Language & Communication 24 (2004) 165–181

LANGUAGE
&
COMMUNICATION

www.elsevier.com/locate/langcom

The case for a laissez-faire language policy

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Abstract

Much current literature on language death is flawed by not taking into sufficient account the role of the nation-states in bringing about much of today's global language endangerment. It is argued that modern nation-states—different from any other type of social organization—are based upon forced integration, and that a reduction of linguistic diversity within their borders is an inescapable component of nation-building. Two essentially different kinds of processes potentially leading to language loss are recognized, with the presence of a certain level of coercion making the difference between the two: while economic, cultural, etc. pressure is always present in language replacement, coercion is rather typical of the establishment of national languages, coupled with the extension of the role of the state as a provider of public services and goods, as typical of modern Western-style societies.
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Keywords: Linguistic ecology; Linguistic rights; Language policy; Language minorities

1. The unbearable statism of linguistic ecology

Much work on linguistic rights shares these basic tenets: (1) there are linguistic rights, and they are (2) collective, and (3) positive (cf. Phillipson et al., 1995). Even assuming that the enormous philosophical problems raised by the very idea of positive, collective rights are overcome, one is left with at least another serious issue. As noted by Bamgbose (2001: 640–641) on the subject of the implementation of linguistic rights, one question remains open: '[W]hat is the economic or political mechanism for achieving such an end? [...] Whose responsability is it to enforce LHRs [: linguistic human rights; MT]? The assumption is that it is the duty of the state to do this.'

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doi:10.1016/S0271-5309(02)00039-3

Rather than focusing on linguistic rights and their implementation through government agencies, language ecologists take a broader view: Nettle and Romaine (2000) prefer to insist on sustainable development:

> We believe that people should be given control over their environments at the local level to the greatest extent possible. We also believe that where this is done many people will choose [...] to retain elements of their cultural heritage. [...] True development of a political, economical, or social nature cannot take place, however, unless there is also development of a linguistic nature. [...] The right of people to exist, to practice and reproduce their own languge and culture, should be inalienable' (Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 172–173)

On a more practical level, the case studies discussed in the last chapter of Nettle and Romaine (2000), "Sustainable Futures," have to do with bi- and multilingual education, and with the revival of traditional techniques and knowledges. Although the authors note that 'financial aid comes at a price. Dependence on state resources undermines the minority's responsibility and right to control its own affairs [...] No language or culture can endure if it is dependent on another for its intergenerational transmission' (Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 189), it seems correct to assume that the economic costs of the implementation of sustainable cultural development will have somehow to be covered, and that they will be through the compulsory allocation of resources by state agencies. Hence by force and by the only legitimate source of force: governments. Although the word "force" itself is never mentioned, and consensus and persuasion are preferred, it is clear that the legitimate use of force remains the *ultima ratio* of any language policy. It is hard to escape the conclusion that language ecologists, while apparently taking exception to the working of governments as agents of cultural and linguistic genocide, are actually advocating an ever more intrusive presence of the state and its agencies in the field of language use: i.e. they are advocating more language policy.

In this writer's opinion, they show an apparently irresistible tendency to appeal to the very source of their discomfort in order to have their problems solved.

2. The nation-state in the literature on linguistic ecology

It will be assumed here that (1) the rate of language loss across the world is increasing, (2) that a substantial, albeit unknown,[1] portion of the world's languages are endangered and many of them will be certainly lost in the near future, and (3) that language conservationism is ethically and scientifically justified (although I have many reservations about the possibility of its success). My remarks in the following

[1] Many authors, from Krauss (1992) to Nettle and Romaine (2000), draw an explicit parallel between language death and the loss of biological diversity. Linguists should definitely strive to come up with better measures of language death than are still current in public debate on biological death, and which, as has by now become clear (cf. Lomborg, 2001), do not stand up to scientific scrutiny. Obviously, while counting species is not without its problems, counting languages is much more difficult.

will be rather directed at the relative weight which much current literature on language diversity assigns to different factors in language loss, and, as a consequence, to the proposed solutions—although I will not attempt offering any counter-proposal.

In discussing the radical acceleration of the processes of language loss in modern times, the major role in the literature on linguistic ecology is generally ascribed to culture clash, economic exploitation, and demographic outnumbering. Both Mühlhäusler (1996) and Nettle and Romaine (2000), just to mention two major works on the subject, are typical in this respect. This may lead to blatant errors of perspective. Consider the following statement:

> this radical restructuring of human societies, which has led to the dominance of English and a few other world languages, is not a case of "survival of the fittest," nor the outcome of competition or free choice among equals in an idealized market place. It is instead the result of unequal rates of social change resulting in striking disparities in resources between developed and developing countries (Nettle and Romaine, 2000, 18).

