

## THE LANGUAGE IN THE PROCESSES OF GLOBALIZATION

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**Abstract:** *We live in a globalized world. For some decades now there has been economic, cultural and social integration throughout our planet, although the impact is, on each area, of different scope. Unification of markets, free movement of people, goods and ideas are just some of the consequences deriving from this phenomenon that, like it or not, has invested the world towards the end of the 1900s and is constantly growing, unstoppable. The debate is open and today more heated than ever: rivers of words and ink are poured to criticize the economic inequalities and cultural homologation caused by globalization; likewise the easier international integration, the economic and social freedoms that it inevitably brings with it are praised. The weakening of local cultures creates the conditions for homogenization without integration, characterized by strong socio-economic and cultural differences, which leads to mass migrations towards "valuable citizenships" (Bauman, 1998). The processes of political and economic integration, the formation of multicultural and multilingual societies and the emergence of a new global awareness determine important changes in culture and thought in a world in which distances and differences tend to be less and less perceptible.*

**Keywords:** *globalization; languages; extinction*

### 1. GLOBALIZATION AND LINGUISTIC APPROVAL

An aspect that is less frequently considered when we speak of globalization is the impact that this phenomenon has on language; on those languages, in particular, "weaker", known and spoken only by small or very small groups of individuals who, giving way to the great giants of the global market, risk, generation after generation, to disappear forever. These are unfortunately not only groundless fears: a recent study by the University of Cambridge revealed that there is indeed a relationship between the economic development of an area and the disappearance of so-called minority languages within that specific territory.

There are three risk factors identified as the most dangerous: the small size of the reference population (a small number of 'speakers'), the small size of the geographical area in which the language is (or was) widespread, the change within the population (change, of course, in linguistic use, to the detriment of the minority idiom).

Starting from these considerations, a correlation between the levels of Gross Domestic Product, GDP (Domestic Wholesale Products) and the probability of losing the linguistic identity was identified: the faster the economic development, the faster the disappearance of the variety will also

be native linguistics. This is mainly due to pragmatic factors: the languages related to finance and commerce (English, Arabic, Mandarin Chinese), tend to spread widely in countries with developing economies whose populations are enticed and - at the same time - forced to learn them and talk to them so as not to be excluded from the working world. But in reality the question is even more complex than that. The economic factor, in fact, could only be part of the problem: the disappearance of minority languages is also linked to cultural factors.

Another study, conducted this time by the linguists of the University of Chicago, revealed that the economically most powerful regions, those that contribute to "driving" global trade and production, tend to impose their hegemony also on the culture of the most important countries weak that slowly homologate to a model imposed on them from above, losing their cultural and linguistic identity.

According to UNESCO (2017),

languages are threatened by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural or educational subjugation, or by internal forces such as the negative attitude of the community towards their own language.

This phenomenon is perfectly reflected in the concept of 'soft power' introduced by the American political scientist Joseph Nye already in the 1980s: he defines it as the capacity of a country to push others to do what it wants without the use of force or coercion, shaping, over the years, their habits, preferences, their tastes (see Nye jr, 1990:153-171).

It is appropriate to provide some more detailed data to understand the actual extent and severity of this phenomenon. Currently there are at least 7,102 languages spoken all over the world, divided unevenly between the different continents: in the first places there are Asia and Africa, with more than 2,000 idioms each, followed by Oceania and the Americas, with about 1,000 languages each. Europe closes the rankings, where "just" 286 different languages are spoken. Out of the 7.2 billion people that populate our planet, 2/3 speak only 12 (Chinese, Hindi and English are on the podium) of over 7,000 existing languages.

The data, collected during a fortnightly study conducted by Ulrich Ammon (2015), a linguist professor at the University of Düsseldorf, refer to native speakers of a certain language, and also include bilingual individuals. The research continues, showing that English is the "most popular", most spoken and most studied (from 1.5 billion people) idiom in foreign countries, as it is more often used as a language for official international communication. Although the numbers are impressive, so far no surprise: the fundamental role that the English language plays at world level is well known.

Instead, the most shocking information emerges when we look at other minority languages, excluded from the global stage: about 3% of the population of our planet preserves the knowledge of 96% of the languages still existing. About 2,000 languages have less than 1,000 native speakers. It is easy to imagine how, soon, these languages are destined to disappear. The current rhythm is 25 idioms per year which, as they die, take away the culture, traditions and literature of the populations that generated them: at this rate by 2100 the world will have lost 3500 of the idioms that currently they talk.

The areas considered most at risk of others are northern Australia, central South America, the North American coastal zone of the northern Pacific, eastern Siberia, the southwestern part of the United States, in addition to the tropics, the regions of the Himalayas, Brazil and Nepal, which are rapidly growing economically. Among the most incredible examples we find, for example,

Quechua, spoken in the Andean region, which has been slowly supplanted by Spanish and Portuguese, the official languages, which are spoken at school, in offices, are used in newspapers, magazines, road signs. There are very few, perhaps less than ten, (this number dates back to 2014, today it could be drastically decreased) the people in Arizona who speak chemehuevi, the language of the Indian tribe to which they belong.

Italy is also at risk. Considered by scholars and linguists as one of the countries with the greatest variety and linguistic richness, in the coming decades it could lose this primacy: the Cimbrian, the Sardinian, the Friulian, the Ladin, are just some of the dozen minority languages in our country, speak, currently by 4 million people.

