

# Language Death versus Language Survival: A Global Perspective

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## Abstract

The present-day world is marked by a significant discrepancy in the development of languages. While some languages are on a steep advance, a large number of other languages are facing rapid endangerment, in many instances resulting in death. Languages have always died off, but no historical period experienced such massive attrition. It has been estimated that approximately one half of the 6,000 languages spoken in the world today are going to disappear in the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In relation to this horrifying data, it has often been argued that language extinction must be viewed as a terrible loss, and language renewal is thus beneficial and worth trying. By contrast, the discussion has also been enriched by anti-survival conceptions.

Within the framework of this contextual background, the paper attempts to contribute to the growth in linguistic awareness about the problem. Drawing on the research results of such scientific fields as, for example, sociolinguistics, geolinguistics, language ecology, and linguistic anthropology, it (1) presents the global status of the world's languages, (2) outlines the future perspective of both 'threatened' and 'strong' languages, and (3) discusses pro- and anti-survival/revitalization arguments.

**Key words:** globalisation, language death and survival, revitalization, international language, linguistic anthropology, sociolinguistics, geolinguistics, language ecology

## Introduction

While my contribution to the conference titled *Globalisation and its impacts on localities*<sup>11</sup> (which was held here in Ostrava two years ago) discussed the importance of languages for preserving the identity and integrity of nations in multiethnic regions using the example of the Lakota people, my present-day talk attempts to approach the topic of language development, its rise or demise, from more general viewpoints. Drawing on the research results of such interdisciplinary fields of study as, for instance, sociolinguistics, geolinguistics, language ecology, and linguistic anthropology, the aim of the paper is three-fold. Firstly, it deals with the global status of the world's languages. Secondly, it outlines the future perspectives of both 'threatened' and 'strong' languages. Thirdly, it discusses some pro-survival and anti-survival/ revitalization arguments.

## Global language loss

It has been estimated (e.g. Dixon 1997) that there are approximately 5,000–6,000 living languages in the world – it depends, of course, on how we understand languages as opposed to dialects – and that about one half of these are going to vanish in the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, circa 3,000 languages are going to become extinct in 1,200

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<sup>11</sup> Černý, M. 2008. Lakota Language Revitalization: Past, Present, and Future Prospects. In *Globalisation and Its Impact on Localities*. Ostrava: University of Ostrava. pp. 255–261.

months. As Crystal (2000, 19) aptly expresses, "that means, on average, there is a language dying off somewhere in the world every two weeks or so". According to other sources (e.g. *Ethnologue* 2005<sup>12</sup>), there are 51 languages (now 50; for the explanation see Conclusion) with only one speaker left: 8 (now 7) in the USA, 3 in South America, 3 in Africa, 6 in Asia, 28 in Australia, and 3 in the Pacific Ocean islands. Nearly 500 languages have fewer than 100 speakers; 1,500 languages are spoken by fewer than 1,000 speakers; over 3,000 languages have up to 10,000 speakers; and 5,000 languages have no more than 100,000 speakers. To put it yet more differently, it has been calculated that about 96% of all the world's languages are spoken by about 4% of the Globe's population.

Reasons for language loss (and/or language shift towards a stronger language, frequently English) are numerous. Besides natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc.) we should mention colonization, migration, and invasion, often resulting in cultural assimilation, or even genocide. Nevertheless, compared to language, cultural, and education policies taking place during previous centuries, today it is not common to punish people for practicing their languages; still, they continue in dying off.

In relation to this predicament, Fishman (1991) delimits four social changes affecting our languages choices: (1) demographic factors, (2) economic forces, (3) social identifiers, and (4) mass media. Moreover, Fishman (1991, 88–109) postulates a graded division of languages according to their endangerment (for details, see *Figure 1*). As the following figure suggests, Stage One languages are the least threatened, with higher levels of government and education institutions employing the language. Stage Eight languages, on the contrary, are the most seriously endangered, having only a few fluent speakers left. The remaining six stages rank between these two poles.

