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Giving People a Voice

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Abstract

Scandinavian countries, in particular northern Scandinavia, have developed unique sociolinguistic frameworks which aim to preserve local indigenous languages. These models have acted to protect the cultural heritages of these ethnicities. As such, these models of preservation have offered a framework to be applied to other contexts, and hence in regions where language and cultural preservation and revitalization have become a salient factor.

This current study presents an evaluation of the Norwegian State Action Plan for the preservation of indigenous languages in the region of tribal northern Scandinavia. The study produces the several recommendations as a comparative framework between northern Scandinavia and ASEAN countries.

With respect to education, the study suggests establishing kindergartens for tribal children led by tribal communities, developing teacher training programs for indigenous instructors, developing educational materials and curricular guides in the local languages, establishing networks of distance learning, arranging language and cultural learning summer camps for tribal children and youth, and mapping mother tongue illiteracy among adults so as to assist in the action planning of these projects.

With respect to the daily use of languages, the study suggests a development of interpreter training programs, the implementation procedures for translation of official documents, the development of minority language proficiency in the health services and judicial system, incorporating indigenous language in digital technologies and likewise promoting digital literacy, developing dictionaries for minority languages, and instigating the promotion of place names in local languages.

The study employs a literature analysis, and a comparison of contexts, to determine the appropriation and effectiveness of the application of the Scandinavian preservation system to ASEAN. The study contributes to thought in Linguistic Anthropology, in that it suggests that, despite the uniqueness of sociolinguistic practices, preservation methods and government mandates may, at least in part, offer transferability.

Keywords: Transition, sociolinguistic frameworks, Scandinavia, Asia, linguistics

Introduction

On 21 October 2016, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages, beginning on 1 January 2019, dedicated to

preserve, revitalize, and promote indigenous languages; as languages matter for social, economic and political development, peace building and reconciliation.

Indigenous languages are essential to sustainable development; they constitute the vast majority of the world's linguistic diversity, and are an expression of cultural identity, diversity and a unique understanding of the world.

In 2010 UNESCO, with the support of the Government of Norway, published the 3rd Edition of the Atlas of the Worlds Languages in Danger that has also been made available interactive Online

The UN 2016 proclamation followed upon the decision by UNESCO to build on their Atlas of Languages in Danger to create a new Online collaborative platform "World Atlas of Languages" aiming "to share own data on linguistic diversity, information about good practices, existing language teaching and learning solutions, and host user-generated content."

It seems evident that this program of sharing will in the first round benefit programs to counteract the trends toward language decline among tribal peoples. This is why the protection of the languages of our tribal populations took center stage at the conference 'Multilingualism and Education,' both through research presentations and poster sessions, with representatives from the Sami communities on hand to tell their stories

Indigenous Communities in Danger

It is a well known fact that governments as part of their assimilation policies toward minorities have implemented extensive legislation directly aimed at restricting the use of indigenous languages. The Norwegian discrimination of the culture of our indigenous Sami population represents no exception.

As early as 1880, the Norwegian parliament enacted a law prohibiting the use of Sami languages in schools in the provinces of Nordland and Troms as well as the coastal area of Finnmark. Later, in 1898, this was expanded to include all the Sami territories, and with a prohibition of using Sami languages, even during recesses. This regulation was not repealed until 1958.

The total Sami population today, inhabiting Northern Scandinavia (Norway and Sweden), Northern Finland and the Russian Kola Peninsula, is estimated at little more than 100,000, including an estimated 30% being speakers of a Sami language and only 15 % using one of three languages- North Sami, South Sami and Lule Sami in writing. Of these, only North Sami people have not been considered to need support and cultural revitalization.

The Government Action Plan for Sami Languages

In 2009, the Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, after comprehensive talks with the Sami parliament and other ministries, published its first ACTION PLAN FOR SAMI LANGUAGES (Publication A-0025 E, 69).

The Foreword (p. 8) Lays Out the Proposed Program

Through this plan of action, the Government will lay the foundation for a broad and long-term commitment to the Sami languages across all sectors and levels of administration. The

aim is that the Sami languages will emerge as a stronghold in society and will be given room to develop in all areas of society.

The Objectives, Challenges, Long-term Strategies and Measures are then laid out in three the major divisions. LEARN, USE, and SEE.

In the LEARN section, special emphasis is placed on providing instruction in Sami languages throughout school life, to prepare Sami children for participation in the Sami community as valuable language users. The Action Plan sees it as important that pupils be offered adequate programs to learn Sami throughout school life, providing parents and peoples in the child's environment with a chance to be co-learners (p. 27). The plan also points to the Education Act that gives Sami youth in secondary education the right to Sami as a subject (p.30).

In the USE section, Action advocates a program for increased use of Sami languages in the public services for users in all areas of society.

The right to use the Sami language in their meetings with the public sector is one of the most fundamental rights for Sami people. When the language provisions in the Sami act were first introduced, it was pointed out that the right to use Sami, first and foremost, must be in places where one needs to express oneself clearly and precisely as well as understand what is being said. Here the health services and legal system are central because a breakdown in language communication can have particularly serious consequences for the people involved (p. 41).

Lastly a SEE section deals with the necessity of making the Sami language visible to the public. This includes strengthening the place of Sami literature films and theater in the public domain, not least in libraries and in the communication media of radio and TV, and including web based information services. Special provisions for making purchasing arrangements for Sami literature are likewise recommended.