Finally, among the causes of the disappearance of minor linguistic truths it is inevitable to also include the Internet, a world that, although on the one hand favors the inclusion and contact between languages, cultures, the most disparate, distant and radically different people among them, on the other hand, it uses, in fact, few hegemonic idioms (first of all English), excluding a priori who is not able to master them and thus forcing the populations to abandon their mother tongue to avoid being cut off from these communication circuits.

This phenomenon takes the name of digital divide, and is very vast, much more dangerous than we could imagine. To be at risk of extinction are not, as we might think, the dialects of small communities, but of the real national languages of European countries.

A Meta-Net research (Multilingual Europe Technology Alliance), a European network involving about sixty linguistic research centers in 34 European countries, has reported that, due to the poor representation at digital level, languages such as Icelandic, the Latvian, Lithuanian and Maltese but also Hungarian, Polish, Greek and Bulgarian are gradually weakening and are destined to disappear. Natural languages undergo profound mutations under the impact of telecommunications: languages mix, words and expressions are exchanged, but at the same time more powerful languages tend to impose themselves on weaker ones.

Historically there have already been great linguistic empires: from the Latin of the Roman Empire, survived in religion and culture for many centuries, to Arabic or colonial English. The same applies to writing systems: think of the spread of the Latin alphabet which on the other hand has adopted the numbering system from the Arabs, but also to the success of Chinese ideographic writing, capable of overcoming linguistic differences.

Recently in Germany a drastic simplification of German spelling has been introduced to facilitate its use and dissemination. A fact like this must make us think of those who consider language as an immutable heritage to be protected.

Some believe that the extinction of languages is part of the progress of humanity, that it is a natural and inevitable phenomenon, and that any attempt to stop it would be impossible and useless. But, says Mark Turin, an anthropologist from Yale University

[...] we spend huge amounts of money to protect animal species and biodiversity, so why shouldn't the one thing that really makes us human be nourished and protected in the same way? (*apud* Nuwer, 2014)

Languages are part of the heritage of humanity and contain within them real fragments of culture (songs, poems, stories) that, not always kept in written form, are lost forever with the disappearance of the language.

Some languages also represent precious gems in themselves, due to the unique meanings that only they contain. The Cherokee, an idiom spoken by a native North American people, has a word ("oo-kah-huh-sdee") to express the feeling of tenderness and sweetness that pervades us when we see a small, adorable kitten. Moreover, the Cherokee does not have a word to say 'goodbye', but only 'goodbye'.

Each language is a different filter through which we can analyze human behavior, feelings and emotions. Each word contains different shades of meaning that allows us to interpret the world differently than we have always imagined. For this reason, although the weakening of minority languages is indeed an inevitable process, it is advisable to move as far as possible in order to slow it down and somehow prevent it.

### **2. IT IS POSSIBLE TO SAVE A LANGUAGE FROM EXTINCTION?**

Unfortunately no. A language cannot be saved: once the last native speakers have died and the others are absorbed by the dominant languages, idioms are destined to disappear. However, the operation that can be done is that of preserving the linguistic, lexical and cultural heritage of a population or tribe. Linguists from around the world are starting to search through documents, archives, stories of extinct languages in an attempt to find out as much as possible and collect it,

report it, make it usable also for the future by creating dictionaries, the report of stories, traditions and the transcription and translation of tales handed down orally. For this purpose a project of the University of Cambridge has existed for some years, called the World Oral Literature Project which has been gathering for 9 years hours of audio recordings of songs, national poems, stories of tradition with the aim of creating a huge archive of languages in way of extinction, marking the grammatical and syntactic rules. This is the only way to allow traces of a language to remain, an extinct fly, thus preserving cultures that would otherwise fall into oblivion. Similar is the initiative proposed by the National Science Foundation in collaboration with Eastern Michigan University active since 2009: the creation of an online database that not only has the function of collecting data on languages in danger of extinction (cataloging of idioms at risk, count of the number of speakers still alive, grammar and syntax conservation) but also a financial purpose. Once idioms in danger have been identified, resources, including economic ones, will be used to prevent their final disappearance.

There is perhaps no better way to conclude this article than with the words of Anthony Aristar, linguist of Eastern Michigan University, one of the United States promoters of the workshop and the online database, with the hope that they can help us to acquire a greater awareness compared to what we are losing (ELP, 2009):

A language is not made only of words and grammar is a network of stories that connect all the people who once used that language, has in it all the things that those people did together and all the knowledge that the linguistic community left to his descendants. The death of a language is like the death of a species, with it you lose a link in the chain and all that that part meant for the whole.

Can we therefore say that linguistic diversity is destined to end? This judgment makes sense only if relatively to a time so far as to render any forecast useless. It would therefore be very dangerous to attribute any regulatory role to linguistic globalization: if politics assumed this scenario as regulative for its preferences (for example, distinguishing between favorable and contrary to the formation of a world language) would risk not noticing one of the major challenges of the contemporary, constituted by the communication between great linguistic-cultural universes that are profoundly different from each other.

Globalization is not a process that takes place somewhere far away, in some exotic space. Globalization is taking place in Leeds as well as in Warsaw, in New York and in any small town in Poland. It is just outside our windows, but inside as well.

Thus said Zygmund Bauman in one of the most famous interviews (Galecki, 2006).

Studying, understanding, interpreting and governing the process of globalization, intercepting phenomena, interpreting processes and not being overwhelmed by them; because

The globalization of the economy transforms all authentically or theoretically sovereign territories into “communicating vessels” in which the liquid, as is known, continues to flow until it reaches a stable level.

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