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LANGUAGE – AUDIBILITY – MARGINALISATION ON DYING TONGUES AND CREATIVE PARTICIPATION

Abstract: *The paper is dedicated to the problems of linguistic revitalisation and the dynamics leading to language death. Among such factors as colonial oppression and policies of state centralisation, a special attention is paid to the causes of language relinquishment and the situations in which minor languages are abandoned in favour of major ones. The author muses on the lure of larger, more attractive speech communities and the importance of language choice in building global solidarity and networks of exchange of ideas. The main question asked is how to foster the participation and visibility of creators and intellectuals representing minor ethnolinguistic communities, making the diversity of outlooks and cognitive modalities associated with minor languages available and enriching for global majorities.*

Key words: *endangered languages, global culture, marginalisation, participation*

Introduction

In the essay *The Fragility of Languages*, published in 2015 as the Editor's Column in the influential *PMLA*, Simon Gikandi mused on the phenomenon of language death, an aspect, perhaps a paradoxical one, of the universal penchant toward extinction that seems to mark our times. Paradoxical, since the Anthropocene as the new geological period in which the humankind becomes the most powerful force shaping the Earth is a time in which the products of cultural – not only natural – evolution disappear at an unprecedented pace. Tongues die out apparently in just the same way as biological species do. It has also been observed that the hotspots of linguistic diversity tend to coincide with the hotspots of biodiversity. Although the reasons of such coincidence are not entirely clear, the researchers associated a total of 3,202 tongues (that may correspond to as many as a half of all languages spoken on Earth) with 35 biodiversity hotspots (cf. Gorenflo et al. 2012). They are situated in such regions as East Melanesian Islands (also known as the Solomons-Vanuatu-Bismarck moist forests area that is to be found, just to give a rough idea, around Papua New Guinea), Guinean Forests of West Africa, Indo-Burma, Mesoamerica, and Wallacea (i.e. the group of Indonesian islands including Sulawesi, Lombok, Sumbawa, Flores, Timor, etc.).

All those remote areas have in common not only their geographical isolation on islands or in mountain ranges covered by dense forest, but also, in most cases, the historical absence of strong centres that might merge them together into powerful strands of written culture and hegemonic traditions. “A language is endangered when its native speakers feel powerless in the face of encroaching languages or think that their language is a shameful mark of backwardness”, says Gikandi (12). And he goes on evoking conquest, colonisation and powerful

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centralised states prohibiting regional tongues that might provide a voice for decentralising tendencies. Such would be, for instance, the case of Catalan in Franco's Spain. The linguistic diversity survived in those areas that were sufficiently remote to escape such imperialistic, or simply centralising dynamics. Thus, there may exist an exploitable relationship between the linguistic diversity and the concept of Zomia, introduced in 2002 by Willem Van Schendel to refer to the Southeast Asian Massif that historically escaped the control of the governments based in the lowlands. He coined this term using the word "Zomi", common to several Tibeto-Burman languages spoken in the area; it simply means "highlander". For many centuries, this elevated, rugged terrain was the home of distinct ethnolinguistic communities cultivating a diversity of forms of social organisation, all of them avoiding being integrated into powerful states, the fact that led to James C. Scott's influential vision of the "art of not being governed" and "anarchist history" (2009). Such an anarchist history may preserve minor tongues from the "encroaching languages" backed up by a centralised power.

Language revitalisation as an engaged academic practice

Over the last two or three decades, language revitalisation has been considered 'sexy'. The idea of linguistic rights has been propagated all over the world. The urgency of studying, cataloguing or at least archiving the tongues before they disappear justified the mobilisation of considerable human and financial resources; it fostered individual careers of the researchers. Even in a nearly monolingual context such as Poland, not only Kashubian and Lemko, but also Wymysorys – an endangered language spoken exclusively in one town, Wilamowice, in Lesser Poland – have focused a considerable academic and public attention. Since 2001, Lemko has been studied and taught, in the framework of Russian Philology, at the Pedagogical University in Kraków; since approximately 2013, Wymysorys has been researched and actively revitalised by a team based at the Faculty "Artes Liberales", University of Warsaw. These facts contrast sharply with nearly complete oblivion and strong depreciation of those languages before 1989, offering, at the same time, an exemplification of the concept of cultural democracy used to describe the readiness of the state and majoritarian society to accept the claims of ethnolinguistic minorities. Unfortunately, with the present-day advent of right-wing nationalisms in various parts of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, the progress of linguistic revitalisation risks to be compromised. The minoritarian cause may easily be deferred to another period of political thaw and cultural democratisation. The lemma of "Reversing Language Shift", advocated by Joshua A. Fishman (2001), actually acquires a sinister, bivalent connotation, as a positive reversal of a negative trend (language endangerment), as well as a possible negative reversal of a positive trend (political endangerment of language revitalisation). The matter depends strongly on the incessant turns of political tides.

