



# LANGUAGES IN COMPETITION

Ronald Wardhaugh

# Languages in Competition

*Dominance, Diversity, and Decline*

RONALD WARDHAUGH

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# Preface

Language has become a burning issue in many parts of the world today. Passions are aroused as some languages spread and others decline, and, on occasion, these passions lead to violence of one sort or another. The spread and decline of languages is not a new phenomenon; there is every reason to believe that it is as old as language itself and that competition between languages is to be expected when their 'territories' impinge on one another. What makes the phenomenon so interesting today is that in a world of well over five billion people who speak several thousand languages among them but who are organized into less than two hundred states the opportunities for competition to turn into conflict are considerable.

This book is about language spread – or dominance – and about various languages that have found themselves in competition as a result of that spread. Dealing with every aspect of such a topic would require an encyclopedic treatment. In order to make the topic manageable, I have concentrated on the spread of English and French, on competition between them, and on the way in which each has been imposed on speakers of other languages both within the British Isles and France and outside. I have also included a discussion of a variety of other linguistic situations in the world in order to show how states other than the United Kingdom and France have tried to deal with competition among languages and problems of language dominance and diversity. Finally, I have felt it necessary to mention certain developments that have created recent complications in several more or less stable linguistic situations in the world.

In discussing particular cases, I have tried to indicate trends when these are apparent but have deliberately avoided adopting either a position that language loss is to be deplored in any circumstance or its opposite that states are best served by unilingual populations. I believe that these are opinions not facts, although they are often stated as facts. Readers can let their own personal opinions guide them in this matter, if necessary to conclusions different from mine when I have drawn conclusions.

Facts are themselves, of course, relative. They must be selected and that selection must be motivated by a theory of one kind or another. I have tried to provide a wealth of facts but the selection is mine, guided

by what I have attempted to do, which is to show some of the forms that language competition takes and some of its consequences. Sometimes it has been necessary to state a fact one way rather than another, for example, to choose one version of a name rather than another, e.g., Bern or Berne, Ireland or Eire, etc. The choice I have made implies no political judgement, for in most cases I might just as readily have chosen the alternative.

A book like this should also encourage readers to delve further into the various issues that it raises. Consequently, each chapter ends with some suggested further readings. These are not meant to be at all exhaustive for the topics are vast, but the suggestions should provide the reader with an opportunity to go further into the issues discussed in the book so as to form an independent judgement.

Finally, this book is written by a linguist, a professional student of language and languages. Much of the literature on the topics contained within it has come from historians, political scientists, sociologists, educators, etc. rather than from linguists. It is my belief that linguists must be more prepared than they have been to treat 'real-life' language issues such as those I have dealt with here and I hope that this book will provide a further stimulus to that end.

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# 1

## Language Dominance

It is a well attested historical fact that languages are born and die and experience periods of ascendancy and decline. Today, some languages appear to be prospering: they are acquiring many new speakers and extending their influence far beyond their original bounds; however, others appear to be in retreat before the advance of rivals who may eventually overwhelm them. There is little that is new in this process – it seems to have existed since time immemorial – except the emphasis that the modern world places on language. People seem now to be more conscious than they once were of the importance of language in daily living; language loyalty is associated with ideologies of various kinds; and states now have resources they may use to deal deliberately with matters they heretofore left largely unattended. Some people are also actively concerned with spreading particular languages at the expense of other languages, while still other people concern themselves with attempts to preserve these threatened languages from the effects of such dominance.

The scope of the problem is easy to illustrate. Estimates of how many languages are spoken in the world vary widely – from 4,000 to 8,000 – and 5,000 appears to be a not unreasonable number. Each of these languages offers those who use it a unique way of looking at the world and unique cultural opportunities. However, a very few languages are dominant in the world in terms of the numbers of people who use them. Five languages account for 45 per cent of a world population estimated to reach some six billion by the year 2000: Chinese, English, Spanish, Russian, and Hindi. Altogether a dozen languages account for 60 per cent of the world's population, 25 languages for 75 per cent, and about a hundred languages for 95 per cent. Within even these few though some are currently prospering and others declining. But outside, among the several thousand that exist, many are in serious jeopardy. Essentially what we will be concerned with in the pages that follow are the tensions that are created by situations in which one or more members of the few compete either with one another or with one or more members of the



many and the various types of linguistic competition and accommodation that have occurred in the modern world.

