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.

1 INTRODUCTION

Globalization has a profound effect on languages. Its impact is found at every level: the individual sounds that make up languages, the vocabulary and grammar, text and discourse features, and, of course, the distribution, spread or decline of languages. Indeed, it is fair to say that languages achieve their distinctive cut as much from the shaping processes of globalization as anything else. (For the polar opposite view, see Bickerton, 2007)

But what sense is intended here for 'globalization'? Globalization can refer either to a process or a state. In this paper, I narrow its focus to mean the processes or actions causing the movements of peoples that result in contact between speakers of different speech varieties or languages. This includes farmers expanding their territories in search of arable land, tourists rubbing shoulders with souvenir vendors, or communication links made possible by the Internet. Contact (physical otherwise) among groups of speakers is a very good place to start not only because of the diverse ways that contact impacts languages, but also because of the speed with which dramatic and unanticipated changes can take place.

Focusing on contact between groups brings many advantages. This perspective connects globalization processes with, on the one hand, emerging technologies and infrastructures, and on the other hand, complexification of societies and increasing population sizes. Throughout history, the frequency of contact among speech communities rises as a factor of increasing population size and development of new technologies. This is most obvious today where information technology has enabled us to have multiple simultaneous contacts with speakers of other languages separated in both time and space by great distances. Thus, technologies in this sense would include not only the invention of agricultural implements or infrastructures, but also advances in medicine and public health, and communications technologies that augment the plexity and density of network connections.

Globalization effects can be examined at many scale levels. In this paper, I will consider the large scale effects (a "longue durée" perspective, Ferdinand Braudel, 1958) of language spread (English and Malay), followed by an examination of globalization effects on a local scale on a language spoken in northeastern Queensland, Australia (Dyirbal).

2 THE RISE OF LANGUAGES: ENGLISH AND MALAY

A combination of available technologies and a determination to open up and control new trade routes account for the European ocean voyages beginning in the mid-1400s. These voyages brought Europeans into contact with diverse populations across the planet. In many cases, contact led to colonization in one form or another. One concomitant of these events was the dramatic increase in numbers of people speaking European languages in the colonized territories. European languages were not, however, the only languages to rise; the numbers of speakers of many local languages swelled as well—an outcome of intensifying trade networks or political contingencies that were attendant on European colonization and competition. Languages such as Guarani in Paraguay, Hausa in the Nigeria and neighboring countries, Swahili in east Africa, and Malay in Southeast Asia also increased their speaker numbers and range. Another concomitant of the European voyages was the decline and fall of hundreds of indigenous vernaculars. Two sides of the same coin, the rise and fall of languages will be considered below.

The trajectories of English and Malay illustrate these twin outcomes well. What is fascinating, however, is that they had very different beginnings and rose to prominence at different times for different reasons, duly noted below. Both languages now function *lingua francas* and political languages in at least several countries. Although English is often represented as the language of the imperialist conqueror and Malay as an underdog upstart, both are responsible for the decline and extinction of vernacular languages following on their successes.

2.1 English

English arose from a small outpost in northwestern Europe to become the principle language of science, technology, and international diplomacy. There were between two and three million English speakers in the year 1400. Today, English is the official language of 67 countries, most of them former British colonies, and the primary language for most international political and trade organizations. There are some 380 million native speakers and well over 1.5 billion non-native speakers; around 30% of the world's population have at least some competence in English.

Superior technologies and immunity to crowd diseases (e.g., smallpox, cholera, plague, flu) meant that European intruders from the 15th-19th centuries could easily overwhelm the indigenous populations with whom they came into contact in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Oceania. Although most European powers succeeded in their colonial enterprises, the United Kingdom, and latterly the United States, emerged to a dominant position both economically and politically after the two World Wars. The use of English followed on these successes, and English even came to replace French as a diplomatic language and language of cultural exchange in Europe, further extending its range and functionality throughout the 20th century. A recent example was the Rwandan government's decision in 2008 to abandon French as its official language, to quit La Francophonie and to join the British Commonwealth (Steflja, 2012).

2.2 Malay

Malay began its career in small communities scattered in the eastern regions of Sumatra and along the coastal regions of Kalimantan. Historically, however, its importance lies in its use as a trade language along the Indonesian archipelago and coastal Malaysia. Scholars believe that varieties of Malay have been around for over 1,000 years. (Ostler, 2005).

