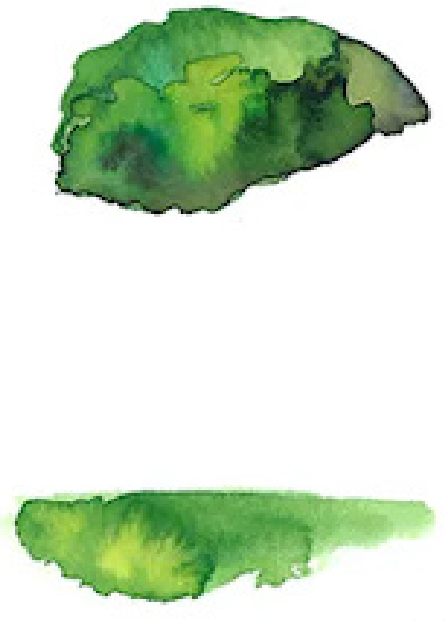
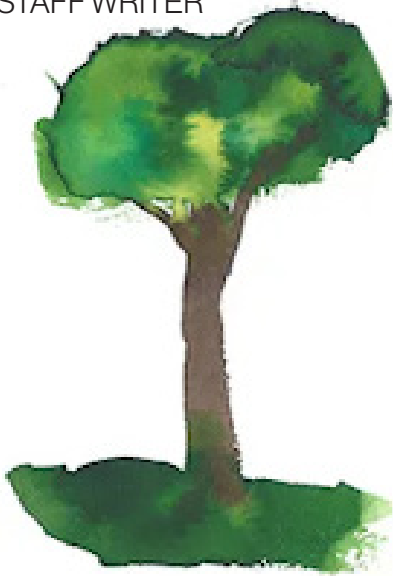


The Lost Languages

A Journey Through History of Being Silenced and Language Attrition

BY: KALYANI PUTHENPURAYIL
STAFF WRITER



INTRODUCTION

According to National Geographic, a language dies every two weeks.¹ Approximately 7,000 languages remain alive today, with around 43% of them being endangered, or at risk of dying out.² This phenomenon is referred to as language loss, occurring when a language loses its last native speaker.

Though language loss is when an entire community no longer knows a language, language attrition is an individual's loss of proficiency in a language throughout their lifetime due to a decline in exposure or usage. One example of language loss and attrition comes from the Cherokee Nation, which is the largest federally recognized Indigenous tribe in the United States. Like the majority of individuals from his tribe, Chuck Hoskin, the Cherokee Nation's principal chief, was unfamiliar with the Cherokee language. However, several years ago, he experienced a meaningful exchange with a language preservationist, who said "you may not speak it [the language], Chief, but it's in your heart." Ever since, he has confronted the challenge of trying to adopt the language and pass

his knowledge onto new generations of the tribe.³

The Cherokee tribe has approximately 2,000 fluent speakers today, but these numbers are experiencing a sharp decline. Additionally, over 200 Native American languages have gone extinct or are endangered. Thus,

While language attrition can happen naturally, a devastating catalyst for this phenomenon is colonization.

Chief Hoskin says that language was "figuratively and sometimes literally beaten out of children," capturing the forceful nature of colonization.³

language attrition lies at the crux of cognition, society, and politics.

MECHANICS OF LANGUAGE ATTRITION

So, how exactly does language attrition happen? It is not caused by brain-related injuries, but rather cognitive and societal factors that provoke a decline in an individual's levels of exposure and usage of a language.⁴

Researchers study attrition through an individual's lexical retrieval, defined as a speaker's ability to select the right word or phrase from their memory for a specific concept or idea. Lexical retrieval can be observed in instances when an individual translates from one language to another or names specific objects or pictures. Conclusions from these experiments, drawn by analyzing both accuracy and speed, enable these studies of language attrition patterns.⁵

Multiple areas of the brain work in tandem to achieve language processing, and they are also key factors in language attrition. This includes the Broca's area, Wernicke's area, arcuate fasciculus, primary auditory

area and the motor cortex. fMRI results show that these areas experience a reduction in activity when a person experiences language attrition. The brain is defined by its neuroplasticity, when it forms and reinforces synaptic connections due to exposure, learning, experience or injury. Neuronal pathways for language in the brain are created and strengthened by repeated usage of the language; conversely, those pathways are weakened when they fall into disuse.⁶

