

## THE PROTECTION OF NATURAL LANGUAGE DIVERSITY – FANCY OR DUTY?<sup>1</sup>

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*„Increasingly, individuals in various sectors of academic, political, and public life in several countries around the world are becoming better aware of the precipitousness and the profundity of the consequences of language loss on a global scale”.*

*(Patricia A. Shaw, 2001b: 181)*

### 1. Introduction

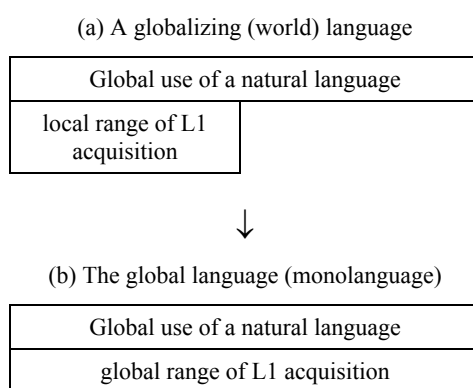
All natural languages constitute a universal natural language space or a global pool of language resources which may be referred to as the ‘natural language global arena’. The metaphor of the arena implies that they are in continuous contact with each other and remain in some form of contest. Obviously, the contacting languages differ as to their size and other traits jointly corresponding to a complex of features (i.e. parameters) that may be referred to as ‘natural language robustness’. It has been repeatedly estimated by learned consent among professional linguists dealing with language ecology that half of the existing 6,900 languages which fill up the ‘natural language global arena’ will disappear in the coming century and that of the 3,400 remaining languages, about 2,000 languages will enter the stage of being severely endangered. The reason for this dramatic state of affairs has been heralded as basically resulting from a further dynamic progression of the process of world globalization which, among other factors (e.g. demographic, economical, educational, technological, etc.),

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has already shown its grip over the entire human culture complex in leading to the well known fact of challenging the various local cultures and languages, cast in what has conveniently and aptly been termed ‘cultural heritage’, by the so-called ‘globalizing’ language(s) involved in a global contest (or rivalry) with other natural languages.

In this context, it is assumed that the notion of a ‘globalizing language’ (i.e. a world language) should be opposed to that of the ‘global language’ as one which has succeeded in gaining a dominant (i.e. hegemonic) position among all the existing languages in the natural language global arena (hence abbreviated as NaLGA) above all in the most important of the communicative niches, that is, in the professional niche (e.g. in science, technology, publishing, commerce, diplomacy), but which, at the same time, is not the only language that children all over the world have been mandatorily acquiring as their first language. On the other hand, the global language (or, more precisely, the global monolanguage) is one which may be defined as the only survivor of language contests in the NaLGA and thus a sole winner of the process of linguistic colonization and one which has additionally won all the children in their first language acquisition on the global scale. This dichotomy may be illustrated in the following way:



**Fig. 1.** Where the vertical downward arrow (↓) indicates a possible direction in the change of the status of a globalizing language within the NaLGA as a result of language contest

Therefore, it is assumed that the globalizing languages, which at present are so clearly epitomized by English as a major force behind the seemingly unifying pressure processes leading to the weakening and replacement (or overpowering of other languages, or ‘winning the language contest’) of the existing natural languages with a globally accessible *lingua franca*, pose a direct threat to the very existence of all the other non-globalizing natural languages which, together with a limited number of globalizing languages, constitute the NaLGA.

At this point one should define natural language dominance as a relationship among/between all the natural languages occurring in the NaLGA that is established by the complex processes of force/aggression on the one hand, and submission, on the

other, generally leading to the determination which language has the status of the most dominant in the NaLGA. It should also be added that a dominance-submission relationship between different languages does not exist until one particular language consistently submits to another language under conditions of prolonged language contact. In the light of the remarks made above, some of the essential questions that may be formulated are the following ones:

- what does it mean that a language turns out to be a ‘winner’ in a contest with another language?
- what happens when a language is meant to be on the ‘winner’ or ‘loser’ side, that is, when an invading (i.e. dominant) language (hence abbreviated as IL) wins a contest with a ‘loser’ language, and when the communicators within the host (i.e. receiving/resident) language (hence abbreviated as HL) tend to additionally strengthen this process while participating, either consciously or subconsciously, in weakening their ethnic-linguistic guise and contributing to the overall weakening of HL fitness?
- why should we care and what can be done to remedy such a situation?

