

GLOBALIZATION AND THE RISE AND FALL OF LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Among the many effects of globalization, comparatively little attention is given to its impact on languages. This bias reflects a wider orientation to language in general—the popularly held notion that language is just ‘out there’, the means through which humans exchange information—and explains why most people express ambivalence over the fact that upwards of 50% of the planet’s languages will disappear by the end of this century (Nettle and Romaine, 2000). However, languages are deeply-rooted in every human endeavor, from identity formation to theory making. Tracking the destinies of languages and how languages fare in the context of contemporary globalization, their “rise and fall” (Dixon, 1997), is thus a legitimate and essential inquiry. The first part of this paper examines globalization processes that contribute to the rise and spread, and decline and fall of languages.

Less obvious are the effects of globalization on the grammars of languages. While little is known for certain about the origin of languages or their grammars, scholars are beginning to understand how grammars evolve and change over time (e.g., Heine and Kuteva, 2007; Trudgill, 2011). Not surprisingly, their findings often point to social conditions associated with globalization processes. Drawing on the evidence from several languages, the second part of this study will link globalization processes with the emergence or attrition of grammatical systems. Because it is the grammars of languages that are in significant measure responsible for reproducing distinctive cultural world-views, this paper will show how, with the attrition of grammars, cultures are casually slipping into oblivion.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, globalization, language spread, language extinction, grammar.