The second part of Nettle and Romaine's statement, where dominance is seen as 'the result of unequal rates of social change resulting in striking disparities in resources between developed and developing countries' is a mixed bag of economic and social facts and environmentalist propaganda which cannot be dealt with here appropriately.[2] The first part, about 'English and a few other world languages' coming to dominate the linguistic scene is correct when one thinks in terms of the world-wide diffusion, especially in specific domains, of a few languages. It is instead plainly wrong when it comes to language death, which is the focus of Nettle and Romaine's book: neither diffusion nor dominance imply death, and, as will be shown further below with a couple of examples from Africa, most actual cases of language death, even today, do not involve English nor other major languages; they are much more small-scale things, in which the winning party is not likely to impress anyone as particularly "strong," either in demographic or in economic terms.

But the focus on social and economic conditions for language replacement also excludes from the scene the ultimate agents of language death in modern societies: governments and the language policies issuing from them.

While "nation" and "state" are often used more or less interchangeably in much literature on language loss and maintenance in the contemporary world, it is clear that "nation-state" is always logically implied. It could not be otherwise, given that the nation-state, either in its fully developed structure or still at an embryonic stage, is the overall form of contemporary social organization. As noted by Coulmas

[2] Among the many passages in which the authors show an open bias toward environmentalist arguments, one can just mention here their appreciation for such results of the environmentalist movement as, in the USA, the EPA, the Clean Air Acts, the Endangered Species Act, etc. (Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 23–24). This is at least odd, given the emphasis at various points in the volume on "bottom-up" policies, self-government, etc.: the authors seem not to notice that federal agencies (such as the EPA) and federal bills make for an *increase* in top-down power and control and to a large extent divest local communities (at any level) of much of their power.

(1985: 9), this is a remarkably recent phenomenon, and it is only since the end of World War II that the entire surface of the planet is divided between a limited (and to a great extent fixed) number of states: 'Praktisch jeder Mensch ist heutzutage zumindest nominell Bürger eines Staates und gehört damit einer Organisationsform menschlicher Gesellschaft an, wie sie seit der Französischen Revolution und den Napoleonischen Kriegen in Europa und der ganzen Welt immer bestimmender geworden ist.' ('Nowadays, practically everybody is, at least nominally, the citizen of a State, thereby belonging to an organisational type of human society which since the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars has become ever more decisive in Europe and in the whole world.')

At the same time, the central characteristics of the nation-state are rarely given much attention in discussing language diversity. After having devoted a whole book to linguistic imperialism in the Pacific, Mühlhäusler does not seem to have any difficult in embracing the nation-state when he speaks of the 'economic difficulties' involved in any effort to empower minority languages everywhere with all the means which official, "real" languages have: 'A multilingual nation such as Papua New Guinea could not afford fully to "develop" its 800 plus languages and it would quite simply be beyond the powers even of an affluent country with a much smaller number of languages, such as Australia, to afford a programme of this type' (Mühlhäusler, 1996: 318).

Now, while the languages spoken in that portion of the globe conventionally called "the island of New Guinea" are a fact, the state called "Papua New Guinea" itself is more or less an accident of recent history. Papua New Guinea is so much a "natural entity" that a good chunk of the island (its western half) lies beyond its borders. In a single state encompassing the whole of the island the number of languages to be coped with would be much larger than 800. Should Papua New Guinea be divided instead into 10, 100 or 10,000 sovereign states, the number of languages within each state would logically be smaller. But the total number of languages would of course remain the same.[3]

Similar concerns with regards to the costs, i.e. the limits, of "linguistic democracy" are found in Wardhaugh (1987): as nation-building is seen both as the necessary prerequisite to development and—what is of concern to us here—as the goal of language policy, Wardhaugh notes that '[N]owhere then is this process of nation-building more necessary today than in those states that were until so recently the colonies of European powers' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 59). From this goal to the vindication of the reduction of languge diversity it is but a short (although unstated) step.[4]

Again and again, similar comments are made: Peter Ladefoged (1992) rightly notes that it would not be appropriate for linguists to help preserve language diversity in

[3] Safran (1999: 78) notes that '[I]f language were the sufficient ingredient of nationalism (defined as a politically mobilizing and state-seeking ideology), there would be several thousand sovereign states, rather than the existing two hundred.' Both clauses in this sentence are factually correct, but it is hard to see a causal link between them: the vast majority of the existing two hundred states are not the result of nationalism and they do not owe their existence to any form of state-seeking ideology.