As with many post-colonial states at the time independence, the Indonesian territorial islands in 1945 encompassed a mosaic of ethnicities and languages. As early as the 1920s, separatist movements had promoted Malay as the language to represent the nation-to-be, and this choice persisted through to the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. Not only is Indonesia unique in, early on, outing the colonial language (in this case, Dutch) but the founders also chose to pass over the Javanese language spoken by 40% of the nation in favor of a language of the bazaar, Malay, spoken natively by fewer 5% of Indonesians at the time of independence (De Swann, 2001). Javanese would have been the most rational candidate for promotion to official language status had it not been for its elaborate system of social markers and language registers reinforcing the rigid social hierarchies within Javanese society.

Today, standardized versions of Malay are the official language of four states: Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia), Malaysia (Bahasa Malaysia), Brunei (Malay), and Singapore (Malay). The total number of first and second-language Malay speakers is estimated to be between 215-250 million (*Ethnologue*: Lewis et. al., 2015). If 80% of the population of Indonesia speaks Bahasa Indonesia as a first or second-language, then in Indonesia alone, there are around 190 million Malay speakers.

2.3 The fall of languages

There is another side to consider following on the spread of English and Malay. As for the European voyages to 'New Worlds', the historical accounts of the marginalization and annihilation of indigenous populations by the European colonists in the Americas and Australia are well documented. In many instances, disease and butchery drove the indigenous populations, their cultures and languages, to extinction. For North America, Golla's (2007) survey gives the pre-Colombian estimate at 312 distinct languages, of which 68 were believed to be extinct by 1930. Fifty-eight have become extinct in the past eighty years, leaving the number of surviving languages in North America today at 169. Of these, 89 languages have fewer than 100 speakers, and not one of these languages is being transmitted to children (Golla, 2007, pp. 1-4). Thus over 50% of the surviving 169 languages are moribund and will be extinct in the coming decades. English and French are the successor languages in North America, replacing indigenous languages and greatly increasing their speaker populations. In Australia, English has all but replaced the estimated 350 Aboriginal languages spoken prior to European contact. Fewer than 150 remain today, and all but 20 are critically endangered. English has disturbed indigenous language ecologies in most other parts of the world.

As for Malay, it is interesting to focus again on its history in Indonesia. Indonesia's choice of Malay (known as Bahasa Indonesian or simply Indonesian) has been regarded as exemplary for the reasons mentioned above (e.g., De Swann, 2001). Whereas fewer than 5% were reported to speak it natively at independence, around 190 million Indonesians speak it today. But its success, unsurprisingly, has been and will continue to be at the expense of the myriad indigenous languages, of which there are some 709 (*Ethnologue*: Lewis et. al., 2015). Of these 709 languages, around 230 have fewer than 2,000 speakers and *Ethnologue* shows that 330 of these are endangered. The government's program to indonesianize the archipelago through transmigration and rigid educational policies, in addition to the effects of urbanization and movements to the larger cities, contribute to undermining the language ecologies. Further complications are as follows:

- "Kramatization" of Malay—a Low and High variety is emerging in Indonesian, an apparent influence of the Javanese language and culture (Paauw, 2009; Yoshimichi, 1992). This development risks compromising the democratization program.
- There are many varieties of Malay. Several of them not inter-intelligible with standard Indonesian, and some groups have adopted these varieties as identity markers. The likely outcome will be resistance to convergence with standard Indonesian.
- In an ironic twist of events, even the big languages of Indonesia are not immune to erosion. One study shows (Andalaar, 2010) how, as a predictable outcome of the spread and influence of Indonesian, the younger generation is not speaking proper Javanese.

3.   GRAMMARS AND GLOBALIZATION

In the previous section, we considered relationships between language contact and technological sophistication in terms of language spread and its effects on minority language groups. Recently, scholars have confirmed that large scale variables relating to social factors also have consequences for level of grammatical complexity in languages. Grammar constitutes the organizing principles of a language. But not only do grammars function to package information into single and multiple propositional units, grammars also code vital cultural and social information.

3.1 Grammars and social variables

Thurston's (1987) work in New Britain, Papua New Guinea, led him to observe two types of language: esoteric languages (grammatically complex languages used for communication within communities) and exoteric languages (less complex languages, including regional lingua francas and pidgins, used for inter-group communication). He noted that languages on the esoteric side of the continuum were often deliberately made to be difficult for adult learners, a process he called esoterogeny, thus securing their value as badges of community identity. Exoteric languages tended to have larger numbers of speakers and were more readily learned by adults. This can be framed in ecological terms as well: esoterogeny can not only account for high levels of linguistic diversity, but also for the perpetuation of languages with small speaker populations situated in areas of high linguistic diversity. The upper layers in the hierarchy of languages in a communication community, in effect, protect the local languages. A process such as esoterogeny would be unsustainable in a competitive ecological environment.

