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# Fall 2016 Second Prize Essay

## LINGUISTIC PERSISTENCE

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**"If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head.  
If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart."**

**-Nelson Mandela**

Many people wish they were bilingual in today's world; thankfully I have had the opportunity to become fluent in both German and English—which is an advantage not only because I have been able to experience two different cultures but because I will be able to put my bilingual abilities to use beyond my university days as well. That being said, I have realized that my German language skills have deteriorated quite a bit over the last six years that I have lived and studied in the U.S.. As I was dining at Atria's Restaurant with my parents and two of their friends it really sank in that it was not just me who realized it. While talking about being bilingual and the different cultural aspects between Germany and the U.S., my father said something along the lines of: "Both my wife and I have noticed that his German has worsened over the past few years. He's a 20-year-old guy and his German skills are not at the level they should for a kid his age." A similar situation happened two years prior—when I visited my grandmother in Germany. She bluntly told me: "Your German is shit. Do you never speak it?" Back then I thought that it was only a grandmother jokingly teasing her grandson but over the next few years, every time I spoke German at home, I would be scrambling to find the German word before ultimately giving up and saying the English word. This may not seem like a huge issue to many readers, but seeing your native language skills deteriorate in front of your eyes is scarier than any haunted house could ever be. Our own language is not just a form of communication across countries, it is also a link to the culture and rich history of the specific country. Having this connection fully vanish in front of my eyes would be a metaphorical spit on the grave of my ancestors and the history that is connected to my name and family. Although it is a very easy fix for me by enhancing my German vocabulary and bettering my technical skills, for many individuals around the globe it is a much different situation. Before I continue, I ask you to let me indulge your patience as the background context about language endangerment is vital to understanding the bigger picture of language diversity. There are thousands of languages that are to become extinct over the next few centuries due to the fact that the speakers are slowly dying off and with them their language as well. To understand the severity of language endangerment, one must know the classification system that the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has set in place:

Safe (5): The language is spoken by all generations. There is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language, and the intergenerational transmission of the language seems uninterrupted.  
Stable yet threatened.

Unsafe (4): Most but not all children or families of a particular community speak the language as their first language, but it may be restricted to specific social domains (such as at home, where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

Definitively endangered (3): The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage,

parents may still speak the language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

Severely endangered (2): The language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children.

Critically endangered (1): The youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language but do not use it, since there may not be anyone to speak with.

Extinct (0): There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

In a TEDxUTA talk by Colleen Fitzgerald she said “ 30 languages including English, Arabic, Hindi, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese include more than 4 billion people speaking the language. So if there’s 7 billion people worldwide, and 4 billion speak 30 languages, that does not leave a lot of speakers left for the remaining 6,970 languages.” This puts into perspective how many languages there are across the globe and really how the number of these languages are on the decline and have been so for the past few decades and century. Of the top 30 thirty languages used in the world, English and Chinese are arguably the most prevalent and widely spoken. In David Masci’s article, “Future of Language,” he says linguists and other experts argue that “ the new century will see English supplant many other tongues as the language of everyday discourse” (Masci). This language of everyday discourse is related to the lingua franca. Lingua franca is all about connecting people all around the world with a language that is purely there for communicating and nothing else. The mother tongue is the other side of the argument that will be made throughout this paper. As learning a second language is becoming progressively more important and necessary in today’s world, losing grip of the mother tongue is a valid and serious concern. Every person needs to find the middle ground of learning the influential lingua franca while also still speaking his or her mother tongue. Achieving my proposal will not only benefit oneself, but also the success of mankind as knowledge, wisdom, experiences and much more can be shared with ease. If this does not succeed, the majority of those 6000-7000 languages around the globe are in danger of becoming extinct and with them their culture, history and knowledge.

