

Discussion Note

Linguistic genocide or linguicide? A discussion of terminology in forced language loss

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Forced language loss is a reality for many communities around the world and language loss brings with it an entire spectrum of negativities. This article examines two of the most common terms that are used in linguistics for forced language loss – linguistic genocide and linguicide. The terms are almost synonymous and recognize that the ultimate aim of forced language loss is usually forced assimilation or the destruction of group identity. However, through a critical reading of both terms, linguicide is argued as the preferred term for use in linguistics as linguistic genocide gives rise to linguistic essentialist positions that may harm communities that have suffered forced language loss.

Keywords: linguicide, linguistic genocide, language loss, language death

Forced language loss is the legacy of many colonial regimes and can still be found in several forms around the planet. Forced language loss is not always the result of violence but can come in the guise of other social factors such as economic changes, educational policy, and the media. These result in unequal forms of diglossia, where one or more of the languages lose domains and shift to the socially dominant language, and frequently this unequal diglossia is the very aim of policies that promote the aforementioned factors. Exactly *when* a language is lost is difficult to determine and there are a variety of different scales and measures (e.g., Eberhard et al., 2021; Fishman, 1991; UNESCO, 2015; Wurm, 1991) that seek to gauge the loss of a given language. It also important to note *who* argues that a language has become lost and how. While frequently the sphere of linguists and anthropologists to declare such things, the language community itself is the better judge of when something has become lost and whether this loss was forced or not. Here I discuss two terms used to name forced language loss – linguistic genocide and linguicide – and argue in favour of linguicide based on certain implications of how linguistic genocide is argued.

Linguistic genocide was the term used by the United Nations in the original draft of The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (E 794, 1948), defined as "prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group". While not accepted into the convention, this

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definition is still argued through a certain interpretation of the International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, most persuasively by Skutnabb-Kangas (2008; 2010) who argues that two of the five definitions of genocide in the UN Convention may be applied to language: II(b) “causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group” and II(e) “forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008, p. 5). The strength of this definition is the strong argument it gives in favour of mother tongue education for minority/indigenous language speaking youth.

The mental harm in definition II(b) done to minority language groups must be argued through personal crises that involve damaged cultural identity resulting from language loss as one of the determining factors. Dorian (1993) argues that communities or groups that lose or relinquish their language are not likely to be real agents of their language’s loss, given that they are likely to be in socially disadvantageous positions. Furthermore, she argues that the real effects of linguistic choice are not immediately evident and are likely to surge in later generations when the loss of ethnolinguistic identity causes regret or resentment. This can be demonstrated in studies that observe a correlation between language loss and harmful behaviour among youth. Some authors (e.g., Nicolas, 2011; Reyhner, 2010) argue a correlation between indigenous language loss in North American indigenous youth and participation in gangs as a result of the youth looking for an identity. These authors observe the link between a young generation looking for an authentic identity, and the loss of their indigenous ties due to language loss, and the subsequent joining and formation of gangs by these youths as they seek to form the identity lost to them with language loss. As a result of their indigenous ethnolinguistic identity, the decisions made by these youths result in harmful or criminal behaviour and thus, definition II(b) would appear to hold. However, lost ethnolinguistic identity cannot be demonstrated to be the single causing factor in these situations as these studies tend to ignore questions of other social disadvantages associated with these antisocial behaviours. This, in turn, indicates that significant study is required before an unequivocal link between language loss and harm can be proven.

Definition II(e) from this argument however appears to apply well in that by forcing a linguistic change in children, governments are indeed forcibly transferring the children to another group. Studies into the connection between language and ethnic group identity abound (see Fishman, 1991, 1996, 1999; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; and many others) and the loss of language in youth can be considered a forced shift from one group to another at least at a linguistic level. However, as we will see below, this is the weaker of the two arguments.

A central issue with the term linguistic genocide is that genocide directly refers to the forced loss of a people or a culture. Defining language disappearance via linguistic genocide is attractive due to the force carried by the word genocide. However, this term proves difficult to define and defend at a finer level of analysis given that the definitions of genocide do not directly apply to language. This means that forced language loss would have to be argued via the disappearance of the people or culture – specifically that the loss of language causes the people or culture to disappear, that is, argumentation via linguistic essentialism. Linguistic essentialism argues that identity and language are connected in such a way that by removing one, you remove the other – either completely or by removing some key concept that cannot be expressed in another language and in doing so, damaging the identity. However, while there are cases of ethnicities disappearing

with their language upon being subsumed into majority society, there are ample examples of ethnic groups surviving the loss of their language and not losing their ethnic identity. Examples of the latter include the Miwok of the United States (Delgado Olsen, 2014), the Xocó of Brazil (Hoffman French, 2004), and the Xenú and Pijao of Colombia (Zwisler, 2018). In each of these cases, the ethnic group has suffered ethnic discrimination as a result of no longer possessing their ancestral language, but these groups remain and are able to express their ethnic or indigenous identities. This illustrates that while there is a connection between ethnicity and language, ethnicity and language are not mutually dependent, that is, language loss does not equate to loss of ethnicity. This weakens the term genocide inside linguistic genocide, as language loss does not equate to genocide. Thus II(e) should not be considered for arguing in favour of the term linguistic genocide as it rests upon essentialist assumptions that don't ring true in the lived experience. This leaves the argument for the term 'linguistic genocide' resting upon the notion of harm, but this notion alone is not enough to warrant the term 'linguistic genocide' when the 'genocide' part cannot be sustained.

