

EX ORIENTE LUMINA
HISTORIAE VARIAE MULTIETHNICAE

**Festskrift tillägnad Juha Janhunen
på hans 61. födelsedag 12.2.2013**

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IN SEARCH OF HIDDEN LANGUAGES

Jaakko Anhava

In recent research there have been several reports of discoveries of hitherto “hidden” languages. What is a “hidden language”? Just as languages can be endangered or go extinct in several different ways, they can also remain “hidden”, either from scholars doing research or from the surrounding society, for different reasons. In this article, I will sketch these possibilities. I have taken the term “hidden language” from K. David Harrison’s book on endangered languages (Harrison 2010).

UNKNOWN GROUPS OF SPEAKERS

In principle, it is impossible to determine whether, in some remote parts of the world, there still remain ethnic groups whose very existence is unknown. Even in our time such cases cannot be ruled out, although they must have become exceedingly rare in the last one and a half centuries. Most likely, groups whose existence is unknown even in their immediate vicinity (e.g. to neighbouring aboriginal groups) no longer exist; rather, such groups may be unknown to the mainstream societies of their respective countries and the scholarly community. Such groups, to the extent that they still exist, are most probably located in little-visited corners of the world’s tropical rainforest areas: Amazonia, Central Africa, Southeast Asia (both mainland and insular), and New Guinea; their other possible whereabouts include some mountainous areas.

The languages of such undiscovered groups, by definition, also remain undiscovered and, in that sense, they are hidden.

GROUPS OF SPEAKERS WHO REJECT CONTACT WITH OUTSIDERS

In some above-mentioned areas (Amazonia, Central Africa, etc.) groups are known to exist which wish to have no contact or, at most, very limited contact with the outside world, sometimes including other aboriginal peoples in their area. This often extends as far as violence towards all intruders.

A notorious case in point is the aboriginal population of North Sentinel Island in the Andaman Islands of India. From Amazonia there are reports of around ten indigenous groups whose areas are regarded as dangerous by the authorities and other Indians alike. In the case of the Sentinelese, this probably is a continuation of the traditional hostility of Andamanese aboriginals towards all outsiders, including aboriginals of other tribes or clans (which was reported already in the time of the first Western contacts with Andaman islanders in the early 1800s; see Weber). In other cases, such attitudes might be the result of bad experiences in contacts with colonialists and other intruders.

When it comes to such groups, their languages remain, and should remain, out of the reach of scholars until the unlikely (and, for their own interest, even undesirable) change in the attitudes of those groups. In some cases, such groups may speak the same languages as neighbouring, less seclusive aboriginal groups, while in others, their languages remain as hidden as those of the first category.

LANGUAGES KEPT SECRET FOR REASONS OF SECURITY

Over the course of history, several peoples have been subjected to persecution due to their distinctive traits, including their languages. In the case of suppressed “big” languages, such as Kurdish with millions of speakers in several Near Eastern countries, or Catalan and Basque in Spain under the Franco regime, such persecution has not led, on part of the groups in power, to real ignorance of the continued existence of the suppressed languages. However, many smaller groups have, by their own actions, “hidden” their languages from the ears of outsiders in order to avoid persecution for their continuing loyalty to their inheritance.

Such concealment has not been limited to peoples and groups conquered by Western colonial powers. Professor Stephen A. Wurm (1991: 13) refers to a similar case in pre-colonial times:

The case of the Inca conquering a large part of western South America a short time before the Spanish invasion and putting the local populations under pressure to adopt their Quechua language is well known. It seems that most speakers of the other languages in the area adopted Quechua only reluctantly, because a number of other languages are said to have appeared (i.e. reappeared) in the area, after the power of the Inca had been broken by the Spaniards.

The languages referred to by Wurm were thus hidden, at least to some extent, by their speakers themselves under the Inca Empire. Colonial and post-colonial powers have had more time and more effective means at their disposal than the Incas, so countless languages have been swept away by them in all parts of the

world. Nonetheless, some groups have been able to maintain their languages in secrecy, and information on such languages has later, under more favourable circumstances, become available to scholars.

A less forceful but still effective reason to hide one's traditional language in this fashion has been the social shame and stigma often felt by speakers of minority languages.

LANGUAGES KEPT SECRET FOR THE BENEFIT OF ONE'S OWN GROUP

Throughout history criminals and other outcasts have created diverse cants, argots, and other in-group speech styles in order to hide their activities from others. In addition to this, numerous natural languages, that is, mother tongues of socially disadvantaged ethnic groups, have been used in the same way. This differs from the languages of the third category in that the continued existence and use of such languages is usually no secret, but outsiders are not permitted to learn them.

A case in point is the use of Romani by the Roma population in Europe and elsewhere. Several other minority languages in the Americas, Australia, and other parts of the world have served the same function (for a number of examples, see Wurm 1991: 15). This has helped some languages facing discrimination to survive under adverse circumstances for a long time.

