

## LANGUAGES IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD

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### Abstract

Scholars have written extensively on the processes and effects of globalization, documenting its many dimensions including economic, political, ecological, cultural, and ideological. That said, there is little found in the published literature on the relationships and interactions between globalization processes and language. This paper will provide new insights into the roles that languages play in today's globalizing world.

In the public mind, there are two predominate scenarios about the roles and outcomes of languages in the globalizing world, and the English language is implicated in each one. In the first, English is spreading everywhere and causing the extinction of the world's languages (e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, Phillipson 1992). In to this scenario, English has been characterized as a weed, a *Tyrannosaurus rex*, the 'killer language' in a language-eat-language world driving the planet to the brink of unprecedented and dangerous uniformativity and conformativity.

The alternative scenario claims that, as the global auxiliary language, English is creating a common standard for communication that will promote greater understanding and transparency among peoples in the realms of trade, international relations, and cultural exchange (e.g., Walker 2009). In this case, English has been characterized as a unifying *lingua franca*, the antidote to the curse of Babel, and a benign facilitator integrating the world diverse cultures within the proverbial Global Village. These parallel but opposing scenarios, the one dystopic, the other utopic, are naïve. The reality is far more complex and far more interesting.

This paper provides a critique of these prevailing scenarios and proposes both a more nuanced perspective on the effects of globalization processes on languages and the roles that languages have to play in the globalizing world. For example, both scenarios assume that languages are definable objects, that languages are discrete and bounded within a horizontal space, that languages are mono-functional, and that there is only room for one language at a time in any given space. However, recent sociolinguistic approaches to languages and communication show otherwise. Drawing on fresh perspectives presented in the research literature (e.g., Blommaert 2010, Jacquemet 2005), this paper will show how globalization processes have not only extended the existing communicative potentials of language, but also how they have created novel interactive niches for the emergence of new styles, genres, and discourses.

**Keywords:** globalization, language shift, English, sociolinguistics, lingua franca.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the public's mind, globalization, has often been conceived as a monolithic force encompassing the whole planet. The idea here is that growing networks of interdependencies among people, their cultures and institutions are attaining more penetrating levels of integration that bind us all together into a single global village, albeit not necessarily a village in which one always gets along with one's neighbors. This vision of globalization, however, masks much of the underlying complexity and processes that often work at cross

purposes. For their part, scholars have identified several central themes in their examination of globalization: globality versus the underlying processes of globalization; the time depth of globalization; and globalization and its manifestations among the world's economies, politics and cultures. While most treatments focus especially on the economic and political dimensions of globalization, it is only recently that scholars have considered the roles that languages have to play in the phenomena that go by the name of 'globalization.'

It goes without saying that language is a uniquely foundational, if underappreciated, capacity in the human experience—so we may wonder why globalization scholars have paid so little attention to language in their discussions. For example, Jan Art Scholte's (2005) widely read text on globalization includes two brief mentions about language: one noting the increasing rates of language extinction (p. 80), the other noting the unfairness inherent in the dominance of Western languages, particularly English in international institutions (p. 377). On the other hand, a good number of books and collections of papers on the subject have been published by linguists over the past ten years. Generally, these treatments focus on two complementary themes in which it is claimed that between 50%-90% of the world's languages will be extinct within this century (Hale 1992, Nettle and Romaine 2000), and that the spread of English is the underlying cause of the language extinction crisis (e.g., Phillipson 1992, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). A third theme frequently voiced in public forums reflects the popular view (especially among anglophone speakers) that the emergence of English as a global *lingua franca* is "arguably worth celebrating" (Miller 2002) and that, "English represents hope for a better future—a future where the world has a common language to solve its common problems" (Walker 2009). What are we to make of these claims and pronouncements? This paper will try throw some light on these issues and contribute fresh perspectives to the discussion on languages and globalization.

## 2. EFFECTS OF PAST GLOBALIZATIONS

I will use Steger's (2013) definition: "Globalization refers to the expansion and intensification of social relations and consciousness across world-time and world-space" (p. 15). Taken in this sense, and in the general spirit of many commentators, we may, as Steger and others have suggested, claim that there have been several major globalization events throughout human history (as in Table 1 below), and that what we see at work today is either, (a) a continuation of what has been going on for a long time with no differences in kind or spirit across historical time or, (b) that there are qualitative differences today that set recent events apart from past globalizations.