Certainly, such issues acquire even greater importance in the regions that are linguistically more diversified, such as the Balkans or the Caucasus. In any case, the question if and why the languages should be revitalised, including the purpose of archiving the dying tongues, may be seen as awkward, misplaced, or strongly dependent on the political correctness adopted under given circumstances. The

linguists usually take the answer for granted: it is generally admitted that the linguistic diversity is an important patrimony of the humanity. Languages should be preserved simply because they took such a long time to grow and diversify; they are regarded as receptacles of the experience of countless generations, something that links us to the past, even if we know that also the process of their change and reinvention is constant. Also the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, or the hypothesis of linguistic relativity, is often invoked. It consists in the claim that language shapes not only the speaker's world view, but also his or her cognition and the way of experiencing the reality. Thus, it may be argued that the death of a language implies a loss of a specific modality of being human. Even if this legacy, for any practical purpose, apparently remains far beyond the horizon of a great majority of us, hidden somewhere in the depths of the moist forests of Wallacea, while we live in an impoverished, often monolingual reality close at hand. The argument that may eventually appeal stronger to the general imagination is that the linguistic grail, the secret of the origin and evolution of human speech, may remain forever an inscrutable mystery if we lose – as many prognostics indicate – up to 90% of all languages before the end of the current century.

Language death and cultural dynamics

The causes of the death of languages are often presented in the scholarly literature as complex, yet relatively clear. As Brenzinger and de Graaf present it, “language endangerment may be caused primarily by *external* forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. It may also be caused by *internal* forces, such as a community’s negative attitude towards its own language or by a general decline of group identity. Internal pressures always derive from external factors” (3). Yet, countering this prevalent opinion stressing the role of external factors, the question of cultural evolution and autonomous decisions taken by the members of the communities, preserving a degree of independence in the deliberate adoption of certain ways of responding to external pressures, should also be taken into account.

In the assessment based on the analogy between biodiversity and linguistic diversity, the fact that numerous tongues exist is treated as an obviously positive factor, since it is inferred that with diversity comes strength and resilience. Diverse ecosystems adapt more easily to changes, those impoverished may be easily destroyed even by minor events. Certainly, at the best academic level, the resilience theory applied to linguistics is not to be seen as such a simplified approach (cf. Bradley 2011). As David Bradley explains in a recent publication,

“resilience thinking is a developing paradigm in ecology which recognizes ecological challenges and tries to identify and quantify the factors behind them. Accepting that some changes are irreversible once a threshold is crossed, it sets out to ameliorate the situation of an ecosystem through changes in the ways humans use and interact with that ecosystem and to reach a new stable state. [...] Human language is also a complex adaptive system which goes through phases of stability and growth and also through phases of change; our challenge as linguists is to help communities to make

and implement informed language-related choices that meet their new needs in a changed world, and where possible lead to renewal of the language and preservation of its cultural riches, and to develop more positive attitudes about the language and its users, both within the community and outside” (Bradley 2019: 509-510).

Yet the application of biology-inspired theories to cultural phenomena should always be done with due caution; certainly, they are not fully analogous to the functioning of ecosystems. The variety of tongues comes at a price: it seems to be associated with a degree of cultural weakness. On the other hand, the accumulation of cultural potential, reinforced with writing that permits to preserve and transmit symbolic achievements across generations, tends to merge together or bring about the demise of minor tongues, creating linguistic uniformity associated with broad horizons of communication across extensive territories and numerous populations. This is how the languages die – not just under direct oppression, but also due to the lure of stronger languages that offer richer opportunities to communities and individuals, especially those who are more active and creative than the majority. As they act as trendsetters, their personal options may have a powerful impact on communities.