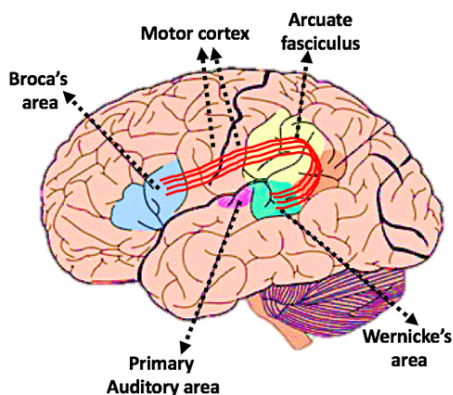


Figure 1: The areas of the brain that control speech are the Broca's area, Wernicke's area, motor cortex, arcuate fasciculus, and primary auditory area. The Broca's area works to produce sounds of speech, whereas the Wernicke's area comes into play to understand the speech. The arcuate fasciculus connects both the Broca's and Wernicke's areas, and the motor cortex controls muscle movements.

Language attrition comes in different forms—first language or native language (L1) attrition and second language (L2) attrition. A common example of L2 attrition is when an individual learns a foreign language in high school or college to satisfy graduation requirements, but does not use it after graduation and eventually loses their writing and speaking abilities. On the other hand, L1 attrition is more complex. Researchers determined two main hypotheses for L1 attrition: the progressive disuse hypothesis and the cross-linguistic influence hypothesis.⁵

The progressive disuse hypothesis is when an individual's usage of L1 declines due to a lack of exposure. In order for a language to be consistently used and maintained, the language needs to be utilized in formal settings, such as in education or in professional settings. Meanwhile, informal settings for language use includes speaking at home with family or with friends. These environments, however, are often limited in how much of a language an individual can use, and exposure may be inconsistent,

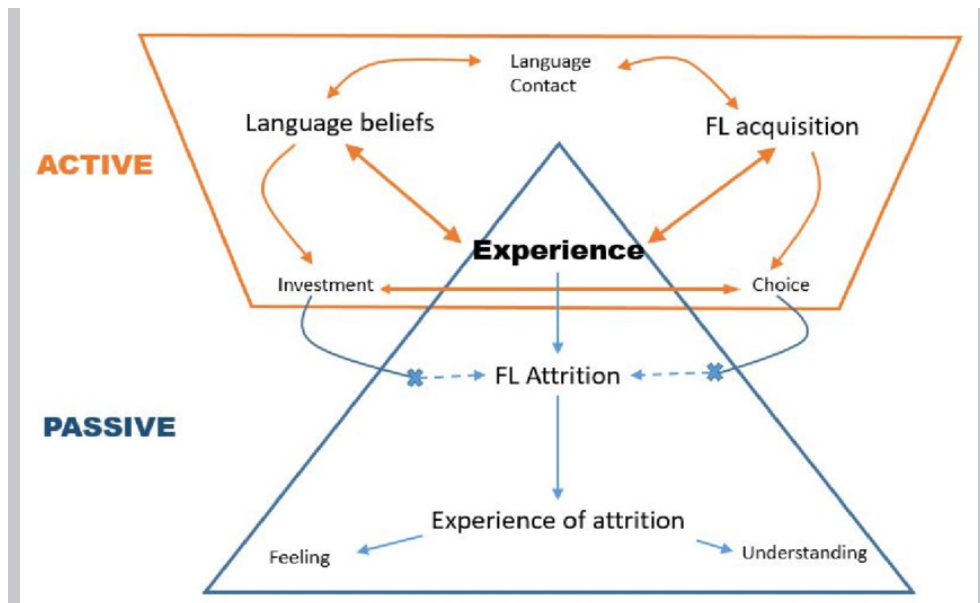


Figure 2: An individual experiencing L1 attrition will both actively and passively experience attrition. Some active factors include how the individual engages with the language, such as how often they come in contact with it or how much they choose to use it. On the other hand, the passive factors include how they feel about the language and their overall understanding of it.

which affects their ability to retain a language.⁵

On the other hand, the cross-linguistic influence hypothesis states that L2 acquisition can affect proficiency in L1. This is often due to L2 having different structures that can lead to slower cognitive processing or mistakes when communicating in L1. Additionally, it also depends on what age an individual started learning L2, which is heavily dependent on the state of society at the time of acquisition. Due to the variety of factors that are subject to personal background and specific experience with language, language attrition varies greatly between individuals.⁵

LOOKING INTO LANGUAGE ATTRITION DURING COLONIZATION

In the past centuries, a key factor in language attrition has been colonization. Proficiency in European languages, such as English, French and Portuguese, has been either prioritized or strictly enforced in colonized communities, threatening the existence of minority languages. Language is frequently used as a powerful tool for colonial powers to exert control over society; by both changing and limiting communication and the spread of culture, this allows the group in power to suppress the subjugated people's culture and show their dominance.