In what follows, some comments will be offered with respect to the above questions.

## **2. ‘Overpowering’ a host language by an IL**

The following situation has occurred very frequently both in the on-going and accomplished history of many natural languages: a local HL ‘encounters’ another language which may be running according to the following narrow formula: a local community language is ‘invaded’ by another language. Or, the invading language starts its unidirectional flow into the host language in what may be termed the process of ‘external linguopressure’. The result may, especially after a longer period of time, turn out to be quite disastrous for the local host language. Simply, in a longer run, such a language may become a subordinate in relation to the invading language which will thus become a dominant language. Subsequently, the former language may either become heavily saturated with various bits and pieces pumped into it, as it were, across all the levels of language structure, from the invading more or less ‘despotic’ language. Or, the invaded host language may, in extreme (and, after all, not so infrequent) cases, finally give up its autonomous existence and disappear quietly and without much fuss from the natural language arena, either in what has been called ‘language suicide’ or ‘language murder’.

Overpowering a language by another language appears, above all, to be a mental phenomenon and may usually be accounted for as being likened to the process of a growing appreciation of the invading language by a growing number of native communicators within the host community. The latter jointly and very often unconsciously (i.e. involuntarily), work towards granting the invading language the rank of a prestigious (i.e. superstratal) and highly valuable language, that is, a language of socially highly appreciated rituals of its use, the rituals of organizing shared positive emotions towards and intersub-

jective focus on the IL regarded as some kind of group emblem. In so doing, this group of native communicators automatically becomes interested in seeking and being exposed to the invading language as well as to its more or less massive spread in the host community through deliberate and over-invested foreign/second language learning.

As a result, it very often forms a significantly large and influential group of communicators more or less interested in a further proliferation of the invading language in the entirety of what may be termed the complex processes of ‘internal linguopressure’. Usually quite well organized into (semi)professional ‘cliques’ (or changeable temporary ‘coalitions’, e.g. foreign language teachers, university educators, scholarly experts, administrators, journalists, businessmen, etc.), this group of host language communicators tends to perceive the physical co-presence of the invading language in the public sphere of the host (resident/receiving) community as some kind of a blessing that prompts a joint and supportive (i.e. host community aid-giving) action determined to be geared towards increasing its further privileged conduct within the host community. Simply, appreciation of the IL becomes a special kind of group emblem and a marker of group identity via the processes of collective generation of and sharing positive emotions towards the IL and leads to its broader promotion within the HL society. The above characteristics may be regarded as responsible for the phenomenon of ‘internal linguopressure’ organized by the temporary and changeable social coalitions whose joint actions favouring a given IL may significantly strengthen the overall effects of the despotic processes of external linguopressure. The result of the combined action of both types of linguopressure may be the occurrence of marked nonequilibrium among natural languages and the subsequent establishment of the submissive status of the local HL on the one hand, and of the more integrated and more massive, therefore more viscous and more dynamic, nature of IL inflow into and intake by the HL community, on the other.

Thus, overpowering the host language usually entails some kind of (mainly psychological) domination of that language by the invading language. More precisely, it may indicate that the host language’s overall resource-holding power is significantly weakened and thus its general ‘fighting ability’ (or ‘stamina’) is diminished as regards its maintenance *vis-à-vis* other languages in the universal space of the NaLGA which is composed of all the presently existing languages as possible contestants. The result is usually the occurrence of an asymmetric contest between the host and invading languages whereby the former language may receive a debilitating inflow of information from the invading language and the latter may succeed in ‘flooding’ the HL and propelling changes within the HL leading towards the marginalization and erosion of that language. In this way, the most basic condition for the weakening and a subsequent possibility of final eradication (or ‘killing’) of the host language has been established as a result of which the host language may simply face the fate of being first reduced to a more or less substratal status (i.e. a language with a more or less subdominant/submissive ‘loser’ strategy) *vis-à-vis* the IL. We may further say that the HL has thus entered the phase which may be termed the ‘loser phase’ with the HL language as a ‘loser’ language, that is, one which has lost, or is currently undergoing the process of losing, a competitive

edge over the IL, which may subsequently be regarded as the superstratal (i.e. ‘winner’) language owing to a successful application of the despotic strategy.