A tongue is, after all, a tool of communication. The tools judged obsolete are abandoned as the speakers move into new contexts of communication. It is often enough to get out of one's own village to be confronted with such a situation, and the members of small communities may identify their language as a hindrance and chose to reject it in the course of their autonomous development. Endangered languages are, in the first place, those with less than 10,000 speakers, usually lacking standardised writing. Such is – or was – the case of nearly a half of the 6,000 or 7,000 spoken in the world by the half of the 20th century. This is why, in Gikandi's rather macabre phrasing, “the world seems littered with dying or dead languages” (10). The expression seems to evoke a battlefield covered by corpses, yet it is better to keep in mind a clear distinction between tongues and people. It is true that in modern history, some languages died as a consequence of physical elimination of their speakers. Such events took place, just to give an example, in Tasmania during the 19th century. Also in the present-day world large-scale ethnic cleansing still exist, as the cases of Uygur and Rohingya communities testify. Nonetheless, the scale of spontaneous shift toward major languages is not to be underestimated as a major factor shaping global linguistic reality.

Language relinquishment

The Angolan writer and jazz musician Kalaf Epalanga illustrates this situation as he writes in the foreword of his volume of urban chronicles *O Angolano que comprou Lisboa (por metade do preço)*:

Eu sou esse órfão cultural que mal sabe contar até dez na língua dos meus pais, dos pais destes e por aí fora. Mosi, vali, tatu, kuãla, cinco, seis, sete, oito, nove, ekui... (14)

I am such a cultural orphan who can hardly count to ten in the language of my parents, their parents, and so on. Mosi, vali, tatu, kuāla, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ekui... (my trans.)

At the first glance, it looks like a lament on one of those cadavers evoked by Gikandi. But Epalanga does not actually seem to suffer from bereavement, lamenting on the loss of those traditional identities and languages that had disappeared under the pressure of Portuguese colonisation. Quite to the contrary, he is celebrating the urban, hybrid culture that comes from Angola to conquer – at least symbolically, through fashionable dances and other forms of cultural creativity – the ex-metropolis that, according to the suggestion included in the title, is ready to sell itself to the newcomer for half price. His native Umbundu, one of the languages belonging to Bantu family, is the major language of Angola. The ethnic group that speaks it constitutes one third of the country's population. Although this population traditionally inhabited the Central Highlands of Angola, recent migrations have brought Umbundu to the coastal cities: Luanda, Benguela and Lobito. Thus, not exactly a dying tongue. Rather a tongue that came to the city only to be abandoned by those speakers who prefer to follow the lure of some thrilling, fashionable speech better befitting, as they believe, the status they acquired. In Epalanga's case, a transcontinental variant of Portuguese.

The passage from one's native tongue into a larger linguistic horizon certainly has a thrill. I have myself experienced it, – as well as the discomfort of abandoning one's first and innermost modality of expression –, when I ceased to be an academic author writing in Polish and started to write in English instead. Knowing only too well the symbolic rewards of such a decision, I cannot blame anyone who abandons a minor language in order to gain a voice and an opportunity of participation in a larger intellectual or creative community, even if we are to regret so bitterly the loss of linguistic diversity. Concomitant cultivation of two (or more) tongues of expression may appear as an obvious, ideal solution. In practice, such a parallel progress comes at a price that is often too high to pay. It implies the division of time and resources, often leading to diminished efficiency. Those who already at the starting point are forced to face the globalised competition with considerable handicaps simply cannot accept the additional effort of multilingual development.

Such is the case of a schoolchild in Indonesia, speaking a dying tongue while the nearest school is at a distance of many hours of marching through the forest. Although assuming quite different proportions, such is still the case of a scholar from Central and Eastern Europe eager to join the international academia. In both cases, the lure of succeeding comes at the price of adopting one of those “encroaching languages” mentioned by Gikandi. The hegemony of globalised English only exemplifies a much more universal process of language suppression and replacement. It is the same process by which Portuguese replaces Umbundu for the emergent urban middle class in Angola, epitomised by Kalaf Epalanga. It is important to notice that he testifies of a language shift that is no longer to be attributed – at least not in a simple, linear way – to the colonial oppression. The writer belongs to the generation born after the independence, that nonetheless

experiences the loss of language – or rather its relinquishment or deferral – as a part of their present.