**Figure 1** *Adaptation of Fishman's Scale for Threatened Languages*

Stage One	Used by higher levels of government and in higher education.
Stage Two	Used by local government and the mass media in the community.
Stage Three	Used in business and by employees in less specialized work areas.
Stage Four	Language is required in elementary schools.
Stage Five	Language is still very much alive and used in community.
Stage Six	Some intergenerational use of language.
Stage Seven	Only adults beyond child bearing age speak the language.
Stage Eight	Only a few elders speak the language.

To fight language disappearance and to strengthen a particular language code, Reyhner (1999, VII) suggests a series of varied interventions. With regard to the first stage, he holds the opinion that the indigenous language oral and written literature should be cultivated through dramatic presentations and publications. To reverse Stage Two, he would promote the use of the written form of the language for legal and business purposes. Stage Three might be altered through developing a specialized vocabulary for both employers and employees. Stage Four requires new indigenous language textbooks. In Stage Five a special recognition should be given to local renewal efforts through prizes and awards. Stage Six expects parents speaking the language at home, especially with the youngest generation. For Stages Seven and Eight Reyhner offers a model where fluent elders are teamed with younger learners, either in the form of so called "language nests"<sup>13</sup> or one-to-one.

<sup>12</sup> This material has its printed and online version. For the purposes of my paper I take the advantage of using the internet source. For details see the reference section at the end of the article.

<sup>13</sup> Language nests are community centers aiming at promotion, advance, and renewal of indigenous languages. They are typical of the Maori revival initiative.

In addition, Crystal (2000, 133–144) proposes six factors that may help reverse the shift towards another language. He claims that the threatened language will progress and possibly recover if its speakers (1) increase their prestige within the dominant community; (2) increase their wealth; (3) increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community; (4) have a strong presence in the educational system; (5) can write down their language; (6) can make use of electronic technology.

### Top twenty languages

While many language codes are dying off (some counts suggest that only 600 of the 6,000 languages in the world are 'safe' from the threat of extinction), some languages are on steep advance. The following two figures present the list of top twenty languages; in other words those with the most numerous community of speakers. While *Figure 2*, which is an adaptation of Comrie's calculation (see 2007, 19), bases its order on the number of native (so called L1) speakers, *Figure 3*, presenting Ostler's statistics (2007, 558), covers both L1 and L2 speakers, and, moreover, it differentiates between particular Chinese dialects (Mandarin, Wu, and Yue). That explains the discrepancy in the counts presented. Here, it is important to stress that more recent sources might offer slightly different estimates as the number of languages and their speakers experiences constant changes.

*Figure 2 Top twenty languages in terms of the number of speakers I*

List of languages	Number of speakers	List of languages	Number of speakers
1 Chinese	1,000,000,000	11 French	70,000,000
2 English	350,000,000	12 Panjabi	70,000,000
3 Spanish	250,000,000	13 Javanese	65,000,000
4 Hindi	200,000,000	14 Bihari	65,000,000
5 Arabic	150,000,000	15 Italian	60,000,000
6 Bengali	150,000,000	16 Korean	60,000,000
7 Russian	150,000,000	17 Telugu	55,000,000
8 Portuguese	135,000,000	18 Tamil	55,000,000
9 Japanese	120,000,000	19 Marathi	50,000,000
10 German	100,000,000	20 Vietnamese	50,000,000

*Figure 3 Top twenty languages in terms of the number of speakers II*

List of languages	Number of speakers	List of languages	Number of speakers
1 Chinese – Mandarin	1,052,000,000	11 Urdu	104,000,000
2 English	508,000,000	12 Korean	78,000,000
3 Hindi	487,000,000	13 Chinese – Wu	77,000,000
4 Spanish	417,000,000	14 Javanese	76,000,000
5 Russian	277,000,000	15 Telugu	75,000,000
6 Bengali	211,000,000	16 Tamil	74,000,000
7 Portuguese	191,000,000	17 Chinese – Yue	71,000,000
8 German	128,000,000	18 Marathi	71,000,000
9 French	128,000,000	19 Vietnamese	68,000,000
10 Japanese	126,000,000	20 Turkish	61,000,000

