

# English as a Global Language: Threat or Opportunity for Minority Languages

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**Abstract:** This essay mainly discusses the influence and interaction of English as a global language on other weak and minority languages in the world. However, globalization is not equal to uniformity. All countries should put forward necessary protection measures for the inheritance and development of their own languages and cultures, so as to make contributions to the harmonious international multi-language environment and the splendid history of human civilization.

**Keywords:** English; global language; Minority language; Language shift

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There are 7,115 living languages in the world; among them about 2,845 languages are now endangered, often with fewer than 1,000 speakers (Ethnologue, 2019). Why are more and more languages facing extinction? Is it related to English? With the rapid development of economic globalisation, a common language is widely needed. English's status encourages people to adopt it as the language in global context because English has not only the highest status in the language policy of many countries, but also arguably the most important language in international affairs, for example, English is not only one of the six working languages of the United Nations but also the working language of most international and regional organizations and agencies. English belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Germanic family of Indo-European languages. It has developed more than 1,500 years since its formation in the 6th century, while it has been a complete and standardized language system for only over 200 years (Viney, 2008, p.14). English has become the most widely used language in the world.

Since discussion of language, terms such as 'majority' and 'minority' are usually prominent. Hence, it is necessary to define what a minority language is. Some background is certainly important here. For example, is French a minority language in Canada? It depends on the geographic perspectives - provincial, regional, continental. Grenoble and Singerman (2014) demonstrate that the term "minority language" has a natural but problematic definition, because in the most direct sense, a minority language refers to a language used by less than 50% of the population in a region, state or country. The key criterion here is the number of people who speak the language in a given geographic setting: a language may be a minority language in one region or state, but a majority language in another. Furthermore, The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1998 quoted in Laruelle, Navarro, and Escobedo, 2019) seeks to ensure respect for the protection and promotion of regional and minority languages in Europe. It defines a regional or minority language as 'the language traditionally spoken in a particular territory by the nationals of a state who constitute a group less numerous than the rest of the population of the state'. It means that minority languages are not necessarily endangered.

According to Aitchison (2001, quoted in Pecnikova and Slatinska, 2019, p.49), a language stops when there is no people speaking it anymore. There are many possible factors which cause language death. Changes in the natural or cultural environment can create an ecosystem which cannot survive. For example, a natural disaster such as a flood or earthquake can wipe out all speakers. In addition to the extinction of populations, languages can also die when overwhelmed by more powerful cultures. When it happens, the sequence of events affecting the endangered language appears to fall into three stages: at first, because of political, social or economic pressures, people need to speak the dominant language; furthermore, it came the bilingual period, when people were able to master the new language while retaining the ability to speak the old one; finally, bilingualism usually declines quickly, eventually leading to a younger generation becoming proficient in the new language, identifying with the new language, and finding that the old language does not

meet their needs.

In case of the Irish of the Republic of Ireland, the Irish language almost disappeared because of a combination of environmental, economic, cultural and political factors (Pecnikova and Slatinska, 2019, p.48). Aitchison discusses that 'Language is triggered by social needs.' It means that language can easily disappear if it is useless for a community without any social purpose. That is what happened in the Republic of Ireland. People began to use English widely in their daily lives, both in public places and at home. Because compared with the more superior English, Irish is considered inferior and poor in Republic of Ireland. These events led to an almost fundamental shift in the language. Furthermore, the usage of English enables individuals to obtain more opportunities to improve their living standards and have higher pursuit in work. These events led to an almost fundamental shift in the language. Therefore, English as a dominant language is not the main reason to threaten the existence of a minority language. Crystal (2002, quoted in Majidi, p.35) states that the biggest reason is 'language shift', which gradually leads to the death of languages.

According to Kandler, Unger and Steele (2010, p.3855) 'Language shift' refers to the process by which members of a community who speak more than one language abandon their native language for another. Moreover, Fishman (1991, quoted in Majidi, p.36) analyzes that 'language shift' happens in speech communities. He explains that the mother tongue of language communities is threatened because the native language usage of their descendants is proceeding in a negative way, with each generation having fewer speakers (Fishman, 1991, quoted in Majidi, p.36). Thus, as the definitions of language shift, a language cannot shift to a new language unless people are able to speak another language. This essay analyzes the reasons influencing the shift of minority languages from the following four aspects.

Firstly, with the remarkable development of economic globalization, English is urgently needed by people, especially, who want to get good jobs. Therefore, socioeconomic factors are the main factors of language shift in minority languages. According to Paulston (1988, p.5, quoted in Majidi, 2013, p.38), language shift only take place 'social prestige and economic advantage, primarily in the form of source of income.' Moreover, finding a good job is the most obvious economic reason to learn another language because learning a new language is good for career development. Many parents want their children to learn a new language which is widely used in business in order to get good jobs in the future. However, they don't realize it's a threat to their language. When job seekers find that English proficiency is in high demand in many industries, they are willing to arm themselves with English, because good English skills can earn high salaries. In a case of 'immigration', when many people who speak minority languages as their native languages, live in a majority language background, they will be eager to master the majority language to improve their status in society and have little chance to speak their own language. For example, people (immigrants) who want to work in Australia must pass an English language test to be eligible for a job (Majidi, 2013, p.39). This shows that many people choose to learn English in order to be eligible to work in Australia. Hence, in these cases, socioeconomic pressures push people to learn English, which leads to a gradual shift in their own language.