While the aim of forced language loss is, more often than not, the forced assimilation of a people, genocide as a term does not hold against analysis. The term *linguicide* is less common than linguistic genocide but is more applicable as *linguicide* addresses language loss alone. Nicholas defines it as "killing the language without killing the speakers" (2011, p. 5) and Zwisler (2017, p. 43) defines it as the elimination of a language via government policy aimed in order to destroy a group's immediate means of linguistically 'othering' themselves. These definitions allow an understanding of forced language loss that does not necessitate linguistic essentialism. Here, though, I wish to expand on this definition.

Linguicide refers to those cases where the loss of the language is either mandated in, that is, there must exist some law or legal resolution that empowers the government or some other national body to punish the use of the language in all public and private spheres; or through force by a non-government body, for example, through the application of lethal-force against language users. An example of this first case includes the linguistic legislation of Colombia pre-1991 which forbade the use of indigenous languages and actively promoting the "civilizing" of indigenes (Areiza-Londoño, 2011). However, government legislation need not openly warrant force against the population and its language. *Linguicide* also covers those instances where a government mandates the loss of a language without the use of physical force or exclusion from public spheres. *Linguicide* also refers to where the government promotes the use of a non-native language in education or media, in situations where mother tongue use is already threatened by a majority language, resulting in unstable diglossia and language shift over time, or where a government or influential NGO mandates economic policy that does not allow for minority language use and a language community shifts its language as a response to this policy. In terms of education, is important to note that *linguicide* only applies to those policies aimed at reducing or eliminating minority use, and not those policies aimed at general bilingualism. The prohibition of a child's mother tongue in education often cuts the child off from social and scientific advances, and the child will move towards the educational language in other social spheres (Phillipson, 1997). For the mother tongue language, this means an unstable diglossic situation which, over time, will force it from home and its position of mother tongue will be threatened until it remains, at best, a community heritage language – this is, *linguicide*.

In all forms of linguicide, language is forcibly lost, and this may be achieved through a variety of means – a government may actively punish the use of the minority languages and repress them relatively quickly (for example, in Colombia the Pijao language was lost within the space of 50–60 years as a result of these policies) or may prohibit a child’s mother tongue in education. The same end though is achieved – language loss, no matter what time is required to fulfill the government’s plan. Regardless of how the government legislates the loss of the language, the loss still occurs. However, it is important to note that while the language is lost, the population is not – thus freeing the term linguicide from the connotations of linguistic essentialism. This is an important point to make as arguments from linguistic essentialism may force groups that have suffered from forced language loss into disadvantageous positions where identities (e.g., indigeneity or ethnicity) may be denied to them based on arguments that identity X requires language X, which is false (again, indigenous groups without an indigenous language point to this).

This is the crux of the argument against linguistic genocide. Arguments that make necessary connections between a social group and a language ignore those groups that exist that maintain an identity that, were the language identity connection requisite, would be impossible. Indeed, where the use of scientific terminology opens itself to possible essentialist readings, it opens itself to use as a colonizing agent or agent of oppression through the negation of identity. Given the history that linguistics as a science has with colonialism and the move towards terms that encompass broader social understandings, terms such as linguistic genocide and linguicide should be examined as well. While the study of forced language loss generally has the good of the forced-loss community at heart, well-meaning terminology choices may – quite unintentionally – have readings that run contrary to the purpose of science. Through the use of linguistic genocide we may be sponsoring an essentialist position that can undermine the communities which have suffered forced language loss.

The forced loss of a language is a reproachable act that is today seen as an affront to collective human heritage. However, “linguistic genocide” is not the most adequate term to denote this phenomenon. Linguistic genocide, as a term, relies upon arguments of linguistic essentialism that are not realistic when analysed in the light of minority groups that have lost their ancestral language but have managed to continue expressing ethnic and cultural life. Linguicide offers readings, be it active government repression or educational or economic policy, that serve the same function without the essentialist implications. Thus, linguicide is the more appropriate term as it argues that language can be forcibly lost without necessitating a forced culture or population loss.

Author positionality statement

The author is an Australian of general European descent (and appearance) with an Australia Aboriginal ancestor from coastal Central Queensland (the author does not claim group membership to this ethnicity). The family language (Goreng Goreng) is classified as 9 (Dormant) and there is an active community working at linguistic revitalization. The loss of his ancestor’s language is one of the reasons the author entered the field of endangered language in linguistics. The author currently works as an outsider sojourner in the Pijao community in central Colombia, working on language revitalization. His doctoral thesis dealt with this same group.

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