

Languages Lost: The History and Future of Endangered Languages

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Introduction

It is commonly agreed that language is a cornerstone of civilization; language can be used as a means to record and communicate information. However, as history has shown, languages often crumble. Adjustments to the French language are made by a group known as *les Immortelles*. This group convenes to adapt the existing structure of the French language at a given time and alter it to reflect society's constantly changing values. More recently, flexibility in definite articles has been added to certain nouns that have historically been associated with the male gender. The past vernacular of the masculine *le gerant* can now be accepted as the feminine *la gerante* to suit the more modern notion of gender inclusivity. The previous example describes a small adaptation that a language can experience. Languages can evolve to form branch languages or take on an almost unrecognizable forms owing to extenuating conditions imposed on the people of a particular language region. Consequently, languages that were at one point in wide use can become endangered. The three main causes of language endangerment are the increased use of regional vernaculars, colonization, and globalization.

Increased Use of Regional Vernaculars

Surprisingly, the widespread popularity of a language can lead to its own extinction. Often, when a language is used in a variety of different regions, each region can develop its own area-specific dialect of communicating under the fundamental structure of the core language. An internationally relevant example of a core language branching out into a variety of regional languages is the history of Latin's decline and the rise of the Romance languages. As a result of Rome's far-reaching influence, Posner, a professor emeritus of Oxford University, and Sala, Director of the Institute of Linguistics in Bucharest Romania, (2019), believes that Latin eventually developed different dialects due to the cultural differences between Rome's many territories, spawning distinct languages. In this way, the Romance

languages were born. Their rise to popularity began during the 5th century, when some scholars believe that Romance language speakers began to realize that they had made linguistic divergences from their Latin mother language (para. 24). Eventually, the question was raised by Italy's Dante of "what should constitute a *volgare illustre* (an 'illustrious popular speech') capable of rivalling Latin for literary and scholarly purposes" (para. 29).

Colonization

The strain colonization has on a society is reflected not only by its people but by its languages. The process of colonization deprives the colonized people of their cultural practices, including their language, replaced instead by new ideals and concepts that the colonizers believe to be superior. The story of the East India Company and British Colonial India attests to this fact. India is revered for its rich culture and diversity, however, India holds the title as the country with the second largest number of English speakers in the world at over 125 million (Masani, 2012, para. 11). In a BBC article, writer and broadcaster Zareer Masani (2012) concludes that the English language's widespread presence throughout the Indian subcontinent can be attributed to the revolutionized education system in Colonial India at the hands of historian Thomas Babington Macauley (para. 15). It was Baron Macauley's belief that English "should not only be taught as a language but also should form the medium of instruction at [the] college level" (Sengupta, 2018, p. 29). Dr. Papia Sengupta (2018), an assistant professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Social Sciences, builds on Masani's conclusion in her idea that what Macauley believed was that native Indian languages, such as Sanskrit, were too implausible by nature for Indians to ever be convinced by Newton's laws and John Locke's philosophy"; European ideas needed to be conveyed through a European language: English (p. 30). When India's British colonial rulers were persuaded by Macauley's ideas, Indian education policies were reformed and English language learning transcended education systems throughout the country. Colonial rulers had foreseen the benefits of such a reform; "if English was the medium of instruction, more and more English-proficient Indians could be

hired at a much lower cost, cutting the expenditure incurred by the [East India] Company's treasury.” (Sengupta, 2018, p. 30). In their colonial rule, the British had deprived India of its linguistic independence for their own gain. In a similar case, the vitality of many indigenous African languages was put at risk during the European colonization of Africa. Mufwene (2008), the Frank J. McLoraine Distinguished Service Professor at the University of Chicago's Department of Linguistics, and Vigouroux, an Associate professor of Simon Fraser University's Department of French relate Africa's colonial situation to that of India's in a comment that “the European colonizers were no more interested in sharing their languages with the indigenous populations than they were in India” (p. 4). As in India, European languages spread through reformed education systems for Africa's youth (Mufwene and Vigouroux, 2008, p. 5). In both India and Africa, colonial languages pervaded the younger generation through education reform and weakened the generation's bonds with their linguistic roots.

Globalization

In today's day and age, the most prevalent cause of language 'death' is globalization. Due to modern innovations, such as the internet and optimized transportation, the world is more connected than ever. As a result, lingua francas, have far-reaching influence and are being spoken globally, thus diminishing the presence of smaller, endangered languages. Dr. Rubenstein (2017), an American geographer and Professor of Geography at Miami University defines a lingua franca as “a language of international communication” (p. 192). In international relations, people are seeing that in order to communicate with others, there must be a global means of communication—a common language. This is where the role of lingua francas comes forward thereby receding the place of niche languages. Although this may seem unfair to the world's rich and diverse cultures, “it is more likely that several million Dutch people learn English than that a half-billion English speakers around the world will learn Dutch” (Rubenstein, 2017, p. 193). Similar to Rubenstein, Dr. Thomas Christiansen (2015), a professor in

English Language and Translation at the Università del Salento, describes the English language as “tempting to foresee a largely monolingual future at the international level, where other languages become irrelevant” (p. 129). Although monolingualism may seem like the end of linguistic diversity, Christiansen opposes this perspective by being optimistic in his belief that the increasing influence of lingua francas could give birth to new forms of plurilingualism, the existence of multiple global languages (p. 129). He is correct in the sense that to counter the possibility of ethnic and endangered language speakers turning away from their native tongues to pick up English, governments are implementing more policies to ensure that their ethnic languages are preserved with the onset of the next generation.

Conclusion

To answer the question of how languages have vanished, we have seen how languages can bring upon their own demise as in the case of Latin and the birth of the Romance languages. Moreover, the influence of a foreign power can force ethnic languages into endangerment, just as how the English language permeated learning programs through education systems across Colonial India. In today’s global world, many languages are on the brink of extinction, with popular lingua francas providing a more connected means of communication. Despite the marginalization of smaller languages, many countries are implementing and reforming policies to reinvigorate and strengthen ethnic languages. Out of all the countries in the Americas, Paraguay is the only one where an indigenous language is spoken by the majority of the population (Romero, 2012, para. 2). Paraguay’s Guaraní is a point of focus for the federal government; this focus is serving an important role in preserving the language, with the language having constitutional significance and its teaching being enforced in schools all over the country (Méndez, 2012, para. 10). Overall, in the face of adversity, a multitude of nations are taking precautions to protect endangered languages against lingua francas. Regardless of the steps taken to prevent the linguistic extinction, it is difficult to predict whether the onslaught of globalization will have as drastic an impact as in the case of regional vernaculars on Latin and colonization on ethnic Indian and African languages.

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