

“Globalization need not sound the death knell for minor local languages, whether Catalan, Welsh, Ukrainian or Frisian.” Discuss.

“The only way to kill a nation is to kill its language.”¹ If this is the case, why then do so many minority communities succumb to the forces of globalization, and set aside their native language for something more pragmatic? Globalization can be defined as the increased interconnectedness of the world’s markets and culture, resulting in the sharing of goods and ideas across the globe, and has been rapidly expanded by recent technological developments. There are two main reasons for the threat that it poses to minor languages. Firstly, due to the rise of global superpowers (such as the USA and China), it becomes much easier to partake in the opportunities that globalization offers if one speaks an economically dominant language. Secondly, approximately 50% of internet content is produced in English², meaning that knowing only a minor language can greatly limit the resources available for learning, thus perpetuating language decline. Despite this, there are often other prevalent factors that ensure languages are preserved; an innate desire to use language to express culture and thus maintain a national identity, and a potential for creativity that is best utilised with a mother tongue. These concepts will be illustrated with the examples of Catalan, Welsh, Irish, Frisian, and Ukrainian.

The psycholinguist Steven Pinker summarises the role of language as a “biological adaptation to communicate information.” The evolution of the language instinct, alongside that of social learning, allowed for greater co-operation amongst early humans, thus meaning that they were able to develop complex societies, through the accumulation of ideas. Considering the advantageous way in which language enables progression through advanced communication, it seems as though the development of human society as a whole could be furthered if everyone spoke the same language, as the sharing of business and ideas through globalization could be even more rapid. However, it is important to bear in mind another important aspect of human social evolution. As social psychologist Jonathan Haidt explains, all early humans evolved a ‘tribal instinct’, which can be defined as an instinctual desire to form social groups- or ‘tribes’- and to view outsiders as competition for resources. It can be argued that these traits continue to exist in us today, most notably in the nationalist anti-globalization sentiment that is becoming increasingly prevalent, as exhibited in the extreme by the support for ‘closed-door’ politicians and policies, such as the Brexit vote, or the election of Donald Trump as the

¹ Talhouk, S. (2012)

https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_talhouk_don_t_kill_your_language?referrer=playlist-how_language_changes_over_time#t-835916

² (No author indicated) (2018)

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_used_on_the_Internet

president of the USA³. Maintaining traditional culture is common expression of nationalist sentiment, as it is a means of distinguishing societies. The use of language is a vital means for the expression of culture, thus it is likely minority communities will continue to take steps to ensure the preservation of their language, as it is a way of fulfilling the desire to maintain a national identity through cultural expression. This idea will be evidenced through the histories of Catalan, Welsh, and Irish.

The desire to preserve a cultural identity through language is evident in the history of Catalan. Catalan has long been threatened by Spanish dominance; the situation reached its peak in 1939 following General Franco's fascist takeover of Spain. Franco swore to enforce "Spanish nationalism that harboured no expression of the distinct 'minority cultures'"⁴, and all expressions of Catalan culture, including the language, were oppressed. Paradoxically, this merely encouraged Catalans to use their language at home. Maintaining oral traditions became the main way of resisting the authoritarian government- or the Castilian 'tribe' so to speak- and the use of language became the only way to satisfy their impulse to form a collective identity. Upon the return to democracy in 1975, the Catalan language flourished, so much so that it is now the ninth most spoken European language⁵. The history of Catalan proves that the threat of extinction by a dominant language can actually serve to awaken a tribal sense of linguistic nationalism, which only motivates the speakers to attempt to preserve their language as a way to keep their identity alive in the face of oppression. It should also be noted that nearly all Catalans are fully bilingual, speaking both Castilian and Catalan, therefore suggesting that a linguistic balance can be struck- it is possible to participate in a globalized world by using a dominant language, whilst maintaining a sense of linguistic and national individualism.