Thurston's esoteric-exoteric language continuum was confirmed in a statistical analysis of 2,236 languages in a study by Lupyan and Dale (2010) using combined demographic and morphological language variables. They showed that languages with smaller speaker populations spoken over smaller areas and having less contact with other language communities have overall more complex morphological systems than languages having larger speaker populations, greater geographical coverage, and greater language contact. Their *Linguistic Niche Hypothesis* provides that "the level of morphological specification is a product of languages adapting to the learning constraints and the unique communicative needs of the speaker population" (2010: 7).

In terms of globalization, we conclude from the above that higher levels of contact among speaker groups bring about overall greater degrees of morphological simplification. Another conclusion to be drawn from the above findings is: we can assume that all languages before widespread contact and the emergence of wide power differentials between groups (that is, in the days before the advent of agriculture and animal domestication) were relatively more complex grammatically than modern standard languages today.

3.2 The case of the Dyirbal language

As interesting as the findings above are, we may wonder at the same time what the correspondences between morphological complexity and social factors mean to the individuals who speak these languages in high contact conditions. In other words, what is going on at the ground level, and what does loss of morphological complexity mean to individuals immersed within the cultures? In terms of the significance of grammar, we must recall what linguist Roman Jakobson (1959) once said: "Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey." In this he captured the insight that the culture itself is encoded in the very organization of, for example, the elaborate noun taxonomies and noun classes, in the idiosyncratic divisions of alienable-inalienable possession, in the verb tense-aspect systems, in geographic coordinate systems—and, crucially, that speakers, in the very grammar they use to shape their every utterance, by virtue of that grammar, obligatorily affirm a unique perspective on the world.

When two languages are present in an unequal power relation, 'language shift' is the expression that sociolinguists use to describe the gradual adoption by speakers of one language over another, typically resulting in the abandonment of the speakers' mother tongue. The common formulation that linguists refer to in this context is the 'three-generation language shift' – in the first generation, the parents are native speakers of their mother-tongue; in the next, their children become bilingual speakers in both their mother tongue and the adopted language; in the third generation, their grandchildren become monolingual speakers in the adopted language.

As smooth as this sounds, it is never a clean and neat transition—rather it is very messy. Speakers do not simply shed one language and take on another, as if putting on a new change of clothes. Apart from psychological and social violence that attend language shift, the processes of simplification, attrition, and relexification set in over time through which the minority language loses bits and pieces of its grammar and replaces its own vocabulary with that of the dominant language. In most cases, the outcome is a total collapse of grammatical and conceptual systems, especially in instances where there is no equivalent replacement for a lost grammatical system such as the binary alienable-inalienable possession found in many North American languages or in instances where vocabulary of the adopted language expressions does not match the conceptual fields of the minority expressions.

These anomalies in grammar, vocabulary, and conceptual coherence come about because, in language shift, the minority language gradually loses both its functionality and contexts of use – the functions and

contexts are overtaken by the dominant language. Another reason is that, because assimilation into the mainstream culture is often coercive, the mother-tongue ceases to be transmitted normally to descendent generations, and subsequently it loses its status, raison d'être, and relevance. Needless to say, language shift occurs under circumstances unfavorable to minority language speakers. The question is, what happens when a language loses its morphological complexity?

An excellent example is provided by Schmidt's (1985) study of the Dyirbal language spoken in northeast Queensland, Australia. Traditional Dyirbal (see Dixon, 1972) provided for four noun classes as in the upper frame of Fig. 1: *bayi* (Class 1), *balan* (Class 2), *balam* (Class 3), and *bala* (Class 4). In normal speech, these noun markers had to be used with the associated nouns classified within the same noun classes as in Fig 1. The *bayi* class included nouns referring to 'male' and all other animate creatures; the *balan* class included all inanimate things, but also nouns relating to 'female'. The third *balam* class included nouns for non-flesh foods, and the *bala* class all other unclassified nouns.