## LANGUAGE SPREAD

All languages are constantly in a state of change, a fact that does not go unrecognized but one which is nevertheless hardly acceptable to those who make part – or the whole – of their living by warning us against the evils they perceive to be inherent in change. But languages also change in their attractiveness to speakers: they change the uses to which speakers put them; they sometimes retrench, losing speakers either entirely (and, of course, ‘die’) or only for certain functions; and they sometimes spread or expand, gaining more uses and users. Most of the factors bringing about change, retrenchment, or expansion are unconscious ones: generally, speakers are not aware of what is going on. However, some changes are conscious: when a government decrees that one language rather than another must be used in certain circumstances, then that is a conscious decision affecting both languages. Language planning, that is deliberate government intervention in language matters, is therefore a factor that must be considered if one is to achieve an adequate understanding of the phenomenon of language spread and how languages gain or lose speakers.

A very first prerequisite to the spread of any language is a base from which to spread or to dominate others. Such a base is also critically important when one language comes under attack from another, that is, when it is threatened by one or more other languages. The larger and more populous the base the greater the degree of security, initially at least, and possibly the most secure base of all is a territory in which the language has exclusive domain. In this way a language may maintain its vitality, particularly if those who use it do so for a wide variety of purposes: they should speak it, write it, work in it, govern themselves in it, publish books in it, use it on radio and television, and maintain contact with those who use the language elsewhere in the world if such people exist. It helps too if the population is an expanding one and if it exhibits considerable resistance to learning other languages. If these conditions are present, the language should at least hold its own. If, however, the language is to spread outside the territory some additional factors must undoubtedly come into play.

The boundaries of a state often appear to offer a language a ‘natural’ area to dominate, particularly if the state is at the same time a nation-state. As we will see in Chapter 3, it is common in the modern world to equate the terms *nation* and *state*, but the equation is scarcely valid,

for few indeed are the modern states which are also nations. Most states are composed of several national or ethnic groups and even states such as the United Kingdom and France enclose groups that sometimes present themselves to others as nations that are more or less 'captive'. However, the equation of nation and state does persist and nearly everywhere language is regarded as a potent unifying and integrating force within the bounds of the modern state, which is seen as the natural domain of a particular language. In those cases in which a state has had to recognize more than one language the resulting situation is often fraught with danger. A single language appears to offer people who must live together under a single government a system for achieving a shared set of beliefs and a common ideology and, of course too, a shared medium for pursuing the mundane matters of everyday life. Many states are engaged in the active promotion of one or more languages within their territorial bounds in order to foster the creation of a 'national' identity and this even in cases when all that really exists are states that are but the chance creations of political 'accidents', as are many of the states of modern Africa. We may even view the United Kingdom and France as states which are in the late stages of becoming nations, with pockets of resistance on their geographical peripheries, pockets which continue to resist, although not very successfully, the dominance of the English and French languages respectively.

If the authority of a state is to appear legitimate to those who live within its bounds, certain basic issues must be resolved during the state-building or nation-building process. Individuals must achieve some sense of common identity or membership in a single community. They must also come to recognize the legitimacy of the state's authority over them and comply with its edicts. They must feel a sense of involvement in the affairs and decisions of the state rather than a sense of isolation from what happens and a resulting powerlessness. There must also be a feeling that rewards are fairly distributed and not dependent on inappropriate factors. And, finally, where a person happens to live should not affect the life chances of that individual: peripheral geographic areas should be treated equitably with those that are more central. We can easily appreciate how important a factor a common language or, when there is more than one language in the community, an equitable language arrangement is in achieving these goals and why those who seek to develop a sense of belonging to a particular state promote the kinds of language policies they do. That there should often be resistance is also not surprising as people reject those policies or realize that they fail to meet many of the objectives for which they are apparently advanced. In the modern state language can therefore easily become a symbol of either unity or resistance.

It is probably only in the modern world that language has become such a powerful political symbol. Language has become symbolic of nationalism, and nationalism is a modern phenomenon. In the pre-nineteenth century world languages diffused and contracted as empires expanded or fell, or religious systems flourished or declined, or mercantile patterns changed. There was little direct management of language affairs by states and empires. Directives, orders, and laws there were, but these tended to affect the few rather than the many and to guarantee administrative convenience rather than define long-term policies. It was only with the rise of nationalism in the late eighteenth century that language became symbolic of nationality and could be used as a focus for political and cultural struggle. It could also at the same time be used to expand a state's power both within and without and to resist similar expansionist policies of other states. Language diffusion could be managed and, because it could be, it was.