[4] It is fair to note, on the other hand, that Wardhaugh explicitly states in the Preface that he tries avoiding 'a position that language loss is to be deplored in any circumstance' (Wardhaugh, 1987: vii)—thereby marking a precise distance from more recent works on linguistic ecology.

places where authorities see local languages as a source of tribalism and encourage the spread of a ''national'' language as a means for nation-building (Ladefoged cites Tanzania as an example). He further adds that 'it would not be acting responsibly to do anything which might seem, at least superficially, to aid in' the preservation of tribalism (Ladefoged 1992: 809). He is certainly right as far as our interests as theoretical and descriptive linguists are concerned. On the other hand, while linguists are definitely not asked to ''defend'' tribalism or act for its preservation (nor against it), neither are they compelled to accept official definitions and clichés. For all we know, tribalism—whatever may it be—can be a decisive factor in language maintenance and the reduction of tribalism be directly connected with language loss. Linguists should also never forget that what is a ''tribe'' in country X can be a ''minority'' in country Y, and can itself be the nation Z elsewhere. And what is a ''tribe'' in country X at time point t_1 can become a ''minority'' at t_2.

Uncritical acceptance of the boundaries set up by the nation-state seems to be rejected by Nettle and Romaine (2000); they note that '[n]either ethics nor economics' support the conclusion that 'a strong centralizing power, however unpalatable in the short term, is ultimately necessary to turn developing areas into modern and prosperous nation-states' (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 147), and, on the subject of education:

> The principle of self-determination has been often expressed in liberal thought for centuries and might seem uncontroversial. However, the practice of governments has hardly followed the theory in this respect. Taking the right to choice seriously would mean decentralizing power and knowledge to a much greater extent than national governments have generally been willing to do. It means, for example, allowing the language and even the content of educational curricula to be devolved to the smallest appropriate level. Such policies can be pursued to a certain extent within existing political structures, though legal, administrative, and educational reform are all necessary, as a change in general priorities. *Ultimately, they may require a rethinking of the nation-state itself* (Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 174; emphasis added).

A rethinking of the nation-state is obviously not among the goals of Nettle and Romaine's book—nor of this article. More modestly, I suggest that, in order to become effective, language conservationism needs to radically distinguish two different kinds of processes potentially leading to language loss, with the presence and role of a state, especially in its modern, pernicious variety as nation-state, making the difference between the two:

1. pressure-induced selection of language varieties for specific effects (trade, culture, religion, administration, etc;
2. planned reduction of linguistic variety as a necessary means to achieve national unity.

While both may be, and often are, conducive to language death, only (2) explicitly plans it and puts in place the means to achieve it. Following up with the ''language

killing'' metaphor, one could say that failing to distinguish between language death resulting from (1) and (2) is in a way similar to confusing accidental killing and murder—a difference which any legal system preserves. Of course, just as in between there are various kinds of killing, likewise there will be different kinds of language endangerment, from maybe a minor ''language-attacking'' through ''language-slaughter'' to downright ''language-murder.''

3. Between Mozart and the Turkana: language behaviour before the nation-state

The mental model imposed upon the researcher by familiarity with the mechanisms of the nation-state and the failure to recognize the radical difference with earlier forms of government may lead to mistaken historical conclusions. Thus, Wardhaugh (1987: 7), when dealing with language loss in the past, mentions Latin, Greek, or Arabic as languages which were 'imposed over a particular area as a result of economic conquest and, once imposed, maintained by force there for several centuries.' Actually, none of these languages was strictly speaking imposed. Not in the same sense in which one can say that French or Italian have been imposed in France and Italy, i.e. by law (which implies force).

This is patently obvious in the case of Greek, which, as is well known, retained many of its commercial, cultural and even administrative functions within the Roman Empire. Things went differently in the West with Latin, whose spread, although not the result of a specific language policy, was helped by the absence of a competing lingua franca. As regards Arabic, Syriac—associated with Eastern Christianity—retained for a long time its cultural functions within the Caliphate. Under the system mostly known by its Turkish name of *millet* (whereby a non-Muslim community was ruled through the intermediacy of its religious hierarchy), Christian communities enjoyed legal autonomy and Syriac, as the chief Christian language, thrived. While I do not know of any specific measure aiming at *preventing* language shift to Arabic, this is not excluded, considering that conversion to Islam was at times actively discouraged, as it implied for the treasury the loss of the *jizya*, the head tax imposed on free non-Muslims.

More generally, if we do not take into account the drastic deterioration of language relations in the modern Western world brought about by the nation-states, we are compelled to register as historical or anthropological oddities too many aspects of language behaviour.

As is well known, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* was first represented on 30 September 1791 at the *Theater auf der Wieden* in Vienna—not at the Palace. This was dictated, among other things, by Mozart's revolutionary decision to use the German language. Mozart, as a rational agent, made the choice to use German for the *Zauberflöte*; the further choice of having it represented in a bourgeois theatre was not ''free:'' it was rather a move forced upon him ultimately by the cultural (and linguistic) conventions of his times, which wanted Italian to be the only proper language to be used in opera, even if a play was to be represented at the Imperial Palace of a German-speaking court.