A last chapter then deals with the need for research and the development of knowledge.

All in all, the document forms the basis for preservation through cultivation of indigenous languages that could serve as a model for collaborative efforts across the world.

The UN proclamation of 2019 as the Year for Indigenous languages, dedicated to preserve, revitalize and promote indigenous languages, declares aims of promoting social, economic and political development, peace building, and reconciliation, that are also central to the UN charter. It commits our governments to listen to the voice of our minorities when their very existence is threatened by endangering actions affecting their territories and lives.

These are threats not mentioned in any of the official action plans already discussed. Ever since the cold war, Sami territories have been used and colonized for military purposes as testing fields for new weapons and war exercises, predicated on reasons of "extreme" conditions of darkness, snow and freezing temperatures. These are thinly populated areas considered as having their own rightful schooling fields for military training or weapon development in violation of the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples that prohibits military activities in territories populated by indigenous peoples.

Language and Voice

The government action plans for the preservation of Sami languages must be seen along side the courageous fight for survival by a people oppressed throughout centuries. It is a history of humiliation, degradation and discrimination only paralleled by the suffering inflicted on

the other minorities considered as threats to our culture – the Roma, travelers and outsider disadvantaged groups that have experienced decades of exclusion

Their stories need to be told and their voices heard. At the conference, our leading language researcher Nancy H. Hornberger quoted Richar Ruiz on the necessity of distinguishing language and voice.

As much as language and voice are related, it is also important to distinguish between them. I have become convinced of the need for this distinction through a consideration of instances of language planning in which the "inclusion" of the language of group has coincided with the exclusion of their voice...language is general, abstract,subject to a somewhat arbitrary normalization;voice is particular and concrete...To deny people their language ..is, to be sure to deny them voice, but,to allow them "their" language is not necessarily to allow them voice.

Postscript

On July 11-17, 2019 the UNESCO affiliated International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) will hold it bi-annual world conference at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts at Chulalongkorn University. One of the themes announced directly involve language preservation: How can researchers engage communities to sustain their own cultural traditions, and what role shall UNESCO and other internationals take. It is a common experience that vocal music is a primary source for preserving and revitalizing endangered languages.

The main background for this proposal is no doubt the major cooperative research project Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures led by Huib Schippers, now the Director and Curator of the Smithsonian Folkways. Its aim was to offer guidance to empower communities to develop strategies that help sustain their own music cultures.

In their interconnectedness as mutually supportive cultures, they form the base for the preservation and survival of the collective memory and the continuity of the means for expressing the spiritual base for the existence of a people. Or as a role that Smithsonian delegates to both language and music: The expression of a unique vision of what it means to be human. In his article, Schippers (2016) makes a plea for a much needed bottom up instead of the prevalent top down approach. A key element in these efforts is defining the nature of what needs to be preserved in consultation with communities, and devising strategies on how best to approach the particular challenges that prevail.

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Language Revitalization and Representation

A question that keeps returning to my mind is to what degree the recognition and vitalization of minority cultures and languages could prevent inter-ethnic conflicts before a point of no return has been reached.

In Asia the partition of India and later Pakistan is held to have its roots in the linguistic aspects of culture. Likewise, in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala Only act of 1956 led to the peaceful protests by the Tamils outside the Government complex. The protesters were then met by

Singhalese counter-protests with 150 Tamils being killed during the ensuing events leading up to a bloody civil war. In Myanmar, the persecution of the Rohingya culture has likewise recently taken a heavy toll. And in Thailand, a recommendation by the National Reconciliation Commission aiming at revising the Thai-centric school curriculum through making the local Pattani- Malay Jawi a working language of the region has not been implemented.

A conference on Asian Linguistic Anthropology in an ASEAN nation aiming at the revitalization and representation of minority cultural expressions such as The CALA 2019 thus seems long overdue. Presided over by the Secretary of State of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts H.R. Chuch Phoeum and hosted by the Pannasastra University of Cambodia, the conference was opened on January 23 in Siem Reap by the Conference Chair, Chancellor of the PUC Dr. Sam-Ang Sam.

Emphasizing the role of an anthropological approach to the preservation of culture and language, the conference organizers underlined the necessity to take a reflexive focus on cultural origins in times when “new mobilities, new textual modes, and new technologies have pervaded Asian regions, affecting communications, structuring life worlds” alongside exploring how “Asian languages and identities have become an increasingly concentrated nexus for new representations of global knowledge, globalization and global identities.”

Announcing the special purpose of creating networks for the protection of endangered Asian languages, the Secretary in his Keynote Address gave an initial overview of the Khmer language and the impact of globalization, and like other speakers, outlining a program for preservation of minority languages.

On the background of the increasingly threatened tribal languages and cultures in the ASEAN nations, many presentations pointed to research and activism in their own region aimed at implementing policies of preservation through vitalization, while others were involved with studying programs of upholding languages among the replaced and immigrant population groups.

Realizing steadily increasing urbanization globally, and not least in South East Asian nations, presenters also addressed language interaction or translanguaging in the city across physical and social spaces. City planners and managers will have to consider ways for better communication in increasingly diverse city settings.

Responding to the wave of globalization, voices from the academic communities in conclusion likewise emphasized the necessity of empowering youth for living in a pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural world through an educational program for intercultural citizenship.

References

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