### Lingua Franca vs Mother tongue

In 1887 Dr. L. L. Zamenhof created a language that was purely there for communication and to allow individuals from different backgrounds to interact with each other without problems. In Nicholas Ostler’s article, “Is It Globalization That Endangers Languages?” he references this language which is called Esperanto. He said “ its spread is an asset to globalization, since it puts more people in touch with each other across the world, but it does not thereby replace any other linguistic competence” (Ostler 591). Many linguists see Esperanto as the perfect solution to the global language endangerment crisis currently taking place but, because it does not have a big speaking group, it has never held the title as the world’s lingua franca; this title currently belongs to English. In late 2000, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi published the government goals in place for the new century with one of the most controversial recommendations being “to make English the nation’s official second language” (Masci). The report said “ Achieving world-class excellence demands that all Japanese acquire a working knowledge of English.” The English language has slowly taken over the business markets all across the globe and it is cementing its place as the

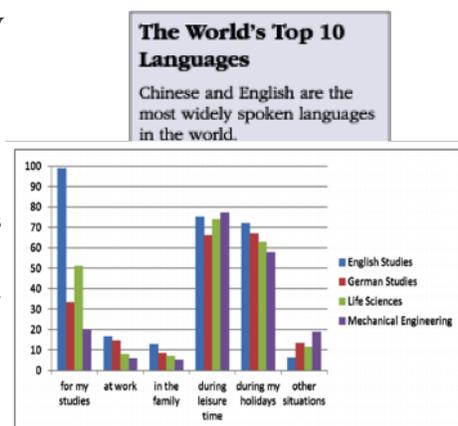


Figure 1: "In which situations do you use English?"

world's lingua franca with former Japanese Prime Minister Obuchi's statement only supporting this fact. In David Masci's article he further explains: " Even in France, known for its resistance to foreign influence, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin recently uttered what amounted to linguistic heresy by acknowledging that the French must learn English, as it is likely to be the world's language someday" ( Masci). He continues to reference the increasing number of English speakers by stating: " This group is likely to grow, as an estimated 1 billion people are currently trying to learn English" and also: " An additional 375 million people use English as a second language in their native countries. While they may speak their nation's indigenous tongue at home, they turn to English to communicate with their countrymen, often at work." A graph in which German students were asked in which situations they use English was created by Claus Gnutzmann, Jenny Jakish and Frank Rabe for their article, "English as a lingua franca: A source of identity for young Europeans," only strengthening Masci's argument of the growing use and necessity in everyday life--English speaking individuals or not.

### **Rise of English as the Lingua Franca**

As English is rising as the business and finance language across the globe, with it rises the social and entertainment aspect. While the U.S. is the center for entertainment--may it be film, music, TV, theatre or writing--it is making English come across as a much needed entity if you wish to succeed in entertainment and life as a whole. Masci uses a quote by John Brough, a professor of philosophy at Georgetown University, in which Brough says: " In the coming century, most people will eventually speak English fluently and use it in their everyday lives. Some people may not entirely give up French or German or whatever their native tongue is, but English will probably be what they use most" (Brough quoted by Masci). In addition Pallavi Nimbawar said, in her article "Renegotiating Linguistic Identities in the Wake of Globalization ;" which was published in the European Scientific Journal, that:

A lingua franca offers its speakers more value and utility by increasing the speakers mobility and by offering more social and economic benefits. Thus happens 'language replacement', and much language shift and language loss could be attributed to this. Thus languages that are considered lacking offering its speakers certain benefits like economic progress and social mobility are considered to be void of any 'instrumental or practical value and albeit some amount of 'sentimental value' remains attached to the native language or the mother tongue, it is often not enough to lend the language enough vigor for sustenance.

As Nimbawar stated, many languages across the globe do not offer as many benefits as English does and thus the respective speakers tend to lean more towards speaking English than their mother tongue. In an article by the New Strait Times called "Reasons why globalization is resisted by Governments," University of Kitakyushu professor of Asian Studies Yoshihara Kunio stated: "Malaysia, for example has not benefited from globalization because the national language cannot be used to create a large manpower to take advantage of globalization and national culture is not strong enough to bind people together" (New Strait Times). Brough and Nimbawar's earlier opinions are valid ones and one can't argue about the effectiveness and simplicity a lingua franca would bring upon, but there is no need for all these knowledgeable and culturally paramount languages to become extinct in the process. There will always be benefits and drawbacks that come up when arguing about a lingua franca, but linguists can come together and have both of their sides heard. In Eric Garland's article "Can Minority Languages Be Saved" he says: " Without question, there will be a need for common languages... But global prosperity and new technologies may also allow smaller cultures to preserve their niches. It is clear from several modern examples that a dying or dead language can turn around become vibrant again, depending on people's determination..." ( Garland 1). An exemplary situation of this is the creation of the International Mother Language Day which celebrates and recognizes Feb. 21, 1952. In the article "Mother language: celebrating the power of