Sometimes that management has been quite brutal. In France one politician, Barrère, declared that 'fanaticism speaks Basque, hatred of the Republic speaks Breton'; he was prepared to tolerate only French, 'the language of reason'. In Spain Franco once dismissed Catalan as the 'tongue of dogs' and excluded it, along with Basque, from public life. But even in the anglophone world there has been little tolerance of languages other than English as the Welsh or Irish can readily attest, or the French in Canada, or most immigrants to North America. President Theodore Roosevelt was not alone in believing that there was room in the United States for only one language; indeed his sentiments are still echoed as we can see in recent attempts to have English declared to be, by constitutional amendment, the official language of the United States.

Some states try to resist allowing language issues to dominate the political agenda. As events in countries as disparate as Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, India, Sri Lanka, the USA, and the USSR have shown, language can be a divisive, even explosive, issue when people are allowed to align themselves for political purposes according to the languages they speak. Modern political life favours arrangements which encourage the formation of political parties along social or economic class divisions and discourages those made to support linguistic, religious, or regional differences. The latter are seen as direct threats to the state itself. Consequently, attempts may be made to take these out of politics through the imposition of a single language in the first case, separating matters of Church and State in the second, and adopting regional equalization programmes in the third. Thus people can be safely left to organize along what are considered to be the rational dimensions of class and economic interests and discouraged from employing their 'primordial' feelings for like ends.

Speaking a particular language is also often closely related to expressing a certain nationality or identity. With change of language may come a shift in nationality or identity. In fact, there is a widespread belief that a shift in language often brings about a shift in identity and there may be resistance to adopting a new language because the new identity is unwelcome. Of course, the opposite can happen: the new language and the new identity may be actively promoted or pursued. On occasion people may go so far as to fear that taking words into their language from another language will weaken their identity and pose a threat to their continued existence. They may strive therefore to maintain the 'purity' of their language and keep it 'uncontaminated'. In contrast, still others may willingly learn a pidginized variety of a language or a lingua franca for the usefulness it will have in their lives and feel no identity crisis at all. The options available to individuals are many: English is resisted in Quebec because it is perceived to threaten French identity there; immigrants to the USA often willingly surrender the languages they bring with them in their quest for a new identity; the use of pidginized English in Nigeria and of Swahili in East Africa creates few problems of identity; and in Ireland there is only the most tenuous connection between the Irish language and identity, the Irish variety of an adopted language, English, having come to serve the Irish people quite well.

Today, states and groups within them deliberately promote languages and/or raise barriers to the diffusion of languages: they encourage the use of one language at the expense of another or others; they deliberately restrict the uses of one or more languages; they employ special alphabets or writing systems; and so on. They do all of these things in attempts to encourage the use of one language while discouraging the use of another or others, and a move to increase the dominance of one language may well be met with a move to try to ensure that the existing diversity remains. Furthermore, as we will see, not all the attention is given exclusively to their internal linguistic affairs. Modern states are not completely independent entities; the nature of the modern world requires of states a considerable interdependence and few are the states that have not recognized this fact. Therefore, most states are likely to feel the effects of decisions made in other states; and a decision made about language in one part of the world may have consequences in distant places. The modern world may not yet have become a 'global village', but certain events in it do not go unnoticed and certain kinds of language events have become particularly noticeable in the last several decades.

## FACTORS IN SPREAD

Just as states are interdependent so are languages; they too influence one another. Languages expand and contract both within states and without. Many different factors influence such expansion and contraction; nor do these factors remain fixed. As we will see, factors including religious expansion, migration, economic policies, geographical isolation, urbanization, administrative convenience, and so on, all or separately or in some combination, can affect what happens to a particular language. The effect itself may be limited to a specific part of a state, or it may extend to the whole state, or it may be felt far beyond the bounds of a single state or even a single region of the world. As we look at how languages have spread or are spreading in various parts of the world, we will see that, as times and places change, so the factors responsible for the spread either change or relate differently to one another. However, the factors themselves seem to cluster into a few broad areas.

A necessary but apparently not sufficient condition for a language to spread is that there be the geographical opportunity for one language to spread into the domain of another language or other languages. There must be routes of some kind into the other. These can be the routes that rivers and seas provide or historic trade routes. They can also be the routes of migration and conquest, routes which also often have serious consequences for the movement of whole populations. Languages have spread and come to dominate new areas because of various invasions of Europe and Asia, the movements of populations in Africa, the 'opening' of new continents, and the establishment of patterns of trade in areas like the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, the coasts of Africa, and, in recent decades, across the whole world but modified by an overriding political allegiance to either the 'East' or the 'West'. The Ancient Greeks spread their language through their colonization of the Mediterranean; their language went along with their trade, religion, and culture. In the nineteenth and twentieth century speakers of Amharic spread themselves through Ethiopia largely as a result of military conquest but it was the availability of road systems and towns on those systems that enabled them to spread their language and consolidate its position in the newly acquired domains.