For the sake of time, let me now focus on the status of the European languages only. In the global context of the twenty most numerous languages in the world, we find seven languages having their original area in Europe: namely English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Russian, German and Italian (I am referring to *Figure 2*). The first four languages have

enlarged their territory and population base due to overseas colonial expansion. Russian spread as a result of tsarist military campaigns. German keeps its tenth position thanks to the fact it functions as an official language in several European countries. Italian represents an exception; it has grown organically in its parent country.

Taking into consideration a combination of demographic factors (birth rate versus death rate) and changing prestige of languages under scrutiny, it appears (see Ostler 2007, 557–564) that in the following fifty years the number of German and Italian speakers may be reduced up to ten per cent, which means that Italian would disappear from the top twenty languages, and German would drop down to the end of the list. Also Russian will probably experience certain withdrawal from the more leading positions. Spanish and Portuguese do not have to worry as their native speakers in Latin America show steady natality. On the contrary, the growth of the French speaking population has stopped. However, in many ways (economic, cultural, military), France belongs among the most powerful countries in the world, and thus French is still viewed as a prestigious language.

And what about English? Well, difficult to guess. It is a language of globalisation. The United States and the United Kingdom play prominent roles in foreign and economic policy. The English language functions as a *lingua franca* in the world of science as well as in the world of diplomacy. Nevertheless, the history teaches us that no language has ever ruled the planet for too long; just think about Latin. If the internet should be taken as the criterion for predicting the future of English, it has been recently shown that with regard to the total capacity in internet communication English has been outnumbered by other languages 57% to 43% (see Breton 2007, 75). Importantly, as Crystal (2003, 191) maintains, there is a danger that the English language will split into various dialects, not fully intelligible to each other. The future of English is thus uncertain.

### **Kenan Malik's *Let them die* revisited**

The fact that there is, on the one hand, a large number of languages which are facing rapid endangerment, in many instances resulting in death, and, on the other hand, there is a group of so called strong languages, some of which function even as international codes, opens broad space for contemplation whether it is worth attempting to dedicate time, energy, and money in order to save tongues which are close to extinction, or not. This controversial question seems to be of deep interest not only for representatives of relevant speech communities, but also for scholars of various specializations as well as for lay public. Naturally, opinions differ. We can distinguish either pro-survival or anti-survival/revitalization conceptions. Most generally, the pro-survival supporters argue that language death should be viewed as terrible loss, similar to the death of animal species, and language renewal is thus beneficial. By contrast, anti-survival supporters stress the fact that languages have always died off, and they campaign for language homogenization.

One of the anti-revitalization campaigners is Kenan Malik, an Indian-born British scholar, researcher and writer, the author of such bestsellers as *The Meaning of Race* (1996), *Man, Beast and Zombie* (2000), *Strange Fruit* (2008) and *From Fatwa to Jihad* (2009). In his essay *Let them die* (2000) Malik argues against language renewal theories and practices as they are presented, among others, in Crystal's *Language Death* (2000), Hagège's *Halte à la mort des langues* (2001), or Nettle & Romaine's *Vanishing Voices* (2000).

Quoting words by the Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla, Malik claims that "in order to survive, a language must have a function". In addition to that, he maintains that "the whole point of a language is to enable communication, (...) and the more universally we can communicate, the more dynamic our cultures will be, because the more they will be open to new ways of thinking and doing". He attempts to refute the opinion that language and culture are interrelated, or even inseparable phenomena. He does not share the conviction that the

language we use may contribute to the manner we perceive, structure, and understand the world around us. In other words, he refuses the Sapir and Whorf's concept of language determinism and relativism.<sup>14</sup> To provide some evidence, Malik offers a comparison of French and English, summarizing: "The idea that French speakers view the world differently from English speakers, because they speak French, is clearly absurd." Interestingly, he also pleads against cultural pluralism, which, in his opinion, has re-expressed racial science "for the post-Holocaust world".

