

John Benjamins Publishing Company



This is a contribution from *Endangered Metaphors*.

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Endangered metaphors

Introduction

Anna Idström and Elisabeth Piirainen

The title of our book brings two concepts together, both of which are well developed in linguistics, ethnology, anthropology and related cultural studies and have produced a rich literature: ‘endangered’ and ‘metaphors’. The combination *Endangered Metaphor*, however, is a term newly introduced to the humanities, and thus requires some explication.

The first component of the book title, *endangered*, follows the well-known term *Endangered Languages*. Already in 1992, Hale & al. pointed out an alarming fact: at least half of the world’s languages are going to become extinct during this century; this means that thousands of unique human languages will disappear forever, many of them without a trace. Most of the indigenous languages once spoken in Australia, The Americas, Siberia and the Pacific islands are on the verge of extinction. Only some elders may remember their original native language while their families have often switched to a more dominant majority language and did not manage to pass on their own language to the children. For definitions of the term *endangered language* with its gradations such as *seriously endangered*, *irreversibly endangered*, *near-extinct*, etc., we refer to the relevant literature.¹ For the purpose of this book the broad but necessary definition of an endangered language is: *a language without safe transmission to new generations*.

The second component of the book title, *metaphor*, is even more complex. There are various definitions of ‘metaphor’ in the vast amount of studies of this topic, and we don’t want to add a new one to them.² We chose the term *metaphor* for practical reasons, because it is a short and understandable term. We use it in a broad sense, covering most of the linguistic units discussed in this book. The authors’ methodological approaches are too different as to be subsumed under one and the same concept of

1. Compare, for example, standard works like Crystal (2000), Nettle/Romaine (2000), Harrison (2007) as well as *Ethnologue SIL 2009* or the *UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger*.

2. For an overview of trends in the interdisciplinary metaphor research see Gibbs (2008), among other things.

‘metaphor’: Several articles start explicitly from conceptual metaphors, either including metonymies or not, while others give priority to figurative units such as idioms or other kinds of figures of speech and indirect language, among them even ‘dead metaphors’. What all these non-literal expressions have in common is their *ambiguity*, their semantic irregularity (most of them can be interpreted on two different conceptual levels) on the one hand, and a certain degree of *conventionalization* (they are inherent in the language system, are not freely created) on the other.

Despite these differences, the 14 articles of our book have one – highly topical – theme in common: *Endangered Metaphors*. The articles themselves contribute to the definition of ‘endangered metaphors’, since they are grouped around two salient phenomena: First, several studies cover languages which will be extinct in the near future; this will be accompanied by a complete loss of all metaphors and figurative units encoded in these languages. Secondly, other authors deal with languages whose continued existence as such is not endangered but which are exposed to serious changes, be it under the pressure of a more dominant standard language or due to social changes, education, urbanization and globalization in general. These latter articles unanimously emphasize that the level of metaphorical concepts, among them forms of veiling language or a former number system, is particularly affected by those changes. Our working definition of ‘endangered metaphors’, therefore, takes account of a broad notion of ‘metaphor’ (including all kinds of metaphorical expressions, idioms and other figurative units) and a differentiated notion of ‘endangered’ which includes changes in the realm of figurative language and non-literal mode of expression – independent from the degree of threat of the language in question.

The documentation and research on metaphors of the endangered languages has been neglected almost completely until recently. Despite the significance and urgency of the issue, very little on this subject has yet been published. The academic society should urgently take this task and preserve what is left. We are hoping that this book will encourage researchers and students to document and investigate metaphors of endangered languages and minority languages under the pressure of more powerful majority languages. The intention of our book is to explore in what ways these metaphors and other kinds of figurative language may encode culturally specific cognitive systems which will be lost when these languages cease to exist or will be abandoned when they change under pressure. Each article will investigate how metaphors in endangered languages yield insight into vanishing cultures by offering a large number of concrete examples.

Let us look at the regions and language families covered in this volume. The studies come from all continents and a wide range of language families. Indigenous North America is represented by two articles from Canada, authored by Sally Rice and Carolina Pasamonik, and one from Alaska authored by Olga Lovick. All of these languages, *Dene Sųliné*, *Beaver* and *Upper Tanana Athabaskan* (respectively), belong to the same language family – namely, the *Athabaskan* languages. As these three articles demonstrate, the metaphoricity of a language or a language family cannot be exhausted by one study or one point of view. Each article brings unique information about

indigenous cultures that once flourished, but today are merely fading memories of the last speakers of the languages in question.

Moving southwards on the map of the world's languages we introduce one indigenous language from Mexico and another from Peru. *Nahuatl*, an *Uto-Aztecan* language spoken in Mexico, is fortunately not endangered as a language of communication – but as Mercedes Montes de Oca Vega shows, cognitive structures required by the interpretation of modern Nahuatl riddles have changed from the days when the ancient Aztecs enjoyed the very same riddles. If there were no written documents of the Aztec language, this change could hardly be followed. Elena Mihás' article discusses *Ashéninka Perené*, an *Arawakan* language and sheds light on conceptual bodily metaphors underlying a traditional story from the rainforests of Peru.