Or, to take a radically different example: the Turkana are the first and foremost enemies of the Dhaasanac of southwest Ethiopia and northwest Kenya. Among the Dhaasanac, this traditional hostility (where ‘‘traditional’’ is definitely not to be understood as ‘‘of times long past’’) is reflected, among others, in war songs (Dhaasanac songs *are* war songs). The point is that such songs are sung in Turkana. Another symbolic use of language of prominent importance among the Dhaasanac and neighboring pastoral peoples of East Africa is ox-naming, and consequently, people-naming (males normally assume the name of their preferred ox). Again, most names are Turkana (Tosco, 1998).

Mozart and the Dhaasanac are united by their not belonging to nation-states. Languages had/have symbolic value then and there as nowadays in our society; but such values were not enforced. Either there is no one to enforce them (as among the Dhaasanac), or those in power did not really care (as the Augsburgs in Mozart’s times).

Writing about the difference between ‘‘metropolitan’’ and ‘‘peripheral’’ languages, i.e. the official languages of the European nation-states and all the others, Nettle and Romaine (2000: 131) suggest: ‘The event that has tipped the balance, we believe, has been economic takeoff, which has occurred this millennium in a few of the world’s societies.’ The authors think here of the advent of capitalism in the late Middle Ages, as they note that ‘[C]ompetition between Europe’s many small states may have been a beneficial stimulant, in marked contrast to the monolithic hand of the state in China’ (Nettle and Romaine, 2000: 131). But it is hard to see any causal link between the rise of capitalism and the accelerated pace of language death. Quite to the contrary: it is exactly in the late Middle Ages that a bewildering variety of new European languages came to be written for the first—and too often the last—time. In Northern Italy the phenomenon is strictly associated with the period of the Free Communes, probably the cradle of European capitalism (cf. also Safran, 1999: 79). Language death on a large scale is rather historically associated in Europe (and, I suspect, elsewhere) with the rise of big and powerful states and their transformation, starting from the 18th century, into nation-states.

Nettle and Romaine, in other words, seem to be caught here in the common trap of associating political and economic integration: political integration involves the territorial expansion of a state’s power, while economic integration means the extension of the interpersonal and interregional division of labor and market participation. Forced integration (see below) is involved in political, but not in economic, integration. This is all the more evident in the contemporary, long-distance economic globalization, but was apparent also in the rise of European continental trade in the late Middle Ages, based as it was upon a network of different powers and countless independent political bodies.

Alongside and superimposed on Nettle and Romaine’s (2000) ‘‘biological wave’’ and ‘‘economic wave,’’ which have a wider scope in identifying the sources of language loss across the globe, a separate ‘‘political wave’’ must be identified in the historical process which has led and is currently leading to the reduction of linguistic diversity in the contemporary world.

4. The nation-state as a key factor in the suppression of linguistic diversity

Wardhaugh (1987) lists a set of conditions which are at the base of the authority of the state. It is not possible (and is furthermore immaterial to the present discussion) to enter here into the complex, and possibly irresoluble, question of "why we obey authority" (a question raised since at least Etienne de la Boétie's [1530–1563] *Discours sur la servitude volontaire*). Certainly, 'some sense of common identity or membership in a single community' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 3) is an issue which plays a role in modern nation-states only. The further proviso that individuals 'must feel a sense of involvement in the affairs and decisions of the state' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 3) is definitely restricted to modern nation-states of the democratic persuasion.

As Wardhaugh rightly notes, '[T]he modern state is involved extensively in such matters as the economy, education, security, planning, employment, government services, culture, etc.' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 22). But he fails to notice the connection with another important observation he made a few pages earlier: '[I]t is probably only in the modern world that language has become such a powerful political symbol' and that '[I]n the pre-nineteenth century world [...] [T]here was little direct management of language affairs by states and empires' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 4). The problem is not so much that '[D]irectives, orders, and laws there were, but these tended to affect the few rather than the many' (Wardhaugh, 1987: 4); rather, it is precisely that language was not a *compulsory* symbol of identity. Languages were contracting and expanding, or they were simply curtailing their role within bi- and plurilinguistic or diglottic communities.

A modern nation-state is a more effective compressor of cultural (and hence linguistic) diversity than any other form of social organization because only a nation-state actively and purposefully engages in forced integration. And it is bound to engage in forced integration of its citizens because in a nation-state the citizens are the symbolic holders of power on an equality basis. Differences between groups of citizens, no matter whether in religion, ethnicity, or language, lose any role insofar as access to the functions of power and its benefits is concerned. Even without the active intervention of the state in order to reduce or annihilate differences, this devaluation of differences alone is a direct incentive leading to their abandonment.