language and identity” by the University Wire, civil engineering major Syeed Iskander recalls this day by stating that on this day “ ... students and workers were shot and killed in Bangladesh for demonstrating the right to speak their first language...” (University Wire). The situation in Bangladesh was a very severe one due to the unwillingness of the government to allow any other languages to be spoken besides their national language. Having a lingua franca across the globe does not mean there needs to be simply one language for all of mankind, yet for many individuals who are part of a community that speaks an endangered language, they believe that further globalization and an official lingua franca will only further push their language and culture to extinction. The main force behind keeping a language thriving is a passionate want to do so by the speakers themselves.

### **Urge and Want to Preserve Languages**

There is not much just a few organizations can do to keep languages alive and secure unless the speakers themselves are adamant about it as well. Eric Garland, from *The Futurist* argues: “ It is becoming clear that, when people have strong cultural reason to reverse language shift, they can effectively resist the onslaught of majority languages” ( Garland 2). Many languages are deeply imbedded into country’s political and social past. Wars have been fought and countries have been divided purely on the languages the various countries citizens speak showing the connection people feel with their native tongue. Linguistic diversity is essential for our society not to become completely homogenous. In the article by University Wire “Mother language: celebrating the power of language and identity”, the President of the Association for Bangladeshi Students and Scholars Raihan Sharif said: “We believe in multiculturalism, we believe in multilingualism, because in the age of globalization, in the age of multi-migration, people are spreading across the world. We try to carry on our legacy and spread the message of our love, our friendship with other people and other cultures” (University Wire). As speakers of the wide array of languages migrate across the world, the one thing that they try to hold onto is their language even if it is difficult at times for some—myself being one of them. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, an author who has been on forefront of fighting for linguistic diversity and language rights, once quoted an anonymous philosopher: “ As long as we have the language, we have the culture. As long as we have the culture, we can hold on to the land.” Through this quote Skutnabb-Kangas proves the significance of languages for people and the need not to lose one’s mother tongue as globalization and migration only further expands.

### **Dying Speaker’s Own Experience**

In an article by the New York Times called “Who speaks Wukchumni?” Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee follows and creates an Op-Doc about the story of Marie Wilcox, the last speaker of the Wukchumni language. For several years Wilcox has worked together with the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival to create a dictionary that will preserve the Wukchumni language long after Mrs. Wilcox passes away. The Wukchumni tribe, which is part of the Yokuts tribal group, is not acknowledged by the federal government and thus makes it even more difficult for Mrs. Wilcox to try to spread the language. In the short documentary profile about the Wukchumni language, Wilcox says: “See, I’m uncertain about my language and who wants to keep it around. Just a few. Its sad. It just seems weird that I am the last one. I don’t know, it’ll just be gone one of these days” (Vaughan-Lee). As the last fluent speaker of the Wukchumni language, she carries the weight of preserving the language and with it the vast reservoirs of knowledge and memories. She is the last chance there is to keep this language alive and without her dedication to do so, it would die off like so many of native languages before hers. Although her actions are good first steps to achieving the ultimate goal of keeping the language alive, not one person can do it alone. There needs to be a communal want and urge to help these endangered languages not become extinct, which is starting to grow within the Wukchumni community, yet Emmanuel Vaughan-Lee adds:

“ Few seem able to dedicate the time needed to learn Wukchumni and become fluent speakers. Without additional resources and interest, I fear the language, in any meaningful form, may soon exist only in Ms. Wilcox’s dictionary” (Vaughan-Lee). Language revitalization and persistence is not simply something that can be achieved by a few individuals or groups, it is a worldwide phenomenon that needs to be in the pushed within each society.