Table 1. Five phases in globalization (adapted from Steger 2013, pp. 20-36)

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prehistoric period: 10,000 BCE – 3500 BCE (from agriculture and settlement, to empire)</li> <li>2. Pre-modern period: 3500 BCE – 1500 CE (from empire, to the beginning of European colonization)</li> <li>3. Early modern period: 1500 – 1750 (from European colonization, to the establishment of the nation-state)</li> <li>4. Modern period: 1750 – 1980 (from the nation-state, to the beginning of information technology (IT) and the communications revolution)</li> <li>5. Contemporary period: 1980 – the present (from the beginning of the IT industry and the communications revolution, to the present time)</li> </ol> |
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Corresponding to the five phases above in Table 1, we can say that on the whole, human social organization has undergone significant transformations in tandem with these globalization events. We can also say that the societal organization has steadily complexified over time, from band, to tribe, to chiefdom, to state (Diamond 1999)—both as a cause of and a response to these transformations.

Now, in recognition of these several globalizations in history, we might begin by asking the question, What has been the effect of each of these events on the languages of the day? Or better yet, in order to put language in a reciprocal relation to these globalization events: How have these events impacted language? and, How have languages impacted these events?

Up to now, scholars have provided answers to these questions by referring to the following major processes that are each implicated in one or more of the globalization events listed above: language spread, language speciation (the splitting of languages resulting in the emergence of new speech varieties), language assimilation, language shift, language attrition, and language extinction. Nothing, however, is said about the impact of globalization events on the grammar of languages. No effects have ever been suggested in globalization studies on the impacts of globalization on the very structures of languages themselves apart from those resulting from language contact (i.e., pidginization and Creolization). But this is precisely the claim that I want to put forward here. In M.A.K. Halliday's (1992) words, "The history of language is a part of human history; it is not some mysterious surrogate process that goes bubbling along on its own. Thus major upheavals in human history are also linguistic upheavals." Recent studies confirm Halliday's constructivist

theoretical orientation, and have showed how morphology and syntax have adapted to new social and communicative needs or conditions. Four such studies are outlined below.

- Thurston (1987) – His extensive ethnographic field work on the languages of New Britain (Papua New Guinea) led him to draw a distinction between two types of languages: esoteric and exoteric. Esoteric languages functioned as vernaculars and were particularly used emblematically by communities for purposes of identity; by contrast exoteric languages functioned as regional *lingua francas*. Esoteric languages exhibited great structural complexity (greater irregularity and less transparency) making them extremely difficult for adults to learn, and ideal badges of cultural identification, whereas the exoteric languages had far simpler grammars (greater regularity and transparency).
- Perkins (1992) – His analysis of 50 languages drew a correlation between complexity of political organization (from band, tribe, chieftain, empire, to nation-state) and morphological complexity. His results showed that greater complexity in political organization is correlated with less complex morphology in languages.
- Deutscher (2000) – His analysis of Akkadian texts stretching from 2500 BC to 500 BC shows how, in response to new communicative demands for greater clarity and transparency, finite complementation, a form of syntactic recursion, emerged in identifiable stages in the written grammar.
- Lupyán and Dale (2011) – In a statistical analysis of 2,236 languages combining demographic and morphological 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* proposes 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” (Lupyán and Dale 2010, p.7).

Several considerations are at work here that can be summarized as follows: language structures (morphology and syntax) are adaptational in respect to the communicative needs of speakers, the relative size of the communication communities, and the level of contact with outside speakers. The pattern that emerges is that the smaller vernacular languages function effectively as identification markers because of their structural complexity and are extremely difficult for adults to learn; whereas languages that have experienced greater contact (such as being *lingua francas*) have comparatively simpler grammars and are relatively easy for adults to learn.