While restricting the chances of outsiders to learn the languages of disadvantaged groups is obviously in the interest of such groups as long as their circumstances remain disadvantageous, this has often had adverse effects for the continued use of their languages in more favourable times. Some sections of the groups concerned may strongly oppose the reduction of their languages into writing and teaching of them in schools, even if only to the children of their own groups; the possibility thus opened to outsiders to acquire information on these minority languages troubles some of their speakers.

Again, a case in point is the Roma population, because providing information on Romani languages to linguists, or even linguistic work done by some educated Roma themselves, has at times led to difficulties and threats on the part of other Roma who regard such actions as a betrayal. (I have been informed on such cases in Finland by personal communication, but I prefer to withhold the names of my sources. Fortunately, the attitudes of most of the Finnish Roma have turned positive towards teaching Romani in schools.)

Likewise, in the 1960s and 1970s, when the public attitudes in the Scandinavian countries turned more favourable towards the Saami languages, some of the

Saami people opposed the introduction of their languages in school curricula and the publication of materials, out of similar distrust as among the Roma (Eino Koponen, pers. comm.). This, too, is rather a thing of the past.

LANGUAGES HIDDEN BY BEING OVERLOOKED

Finally, what is probably by far the largest category are those languages which have remained unknown to the authorities and to scholarship because of lack of communication or interest.

Groups speaking languages in this category are not necessarily small. In fact, some of them may even be several millions strong, and mainly they have not tried themselves to hide their language in any active way. Rather, the knowledge of the linguistic situation in many parts of the world has been insufficient or non-existent among the general population in their respective countries, including among the authorities.

While in Joseph Greenberg's seminal work on African languages (Greenberg 1963) the number of languages in Africa is given as somewhat over 700, in the 1990s the number was estimated to be almost three times that figure, around 2,000 (see, among others, Childs 2003: 21). In many cases this increase has presumably resulted from a more thorough analysis of the data and a clearer view on mutual intelligibility among the linguistic varieties (as in other parts of the world as well: for example, in the study of the Uralic languages, Saami was long counted as a single language with highly divergent dialects, but the current view, according to which the 8–10 most distinctive varieties are independent languages, became dominant only in the 1980s). Many African languages have been discovered only by recent fieldwork in areas where little or no research had been done previously. There the surrounding population and the authorities have been under the impression that “in the X area, language X is spoken”.

Childs (2003: 6, quoting Blench 1998) points out that in Africa “there are still languages that have not yet been identified by linguists (as many as thirty just in Central Nigeria)”. Such a situation is quite common around the world. The misleading classifications of state-defined “minority nationalities” in China and Vietnam conceal within them a much greater number of groups and languages, and the population statistics of India have had the same effect. K. David Harrison (2010: 120) describes this as follows:

In the People's Republic of China, official government policy recognizes a maximum of 55 minorities – all ethnic groups must be subsumed under one of these 55 labels. [...] An example of official administrative undercounting occurs in northeastern India. Most of the region's ethnolinguistic groups numbering

less than 10,000 are simply excluded or amalgamated into other groups for administrative convenience.

David and Maya Bradley, who have done extensive fieldwork in southern China, report on their work among the Yi nationality in Yunnan province (2002: 95):

In preliminary surveys of some other areas, we have continued to locate similar numbers of other unreported and undescribed endangered languages. Projecting from work so far, just within the Yi nationality, one might expect to find at least 50 more languages within Yunnan alone; considering that there are many other composite nationalities and many other provinces with substantial minority populations, endangered language work in China is very urgent and needs to be done on a large scale.

Such extrapolations are, of course, tentative and risky, but they give us a glimpse of questions demanding much greater attention worldwide than before.

A couple of individual examples include Koro, a Tibeto-Burman language in India's state of Arunachal Pradesh (Harrison 2010: 123–131) and Kusunda, a language isolate in Nepal (Evans 2010: 208). Of Koro, only scanty information existed before Harrison's team established in 2008 that it really was a language quite distinct from its neighbours; though clearly belonging to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan languages, its exact subclassification within the family remains a mystery. Kusunda was not a hidden language in the strict sense – the ethnic group speaking it has been known to colonial and, later, national authorities since the mid-nineteenth century – but the language had been presumed extinct for some time before a handful of speakers were found by scholars in 2000. In spite of the very small number of speakers (currently less than ten persons), efforts are underway to ensure its survival and revival as a community language.

My final remark links my topic to the work of Professor Juha Janhunen himself. He and his team of colleagues have done research on several small languages in the Amdo area of western China. One grammar by Janhunen's team has been published already (Janhunen et al. 2008). Another, on the Linxia language, is in the making, while a couple of others (Tangwang and Gangou) are on the list. Several languages in this area, too, remain undescribed and almost unreported in the same way as the Bradleys describe the situation (see above).

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Information on uncontacted groups is to be found in, for example, several publications and websites of Survival International.