Towns and cities are very important factors in achieving language dominance, particularly capital cities and trade and commercial centres. Towns tend to dominate the surrounding rural areas and their influence radiates out to those areas. They also become interconnected in the transportation systems that develop and achieve additional strength and

influence from the resulting cross-fertilization. They become government, social, cultural, and economic centres. They attract people, particularly in the modern world where urbanization is an almost universal phenomenon. Cities are viewed as progressive and the countryside loses its attraction, particularly to the young and mobile. Consequently, it is in cities that languages come together, solutions are often found to problems of language diversity, and then these solutions held out as models to surrounding areas. We cannot ignore the influence of London in the United Kingdom or Paris in France as urban centres from out of which English and French were promoted. Nor must we fail to appreciate why the French of Quebec moved in the 1960s and 1970s to preserve Montreal as a French-speaking city and reverse the movement toward English there. Likewise, we can appreciate why the Welsh and Bretons view as disastrous the loss of towns in their midst, both big and small, to English and French respectively and why many Ukrainians deplore the fact that Kiev has become a Russian-speaking city. What happens in urban areas seems critically important to what eventually happens to a language: its ultimate prosperity, its holding its own, or its eventual demise.

Military conquest appears to be one of the most important factors in accounting for the spread of languages. It is often the 'motor' that drives a language along a particular route that is available to it. Latin, Greek, Arabic, and Turkish were all spread by military conquest. As Brosnahan (1963) has indicated, each of these languages was imposed over a particular area as a result of military conquest and, once imposed, maintained by force there for several centuries. Eventual survival of a language imposed in such a way may well depend on the linguistic characteristics of the area under control. If that area is multilingual in nature, then the imposed language may well take firm root: it is promoted as a necessary unifying force. That was certainly the case with Latin, Greek, and Arabic, but not entirely the case with Turkish in the Ottoman Empire for there serious competition came from other languages, particularly Arabic. We can contrast the above situation with that of French in England after the Norman Conquest or of Swedish in Finland; in each case an attempt was made to impose a new language in a monolingual area but the attempt eventually failed.

It is also instructive to compare how the French and English went about spreading their languages as they became involved in imperial adventures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To the French an important part of their imperial mission was the *mission civilisatrice*, (civilizing mission), the desire to create yellow, brown, and black French people having the same ideals and views as those of metropolitan France. At that time many people – not just the French themselves – gave a

supremacy to French culture in the world; consequently, the French were determined that their language should be given a special place in their imperial possessions and that local languages, no matter what their historicity, were to be ignored or spurned. French colonies were to be regarded as parts of France in certain respects, even in some cases as *Départements d'Outre Mer* (Overseas Departments), e.g., Algeria. Still, today, many of the leaders of the post-colonial francophone world accept the validity of some of these claims about French linguistic and cultural preeminence; it is an important residue of earlier military conquest and one that continues to have a profound influence on what is happening to languages in various parts of the world, particularly in Africa.

In contrast, the British were much more pragmatic as they pursued their imperial ambitions. They spread English along with their empire but they did so for pragmatic reasons. They were also prepared to recognize the value of the various vernaculars in whatever primary education they supported. Nor was there the same dominance of the resulting empire from a central headquarters: London was not Paris. Local arrangements and compromises were possible. The English language was highly privileged, to be sure, but other roads to salvation were also available: you could remain Muslim, Hindu, Malay, or Chinese and use your native language and not necessarily feel pressured to be somehow British if you wanted to prosper in the colonial possessions themselves. In fact, the British did not want their colonial peoples to feel 'British'; it was enough that the British Empire should work and that the subject peoples should remain loyal to it. In the French Empire, however, you had to be prepared to assimilate to French ideals and culture through the medium of the French language if you wanted to prosper. But there was a key difference: once 'civilized' or 'evolved', you could prosper in France as well. Military conquest achieved different results in the two empires so far as language was concerned and much of the present-day spread of European languages in the continent of Africa can be explained as the lasting effects there of military conquest.