Linguistic wealth of Oceania is exemplified by two languages from Papua New Guinea, *Siroi* and *Kewa*. *Siroi* belongs to the *Madang* language family, while *Kewa* is one of the *Engan* languages. Sjaak and Jacqueline van Kleef analyze the systematicity of *Siroi* metaphors which are conventionally used in storytelling, and how these metaphors mirror the natural environment of those people, while the colorful *Kewa* idioms described by Karl Franklin draw a picture of the social life in tropical rainforests. Monali Longmailai's & Lakshminath Rabha's study from India opens a view to metaphors used in two *Tibeto-Burman* minority languages. This comparative analysis of *Dimasa* and *Rabha* shows how the metaphors are persistent and vulnerable at the same time, and offer the cultural, political and social environment as an explanation to either situation.

Another alternative view to the wealth of expressive power of metaphors is provided by Gillian Hansford's article about *Chumburung*, which is a minority language spoken in Ghana and belongs to the *Niger-Congo* language family. The *Chumburung* numeral system is partly used in a metaphorically conventional way.

In the end, there are endangered metaphors even in Europe. To begin at the very edges of Europe, our volume includes two languages which existed at their area long before new immigrants came: *Basque*, the only remaining language of the oldest attainable layer of Southwest European languages, now a minority language in Spain and France, and *Inari Saami*, a *Uralic* language spoken at the Far North of Europe: northern Finland. Iraide Ibarretxe-Antuñano sheds light on Basque metaphors and how they carry deep cultural values of a minority. Anna Idström's article about *Inari Saami* demonstrates that systematical patterns of conventionalized metaphors cannot be explained without taking into account the *Inari Saami* culture and human adaptation to the natural environment.

The three *Indo-European* varieties examined in this book – coming from the *Indo-Iranian*, *Celtic* and *Germanic* branches – are very different. However, all of them hand down special, otherwise almost unparalleled metaphorical concepts and images. *Romani* is the language spoken by the Roma in Europe for hundreds of years. Kimmo Granqvist's article compares metaphors that the Roma minority of Finland uses in their Finnish variety with metaphors used in Finnish Romani, their native language of Indo-Iranian origin. *Scottish Gaelic*, an endangered Celtic language, was traditionally

spoken throughout the Scottish Mainland (with the exception of the Northeast and Southeast extremities) and the Hebrides, and is now spoken in pockets of the West Highlands and Western Isles of Scotland. Tiber Falzett investigates the metaphorical connotation between 'food' and 'music' in Scottish Gaelic emigrant traditions in North America. Elisabeth Piirainen, who for the first time studied dialectal phraseology within a linguistic framework, discusses striking cases of endangered metaphors, drawn from her rich data of *Westmünsterländisch*, an archaic Low Saxon dialect whose figurative language in its former originality does not exist any more.

This leads us to the question of the intensity of endangerment of the languages considered here which varies between the two poles of being close to extinction and still being in a more or less stable position. The Athabaskan languages represent the most seriously endangered class with less than one hundred speakers and no transmission to new generations. At the other pole we have languages like Chumburung (Ghana), Kewa (Papua New Guinea) and Nahuatl (Mexico). These languages cannot be considered as endangered at the moment – with their large number of speakers and an untroubled transmission to younger generations, but a deeper investigation into metaphorical uses of the languages reveal clear changes in figurative expressions. As outlined above, those changes are, at least partly, consequences of the pressure of more powerful cultures and majority languages.

As a conclusion, all of the articles point to a single direction: the metaphors of a language are vulnerable. *They start to vanish at the very beginning of a language becoming endangered.* As a number of authors point out (e.g. Idström, Longmailai & Rabha, Lovick, Piirainen), it may be too late to document the conventional figurative expressions of a language effectively when there are only a few speakers of the older generation left, and those few who still remember the language do not use it in every day life. This does not mean that languages on the verge of extinction should be abandoned as hopeless cases. On the contrary: these languages should be seen as cases of extreme urgency and any kind of metaphorical substance that is left should be preserved for posterity. More importantly, the documentation of figurative expressions should be started immediately when a language becomes potentially endangered. In such a situation metaphors and figurative nuances are the first to vanish, even if the language continues to exist. The figurative units of endangered languages in their originality, handed down by generations, are severely endangered by the overwhelming influence of the mightier languages in question, by the processes of globalization and other factors of linguistic change.

Our book is dedicated to all those who experienced the loss of their native language, the loss of the rich conventional wisdom, the images, concepts or myths they have been familiar with since childhood. "Where have all these images gone?" we could ask modifying Nettle & Romaine's (2000: 1) famous yet seemingly melancholic question.³ However, this is not the place to mourn these losses but, instead, to try to

3. "Where have all the languages gone?"

bring about a reversal through increased research in the area of endangered metaphors. Our book should be regarded as one first small step in this direction.

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