Language attrition in a community impacted by colonization can be caused by a multitude of factors. One such factor is when the group in control prohibits the usage of the native language. For example, in 1887,

the Indian Affairs Commissioner J.D.C. Atkins prohibited Native languages from being spoken or taught in schools in...⁷ Neuroplasticity is highest in children, particularly infants, because the brain is growing rapidly and allows children to be receptive to their environment at this age.⁸ Therefore, language attrition is often a consequence of barring children from learning a language in a formal setting during these formative years.

Additionally, many languages in Sub-Saharan Africa were primarily oral, so colonizers started to enforce their written forms in the area's educational and writing systems.⁹ Colonizers also indirectly caused languages to be less localized due to the colony's focus on the economy and trade. They enforced certain languages to be utilized across communities so that it was easier to communicate. This reduces exposure to local languages, which has consequently led to the vast decrease in linguistic diversity in that region.

Many factors on an individualistic level influence the intensity of language attrition during colonization, including the age of the speaker, the individual's attitude towards L1, the frequency and quality of L1 exposure and the perceived need to maintain the language.

WHAT ISSUES DOES LANGUAGE ATTRITION CREATE?

Language is pivotal in passing down culture to younger generations because it contains unique idioms, phrases and traditions

that only exist within the native language, while reflecting the values and beliefs of the community to which the language belongs. This means that when a language is lost, its fundamentals and foundations are also lost in translation. Thus, language is important in preserving cultural identities, and a loss of language can have a monumental effect on a community.¹⁰

Colonization has caused the demise, or at least heavily affected, many communities around the world, and its detrimental effects are present even today. Colonizers fundamentally changing society, especially with language and culture, has nuanced effects on individuals. Moreover, its sociological effect on people is multifaceted since those who have experienced colonization firsthand hold various perspectives on the colonizers. One of these effects is double consciousness, a term coined by American sociologist W.E.B Du Bois to describe the internal conflict a community faces when perceiving itself through the eyes of the dominant culture.¹¹

Using the double consciousness lens, individuals in colonies subordinate the significance of their native language due to its lack of representation in their colonized society. These individuals have less social incentive to keep in touch with the language, which results in language attrition and loss.

Language loss has long-lasting effects on the people who are affected by colonization, which is exemplified in the effects observed from communities in Canada that lost their indigenous language. Since schools didn't allow the practice of indigenous languages, these languages started losing fluent speakers. Language also helps people feel more connected to their roots, which gives them a better sense of identity and where they came from. When a language is lost, it can lead people to feel out of place and cause lower academic performance and higher dropout rates. Additionally, it can also lead to mental health effects such as depression, anxiety and substance abuse, as well as physical health effects such as sleep problems, energy loss and appetite changes. Beyond that, it can also incite long-lasting, intergenerational trauma.¹⁰

As colonizers fundamentally change societies, most colonial subjects are forced to assimilate into the new culture, depriving them of a native language and leading to the eventual loss of cultural identities. Colonization has led to many European languages being globalized in the modern day — with English as the largest. Though it allows peo-

ple around the world to communicate with each other, it is also important to remember the role colonization played in eroding innumerable minority languages.

CONCLUSION

Language attrition has been at play around the world due to groups of people being unable or choosing not to consistently practice a language. Colonization had an immense effect on this due to the different hierarchies and power structures that colonizers exert upon native speakers. Therefore, many people have become unable to pass on languages to future generations, which has led to language loss and endangerment.

As for Chief Hoskin of the Cherokee Nation tribe, he finds that efforts being made by the government are helpful, but the maintenance of a language should be more resource intensive. He believes that in order to remedy this, there needs to be much more governmental support in this sector. Adding onto Hoskin, efforts can be made around the world to keep languages going and hold onto the roots of those before us to remind us of how rich our world is in culture.

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