Paradoxically, therefore, the very democratic character of the modern nation-state leads to the reduction of cultural and language diversity. As noted by Hoppe (2001: 48), 'with a publicly owned government [...][T]he distinction between the rulers and the ruled as well as the class consciousness of the ruled become blurred.' To this we can safely add that historical experience has empirically shown that any other kind of consciousness on the part of different segments of the population becomes blurred and ultimately vanishes—ethnic, regional, and linguistic differences included [cf. also Hoppe (2001: 117) and Gasser (1947)].[5]

[5] Phillipson et al. (1995:4) make an honest attempt at dispelling 'the myth that minority rights are a threat to the nation-state.' Maybe linguists should come to trust politicians in this respect: the nation-state—*qua* nation-state—is inextricably linked to the ultimate eradication of internal diversity. In a similar vein, Nettle and Romaine (2000: 155) hastily dismiss Pool's (1972) remarks on the necessary link between development and reduction of language variety: within the framework of the nation-state, Pool's remarks make perfect sense.

The following well-known observations by Bourdieu contain therefore only half the truth:

> The official language is bound up with the state, both in its genesis and in its social uses. [...] In order for one mode of expressions among others (a particular language in the case of bilingualism, a particular use of language in the case of a society divided into classes) to impose itself as the only legitimate one, the linguistic market has to be unified and the different dialects (of class, region or ethnic group) have to be measured practically against the legitimate language or usage. (Bourdieu, 1991: 45)

An official language is bound up with the state; but only in a nation-state is the state bound up with the language. And linguists know all too well that what Bourdieu calls different "dialects" are often strikingly divergent languages even in the more familiar nation-states of Western Europe.[6]

The special responsibility of the modern nation-state in language loss, alluded to before, must now be substantiated: obviously, it does not mean that prior to the development in the modern age of the nation-state language standardization and empowerment did not take place. Of course it did. Likewise, matters of sheer number, physical extermination, and the like were and still are conducive to language loss. What before the advent of the nation-state was to a large extent lacking was a special interest on the part of the state in matters of language, and, above all, the possibility for the state to have the effects of its language policy felt by the speakers.

To take two well-known examples, both a German and an Italian language were in place well before the coming into existence of, respectively, Germany and Italy as nation-states in the second half of the 19th century. Knowledge of these languages was severely limited by educational factors; it has been calculated that, at the birth of the Italian Kingdom in 1861, a bare 2.5% of the population (little more than 600,000 out of a total population of more than 25 million) had a knowledge of Italian (De Mauro, 1976: 43). Neither was literacy synonymous with an active and proficient knowledge of Italian (a striking and well-known example being the royal family itself and many of the prominent ministers who were instrumental in the unification process). Until around 1850 French books had a wider circulation than Italian ones in Turin, the capital of the Kingdom of Savoy.

Rather than low literacy levels (on which see below), it was the relative separation between the realm of power and the daily life of the population which prevented the demise of the local languages. In this situation, the limited knowledge of the national language took rather the form of a diglottic competence, whereby different domains were given to the standard and the local dialect, with many intermediate speech-forms (regional koines, etc.) occupying different niches in the competence of the speakers.

[6] Both "dialects" and "minority languages" are "abstand languages" upon which an "ausbau language" (Kloss, 1967) has been imposed; an "ausbau language" is the result of a language policy aimed at the unification of a people.

A well-known example of centuries-long, pre-nation-state language encroachment and assimilation is provided by the fate of many Celtic languages. Nettle and Romaine offer a general treatment of the demise of Cornish and other Celtic languages in Britain, noting that 'all the Celtic-speaking areas came under metropolitan political and military dominance early in the process of language shift. Cornwall was incorporated into Wessex by AD 802; Wales was annexed in 1536; the Union of Scotland was achieved in 1701 [...]; and Scotland was formally absorbed into the kingdom in 1801′ (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 139). Among the legal provisions against Welshmen in the penal laws of Henry IV, the authors note the prohibition on Welshmen acquiring lands in the border areas and within boroughs, carrying arms, fortifying houses, holding any responsible office in the service of any English lord, holding assemblies without special permit, and the possibility for residents of border towns to retaliate against any Welshman in case of theft if the stolen goods were not recovered in one week (Nettle and Romaine 2000: 139). Similar laws against Gaelic-speakers are discussed, with the intent of showing that no free choice in language attitude on the part of the Celtic-languages speakers was involved. Nettle and Romaine are certainly right here. But one is left wondering how it is that it took almost one thousand years, from AD 802 to the 18th century, to "kill" Cornish. This is all the more striking when one remembers that it took much less time to eradicate language diversity in France, and it is taking much less time to do the same in Italy and elsewhere.