Participation as the stake of language choice

Relatively lesser scholarly attention has been dedicated to this process; to speak about relinquished minor languages in terms of rejected marginalisation and increasing participation does not even sound politically correct. Nonetheless, without denying the necessity and urgency of linguistic preservation, it is important and legitimate to ask what costs and consequences it implies for individuals and communities, how it empowers or hinders their participation in the exchange of ideas and the planetary community of shared culture. Behind the endangered languages there are endangered people struggling against poverty, low symbolic status or political oppression. Their choice of abandoning local tongues as a tool of expression is often closely connected with their strive to gain sufficient visibility in the dominating symbolic systems in order to make their voices audible. Contemporary writers are often confronted with the choice between the fidelity to their native tongue and the will of transmitting their story to a larger audience. They choose major languages not only to make themselves published, read or famous, but also to bring to the general awareness the tragedies that are routinely overlooked. Such was the case of Moses Isegawa, a writer from Uganda, who learned Dutch to publish his *Abessijnse kronieken* in Amsterdam (1998); another example is Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo, who chose to subscribe to the Hispanic African movement, instead of cultivating any of the native languages. He did so in order to endow himself with sufficient audibility and symbolic power to challenge the sanguinary regime of Equatorial Guinea. Once again, I chose my examples in such a way as to accentuate the point that the “encroaching language” is not exclusively global English. Also other languages play the same role. It is also important to stress that they are not exclusively a destructive force. “Encroaching languages” play a crucial role as doors that lead to communities of shared values; they serve as important tools for building global networks of solidarity. This is why, long after the end of the colonial period, they are far from being abandoned or rejected; at least not by the creators and intellectuals. Meanwhile, Teodoro Obiang, the bloodthirsty dictator of Equatorial Guinea, tried to sever these links, adopting such apparently “progressive” strategies as banishing the use of Spanish and fostering the education in Fang, the tongue spoken by his own ethnolinguistic group. Native language was to become a subtle form of incarceration of minds in a country transformed into a prison.

Certainly, the distance between the individual defection of a writer and the death of a language is enormous. Nonetheless, such individual creative choices establish trends and paradigms; what is more, they may arguably possess a transhistorical value. The endangered languages of today are those lacking accumulated achievements, literatures, strong traditions that would make them worth preserving, at least in any form of ritualised usage such as a recitation of a poem or chanting of a song. And it is not – as it might be argued – my insufficiently informed or colonially distorted view that matters, but the depreciation of languages by their own users. After all, the languages die, in the first place, because people renounce speaking them and transmitting them to their own children. Certainly, the

motivations of such choices vary; both the lure and oppression acquire varying degrees of intensity across the diversity of local contexts. But the importance and validity of the speakers' choice should not be covered up by any form of political correctness. If the target of linguistic preservation is to be maintained, it should foster creativity in the endangered languages and empower the formation of lasting, valorised and respected canons, as well as communities of shared aesthetic and spiritual values finding in them their expression.

These communities have also the right to participate in the globalized culture, which is nowadays such a lure for everybody. They ought to find their place in the academic world, with such modalities as non-English speaking journals and publications, a reality that currently tends to disappear under the unrelenting pressure of international structures, rankings and organisations. They also ought to be present, through competent translations, on the global literary market. What should be the grail of the present-day work on linguistic diversity is not only to preserve languages as such, but also to foster full participation of their speakers in the world culture as a shared space of knowledge exchange. What is more, this participation should be free from complexes, shyness, the persistent sensation of being minor – even such as I have often experienced as an academic writer in Polish. I can easily imagine that such a sensation could be even more acute for many colleagues working in a number of languages of Central and Eastern Europe, without evoking a variety of distant locations and identities.