It may thus be stated that the latter has managed to demonstrate an appropriate degree of despotism within the overall intrinsic ‘dominance potential’ which seems to be the summative result of the functioning of natural language robustness, stamina, and the joint processes of external and internal linguopressure. In this phase, HL is also assumed to be ready to receive and absorb further ‘aggression’ from the IL flowing aggressively into the HL, and, as a consequence, be subject to having its existence thwarted especially with regard to the ecologically most desirable ecocratic and adstratal (i.e. egalitarian) status in the natural language global arena due to the application of the egalitarian ‘winner-winner’ strategy. The arena may, therefore, be further assumed to be organized along the dichotomous dimensions of despotism and egalitarianism within the universal continuum of ‘natural language dominance’, generally yielding a division into ‘winner’ (i.e. dominant-despotic-imperialistic) and ‘loser’ (i.e. submissive-non-dominant-egalitarian) languages.

In the light of the above remarks, it has become clear that even with a small number of dominant-despotic languages operating within the NaLGA, the latter may be regarded as constituting a universal space subjected to the pressures exerted by the despotic languages upon the remaining majority of less despotic (i.e. weaker) contestants. The pressures operating in the NaLGA may include the following major steps:

- gradual formation of IL dominance via more or less massive inflow of an IL into any HL, with a subsequent statistically marked intake/interception (also known as ‘borrowing’) of IL forms, especially on the lexical level, by the HL (i.e. ‘external linguopressure’),
- gradual formation of a substratal (i.e. submissive) status of a HL via the formation of a coalition of social groups within the HL community ready to receive and further proliferate the IL,
- organization of a more or less massive and more or less temporally protracted campaign in its favour within the host (i.e. resident/receiving) community via what has been termed the processes of ‘internal linguopressure’, which generally results in the organization and establishment of a high supply and corresponding growing demand of the IL in a given host society,
- maintenance (preservation) of the hegemonic position of a given IL within the host community by means of preserving and strengthening the complex and synergistic functioning of the processes of external and internal linguopressure and by finally causing the shifting of allegiance from the HL to the IL (or abandoning the HL) within the host community.

Along with the realization of the above four steps, the process of formation of IL dominance may be regarded as resulting from a self-organizing process which involves the following simple reinforcement mechanism: a ‘winner’ language reinforces its probability of winning the contest, while a ‘loser’ language reinforces its probability of losing the contest in the NaLGA. In addition, it may be assumed that the impact of the

synergistic interplay of external and internal linguopressure on any HL is realized as an index of dominance within the NaLGA which is attached to every natural language. Obviously, the ‘winner’ language, which cannot exist without a loser language, tends to obtain the highest value of the index of dominance on the part of social coalitions formed within the host community.

### 3. Some consequences of overpowering the host language by the invading language

As has been stated above, the most expected outcome of all the pressure processes occurring in the NaLGA is not that of necessarily positioning all natural languages as egalitarian, that is, as ecocratic and adstratal. Rather, since languages are in a more or less fierce competition with one another for attempting to secure sufficient space as a reward for their efforts, they tend to position themselves as either dominant (i.e. aggressive Hawks) or submissive (i.e. Doves) languages in the never-ending Hawk-Dove game played for their survival. Subsequently, owing to inequalities in their overall dominance potential, all natural languages enter a natural language dominance hierarchy (hence abbreviated NaLDH), as well as they demonstrate different ‘ecolinguistic footprints’ within the natural language global arena.

In the present paper, the ecolinguistic footprint is defined as a degree of natural language robustness, in particular with respect to the parameters of: (a) geographical area (i.e. habitat) occupied by a given natural language community, supported by (b) the demographic size of the population of communicators using a particular natural language as the native language (i.e. its linguomass). The two are jointly required to guarantee the autonomous existence of a given natural language in the NaLGA via the entire volume of language (i.e. verbal) and non-language (i.e. non-verbal) resources produced by the particular ethnic-linguistic community which has been using that language. It should be added that the ecolinguistic footprints may form a hierarchy of sizes whereby that of a globalizing language is responsible for overshadowing other languages which is shown below.