Secondly, population factors will promote language shift, and urbanization is an essential factor on language shift. According to Holmes (2001, p.59), rural areas have resisted language shift for longer than urban areas because people in rural areas are far from political and economic centers, they can meet most of their living and economic needs in minority languages. However, a data (Sciencedaily, 2019) shows 'by 2050 it is predicted that 64.1% and 85.9% of the developing and developed world respectively will be urbanized.' The most obvious feature of urbanization is population mobility, which creates opportunities for people from different languages and cultures to interact with each other. As a result of these changes, some features of local languages and cultures have an impact on the wider language and culture, such as the absorption of one culture by a more dominant one. For example, in New Zealand, the Maori people live in relatively remote rural areas. In these communities, native speakers of Maori communicate in this language at home and on the streets. In spite of in formal speaking events, they also use Maori. Before the televisions widespread, Maori people only used English when they were learning English in school. With the advent of urbanization, English has appeared in every household television, church, shop, conference and even bar. Benton (1998, quoted in Holmes, 2001, p.60), who has investigated the use of Maori in New Zealand, concludes that, even in remote areas, the Maori language is now spoken only by consenting adults. Ishtiaq (1999, p.108) shows that the more urbanized a region is, the faster its language is shifted because in order to survive, people worked hard to learn new languages, which lead to lost their group identity and traditional culture, including language easily. However, although studies have shown that urbanization is one of the factors of language shifts, this does not apply to everyone who moves from the countryside to the city, because individual language choices play an important role. These individual differences may help people to retain their first language.

Thirdly, the values of a language and people's attitudes are also important reasons for language shift and maintenance. The

attitude of people towards the language is very important, which language they choose to speak or give up. Holmes (2001, p.61) indicates that in areas where minority languages are highly valued, language shift occurs more slowly. When language is seen as an important symbol of racial identity, it usually lasts longer. It shows that people's positive attitudes and support for their own language can help them resist external pressure and keep their language maintenance. According to Crystal (2002, p.86), 'language suicide is used to describe how people's attitudes and values towards their language kill that language'. Those who want to pass on their language will create more opportunities for future generations to expose their children to their own language, such as, reading publications in their mother tongue and holding regular meetings. In this case, English as a global language, to a certain extent, threatens their language, but people can also use English to promote their own language and culture. Therefore, attitude plays a crucial role in language shift.

Therefore, from the perspective of language shift factors, English as a global language has both threats and opportunities for minority languages. The shift and death of languages can affect the diversity of languages which is not only the basis for maintaining the ecological balance of languages, but also the precondition for the continuation of culture (Qin, 2012, p.125). Furthermore, it also means the continuous development of the world's multi-national culture. However, the extinction of minority languages means the disappearance of rich historical and cultural heritage and cultural wealth for reference and learning. Therefore, protecting minority languages is of importance. When people enjoy their own language, the language will bring more benefits to the users, because Pecnikova and Slatinaska (2019, p.51) indicates that speaking their own language is likely to generate creativity and good feelings.

Due to the combined effects of the various factors mentioned above, the bilingual stage in the language shift process has long or short periods, and the speed of language shift is fast or slow. In an environment conducive to the use of the native language, the retention of the native language can last for a considerable period of time. This shows that the trend of language use and the growth and decline of language functions are not completely unpredictable. It has certain humanism, such as, the positive subjective wills of language groups, affirmative language attitudes, more opportunities for language use, favorable social environment and atmosphere, and effective language policies. Those can promote the survival and maintenance of the native language.

Consequently, If the language is actively used, it is a sign of a vibrant language. If a language is guaranteed to be passed on from generation to generation, its future is bright. In multicultural world, it's beneficial to speak different languages. It's like a bridge connecting different cultures and identities. It's also a way for us to broaden our horizons. Indeed, English as a global language poses a threat to minority languages to some extent. But it also, to a certain extent, provides an opportunity for minority languages. From the above analysis, we can see that the extinction of one language is not only due to the oppression of another language. Therefore, as a global language, English is a double-edged sword for minority languages. All languages deserve to be respected because language and culture complement each other and they are part of the cultural diversity of the world. Minority languages should be promoted more among ordinary local residents to maintain languages use. Moreover, people who speak minority languages need to deal with the globalization of English objectively. For example, people need to face up to the conveniences of mastering English. They cannot take it for granted that learning English is good, nor can they give a complete exclusion and rejection to English learning. People of ethnic minorities not only need to use it to expand foreign exchanges; they also need to use it to spread their excellent national culture to the world.

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