Such considerations may be extremely timely, since we are currently at a turning point in which future destinies of participation and marginalization are decided. This is the moment in which a global academic space of a new kind is emerging. New universities are created outside the Western world and develop at an unprecedented pace; what is more, the academic space acquires new characteristics due to digital media. It is thus alarming that only a tiny fraction of this space is actually occupied by minor languages. The scarcity of print (books and magazines are still a rare luxury in an extensive part of Africa, as well as other regions) is apparently a resolved issue due to the emergence of the digital media. Nonetheless, the relative facility of producing and distributing digital materials still has only a reduced impact on the preservation of linguistic diversity. Electronic means, such as computers and the infrastructure enabling the access to the Internet, are difficult to obtain precisely in those areas where the dying languages are located. What is more, the digitalisation of the humanities empowered in the first place the major academic players and fostered their further expansion. It facilitated the global spread of forms of expression they control and dictate (I refer to the use of globally standardised academic English, but also the predominant genres and discourses that, contrasted with the background of the cultural diversity existing worldwide, present relatively few traits of cultural diversity).

Material hindrances are relatively easier to overcome than the deficiencies of competence in dealing with hegemonic symbolic systems. For those who aspire to play an active role in the global exchange of ideas, creating and launching one's own intellectual content, the mastery of a major language is still essential. On the other hand, those who do not achieve such a mastery or do not reproduce the dominant discourse with sufficient fidelity continue reduced to silence. The point that should

be stressed is, once again, that this reality is no longer a simple consequence of the former, colonial and postcolonial forms of symbolic violence (by postcolonial, I wish to evoke the centralising aspirations of the young independent states that have often fostered policies aimed at reducing the linguistic diversity). With the advent of the digital, a qualitatively novel danger of exclusion lurks as a counterpart of new opportunities. It may deepen the abyss between those who are able to participate and those who will remain marginalized.

In search of a synergistic solution

Speaking of the effects of the globalization on the endangered languages, Grenoble and Whaley stress that the assimilation, that is usually seen as prevailing, is not the only factor in play: “Much less examined is the fact that globalizing forces have triggered reacting forces as some people seek to assert, or better to reassert, their unique cultural identity” (2006: 3). Fostering synergy between minor and major languages instead of their contradiction and mutual exclusion is thus a crucial task. Such a synergy requires the creation of paths of participation in the global exchange of ideas directly from the level of native languages. It requires an equitable distribution of symbolic rewards, prestige, recognition and merit among minor and major participants. Only in such a way, shortening the distance between native worlds and the global space of exchange, getting rid of parasitic intermediaries, the diversity of outlooks and ways of experiencing the world, derived from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, will cease to be a mere theoretical construct to become a truly enriching legacy available to global majorities. Meanwhile, the current situation privileges, in quite a disproportionate way, the representatives of the major, English-speaking system of knowledge production. Speaking of intermediaries, I think about unscrupulous researchers and activists coming from major centres, with access to prestige and generous funding, who are often keen to maintain their native collaborators in a subaltern position, denying their ability of conducting independent research on their own. Personally, I could observe similar situations on various occasions, while the preservation of the linguistic patrimony of the humanity continues a major academic industry. This is not a place, of course, to cite names, yet the recollection of my Buryat PhD student, commenting on the unpleasant thrill she felt as she thought she might one day receive the same demeaning treatment she saw reserved to an instructor of Sylheti (a minor language spoken in Bangladesh), is hard to obliterate. The fact that our conversation took place at the SOAS in London, a leading institution presumably dictating the best standards in the domain, indicates how much remains to be done.

Native cultures need to adapt their traditional symbolic instances in order to survive and to affirm their own place in a larger context, confronting both their states and the transnational reality. Meanwhile, in the traditional cultures a homeostatic tendency prevails over the tendency to change. This is why, as I believe, the emergence and empowerment of the native intellectual is a crucial step in this process of adaptation to the accelerated rhythm of development and change that characterises our times. As a paradigmatic figure that opens new questions and creates fields of debate, the intellectual helps the native culture to change, acting against its homeostatic tendencies. This is why the intellectual is a crucial internal

instance, invested with an authority to question and to criticize the established cultural order, provoking a change from within. On the other hand, he or she is responsible for representing the minor culture in confrontation with the external forces, speaking for it to the state and to the international community. Without intellectuals of their own, native cultures are mute and remain silent victims of symbolic – and not only symbolic – oppression.