As is the case with Catalan, the histories of the Welsh and Irish languages also serve to prove that oppressive attempts at language eradication can motivate native speakers to press for revitalization, thus meaning that the spread of dominant languages as a result of globalization need not be the death of minor ones. Both languages have suffered from their close geographical proximity to English speakers. In both cases the ruling English perpetuated the idea that theirs was the superior language, most conspicuously during the 1800s, as the Industrial Revolution meant that English could be portrayed as an international language for business. Irish and Welsh were deemed to be inadequate

³ (No author indicated) (2016)

<https://www.economist.com/news/international/21710276-all-around-world-nationalists-are-gaining-ground-why-league-nationalists>

⁴ O'Connor, C. (2000)

http://scholar.oxy.edu/urc_student/909/

⁵ Boda, I. (2015)

<https://theconversation.com/the-rebirth-of-catalan-how-a-once-banned-language-is-thriving-47587>

peasant languages in comparison, engendering rapid decline. Language revitalization came as a result of bottom-up activism (such as campaigns and activist groups) in both cases, as the people chose to reforge their national and cultural identities through the revival of their language. In turn, knowledge of the language enables access to cultural heritage. As of today, an increasing number of children are attending Welsh Medium Schools (a record breaking 25%)⁶, in contrast to many of their parents, who were unable to do so, lacking opportunity and experiencing humiliation in association with speaking the language⁷. These parents explain they feel that they feel as though they were denied the right to access their cultural heritage by not being able to speak Welsh, and do not want the same for their children. It therefore becomes clear that successful language revitalization is attainable when the desire to preserve a collective cultural identity through language is stronger than any historical stigma that may be associated with speaking it. The importance of nationalism in language revitalization is further emphasised through the lyrics of the de facto Welsh National Anthem “Land of my fathers”, which explicitly states: “the old language of Welsh knows no retreat.”⁸ Therefore, the Welsh example shows language revitalization is crucial in developing and preserving a strong cultural identity.

The revival of the Irish language has also been inspired by this sentiment, and many Irish speakers are second-language learners who want to engage with their cultural heritage.⁹ It is not only in Ireland that people are taking action to do this; the language learning software Duolingo has approximately 4 million Irish learners¹⁰, while 1.76 million speak Irish in Ireland itself.¹¹ Although simply using language learning software is by no means a measure of fluency, these statistics show that there is a substantial interest in learning Irish, most probably amongst people abroad of Irish descent. Once again, this not only highlights the importance of the desire to connect with the culture of our national ‘tribe’ through language learning for the success of language revitalization, but also emphasises that the technology behind globalization can be used to save the very languages that are threatened by it. Overall, the challenges faced by Catalan, Welsh and Irish prove that minor language death can be prevented by the desire for a confident national identity, which is forged through the language and ‘tribal’ instincts.

⁶ Brand, P. (2017)

<http://www.itv.com/news/2017-09-04/back-to-school-but-not-an-english-one/>

⁷ Various authors (2017)

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/23/the-long-struggle-for-the-right-to-speak-the-welsh-and-irish-languages>

⁸ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/music/sites/anthem/pages/anthem-lyrics-en.shtml>

⁹ Wallace, A. (2015)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/the-mini-revival-of-the-irish-language-1.2186677>

¹⁰ <https://www.duolingo.com/courses>

¹¹ Linehan, H. (2016)

<https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/census-2016-says-we-are-older-less-religious-and-speak-less-irish-1.3038927>

Although globalization might require people to turn to dominant languages for pragmatic reasons, there is simultaneously a continued role for minor languages, especially regarding creativity. Still considering the understanding of language as an evolutionary adaptation for complex communication, all languages have evolved a similar function, being as usable as each other when it comes to communicating ideas about the world and the human condition, with concepts and vocabulary specific to each society. As language activist Suzanne Talhouk explains, it is imperative that one gathers creative ideas and material in a mother tongue before starting to write in a second language. She also discusses how cultural ideas and associations are embedded in our mother tongues, are which in turn affect our perception of creative works.¹² The Boas-Jakobson principle states that different languages influence our perceptions by “forcing [their] speakers to pay attention to certain aspects of the world¹³”, such as the sex of a noun or verb tense. Therefore, any creative work inevitably leads to certain language-specific nuances that are often hard to replicate in another language. An example of this is found in Heinrich Heine’s German poem “Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam,” which describes a pine tree’s longing for a palm tree. However, as English common nouns are not gendered, the sexual dimension that is present between the masculine pine tree and the feminine palm tree is lost in the translation to English.¹⁴ As a result, creative works read in the mother tongue contain the greatest abundance of cultural allusions and associations, allowing for a richer engagement. It is therefore evident there will always be a strong desire to partake in the consumption of culture in one’s mother tongue, and enjoy the arts across languages given the means to do so (such as subtitled films), thus globalization’s destructive influence on language may be limited, and increased access to new technologies can even promote the preservation of minor languages.