There are several exceptions to the semantic classification outlined above, all of which are related to belief system and environmental circumstances of the Dyirbal people. For example, although Class 2 is for animate creatures, it nonetheless includes all the nouns for birds; the reason for this is that according to a Dyribal belief, birds are the ghosts of dead females, and so are classified under Class 2 'female'. A second example concerns the classification of fish, the majority of which are classified in Class 1 (animate). However, Class 2 comprises all things considered dangerous or harmful, and so there are several species of poisonous fish classified in the *balan* class: stonefish and garfish.

Animate			Inanimate (except women)						Non-flesh food	All else
1 Bayi			2 Balan						3 Balam	4 Bala
male	*animate*	*myth assoc.*	*female*	*fire*	*water*	*fight.*	*myth assoc.*	*danger*	*edible veg. & fruit*	*residue*
man	snake fish kangaroo goanna	moon storm rainbow	woman	fire coals firestick	water river swamp	fighting spears shield	bird sun star	stonefish garfish stinging-nettle	vege. food black-bean.	tree meat mud bees

Twenty years later...

Animate			Women (only)		Inanimate			
1 Bayi			2 Balan	3 Balam	4 Bala			
man snake fish dog	goanna kangaroo firefly platypus	garfish bird stonefish	woman		Veg. food black bean tree rainbow	storm star river shield	moon fire swamp stinging nettle	sun coals water

Fig. 1. Noun class system in Dyribal: traditional Dyirbal (upper frame) and 'young people's Dyirbal' (lower frame). [Adapted from Schmidt, 1985 and Nettle and Romaine, 2000]

Contact and forced assimilation practices, among other things, by the Australian government has resulted in a severe reduction of Dyribal people, their language and culture. Schmidt's 1985 study of Dyirbal shows a greatly degraded grammar and lexis (what Schmidt called "young people's Dyirbal) compared to traditional Dyirbal (as studied by Dixon over 20 years earlier). With respect to the noun class system, as the lower frame in Fig. 1 shows, Schmidt found that the traditional four-way noun class system had be reduced to three, and that the traditional logic of the semantics underlying the system had been shattered. As can be seen, all birds and fish are now classified under Class 1, the animate class, and not Class 2 along with 'female' and 'dangerous things'; Class 2 solely comprises 'female'; Class 3 no longer exists; and Class 4 includes all inanimate things. These dramatic changes that took place in over a mere two decades illustrate

the extent to which Dyribal beliefs and traditional ecological knowledge had been erased from Dyribal grammar.

Schmidt additionally found that the kinship system had lost its coherence. In traditional Dyirbal there were 20 kinship terms, but Schmidt found young people knowing on average only five of them. For example, whereas four words were used to refer to mother's elder and younger brother, and father's elder and younger brother, some young Dyirbal speakers were only using two of the terms interchangeably while others replaced these terms entirely with the English expression *uncle*.

4 CONCLUSIONS

I have briefly considered the effects of globalization processes (here, viewed in terms of contact) on languages and speaker populations. Globalization was treated from two scale levels: from a 'big picture' perspective in terms of the rise and fall of languages; and from a perspective from the ground up, that is, in terms of 'language shift' in the Dyirbal language. At the same time, I showed how the contact events have a profound impact on the grammars of languages, and that, when circumstances cause speakers to adopt another language (commonly, abandonment of an indigenous language and adoption of a mainstream, standard language), the shift involves not only a loss of grammar, but a loss of a coherent world view.

In the epilogue to his wonderful book that explores several of the themes discussed in this paper, Peter Trudgill (2011) writes, "…our observations in this book suggest that the sociolinguistic-typological matrices [i.e., ecologies] within which linguistic changes occur have changed significantly. It would therefore not be totally unreasonable to suppose that, in the future, we are increasingly unlikely ever again to see the development of highly inflectional, fusional language varieties; and that it is increasingly unlikely that we will ever again witness the growth of languages with 80 consonants, or 31 personal pronouns, or seven-term evidential systems" (Trudgill, 2011:188). Trudgill speaks like a person who is taking a last wistful look at a rapidly disappearing world, a world that has found itself tired of its own innovation and will no longer glory in splendor. It is as if Charles Darwin had visited again the entangled bank he writes about at the end of his 1859 book *On The Origin Of Species,* the bank that had caused him to marvel at all the "elaborately constructed forms" of life, and found that the life of the soil, the plants, and animals had exhausted itself and had ceased evolving "endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful" (Darwin 1859:478).

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