It must be admitted that the different rates of implementation of linguistic uniformity are the result of different goals in medieval England compared with modern France and other nation-states: in England one witnesses a long-term, successful attempt at ethnic homogenization, rather than downright planning of language unity—which was a concomitant result of political control over the whole of the country. The penal laws of Henry IV started from the provise that there *were* Welshmen. In a modern nation-state, in contrast, law starts with the assumption that citizens are equal and then one proceeds to make them so. Only the democratization of the state, bringing about as was seen above a more intimate relationship between subjects and state (whereby the people become "the citizens" and the power becomes "the government"), required the implementation of a language policy and secured its success.

5. Language death without the state: pressure is not coercion

Much language shift around the world is the result of choice, on the part of individuals or whole communities. Pressure is involved, but of a qualitatively different kind than that involved in the penal code of Henry IV against the Welshmen. While it is certainly correct to speak of pressure, it seems unwarranted to speak of coercion in any strict sense of the word.

Among the Yaaku of Central Kenya, the decision to give up the original Cushitic language and adopt the Maa language (Nilotic) of their Maasai neighbors was the outcome of a public meeting of the whole tribe held at the beginning of the 1930s (cf.

Brenzinger, 1992).[7] Brenzinger notes that Maa had already been established as a lingua franca in the region shortly after the turn of the 20th century, but language shift itself was precipitated by bridewealth inflation: the hunting and gathering Yaaku were given cattle as bridewealth by the pastoralist Maasai. This determined a drastic devaluation of beehives, which were the traditional payment for wives, and had two further consequences: the availability of "hard currency"—cattle—enabled the Yaaku to buy also non-Yaaku wives, while, conversely, Yaaku men found themselves compelled to pay in cattle also for Yaaku wives. In order to marry, many Yaaku boys had therefore to go and serve as cattle-keepers among the Maasai and get paid in cattle—thus becoming bilingual. Back at home, the non-Yaaku wives further reduced the degree of exposure to Yaaku, paving the way to the language shift (cf. also Tosco, 1998).

The Ongota of southwestern Ethiopia, a small group living on hunting and speaking an unclassified language, have shifted to the neighbouring powerful language, Ts'amakko. Ts'amakko itself is spoken by 8621 people according to the last Ethiopian census. The motivation for the shift was a socio-economic one: pressure to adopt pastoralism and pastoralists' values. In 2000 Ongota was still spoken by eight people out of a community of nearly one hundred (Savà and Tosco, 2001).

Also the on-going language shift of the Dahalo (Kenya) towards Swahili, alluded to by Ladefoged (1992), has little to do with official language policies, and it is much more connected with a long, steady alignment of former hunting and gathering communities to the language of their pastoralist or agriculturalist dominating neighbors (cf. Tosco, 1992, for details).

The first lesson to be drawn here is that it is simply not right that English and a handful of world languages are wiping out the world's language diversity: much language death in Africa and elsewhere is going on between perfectly local—and all perfectly "small"—languages. English has not killed Yaaku and Ongota—Maa and Ts'amakko, of all things, have.

The second lesson is that neither globalization nor the nation-state have to do with many (I venture to say: most) instances of language shift. And it is also obvious that Yaaku and Ongota are more exemplificatory of a general trend of what has been going on from time immemorial around the world than either Cornish or Occitan—where language loss or maintenance are the direct result of action by a central government.

6. The road to language uniformity

France being the model of the modern nation-state, the well-studied French record remains of crucial importance. It is by now generally acknowledged that the

[7] Notwithstanding Nettle (1999: 99 fn. 1), the picture Dixon (1997:68 ff.) portrays of consensual decision-making among Australian hunter-gatherers is not a 'Rousseauesque picture,' but corresponds to a true state of affairs in most small-scale egalitarian societies; about inter-societal relations and warfare, Nettle is of course right when he adds that 'the lack of military dominance of any one group [...] has more to do with demographic weakness, technological limitations, and inability to command economic surpluses') rather than on 'any pacific cultural attitudes.'

imposition of the Parisian variety often assumed blatantly coercive forms. What on the contrary is not always appreciated is that decline and death of all the other varieties were an inevitable result of the new kind of government.

It is clear that reduction of language variety had been going on in France well before the French Revolution. But notwithstanding the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterets (1539) and the official replacement of Latin with French as the language of the law, it is also well-known that little effort was made under the *ancien régime* to actively spread French—and to reduce language (and cultural) diversity.