These findings may seem, at first sight, of little note. But, in fact, the opposite is true. Leading on from the above conclusions, it cannot escape our notice that such tinkering with the inner workings of language may have a consequent effect on the perceptions and attentional orientations of the speakers. After all, as Jakobson (1959) famously said, “Languages differ essentially in what they *must* convey and not in what they *may* convey.” He captures the insight that world views of speakers are encoded in the very organization of elaborate noun taxonomies and noun classes, in the idiosyncratic divisions in alienable-inalienable possession, in verb tense-aspect systems, in unique geographic coordinate systems—and, crucially, that speakers, in the very grammar they use to shape their every utterance, obligatorily affirm a unique perspective on the world. Just so. Recent work by Lera Boroditsky and her colleagues (e.g., Boroditsky & Gaby 2010, Fausey & Boroditsky 2010) has been demonstrating causal links between such features as grammatical gender, spatial and temporal deixis, and agentivity on the one hand, and the perceptual processes, attentional orientation, and the attitudes and judgments of speakers, on the other – in short, studies showing that the languages we speak influence in non-trivial ways how we construe and behave in the world.

To conclude this section, until recently there has been a widely-held misconception that language structures are fixed and have no practical inter-reactivity with history—in this context understood as globalization events. In contradiction of this established notion, recent studies are confirming that languages are protean and adaptational phenomena that are responsive to shifting social and functional circumstances. By virtue of the complexification of human social and political institutions over time, globalization processes have expanded the grammatical repertoires of languages, opening up novel discourse styles and novel orientations on the world.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR A POST-MODERNIST GLOBALIZATION

Global cities today such as London, New York, Shanghai, Istanbul, and Tokyo are major centers of multicultural and multilingual contact, friction, competition, conflict, and, on occasion, cooperation. Recent migrations into these massive metropolitan urbanizations have many origins: refugees from political repression, ‘guest’ workers, economic migrants escaping poverty and social instability, post-colonial migrations to the ‘mother country’, expatriate employment, and free-flow movements of peoples across soft

borders within supranational entities such as the European Union. These movements are also coincident with the demise of the Soviet Union and the rise in economic prominence of the BRICs countries. Additionally, human social space has been transformed by novel forms of interaction made possible by the innovations in communications technology (Skype, You Tube) and the advent of social network services (Facebook, Twitter, Line). Thus from both demographic and social interactionist perspectives, among others, these urban spaces today are differently constituted than the cities of the early to late-20<sup>th</sup> century.

Addressing these challenges, scholars such as Blommaert (2010, 2013) and Jacquemet (2005) have pioneered fresh perspectives in sociolinguistics that attempt to take account of these new underlying realities. And in so doing, they have developed conceptual tools that have turned the traditional sociolinguistic orientation on its head. In particular, Blommaert injects a fresh taxonomy of social space into research efforts that forces us to question the whole sociolinguistic enterprise, problematizing traditional treatments of space, time, language, power, and communication.

Blommaert's innovative analysis of globalized space such as the inner city neighborhood Berchem in Antwerp (Blommaert 2013) provides a contrast between the tradition-bound sociolinguistics of distribution and a contemporary sociolinguistics of mobility. In the traditional orientation, we find 'languages' or 'dialects' existing across a stable and bounded horizontal space in a single time-frame. Within these spaces, vertical stratification is possible in terms of social class, status, gender and age, but this offering largely remains a "snapshot" fixed in synchronic time. Language is treated as a countable object usually reduced to its structure, vocabulary, and pronunciation; the latter linguistic variables are objectified and indexed over a restricted, horizontal two-dimensional plane. In this orientation, 'language' is "sedentary and territorialized" (Blommaert 2010) much as was the notion of 'sovereignty' in the Westphalian conception of the nation-state.

In the sociolinguistics of mobility, on the other hand, foundational notions and assumptions free up the analysis of social space to create new dimensions and potentials. The sociolinguistics of mobility focuses on languages-in-motion according to which languages are "linguistically defined resources" (Blommaert 2010) rather than objectified, bounded and countable objects. Languages are not found "in-place" so much as they are "within sociotemporal frames interacting with one another" (Blommaert 2010). The frames are understood as "scales"—that is, patterns that are organized on different vertical levels. And rather than sedentary or territorialized language use, the sociolinguistics of mobility puts the emphasis on translocal and deterritorialized forms of language use. We are concerned here with linguistic repertoires (which include truncated language, language fragments), language hybridization, transidiomatic practices, linguistic superdiversity, and strategies such as code-switching and language mixing. And because speech repertoires are treated as resources, there are power differentials to be accounted for, as these resources are unevenly distributed across space (e.g., is 'English' a unitary speech variety, and is it spread evenly across speakers the world over?) and time: one speech variety or speech repertoire may be valued in one context or on one occasion, but worthless in another.

