

## Language Endangerment in Odisha

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### Abstract:

The present work discusses language endangerment of the lesser-known languages spoken in the state of Odisha, India. The study tries to determine the factors leading to the endangerment of these languages. Though the people continue to speak the language, there is gradual loss of significant indigenous vocabularies as the younger generation has ceased learning age-old traditions. Minority community, such as the Juang are experiencing enormous pressure of language assimilation by surrounding dominant languages. The domains for language used are limited and the people have to often rely on code-mixing and code-switching to communicate. The loss of language also causes the loss of other culturally significant practices that are dependent on the language. The present study provides some steps to be taken to preserve and revitalize these lesser-known languages of Odisha.

### Keywords:

Lesser-known language, language endangerment, vitality, mother-tongue, language attitudes, documentation

### Introduction

Language is the backbone of people's culture and identity. A language reflects a unique world-view and culture of a speech community, and "formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. Each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of the people..." (Wurm, 2001). Turin provided four solid reasons for supporting, preserving and documenting endangered languages: "first, each and every language is a celebration of the rich cultural diversity of our planet; second, each language is an expression of an unique ethnic, social, regional or cultural identity and world view; third, language is the repository of the history and beliefs of a people; and finally, every language encodes a particular subset of fragile human knowledge about agriculture, botany, medicine and ecology" (2005:5).

The current Ethnologue language database (Eberhard et al, 2021) listed 7139 distinct languages spoken in the world today; out of which roughly 40% of the languages are now endangered. A language that is at risk of losing all of its native speakers and falling out of use within the next generations is

referred to as an ‘endangered language’. If a language loses all of its speakers, it becomes an extinct language. That means more than 3000 world’s languages are at risk of dying out in the coming century if nothing is done. According to Krauss (1992:6), as many as 50% of the world’s languages are no longer being learned by new generations of speakers, which leads him to conclude that “the number of languages which, at the rate things are going, will become extinct during the coming century is 3000 of 6000”. Krauss estimated the world’s languages in active use to be around 6000

While language endangerment typically involves a process of language shift, the number of users who identify with a particular language, and the number and nature of the users or functions for which the language is employed are two dimensions to characterized the nature of endangerment (Lewis et al, 2015). Another important factor that contributes to language endangerment and vitalization is the attitude of the speakers towards its native language. Many linguists, on the other hand, are of the view that the number of speakers hardly matters for determining the viability of any endangered language. There are cases where a small group of speakers successfully manage to maintain their native languages intact, where as some larger groups fail to pass on their native languages to new generations. The intensity of language contact is a crucial factor too. Studies have shown that prolonged contact leads to change in phonological, lexical and syntactic levels.

### **Language Endangerment in Odisha**

The UNESCO Interactive Atlas of the World’s languages in Danger (Moseley, 2010) has classified 197 languages of India as vulnerable or endangered. Odisha, a state rich in tribal culture and heritage, also faces a severe threat of language and cultural endangerment and extinction. The state that is home to about 62 tribes, including 13 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), is also home to 21 tribal languages and 74 dialects, which immensely contribute to the linguistic diversity of the state. These tribal languages and dialects belong to Dravidian and Mundari language group. Most of these languages are endangered and ways to protect and preserve them should be implemented.

Owing to the threat of extinction of these languages, the Odisha government appointed 3,385 tribal language teachers for the Multi-Lingual Education (MLE) programme introduced in 2006, to address the issue of language barriers faced by tribal children. This is a commendable job done by the Odisha government. However, much more is needed to be done to preserve and promote these languages and cultures. Ministry of Tribal Affairs also envisages to identify and enlist endangered tribal languages across the country in consultation with the State Governments / Union Territories (UTs) with a view to preserve

and promote the same. Presently, Ministry of Tribal Affairs extends support to State Governments / UTs for development of bilingual Primers under the Scheme ‘Support to Tribal Research Institutes’ for enhancement of learning achievement level amongst the Scheduled Tribe Students. According to Press Information Bureau (2019), the state of Odisha has developed Primers in 5 tribal languages of the state, namely, Juang, Kisan, Koya, Oram and Saora.

In Odisha, besides the steps taken by the government to address this issue, institutes like Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences (KISS) have been filling up the gap in the learning process among tribal children by implementing a robust Mother Tongue Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTBMLE) approach. It has introduced ‘Transition Curriculum’ — an innovative pedagogic initiative, teaching and learning tools in 10 tribal dialects of the state. The Department of Linguistics and Culture Studies of the Utkal University of Culture have also upcoming projects which will assist in the preservation and protection of endangered languages and cultures of Odisha.

