Linguistic diversity as a necessity of human language

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1. According to the oft-quoted scenario by Michael Krauss (1992) that only 5 to 10 percent of 6,000 languages currently spoken in the world are “safe” languages, Japanese certainly belongs to this group. However, there are many of us who feel that even ours is “facing a critical fate”. As a matter of fact, i) attempts to introduce English teaching to elementary schools and ii) such things as “special English zones” have already started. I am flatly opposed to these recent policies in this country. We must know that these actions may be Japan’s first steps to becoming a monolingual English society. Are we really prepared for this?

I have been working on Yupik (an Eskimoan language) since 1967, which is spoken by close to 10,000 people in Southwest Alaska—actually the most fortunate of 19 Native Alaskan languages (20 languages until very recently). I have seen the change thereafter until today, modestly involved in bilingual education started in 1970. Contrary to the people’s great expectations of revitalization through the bilingual teaching at school, it turned out to accelerate instead the conversion to English, resulting in a steady decline of the language especially below 40 or so years of age.

2. We firmly believe in linguistic diversity. That is exactly why we are here. There may be different stances, however, as to where the diversity comes from as well as why it is so important.

Many people would agree that a language enshrines a whole culture of a people as the unique strategies of adaptation to their environment (natural, material, social, supernatural) which are closely linked, foremost, to their own way of understanding—cognition and categorization—of the environment they have to face. Language is uniquely weaved by not only cultural activity and behavior but also manufactured things, values, attitudes, meanings, images, accumulated knowledge and experience attached to the category. With a whole culture and its details enshrined, each language may represent a people much better than perhaps any (non-linguistic) cultural World Heritage. Hence, urgency of documenting near-extinct languages (cf. material for discussion at the end).

3. In Japanese, the basic verbs for ‘to divide’ (“wakeru”) and ‘to understand’ (“wakaru”) have the same root. And the noun “wake” does not only mean ‘dividing’ but also ‘reason’. One would surely be reminded of the very beginning of Genesis where God repeated this “dividing” and “naming” to create the world and of the “logos” in “In the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1) which means language and reason. Different environments, being differently categorized (and named), cannot but result in a diversity of <lexicon / dictionary> of languages.
4. A question arises here, however. If a language is simply a reflex of one non-linguistic culture, how can linguistic diversity be so great, or, structurally much greater than cultural one? This may not be any wonder if the latter has inevitably more direct functionality or purposiveness. It ever struggles for the life-or-death adaptation to the environment, and accordingly, little loss, waste, and futility is allowed.

Language, by contrast, does not seem to be so directly bound with the environment. As a matter of fact, language may not be so superb a work (as an instrument), as the Novel Prizer (novelist) Jun'ichiro Tanizaki (谷崎潤一郎) once remarked (『文章読本』). Not necessarily being a superb organ of thought and expression, a language is full of ambiguities, idiosyncracies and irregularities (residues). This fact itself that linguistic diversity is (much) greater than non-linguistic culture, to me, seems to suggest that language is not a mere instrument. Lesser diversity of non-material culture is probably due to its direct functionality or purposiveness. (One might think that language could not have started from the motives of communication but may more likely be a case of exaptation.)

5. I would now turn to another aspect of language (or want to stress it here) than lexicon as a reflex of a people's unique environment.

Language has its own "grooves" (Sapir 1921) by which the lexicon is manipulated for thought and expression. This is the question of <grammar>, in which, it is interesting to note, morphology shows much greater diversity than syntax. Morphology deals with words which are mere "forms" as Edward Sapir wrote:

'the word is merely a form, a definitely molded entity that takes in as much or as little of the conceptual material of the whole thought as the genius of the language cares to allow' (1921: 32; italic mine).

And in the space between the lines by Sapir one may read the thoughts of Benedetto Croce which I believe showed profound insight in saying:

linguistics is 'nothing other than the Aesthetic'—estetico as investigation of a fundamental capacity of human beings—and 'aesthetic activity is...a matter of giving form, and nothing other than a matter of giving form' (1992 [1902]: 17, 20).

Incidentally, I would understand that use of "forms" in human language, which leads to its diversity, comes from cognitive and physiologic limits of the brain and the articulatory organ on which it relies.

A form is not necessarily (or so directly) bound with function, a marked contrast with syntax which is directly functional in terms of communication. It would be the lesser (or more indirect) functionality that yields diversity, as is the case with language itself vs. non-linguistic culture (above). No wonder, a word as a "form" can take in as much or as little of content, hence much freedom or variability of morphology (vs. language universals more favored by syntacticians).

Coupled together, lexicon and grammar characterizes a unique language, which ensures
a vast variety of means of thought (or reasoning) and expression.

6. A linguistic “groove” may be illustrated with one feature permeating in Central Alaskan Yupik, a polysynthetic language. Note that each of the two below is a single word (not a phrase or a sentence) and both are on and the same transitive construction in which the first person is the subject (‘he’ is actually the object)—as the inflection -aqa at the end shows:

a. irnia-q-aqa ‘he is my child’
b. ange-n-q-aqa ‘he is bigger than me’

7. Diversity of languages in the world is currently shrinking at a rate which exceeds the extinction of species on earth, while the reduction of linguistic diversity generates much less concern and is rarely perceived as a serious problem. This comes from the instrumental view of language—the more useful, the better.

Amid great concerns that the diminishing biodiversity may reduce the vitality of living things and cause a catastrophe in the ecosystem, we must consider that the extinction of languages, each which enshrines a unique culture and which supports the diversity of thought and cognition, will probably cut the vitality of humankind as an intellectual being. What if the pattern or grooves of thought and cognition inextricably intertwined with language was far from universal?

The Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas, seeing up close the atrocities committed against the natives by the conquistadors, made an inside denunciation on the view of human beings at those days (“Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies” in 1552). But this is not a problem limited to an isolated incident five centuries ago but is still the case in various earth-shaking events in the world nowadays. If things we arrogantly call “rational” could be biased by a certain language, this may be nothing but Madness which could erase/eliminate the “irrational” in other peoples. It would be no less than “Sheer Madness” recently termed by Thomas L. Friedman, American author and columnist, to refer to the off-shore drilling for more climate-changing fossil fuels in Greenland. This is the very question that diminishing languages pose to us, as I perceive.

References:
Krauss, Michael E. “The world’s language in crisis”, Lanugage, 68/1: 4-10.
Miyaoka, Osahito 2002 What is a ‘Word’, Sanseido. [宮岡伯人『<語>とはなにか』三省堂].
A proposal of “international language helpers”
—material for discussion—

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✓ urgent need for language maintenance and documentation
✓ systematic training of dedicated young people for basic linguistics and related matters
— not for formal linguistics whose interest is in theoretical tinkering for academic degrees
✓ dispatched to be engaged in maintenance and documentation of endangered languages in carefully selected places where they are spoken (not as volunteers but specialists)
✓ necessarily in close cooperation with specialists in related fields concerned
✓ practical orthography to be constructed on the base of on phonetic(phonological) training in consideration of dialect differences and its teaching and dissemination among the people
✓ preparation of reading materials and translations (not only educational but also social, cultural, political, etc.).
✓ documentation — dictionary, grammar, and texts esp. in the case of near-extinct languages
* ca. 200 people involved in documentation of endangered languages (incl. Japanese dialects)  
* ca. 1.5 million dollars a year—an amount which is just a few drops of Japan’s ODA!  
* ca. 120 publications mainly of documentary nature  
* growth of young linguists here but discontinued under the Grants-in-Aid
✓ to be considered as a UNESCO’s long-term project:  
* capital support from Japan’s ODA  
* centered at United Nations University here