These newly minted analytical tools and perspectives, such as the above, are responses to today's globalized cultural and linguistic environments as exemplified by global cities. With these new tools come accounts of new types of discourse, genre, and style that have evolved out of post-modernist globalization conditions.

On another front, Tsitsipis (2003) has developed an ideologically-based framework that problematizes several processes that have otherwise been treated from a more-or-less neutral standpoint in the sociolinguistic literature. This framework was developed to explicate the disappearance of "Arvanitika discourse in modern Greece", a typical situation across the planet where languages in contact compete for speakers, domain use, and functionality. Usually, it is the more powerful variety (backed by demographic, or economic, or political or cultural, or military superiority) that wins. Tsitsipis (2005) proposes four phases to describe the subtle transformations that take place in the process that he refers to as "progressive erasure." In this process, speakers move away from the sociologically healthy condition where a people in a multilingual shared space speak their respective languages as more-or-less equals, to where one group has seemingly given up its language in key domains and functions, and eventually, as time passes, the group does not use their language at all—just because 'it isn't done' or 'no one thinks about it any more,' meaning, that everyone, including the speakers of the much diminished local language, have accepted as the unstated norm that speaking their language is no longer, or simply not, appropriate behavior. (This scenario has been repeated countless times over the past centuries, especially in the major developed countries.) The four phases in the process are fragmentation, marginalization, sublimation, and subordination.

In the fragmentation phase of "progressive erasure", over time the functions of a local minority languages are diminished. For example, all official, formal or educational functions would be taken over by the dominant language. Use of the local language will be limited to the home or the market. In meantime, children are taught the dominant language and become bilingual. Their children, in turn, become monolingual in the dominant language. Eventually only the elderly are native speakers of the local language. The second

phase, marginalization, is the result of severe fragmentation. As more and more functions are taken over by the dominant language, the local language is marginalized in the sense that it slowly loses relevance—it is used less and less. All speakers assume, for example, that local language speakers will accommodate themselves to dominant language speakers by speaking in the dominant language. In the sublimation stage, the local language is decontextualized from its familiar (“unmarked”) functions. As a result, what was formerly regarded as ‘normal’ use of language and language behavior is now regarded as unusual or strange. In the last phase, that of subordination, the situation in which local communities can no longer question the hegemony or imposition of the dominant community language and culture. As Heinrich (2005) put it in his application of the progressive erasure framework to the Ryukuan context in Japan, “subordination is the point of no return”—for all practical purposes, the local language has been erased from the linguascape.

Most insidiously, the effects at each point in the progressive erasure process are co-opted by the dominating culture to justify the gradual diminishing relevance of the local language in public discourse. What is significant for this discussion is how Tsitsipis’ framework unmasks the politically loaded psychological dispositions that underpin the presumed ideologically neutral sociolinguistic processes such as language spread, language shift, language assimilation, language attrition, and language extinction. When understood from the point of view of progressive erasure in which the victims become unwitting agents in their own culture’s demise, these sociolinguistic processes suddenly acquire the status of ideological weapons deployed to remove the fly in the ointment.

