

The Death of a Language: the Case of Ubykh

It is estimated that close to 50% of the present day languages across the world will no longer be in existence within 50-100 years. 4% of the world's languages are spoken in Europe and the Middle East (total 275). UNESCO lists 230 languages in the present day Europe. 40 of these languages are on UNESCO's list of Highly Endangered Languages. Extinction of a language is a loss of one of the most significant elements of cultural heritage of humanity.

With respect to the conditions that lead to language loss, Hale (1992) distinguishes between '..... the period prior to the development of large states and empires,..' and the modern times. According to Hale, in the former times the process of language loss 'has been attended by a period of grammatical merger in situations of multilingualism, in geographically confined areas, and among quite small communities...'. However, language loss in the modern period 'is part of a much larger process of loss of cultural and intellectual diversity in which politically dominant languages and cultures simply overwhelm indigenous local languages and cultures,.....'

This paper will address the case of Ubykh, the Northwest Caucasian language which became extinct upon the passing away of its last speaker Tevfik Esenç in 1992. The paper will argue that Hale's analysis cannot fully account for the case of Ubykh. It will be suggested that Ubykh might be presenting a case of language internal factors playing a role in the loss of a language.