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Big History: Analysing complexity

LINGUISTIC COMPLEXITY



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0:11 / 7:19



Linguistic Complexity



Interactive Transcript

English ▾

0:00

The big question for this segment is, how does human language interact with increasing social complexity in a unified global network? **[MUSIC]** This course come to you from Sydney, Australia, a city characterized by great linguistic diversity. According to 2011 census statistics, almost 40% of Sydney siders speak a language other than English at home. And they speak around 250 different languages. Some of these languages have large numbers of speakers such as Arabic, which is spoken by more 175,000 Sydney residents. That's a bit over 4% of the population. Other languages spoken by more than 100,000 Sydneysiders include Mandarin, Hindi, and Cantonese. However, most of Sydney's languages have lower numbers of speakers. 75 languages spoken in Sydney have more than 1,000 speakers each, that is 0.05% of speakers in the population each. And the remaining 175 languages have even lower numbers of speakers. Viewed this way, Sydney is highly linguistically diverse. But there is also another way of looking at languages in Sydney. And that is through the lens of English. More than 60% of Sydney households speak only English. And the vast majority of people who speak a home language other than English are bilingual in English. The number of Sydney residents who do not speak English or do not speak it well is only around 5% of the population. So we can observe two different and seemingly contradictory linguistic facts about Sydney. First, the linguistic organization of Sydney is highly complex. A large minority of residents speak a great variety of languages. Second, the linguistic organization of Sydney is quite simple. The overwhelming majority of the population speaks English, and the majority speaks only English. In fact, Sydney is not unusual. Most, if not all major cities today, are characterized by the tension between linguistic diversity and linguistic homogeneity I just have described. While the specific characteristics of this tension are locally different in different places, linguistic diversity today is tied to migration, and linguistic homogeneity to nation building and In globalization.

2:30

Linguistic diversity in Sydney today is a result of migration. Almost all Sydney siders who speak a language other than English are immigrants or their descendents. Descendants of immigrants tend to give up their heritage language within two or three generations. The typical pattern of immigrant language shift in Australia and elsewhere is as follows. The first generation is bilingual with dominance in the language other than English. The second generation is bilingual with dominance in English, and the third generation is monolingual in English. This means that a high level of immigration, at any given point in time, increases linguistic complexity in a society. As the numbers of multilingual speakers and of languages spoken increase. With time in the country, linguistic complexity decreases as immigrants and their descendants shift towards English. A key driver in generational language shift comes from schooling. Through schooling, the State favors one particular language over all of others and engineers linguistic homogeneity in a population. In complex institutions operating at

the level of the nation, or even globally, linguistic uniformity is advantageous. Large and complex societies are easier to govern if administrators all speak the same language, trade deals are easier to negotiate where there is a shared language, and a shared language can help to engender a sense of connectedness and loyalty in a population.

3:59

Because linguistic homogeneity is advantageous for groups, the global language system can be understood as competitive. According to sociologist, Abraham the global language system can be pictured a pyramid-like organogram. The languages at the bottom of the pyramid which are accounted 98% of all the five to 6,000 languages in the world are peripheral languages. Peripheral languages can be understood as the languages of local communication, the languages of conversation and narration, rather than the languages of reading and writing. They are learning which is of memory and remembrance rather than the languages of record. Above the huge layer of peripheral languages, sits a thin layer of central languages. Central languages are usually the official languages of a nation or state. Used in elementary and sometimes secondary education. In the media and in national politics and bureaucracies there are around 100 central language. The next layer is occupied by about a dozen supercentral languages which serve an international and long distance communication. Finally, the apex of the pyramid is occupied by one single language, English, which de Swaan describes as hypercentral language of globalization. The Global Language System Pyramid is intended to demonstrate communicative reach. Speakers of a peripheral language need to learn a central language to communicate outside their local community. Speakers of a central language need to learn a supercentral language to communicate regionally outside their national borders. And speakers of a supercentral language need to learn the hypercentral language in order to communicate globally. By contrast, English native speakers often have no obvious need to learn any additional language because English can serve local, national, regional, and global communicative functions. The system is therefore hierarchically ordered. The greater the communicative reach of a language, the more valuable the language is to its speakers.

6:09

Because language learning is difficult and costly, particularly for adults, being a native speaker of the designated language of a place or an institution always confers an advantage on the native speaker of the language of that institution. Whereas speakers of different languages compete for resources such as access to jobs, access to education, as they do in most contemporary cities today. They will also compete over which language is defined as the legitimate language of that space. These struggles of a linguistic legitimacy are an essential aspect of the interaction between language and social complexity in global networks. Linguistic complexity is not only a matter of how many languages and speakers there are in a place, but how these languages and their speakers are connected in webs power that link linguistic diversity to economic inequality, to cultural domination, and to imperative political participation. [MUSIC]

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