To confront his standpoints, there are several particularities worth mentioning. First of all, since Malik does not specify what he understands under the term *communication*, it seems that he is not aware of the variety of language functions (or, for the sake of his argumentation, he just pretends to lack the knowledge). Language communication performs not only the act of transforming information. Roman Jakobson (1960, 350–377) proposes a model, based on the Organon-Model by Karl Bühler<sup>15</sup>, composed of six functions: (1) referential, (2) emotive, (3) conative, (4) phatic, (5) metalingual, and (6) poetic.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, in spite of the fact that language does not primarily determine the manner we think, "there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly common concepts" (Kramersch 1998, 13). Put it differently, whilst the strong form of Sapir and Whorf's hypothesis cannot be accepted, its neutral version is generally taken for granted. Thus, without a shade of doubt, there is a significant level of interrelation between language, culture and thinking. French and English do not differ much because from the genealogical and typological points of view they are closely related; both belong among Indo-European languages with prevailing analytical features. However, if more "distant" languages were to be contrasted, differences in their linguistic pictures of the world would be of much more noticeable character. Following these assumptions, I have to object to Malik's statement that the universality of communication brings about the dynamism of cultures and their openness towards new modes of thinking and behaving. How can culture be more open to a new style of mental and social interaction if the specificity of such interaction is waning simultaneously with the language code within which it exists?

Unlike Malik, I glorify both multilingualism and multiculturalism. In my opinion, cultural and lingual pluralism has nothing to do with racial thinking. It does not assert that one culture or language is better than another. It is the other way round; multiculturalists praise tolerance and liberality. They respect "the other". That is also one of the reasons why they cannot stay passive when "the other" is near total collapse. Yes, languages have always passed away, but no historical period experienced such massive attrition. Of course, nobody can force a person or community of speakers to keep their mother tongue if they do not want to. Nevertheless, as research proves (cf., e.g., Šatava 2009), language revival is often wanted and often successful. And why should we care about endangered languages? Because we need diversity, because languages express identity, because languages are repositories of history, because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge, because languages are interesting in themselves Crystal (2000, 27–67).

### **Names not to be forgotten**

In place of a conclusion, instead of repeating the key points of what has, hopefully, been clearly delivered, let me present a few names which, in my opinion, should not be

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed introduction into the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis see, for example, Duranti (1997).

<sup>15</sup> Bühler distinguishes in his model three main functions of language: *representation*, *expression*, and *appeal*.

<sup>16</sup> Unlike Malik, Léon-Portilla definitely is aware of various language functions (especially *poetic*). See Léon-Portilla 2002.



forgotten (for details see Nettle and Romaine 2000): Ned Madrell (+ 1974), the last fluent speaker of Manx, a Celtic language spoken in the Isle of Man. Roscinda Nolasquez (+ 1987) of Pala, California, the last speaker of Cupeño. Laura Somersal (+ 1990), the last speaker of a Native American language called Wappo. Tefvik Esenc (+ 1992), a farmer from the Turkish village of Haci Osman, the last speaker of Ubykh, a language once spoken in the northern Caucasus. Asai Take (+ 1994) from the Hokkaido village Abankohan, Japan, the last speaker of the Ainu language. Red Thundercloud (+ 1996), the last speaker of a Siouan language, Catawba. Last but not least, Marie Smith Jones, the last speaker of the Eyak language of subarctic Alaska, who passed away just a year ago (January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008), making her mother tongue extinct. Do we really want to have this list enlarged?

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