The way in which the desire to access the arts can benefit language revitalization is evident in the history of Frisian. The Frisians have enjoyed an illustrious literary tradition, most notably the poet Gysbert Japicx, in the early 17th Century, whose plethora of works promoted Frisian to the status of a literary language. The popularity of his works was in part due to their hilarity¹⁵, which is significant for several reasons. Humour is often created through the use of puns, irony, sarcasm, satire and multiple

¹² Talhouk, S. (2012)

https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_talhouk_don_t_kill_your_language/transcript?referrer=playlist-how_language_changes_over_time

¹³ Deutscher, G. (2010) *Through the Language Glass*. UK: Arrow Books, 152

¹⁴ Deutscher, G. (2010) *Through the Language Glass*. UK: Arrow Books, 194-196

¹⁵ Reed, S. (2017)

<http://blogs.bl.uk/european/2017/01/gysbert-japicx-founder-of-frisian-literature.html>

other rhetorical devices.¹⁶ The successful use of rhetorical devices such as these to create humour is dependent on the cultural context, relating to Talhouk's argument that the cultural associations hidden in our mother tongues impact our perception of literature. In addition, the Boas-Jakobson principle highlights the way in which humour is created is different in different languages. Therefore, it becomes evident that our enjoyment of literature is greatly enhanced by engaging with it in a language that we understand both linguistically and culturally. Japicx emphasised this to the Frisians - that their language was the most effectual way to express their experiences through literature - inspiring others to do so for the next few centuries, reminding us that a language's worth is not necessarily measured through its practical capability, but rather through its ability to communicate emotionally with others. As all languages are able to do this, it is evident from Frisian literary history that even the most minor languages can survive the impact of globalization, so long as the speakers are motivated to converse together and to enjoy creative works in their mother tongue.

The significance of language revitalization in increasing access to the arts and vice versa is also seen in Ukrainian. Aware of the importance of the production of creative works in maintaining interest in the language, the language activist Victor Morosov was concerned about the lack of children's fiction published in Ukrainian, which was causing them to read in Russian instead, and therefore start to abandon the Ukrainian language from a young age. Upon the publication of J.K. Rowling's 'Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone' in 1997, he came to the conclusion that if the Ukrainian translation was released before the Russian, this would massively increase children's interest in the Ukrainian language and secure its preservation. Morosov's translations included specific Ukrainian cultural references in place of the British ones that are present in the original books, such as using appropriate Ukrainian alternatives to the distinct accents that Rowling wrote into her work¹⁷. By including these specific allusions to the Ukrainian cultural context, Morosov's translations became immensely more engaging, and Morosov's translations of the first five Harry Potter books sold around 300,000 copies¹⁸, around six times higher than Ukrainian children's books generally sell. Although this could be explained by the universal popularity of the Harry Potter franchise to some extent, it does also emphasise the immense potential of the language for creative expression. In addition, it has been reported that Ukrainian

¹⁶ Attado, S. (2017)

<http://linguistics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-342>

¹⁷ Morosov V. pers com 09-11-2017 Hogwarts, Poulard and Rokfort: Translating Harry Potter at the British Library

¹⁸ Bihun, Y. (2005)

<http://www.ukrweekly.com/old/archive/2005/200532.shtml>

children would actively choose Morosov's translations over the Russian alternatives¹⁹, thus highlighting our desire to read in our mother tongue, owing to the abundance of nuances and cultural allusions, which are not necessarily found when engaging with literature in another language. Although the long lasting impacts of Morosov's efforts have not yet been measured, there is no doubt that he, at least temporarily, raised children's interest in Ukrainian texts, and alerted them to the creative possibilities that their mother tongue offers them.

To conclude, it is argued here that the forces of globalization that could sound the death knell for minor languages are counter-balanced by some fundamental human characteristics: the language instinct in the context of the need for a strong cultural identity, and the need for understanding of one's history and culture. The advancement of globalization driven by constantly developing digital technology, has somewhat ironically enabled increased language revitalization, as more people can access language learning and translation resources than ever before. Bilingualism also helps to resolve this issue, as it allows for both engagement with the opportunities that globalization brings, and the maintenance of connections to native language and cultural identity. In the future, machine learning advancements will likely allow instant, accurate and sophisticated translations, enhancing the benefits technology can bring to language revitalization. However, for the present, as demonstrated here, dominant and minor languages can coexist, therefore "the gathered death of all [one's] kind" need not come to pass.²⁰

¹⁹ Stelmashevska, O. (2007)

<https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/culture/harry-potter-ukrainian-adventures-continue>

²⁰ Malouf, D. (1985) *The Only Speaker of His Tongue*, quote found at Crystal, D. (2006) *How Language Works*. UK: Penguin Books, 342

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