**Fig. 2.** The ecolinguistic footprint hierarchy in which the weaker contestants, symbolized by the diminishing sizes of natural language ecolinguistic footprints, are overshadowed by the stronger contestants

It is assumed that the combined effect of placing a given language in an upper position (i.e. superstratal, hegemonic, and despotic/imperialistic) in the NaLDH, while also overshadowing weaker languages by a bigger ecolinguistic footprint, usually triggers a number of visible injustices in contact with other natural languages within the NaLGA. Subsequently, a prolonged effect of the hegemonic-despotic and winner status *vis-à-vis* another (e.g. loser) language may result in noticeable and socially significant changes as regards the perception of various natural languages within the NaLGA. According to experts active in the field of language loss and language revitalization, a ‘winner’ and globalizing language may cause the following injustices to an invaded language:

- it generally acts as a gatekeeper for education, job availability and social mobility,
- it clearly assists in favouring an elitist group which speaks the hegemonic language within the host community,
- it causes many minority languages and cultures to weaken and, in extreme cases, to disappear,
- it prevents many individual communicators within the host community from identifying with their mother tongue,
- it hinders further development of literacy in the mother tongue
- it generally privileges the figure of an IL native communicator,
- it generally weakens the fitness of a given HL as a result of prolonged contact with an IL.

In addition to the above remarks, when an extreme degree of host community language suffering through contact with a dominant language in the NaLGA, that is, language loss is considered, experts in the field of language loss and language revitalization have recognized the following set of losses:

- loss or leveling of previously distinctive regional dialects,
- loss of ancestral lands (habitat) due to colonial pressures and invasive settlements and environmental degradation,
- loss of control over the children’s education within the home community,
- loss of influence over the growth and establishment of children’s socio-cultural values intrinsic to a given home community,
- loss of control over traditional, hereditary and inherited context of family and social customs as integral components of the local cultural heritage, for, as Kouritzin (1999: 169) has stated, “perhaps the most familial consequence of first language loss is the subsequent loss of extended family”,
- erosion and subsequent loss of a rich and diversified body of human knowledge and traditional local spirituality embedded in the deep tradition of the oral culture of a given home community,
- loss of pride in speaking the native language,
- loss of the will to speak the native language,

- loss of the ability to speak and understand the parents' and grandparents' language,
- interruption of the stages of formation of ethnic identity in children, thus making them ethnically ambivalent and leaving them unable to fully realize their ethnic-linguistic identities via the necessary stages of ethnic emergence and ethnic identity incorporation,
- loss of ethnic identity (ethnocide) and the sense of community,
- loss of the socially recognized right to speak the ancestral language,
- all culminating in the loss of the native language (either in the form of gradual language death or 'linguicide') meant as a loss of a unique 'window' on human knowledge and the human mind.

#### 4. Why should we care and what can be done to remedy the situation?

The important question „Why should we care about language loss anyway?” may be asked in light of the fact that today many individuals, especially those representing the industrialized and commercialized world, are of an opinion that the presence of a single language (i.e. a global monolanguage) would be most ideal for doing business the world over as well as for the cultural, educational and political unification of the world's diversified and quarrelsome human population. This dramatically simplified approach should, however, be counterbalanced by the strong expressions of concern over the dismal possibility of replacing all the existing natural languages, large and small, with a global monolanguage, which has been articulated by many of the leading experts in the field of natural language planning, preservation and revitalization. Some of these opinions are reported below. Thus, Cook (2000) has stated the following:

*“Anthropologists bemoan the language massacre, saying that each language is like a soaring cathedral: a thing of beauty, the product of immense creative effort, filled with rich tapestries of knowledge”.*

Wurm (2001: 13), in turn, has expressed his opinion in the following way:

*“Each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. In this, each language is the means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of people, and it remains a reflection of this culture for some time even after the culture which underlies it decays and crumbles, often under the impact of an intrusive, powerful, usually metropolitan, different culture. However, with the death and disappearance of such a language, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view is lost for ever”.*

In addition, Crystal (2000) has presented five salient arguments in favour of expressing our deep concern over the problem of natural language preservation and maintenance. They comprise the following:



- linguistic diversity enriches the human ecosystem in the sense that over 6,800 presently existing languages provide unique models for describing the world,
- since languages are expressions of ethnic identity, a community without its own language is like an organism without a heart,
- the particular natural languages are repositories of the unique histories of the communities that speak them,
- all languages contribute to the sum total of human knowledge and wisdom in the sense that each language provides a unique slant on how the human mind works framed in different ethnobiological conditions,
- languages are interesting subjects in their own right.