## **Conclusion**

As many of the previous quotes display, the importance of native tongue or mother tongue to migrants is a major factor in many of them being bilingual and having a comprehensive knowledge of both languages. As my family and I moved to the United States, my mother put a big emphasis on purely speaking German in the home because she knew my brother and I would spend the majority of our time in school or doing extracurricular activities in our younger years as well as our teenage years and thus our German proficiency would decline exponentially after a few years. Little did I know that her fear was a grave concern that ended up coming into fruition. As stated at the beginning of my paper, my German skills have deteriorated significantly. If this is the end result in my case, in which my mother put great emphasis on keeping the connection to our fatherland through language, what will the case be for individuals who just simply conform to the official language of the country they have migrated to or of their own country that has a different official language than their own? In the book *Intercultural Communication: An Ecological Approach* by Amardo Rodriquez and Devika Chawla, an article by Norimitsu Onishi called “For English studies, Koreans say Goodbye to Dad” is used in which a Korean family had recently immigrated to New Zealand. The parents signed their sons up for school and were quite proud of their successes in such short time at a foreign school. Onishi said that after a few weeks “ the parents were pleased that their sons had integrated well into the neighborhood and school, and were now even speaking English to each other. But Ms. Kim was worried that her younger son ... might not form a solid Korean identity” (Chawla 73). This is not just an issue that is affecting myself; it is one that affects many immigrants to new countries who don’t know how to balance the two or more languages in their life equally. Losing your first language or mother tongue takes a big chunk out of your personality and identity. In the article “ Languages in Danger of Death - And their Relation with Globalization, Business and Economy” Muhammad Tariq Khan argues: “that spoken language is the most intimate expression of the identity and personality of the people. Language is also the clearest expression of knowledge, wisdom, freedom and culture of the peoples and of their creative spirit.” (Khan). He/she also uses one of Lawrence Berlin’s articles by saying: “ Berlin (2000) reported that people speaking a language among the many feel that there is an integral link between their language and culture and believe that their culture is expressed through their own language and cannot be adequately represented by any other language.” (Khan quoting Berlin ) Do not get me wrong, having a lingua franca is much needed, yet it should not come at the expense of languages that are rich of history, culture and knowledge. By having parents or educators not teach children the importance of bilingualism, the fear of having a homogenous society is a nightmare that just might become reality. The need to, from an early age, have bilingualism be one of the center points of education is becoming more clear now than ever and as globalization continues this will only further increase. In his article Masci quotes Cecilia Munoz, vice president for policy at the National Council of La Raza, who says: “ ... bilingualism should be encouraged since having knowledge of more than one language is very helpful in today’s increasingly global economy” (Masci). Having this mindset not only benefits these children later in life, but it will also save hundreds and hundreds of languages over the next few decades. To conclude, I want to leave you with two more quotes--one by Eric Garland and one by Pallavi Nimbalwar. Garland concludes his article by saying: “ The pressures of globalization on minority languages are undeniable, and many will likely disappear. However, extinction is not a certainty. The

trend toward the homogeneity of global culture has stimulated many people to search for their native roots and hold tighter to their cultural identity” (Garland). Nimalwar, somewhat along the lines, says:

There is no glorification in homogenization if it comes at the cost of multiculturalism and multilingualism. True that the death of certain languages is inevitable, yet we must preserve and save as many as we can, if only to maintain diversity. The threat to languages not only threatens cultural diversity, it leads to the extinction of a community’s identity. A language never dies alone, along dies the vast reservoirs of knowledge, and each last speaker of a particular tongue carries to his grave thousands of years of shared knowledge.

As I leave with these two quotes that stress the importance of linguistic diversity I want you think of a world where there is only one language. It might be easier to communicate, but is not learning new cultures and gaining new knowledge from them one of the things that we strive for as humans? We were not meant to stay within one community but rather experience other cultures and widen our horizons holistically. Conveying these mindsets to the younger minds in our communities will produce open minded, bi or multilingual, successful, and culturally diverse and culturally tolerant humans. Something that is much needed; especially in days like these.

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