### **Attitudes towards Mother Tongue**

The above initiatives being said, there are gaps to be filled when it comes to preservation of endangered languages and cultures. The attitudes of the native speaker towards their mother tongue is one important factor to preserve and protect one’s language. Preliminary study conducted among the Juang in Keonjhar district indicated that community members have a very positive attitude towards their mother tongue and are ready to learn and preserve it (Daimai & Parhi 2023). All the respondents in a survey said they are proud of their language and expect that their children will speak and use Juang when they grow up. However, they feel that one language is not enough for carrying out various activities in life and believe that learning other language can improve their knowledge. All the respondents desire their children to learn Juang well at the same time they want their children to learn Odia, English and Hindi. They cited better opportunities in job, employment and business for opting other languages. Therefore, equal opportunities for employment have to be created for those from different language medium.

### **Steps for Protection and Preservation**

During fieldtrips to some Juang villages, I encountered lack of expertise in traditional and cultural practices and knowledge. Vast majority of the villagers have discarded cultural practices. In each village, just a handful of old patrons have knowledge about culture and tradition and most of them are in their twilight years. It is now time to document the fading cultural legacy as much as possible while they are still alive and educate the younger generation about their culture. Once the younger generation is taught

about the vibrant nature of their language and culture, they will be enthusiastic to learn more about it. The role of speech community in monitoring the degree of language loss is important in maintaining and revitalizing mother tongue. In order to preserve and revitalized the language, the following steps need to be reinforced in the speech community.

### **Documentation and Description**

Documentation and description of language is important because it will facilitate the process of sharing and preserving the cultural heritage of the community which would otherwise be lost. Linguists and wide range of community members should be encouraged to participate in documentation and description of the language. Initially, focus can be given to document the age-old oral literatures which are at risk of complete loss. The speech forms of both young and old should be documented to get the full linguistic resource of the community.

The level of documentation in Juang is fragmentary. I have collected word-lists and some texts for linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. Presently, I am undertaking projects for documentation of oral literatures and folksongs. Few linguistic papers are available currently; however, no good grammar book and dictionary is published so far. With access to smart phones, numbers of people are recording audio and video documents with varying quality, but without any annotation. Therefore, good quality documentation with proper annotation should be encouraged. Documentation should be done with the aim of producing accessible language description and pedagogically oriented materials.

Documentary and descriptive linguists, especially working in close collaboration with endangered language communities like Juang, need to guide and train community people in the preparation of appropriate and useful materials in support of teaching and learning. At present, development of pedagogical grammar and other teaching materials is often undertaken by individuals with no training for these tasks. Though their effort is appreciable, the materials produced are often inapplicable. The act of documentation also impacts language attitudes and heighten awareness of language endangerment within the community.

### **Language Planning**

Development of specialized curricula concerning the teaching of the language and teaching in the language is very essential as the existing ones lack specialization. In order to avoid lack of uniformity, normalization and standardization of one particular variety to be considered the basic and uniform version

of the language, whether acting as an official or literary, teaching curricula, normative grammar, dictionaries, handbooks of orthography, publishing books, etc. should be the aim of language planning.

The use of endangered languages in media and cyberspace should be supported and promoted. Assisting such programs will strengthen the role of native language in the transmission of local and indigenous knowledge. Creation of pictorial glossary and addition of cultural materials will help children and younger people learn indigenous terms and use it in their discourse. It will also be crucial for bridging between their ancient and contemporary cultures.

And most importantly, get the young people interested to use mother tongue in different ways and platforms. Provide venues for them to creatively use their mother tongue by conducting literary activities like writing poems, essays, songs, stories, etc., in the language. Also encourage young people to get involve in traditional cultural activities like singing folksongs, learning folk dances, practicing arts and crafts and narrating folktales. There is a general consensus that culture plays a key role in assisting language revival. This can be done through creating real life situation or a natural context by choosing one of the cultural aspects mentioned to aid in revitalizing endangered tribal languages of Odisha.

## Conclusion

Language is closely tied with identity. The language you speak defines who you are in a major way. Your native language also binds you to others and creates a community of speakers. Experts believe that when a language dies, the knowledge system around also dies and becomes extinct. Thus, the unique way of looking back on the world is also lost. With the language being lost, the speakers start migrating to different languages and regions.

The loss of language also causes the loss of other culturally significant practices that are dependent on the language. Oral histories are lost if no one can speak the language any more. Likewise, traditional songs, poetry, and other verbal art forms are lost. Even if the language has been written down, language loss may cause written tales to be lost as well, if they were not translated into another language first. When a community loses its language, it also loses many other aspects of its culture. Language loss has a significant impact on both the collective and the individual identities of a community. Now is the time to act and record their voices before they die and the rich language and cultural legacy is lost. Unless we preserved these the next generations will have no knowledge of their cultural heritage. The oral traditions are repository of indigenous knowledge which has been in practice since ages and that knowledge should be preserved and pass on to the generations to come.

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