While with the Revolution the ideological bases for gallicization were set up, neither the centralization of the administration nor the famous law of *2 thermidor an II* (20 July 1794), which made French the only legal language of the Republic, had much effect (cf. Wardhaugh, 1987: 103). Discussing the famous Barère "Rapport du comité de salut public sur les idiomes"—the very first act of aggressive language policy in revolutionary France (27 January 1794)—Trabant (1981: 76–77) has noted that no hint of a "counter-revolutionary" role of the minority languages spoken along the borders was actually present in the reports from the various provinces which formed the basis of Barère's "Rapport": the issue of language was raised in the absence of any military or political justification.[8]

Actual gallicization occurred only much later, during the last quarter of the 19th century, and as the result of (1) compulsory national (government-run or government-controlled) education (1886), (2) the introduction of military conscription (1875), (3) the extension of the conditions to access to public life (with universal suffrage for all male citizens above the age of 21 introduced in 1848), and (4) the development of a strong network of government-built and government-maintained communications.[9] The model set by France was followed, with various results, in Italy and elsewhere.

The four elements have at least one point in common: they all aimed at the forced integration of the French people. Similar points, as well as the forced integration brought about by mass conscription in World War I, are explicitly analyzed with approval as key factors in the Italianization of Italy by De Mauro (1976). Pending an extensive analysis of each of the four factors, the following are a few remarks on the role of the first and most obvious: compulsory national education.

The role of education in a national language policy is obvious. It is also widely accepted that education alone, in the absence of viable socio-economic conditions, does not guarantee the success of a language policy. Ireland and the revitalization of Irish are perhaps the best known examples.

[8] The qualitative difference in efficacity between the *ancien régime* and the new democratic state did not pass unnoticed by Friedrich Engels, who approvingly noted that, after three hundred years under the French kingdom, it took the revolutionary French to accomplish 'die Vernichtung der letzten Reste südfranzösischer Selbständigkeit' (quoted in Trabant, 1981: 82, fn. 15).

[9] While apparently "progressive", the building of roads as an effective means to gain control of the territory and to impose taxation efficiently has always been a characteristic of centralizing states. As noted by Weber (1964: 4) and repeated by Hoppe (2001), also the famed roadways of ancient Rome were essentially military rather than trade routes, and were often regarded more as a plague than as an advantage by the local populations.

It is also clear that high levels of education and literacy are not dependent upon a compulsory nation-wide educational system. After distinguishing between horizontal (inter-societal) and vertical (intra-societal) language spread, Wardhaugh (1987: 18) notes that '[I]nsofar as educational systems are made to serve all segments of society they become powerful agencies of vertical language spread.' What is left unnoticed is that educational systems 'made to serve all segments of society', or, for that matter, educational *systems* at all, are a very recent development.

It must also be stressed that a relatively high level of education, even if carried out in the national language or in any other "high" variety, per se does not have any linguocide effect. The high level of literacy in America even prior to independence is well known: it has been calculated that already in the second half of the 17th century in Massachusetts and Connecticut the literacy rate for men was between 89 and 95%, and as high as 62% for women (Hart, 1950: 8).

Also among the first waves of immigrants, both the general cultural level and the preservation of the ethnic language were high, and bilingualism remained the rule until the beginning of the 20th century, as remarked several times and for many ethnic groups (Haugen, 1953, being the most famous example).[10]

Thus, general education is not conducive to the demise of other, "lower" speech forms—whether local varieties of the standard language, or downright minority languages. Education can affect language use and lead to language demise only insofar as it is coupled with other measures of forced, national integration: in such a case, which is typical of modern, Western societies, language demise may become "voluntary" (i.e. a forced move given the circumstances), because proficiency in the national language is conducive to a whole series of benefits which are typical of the modern state and which are carried on in the national language: job opportunities, security, justice, etc. In short, linguocide is a side-effect of the extension of intercourse with government-run services, with the decisive help of government-run education.[11]

7. A laissez-faire approach to language policy

To play down the speakers' motivations in language loss and maintenance seems to be a central tenet of linguistic ecology. Discussing various theories of language loss and maintenance, Mühlhäusler's (1996: 313) first victim is 'the assumption that language loss and maintenance reflect the free and rational choices that speakers make.' According to this "classical theory", which Mühlhäusler calls 'the linguistic

[10] To quote from a literary example, the American writer of German descent Kurt Vonnegut, born in Indianapolis in 1922, has remarked how his generation was the first to be denied the traditional German–English bilingualism. While their parents and grandparents 'were all cultivated and gentle and prosperous, and spoke German and English gracefully [...] [M]y brother, my sister and I were raised as though Germany were as foreign to us as Paraguay' (Vonnegut, 1976: 14 foll.).

[11] It is not coincidental that, as Nettle and Romaine (2000: 179) inform us, most Hawaiian speakers live 'on the privately owned, isolated island of Ni'ihau.'

counterpart of economic rationalism', language loss and maintenance would be a "natural phenomenon".