#### 4. ON ENDANGERED LANGUAGES, GLOBAL ENGLISH, AND ENGLISHES

But what of the extinction of less powerful languages and the putative role of ‘Global English’ in eliminating them? The fact is, in the past several hundred years, there have been both a greater number of languages suffering the effects of attrition as speakers shift to dominant (but not always European) languages, and a greater number of languages disappearing than ever before in human history (Nettle and Romaine 2000). The current rates exceed by some orders of magnitude the estimated background extinction rates for languages in the past (Sutherland 2003). And *contra* Mufwene (2010) and those who choose to understate the great loss of cultures and languages that have disappeared as a result of European settlement colonialism in the Americas and Australia, and who insist, at the same time, that language diversity is replenished by new speciation events (such as, in its time, the emergence of Romance languages out of their respective Vulgar Latins; or the creation of the many Creole varieties that followed on various, principally European, colonizations; or the evidence today of the indigenizing Englishes across the globe), *contra* Mufwene (2010), the number of new varieties that have emerged does not come close to the number of languages lost since the 1500s. In any case, Mufwene’s claim misses the more crucial point that it isn’t just the numbers of extinct languages *qua* languages that we should be concerned about, but it is instead the loss of the layer upon layer of meanings, behaviors, beliefs, and unique accommodations to biogeographical and cultural environments amounting to peoples’ cultures (of which languages are representative) that should especially concern us—not to mention the loss of dignity and social well-being to the speakers themselves. Once lost, these immense cultural edifices are irretrievable.

As for the spread of English, it is understood that there are today, for example, more young people around the planet studying English as a second language than ever before. Two recent events in particular have done much to promote English as a world *lingua franca*: the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s that led to the shift from the study of Russian as a favored second language in the former Soviet republics to the study of English; and the emergence of China as an economic power which has resulted in foreign-language education policies that mandate English language studies in the curriculum. It is true that English has greater reach in terms of geographical distribution, greater connectivity in terms of numbers of second-language English speakers and diversity of first-language backgrounds, and it is used in more domains and for more functions than any other *lingua franca* in the past, for example, Latin or French. Thus we may say that English, for the time being, is the world’s most widespread *lingua franca*.

Is it correct to refer to a Global English (as has Crystal 2003, among others)? There are many problems with this expression. It suggests that there is one standard variety identified as such, and there isn’t. There are many kinds of standard Englishes (e.g., American English, British English) and non-standard English varieties (e.g., Black American English) and English-based Creoles (e.g., Sranan Tongo in Suriname, Bislama in Vanuatu). Certain of these speech varieties have higher symbolic capital or greater prestige associated with them than others, and there are also difficulties of mutual intelligibility among English varieties. Another problem is that the expression also suggests that English is spread evenly across speakers around the world, and it isn’t. The distribution of English is asymmetrical, and so there are regions where it is common to hear English (many parts of India) and regions where it is not (Japan). There are regions around the world where access to learning English is limited or costly (e.g., parts of South America

or Southeast Asia), or where it makes more sense to spend one's time learning a regional *lingua franca* instead of English (see below) in order to increase one's opportunities for employment or access to goods and services. So English isn't 'globalized' in the sense of being evenly spread, and there isn't a Global English, in the sense of there being a global standard variety.

Given the above, we want to ask if 'English' replacing local languages? Certainly not in the former Soviet Republics or China. But this is clearly the case in most Native American communities in North America and among the Aboriginal populations in Australia. Decades if not centuries of decimation and marginalization have ensured that the great majority of these languages will no longer be spoken after this century. But in other parts of the world, in Central and South America, in Africa and Southeast Asia, it is highly doubtful that English is replacing local languages. Instead, it is the more powerful regional *lingua francas* (such as Wolof, Hausa or Swahili in Africa) or national languages (such as Portuguese in Brazil, and Malaysian, Indonesian, or Thai in Southeast Asia) that lure speakers away from their vernacular languages. The circumstances of languages within regions across the world is very complex, and the ecological conditions vary widely from region to region and country to country. Thus, although English is spreading, it is nonetheless specious to claim that English is spreading at a cost to local languages or that it is the prime driver behind language extinction today. Clearly there are many factors to consider, including English, in any discussion about the extinction of languages.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a new dimension in the relationship between globalization processes and languages. Linguists and globalization scholars have overlooked the interactive effects of changing social organization and communicative need on the morphology and syntax of languages over time. These processes should be further investigated to determine the extent that such "crypto-grammatic" (Halliday 1992) adaptations affect speakers' attentional orientation, influence their attitudes, and predispose them to a set pattern of behaviors. We have also surveyed new sociolinguistic perspectives for today's globalized spaces and proposed ideologically-based treatments of concepts such as language shift. We also addressed the question of the role of English in language extinction today and concluded that English, although clearly to be accounted in many ecologies world-wide, is not the driving force behind the death of languages.

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