The emergence and empowerment of the intellectual is closely connected to the question of language. As defined by Edward Said, “the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public” in order to “represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (9). As the Palestinian thinker suggests, the power of the intellectual is linguistic at its deepest level, connected to his or her exceptional mastery of language. “Knowing how to use language well and knowing when to intervene in language are two essential features of intellectual action” (15). It is his or her language mastery that enables the intellectual to dispute the place of the official narrations and to oppose the media controlled by the dominating cultural power; due to his or her literary, discursive, rhetorical excellence, the intellectual is able to express in a convincing way, and thus efficiently represent those points of view that had been absent or silenced.

The role of the intellectual is played both at the intracultural level (representation of the wronged and pointing to the situations of injustice within the community) and in the interaction with external world. The intellectual must thus assume the burden of the multilingual development that I have already mentioned, building a double mastery and a double excellence; certainly not an easy task. It is not enough to cultivate a minor language; if the intellectual is to confront the dominant institutions, he or she must operate with sufficient ease at a non-local level. If his or her voice remains incomprehensible, the community will continue being swept under the rug over and over again. This is what makes the linguistic issue so complex. If the preservation of the local language may be seen as a fundamental aspect of identity, there is still a necessity of adopting any of the “encroaching languages”. Meanwhile, such a pragmatic option risks to become a linguistic Trojan horse. Once the intellectual finds himself or herself at home in the major language, he or she may never truly return to the restrictive domain of the minor one. His or her voice may become sufficiently audible to safeguard the interests of his or her culture and community, but the minor language is lost in the process.

Thus the forced bilingualism of intellectual elites introduces more danger than just the division of creative energy. Such a duality of targets, aspirations and requests demands a constant care in order to preserve a fragile equilibrium. Rather than synergy of minor and major languages, it may create a fissure that impairs the creative development, splitting a native culture into incongruous or opposing currents. This is why the initiatives of linguistic revitalization, often brought into the communities in crisis by foreign researchers and activists, should not appear as isolated projects. They should be inscribed in some larger, holistic vision of cultural development. Linguistic revitalization cannot be understood as a target in itself,

consisting in conservation of a (presupposed) past state, which in many cases is merely a construct or a conviction of the researcher concerning the reality in question. People coming to minor communities with the best intentions are often advocates of an abstraction, of some imaginary state of their cultures; this is why they tend to represent a conservative tendency, opposing the need for a change that the minor participants may see more clearly than the researchers coming with some well-crystallised ideas from their intellectually hegemonic centres. As they appear as lovers of the obsolete, their prestige may act against the cultural change and creative development.

Conclusions

Languages and ethnolinguistic communities are *not* the same as dying zoological species, with which they have been misleadingly compared, since they happen to inhabit the same biodiversity spots. The pace of change in cultural evolution – including the evolution of language – has nothing to do with biological evolution and the threat of extinction that looms over the natural world. People constantly abandon and reinvent their cultural practices; nostalgia of the origins, especially if it is brought into the native words from outside, have no right to prevail over or interfere with the ongoing creative processes. No one has right to privilege any form of patrimony in detriment of the desired change, even if minor communities seem only too keen to abandon their old symbolic stock. Of course, the external intervention may often save some important parts of the legacy that the community is ready to neglect, but no one should feel authorised to impair vital evolution or invert the movements that might possibly lead to new forms of emancipation, even if it happens at a cost of an irrecoverable loss, such as the death of a language.

Projects of intervention in favour of dying languages often encounter a profound scepticism of local communities. Linguistic revitalization should not be a trap or a way of maintaining cultures and communities in their marginalised position. It should not foster the state of self-satisfaction in the margin. Having been taught to feel proud of one's exclusive linguistic patrimony may only sweeten a reality of perpetual exclusion. This is why so many ethnolinguistic communities are much keener to adopt major languages they associate with increased income, prestige, vital opportunities. Including the lure of buying one's own ex-metropolis for a half of the regular price.

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