This article can also be read as a vindication of rationalism in matters of language loss and maintenance. Speakers do act linguistically in a certain way as a result of a rational choice—because they see in this move a possible personal advantage. The move itself can involve the adherence to a certain variety, the learning of another language, or the conscious abandonment of a variety and the adoption of a new one. The advantage itself may turn out to be fictitious (the speaker will have made a bad move), and it may be symbolic. This is not to claim that language loss and maintenance are "natural phenomena". Quite to the contrary: the speaker's choice will always be influenced by innumerable factors which are not "natural." Human choices never happen in a void, and sociolinguistic ones are no exception.

By choosing a certain linguistic solution, a state will act as one of the factors bearing on the choices of the language market: the language/dialect/variety X will be given an advantage which other languages are lacking. As Nettle and Romaine (2000: 155) note 'economic theory points out that when the market is distorted, the allocation resulting is seldom optimal.' Quite so: not different from linguistic choices, economic choices are often influenced by decisions made by third parties. When a tax is imposed upon imported goods, customers may find it more convenient to buy local produce (and this is generally why the tax is imposed in the first place). Local producers are therefore given an advantage, and, freed from the competition of foreigners, are able to sell worse goods at a higher price. Ultimately, the consumers will be the losers.

As much as in economic life, the bearing of these influences in sociolinguistic choices will be proportionate to the role and power which the state is able to exercise. Where the social and economic life of everybody depends upon the approval and permission of the state, and where the chosen language is actively taught and an ever-expanding list of services (education, justice, welfare) is dependent upon its use, the national language will be boosted accordingly. As the role of the state has generally increased in recent centuries, even an "open" language policy is bound to have enormous consequences for language behaviour. That the minority language be "recognized" or not will therefore be immaterial, and the results will apply equally well to Breton (recognized) and to Franco-Provençal (unrecognized) in France, and both to Occitan (recognized) and to Piedmontese (unrecognized) in Italy.

Furthermore, by imposing one national language, language has become a "government good". Since the acquisition of the national variety is therefore a forced move, it is no longer possible to show that speakers prefer a certain language to other linguistic solutions, even if, as remarked in Section 6, language demise may become voluntary:

> By buying a good or service, the buyers (consumers) demonstrate that they prefer this good or service over the sum of money that they must surrender in order to acquire it. In contrast, [...] no one buys government "goods" or "services". They are produced, and costs are incurred to produce them, but they are not sold and bought. On the one hand, this implies that it is impossible to

> determine their value and find out whether or not this value justifies their costs. Because no one buys them, no one actually demonstrates that he considers government goods and services worth their costs, and indeed, whether or not anyone attaches any value to them at all (Hoppe, 2001: 101).

As economic theory and history teach, the result of strict market control is general impoverishment. No differently, language impoverishment is a result of national languages.

8. Conclusions

No recipe for a different language policy is proposed here. The ''laissez-faire'' attitude alluded to in the title and in Section 7 is obviously quite different from Edwards's (1994: 20) proposal that 'in many ethnic matters, the best policy [may be] none at all...lack of government legislation or action need not always mean ignorance or discrimination; indeed, lack of response may be the appropriate action;' Nettle and Romaine (2000: 199) rightly argue that '[I]t is quite naive to delude oneself that a laissez-faire approach represents absence of policy. It is indeed a policy *not* to have a policy' (emphasis in the original). While Edwards sets his approach squarely within the boundaries of the nation-state, the present article questions the very feasibility of a ''just'' language policy within the framework of the nation-state.

Given the bad record of governments, especially in their modern variety as nation-states, in the field of language diversity, to try and reduce language loss by appealing to (better) language policies reminds one of trying to prevent crime by surrendering the administration of law to criminals. Imaginative, but of dubious efficacy.

As remarked by Dorian (1993), responsible linguists ought not foment rebellion against authorities who are determined to eliminate language and cultural diversity. Dorian notes that much language death is taking place in democracies (although this article has abundantly shown that I cannot agree with her on her further comment about it being economic, rather than political, exigencies which operate to discourage people from transmitting their ancestral language). Dorian is certainly right about ''fomenting rebellion''; nevertheless, responsible scientists ought to respect scientific data and logic: if empirical data and logical reasoning make it clear that one of the prerequisites of nation-building (rather than mere state-building) is integration, and that a key element in such integration is the reduction of diversity—linguistic diversity included—one must simply acknowledge that nation-states are incompatible with linguistic diversity, and that one has either to give up nation-building or language conservationism. *Tertium non datur*.

In the particular form of social organization which is the modern nation-state, human beings (the ''citizens'') are subject to a good deal of involuntary and unprotected intercourse with the government. This is conducive to language desease and, ultimately, language death. Generally of the quick variety.

Acknowledgements

This article was written during my stay at the Institut für Sprachwissenschaft of the University of Cologne, which was made possible by a scholarship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I thank Hans-Jürgen Sasse for his comments, criticisms and encouragement. Needless to say, the faults fall under my own intellectual copyright.

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