Another important question „What can be done to remedy the situation?“ begs a more careful consideration of activities and procedures that should be developed and applied in order to attempt a more systematic treatment of the entire problem of natural language preservation and protection in the natural language global arena. According to Bastardas-Boada (2004), the above depicted situation may be at least partially remedied by realizing the following coarse-grained priorities:

- the global society should stop the abusive uses of the large globalizing languages and thus extend the ecocratic and adstratal (i.e. egalitarian) ideology of linguistic equality and solidarity,
- the global society should work towards attaining a more dignified self-image of weaker languages and language groups,
- the global society should allow weaker languages and language groups to be able to control their own communicative spaces and increase the autonomy of their use in the global public space,
- the global society should join forces in creating and magnifying awareness in local governments, local and international business companies and societies in general concerning the overall importance of sustaining maximum linguistic diversity.

The above list of priorities may be further supplemented by the following set of features which make language diversity a most desirable element of human culture:

- language goes hand in hand with culture and is the basis of a person’s identity. Therefore, local languages go hand in hand with local cultures. Subsequently, if a person loses his/her native language, a significant part of who a given person is vanishes for ever,
- the continued existence of non-globalizing natural languages within the NaLGA enables the local communities to fight against the odds and simply help them to survive in the hostile world of progressing globalization and growing pressure from the few globalizing languages, most notably English, the languages of power, commerce and banalities of globalized popular culture. Therefore the simple question: “Why should the Polish learn Polish?” should meet with the equally simple reply: “Because they are Polish”,

- a given natural language links a given linguistic community back into its cultural heritage. Therefore such a language is a cultural icon and asset that both contribute to the communicators' celebration of their ethnic pride as well as help them in rooting them in their place.

The above priorities and features are the ones that should help us in shaping our understanding of the importance of the issue of natural language preservation as well as influence our preservation practices in the hope that, despite increasing globalization, local languages and local cultures are definitely worth preserving, for they lend richness and diversity to our human world.

By way of presenting some concluding statements, let me first of all quote, after Phillipson (2001: 3), a sentence that can be found on Rasmus Rask's tombstone: "Lær mange sprog men glem ikke dit eget" (*Learn many languages, but do not forget your own*). May this epitaph serve as a vital reminder for all of us communicating in non-globalizing languages. As the final reminder and with regard to the very special case of the presently dominant/hegemonic/despotic/imperialistic position of English in the NaLGA as a globalizing (world) language, let me quote Joshua A. Fishman's (2000) sober statement:

*What is to come of English? It may well gravitate increasingly toward the higher social classes, as those of more modest status turn to regional languages for more modest gains. Or it might become widely disliked as a linguistic bully, even as it is widely learned. Resentment of both the predominance of English and of its tendency to spread along class lines could in the long term provide a check against its further globalization.*

*There is no reason to assume that English will always be necessary, as it is today, for technology, higher education, and social mobility, particularly after its regional rivals experience their own growth spurts. The decline of French has not irreparably harmed art or diplomacy, nor has the similar decline of German harmed the exact sciences. Just because the use of English around the world might drop does not mean the values associated today with its spread must also fade. Ultimately, democracy, international trade, and economic development can flourish in any tongue" (emphasis mine – S.P.).*

The above statements may be used to offer the final conclusion of the present paper, namely that, on the one hand, it is definitely worth the while to preserve various natural languages while, at the same time, the globalizing character of a limited number of natural languages, with English as the presently most powerful instance of such a language, should also be properly appreciated by the global community as long as these languages serve to enable neutral and useful cross-community, cross-ethnic and cross-linguistic communication.

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