buryat language: China Buryat, Mongolian Buryat, Russian Buryat. The Russian Buryat is the dialects spoken by the residents of Irkutsk Region and the Republic of Buryatia - Alarsky Okinsky , Nizhneudinsk and others. They are 9 in total [1].

The Russian Buryat (Western Buryat) dialect is classified as a "threatened" dialect as the number of people speaking it amounts to only 369,000. According to the Gazetteer the most endangered dialects are Horinsk and Aga Buryat in the Trans-Baikal region. Only 64,900 people speak it [1]. It must be noted that Horinsk dialect is considered to be a literary (standard) language, and all articles, official documents and literature are published in this dialect.

What measures can be taken to save the Buryat language? To begin with world experience must be analyzed. The most common measures suggested and executed are:

– Record and analysis of languages for future studies. Linguists compile dictionaries on ethnic minority languages and record the languages using tape and video.

– Revitalization of dying languages through "immersion" schools where children use their native language every day and specialized university departments where Far North nations study their indigenous culture and languages to teach them later.

– Special programs that team fluent speakers of native languages with apprentice speakers.

– Introducing bilingual education. It should be remembered that most people in the world are bilingual or multilingual. Speaking one language all the time is not the norm. Therefore, it is important to recognize when a language is being discriminated and vote for bilingual education and positive language policies.

The official status of the Buryat language is not disputed. It is the second official language on the territory of the republic alongside with the Russian language. One of the core competences for a presidential aspirant is the knowledge of the Buryat language. The work of legislative and executive bodies is performed in both Russian and Buryat languages. In some schools the Buryat language is a compulsory subject, while in others it can be chosen as an elective course.

The problem is how to promote the indigenous language as a "fashionable" one among the young generation of the republic. To bridge the gap local authorities organize Days of the Buryat language which include language academic competitions, seminars where the problem of the language extinction is discussed. Of great help is Buddhist Sangha, the main Buddhist organization in Russia, which raises people's awareness to the importance of the issue. Young Buryat actors and directors make films and plays in the native language to attract their peers to the process of the language revitalization and to show the language beauty, treasure and melody. Internet as a new global medium is also an efficient platform which unites the language lovers in their aspiration to master the language.

In conclusion it must be said that this urgent problem requires prompt actions. Otherwise the only language left will be English. It might be convenient, of course, but then people will lose their national identity and the world will lose its diversity and the knowledge accumulated by generations of people.

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