Military conquest is, of course, reversible and even when it appears not to be reversible there can be resistance that can last for centuries. Resistance is still apparent in such long-established political entities as the United Kingdom and France. English was spread throughout the British Isles to bring about a certain kind of cultural and national unity in the wake of military conquest and unification; in the same way French was spread deliberately within France. English and French were used to promote a national identity for those who found themselves within the areas ruled from London and Paris respectively. However, within both the United Kingdom and France we can see continued

resistance to languages' being used to promote a feeling of national identity which is to supplant some other identity. For example, in Wales, Brittany, and Occitania, to cite just a few instances, there is considerable resistance to any further spread of the majority and dominant language of the country; many people still do not want to be 'included' with the majority, and for them the surviving minority language remains as a last, often somewhat token, defence against final, complete conquest.

Political control is the most direct result of military conquest. Language is an instrument of politics, and the state wields its influence through the choices that it makes in the language, or languages, of administration, law, the military, education, and so on. Benefits and inducements can be held out. In the Roman Empire a knowledge of Latin could lead to social and political preferment, to material rewards, and even to full citizenship with all the attendant rights and privileges. In the Greek Empire the great inducement to learn Greek was the opportunity such learning brought to enjoy the advantages of life in the flourishing business, social, and cultural Greek colonies of the Mediterranean. Undoubtedly in this process of hellenization the business advantages were a stronger factor than the cultural advantages for those who sought them: the latter probably followed the former for the few who also found such advantages attractive. Today, political ideas cross national boundaries even without the benefit of the kinds of imperial motives characteristic of previous eras. Contemporary neo-imperialism is of a different kind, as ideologies compete with one another and languages find themselves used as weapons of considerable importance in the world-wide competition for minds and power.

Religious factors can also be important in the spread and decline of a language: they can either help or hinder. For example, the spread of Islam has been an important factor in the spread of Arabic. As they spread their religion, the Arabs were able to absorb many different cultural characteristics and make them their own. However, concurrently, they spread Arabic as the unifying holy language, the key to their holy book, the Koran, and entry into Paradise. In like manner, the English and French languages were associated with the spread of Christianity, although once again perhaps not so strongly in the case of English as in the case of French. The English were much more willing than the French to use the vernacular languages they found for the saving of souls. Religion is also an important factor in the spread of Swahili in East Africa. It is also a factor that restricts to some extent any further spread of English in that continent: in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the association of English with Christianity leads Muslims to resist English and encourages them to prefer either Arabic or Swahili. Likewise, the spread of Amharic has met with resistance in Ethiopia among the



minority Muslim population, who regard it as an agency of Coptic Christianity. In the Roman Empire Greek was preserved well into the fourth century as a language of culture but a growing Christian Church came to oppose the 'paganism' of Greek and that opposition, along with the breakdown in the learning system caused by invasion and insurrection, led to the abandonment of that language. Sometimes the spread of language and the spread of religion are largely independent: when the Spanish colonized the Philippines they left their religion behind rather than their language, but with the French in the Maghreb it was their language rather than their religion that remained on their departure.

One aspect of language spread that has been frequently noted is the relationship between the spread of religions and the scripts in which various languages are written. Christianity has resulted in the use of romanized scripts for many disparate languages and the spread of the Islamic faith was accompanied by the spread of the Arabic script. The Hebrew script has been used not only for Hebrew but also for Yiddish and even at times for Spanish, Arabic, and Persian. The spread of religion can also bring about the adoption of different scripts for what is really the same language, e.g., for Serbian and Croatian, and for Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi. Serbs and Croats understand each other's spoken words just as speakers of Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi understand one another; however, each has a different script which reinforces the sense of using a different 'language'.

Historic factors are not unimportant. Languages can have historical and cultural prestige. They can even be endowed, sometimes retrospectively, with such characteristics during the process of an attempt at 'revival'. The classical varieties of Latin and Greek still have prestige in the Western world. Arabic is a language of prestige in many parts of the world because of its strong religious affiliation and its undoubted past glories. English and French are both languages of prestige almost everywhere, but the French often worry that English appears to have eclipsed their language and constantly seek ways to preserve what influence it still has in the world. Minorities who see their languages threatened tend to claim what they regard as historic rights to their tongues and often point to past glories in justification.

However, the prestige, historical or contemporary, local, national, or international, that a particular language or variety of a language enjoys cannot account for its spread in all instances. There are too many counter-examples, whether they are the persistence of local varieties of French, e.g., of Jòal in Quebec or of Creole in Haiti, or of nonstandard vernaculars throughout the English-speaking and French-speaking worlds, but particularly where the languages are most 'native', i.e., in the British Isles and in France. Prestige is an important factor in the