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LINGUA FRANCA: An Analysis of Globalization and Language Evolution

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Honors Project

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Language is an integral part of the human experience. The languages humans have developed have taken millennia to evolve and spread throughout every corner of the globe. Language has become more than a means of communication; it has become a cultural and identifying feature of many people. Thousands and thousands of years ago, the spread and distancing of languages gave birth to new dialects, which became new systems of speech entirely. That newborn language is now an important feature of the people who birthed it. The words that were important to them become emphasized, and new words for new concepts come into reality for the first time. A group of people settled in the Arctic may create dozens of words for snow, but a desert people have no such concept or word. As thoughts evolve, culture evolves. As culture evolves, so does language.

Linking languages to culture and experiences lends itself to a mindset where all languages should be equally important and evenly diffused throughout the world. A planet in which every person has access to every ounce of human knowledge in the form of language surely would result in an intellectual growth. If this is the case, why are only some languages broadly spoken? Why do languages stop spreading? Why do grandparents refuse to pass down their native tongues to children, and why can students only select certain languages to learn in schools? Why are Americans not speaking Apache Navajo, or Cherokee right now? The fact is, the cultural and historical evolution of languages has not lead to the expansion of all languages. Rather, globalization has created an environment that destroys languages.

It is estimated that fifty to ninety percent of the world's languages will be extinct by the turn of the century (Nuwer). There are many reasons why languages become extinct, and many ways of preventing this from happening. The loss of language is a loss of culture and human knowledge, so in this day in age, why is it still happening? The following essay will adress how globalization has effected language and dying languages can be preserved.
In order to better understand the ebb and flow of language evolution, it is beneficial to look at the roots of how languages form. According to Phillip Lieberman, language began 500,000 years ago in apes. This form of language cannot be compared to what humans speak now; it was rudimentary and lacked the individuality of modern language. Around 260,000 years ago humans developed vocal tracts that allowed for complicated vocal expression. This provided the first form of vocal inflection, tonal shifts, and advanced language (Lieberman). Humans could now differentiate a surprised sounding sentence from a sad sounding sentence. Thoughts could be expressed more freely and without restriction, but this change in the vocal cords had a drawback: the new structure of the throat increased the risk of choking. Why would humans evolve a feature that made it harder to eat; a basic survival function? It was at this point that the need for advanced communication and individual expression became more important than the need to efficiently eat. Once humans evolved the intelligence to hunt effectively, it was easier to get food. In order to optimize hunting, a new range of vocal cords were in order. This advanced system of language goes beyond basic survival needs and into the development of culture.

There are four main components of a culture: a cultural trait, a cultural complex, a cultural system, and a cultural region (Chapter 02 – Diffusion of Languages). A cultural trait is a smaller distinguishing characteristic a people have developed, for example, whether somebody eats with chopsticks or a spoon. A cultural complex is a identifiable systematic structure, like a certain method of farming. A cultural complex is something like language or religion: a unifying and overarching characteristic the entire people share. Lastly the cultural region is the geographic area in which this culture is based (Chapter 09 – Diffusion of Languages). All of these attributes are capable of spreading, becoming lost, or changing over time. Each aspect of a culture is incredibly important, but amongst all of them, language is the most noticeable to others and the easiest aspect of a culture to identify. Can we separate language from culture? Lieberman argues language is strictly based in the need to
communicate and nothing more. However, if culture was not just as important as communication, humans could afford to speak using only impersonal grunts and gestures. Socialization and family bonds became a strength for humans, and with it came social survival rules and guidelines. Without these complicated ties and expressions, humans may not have evolved enough to reach where we are today. It can be argued that in some form, culture is as basic a need as eating or sleeping for people.

“Language is one of the cornerstones of national identity, cultural unity, and community cohesion. It is the most important cultural glue—an aspect that binds a culture together—because without language, there would he no culture” (Chapter 09 – Diffusion of Languages).

After hundreds of thousands of years, the first languages as we know them began in Africa and spread through the word as people migrated. There are three ways languages have historically spread: through religion, commerce, and conquest. Before any advanced communication technology, these were the only methods of spreading language and culture. It took a long time for languages to move in this way, even in the case of conquest. Since it took a much greater time to communicate with far away regions and since humans were not as mobile in the past, it was not always mandatory for the conquered to learn the language of the conqueror. Languages would shift, blend, or change naturally and slowly. It was not until recently that languages like English spread so rapidly or so dramatically. It is thanks to new technology and mobility that the language shift has increased in speed. In a global community, it is economically beneficial to learn a single, dominant language.

To summarize, languages are important culturally and historically. Until recently, the evolution of languages occurred over a long period of time, which allowed for languages to adapt rather than become executed. The loss of language in this manner often reflects a loss of cultural identity for a small or isolated people.
Over the past five-hundred years, languages have spread in a different way. The biggest contributor to rapid language change is colonialization. Colonization has spread several dominant languages around the entire world faster than they would have spread in the past. Salikoko Mufwene elaborates on the varying responses languages can have to colonization: “From the point of view of language contact, the consequences of colonisation have not been uniform. Although several languages have died in the process (e.g. Celtic languages in Western Europe and several Native American languages), new ones have also emerged (e.g. English out of the contact of Germanic languages among themselves and with Celtic languages, the Romance languages out of the contact of Vulgar Latin with continental south-western European Celtic languages, and today’s pidgins and creoles out of contacts typically of Western European with non-European languages in some extra-European colonies during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries)” (Mufwene 4-5). As described in the previous quote, many different effects can be found. A creole or pidgin language describes a blending of two languages to create a third that is similar, yet distinct. The creation of pidgin languages proves useful when communicating with two different language groups; the pidgin language merges the two often for trade purposes. It differs from a dialect in that it has evolved beyond either of the languages it once stemmed from, and has become a new thing entirely, nearly indistinguishable from any previous language. Pidgin languages preserve aspects of the languages it comes from. One of the worst effects on language that stemmed from colonialization is the uniting of our world through globalization.

Globalization describes the collective community around the world, shared between all types of people. Globalization creates a standard in economics, politics, business and trade, so that the whole word may connect and compete with each other. It unites the world in a lot of ways and offers people everywhere more opportunities to become involved throughout the globe. Globalization is an inclusive development in many regards, except when it concerns language. How are hundreds of different tongues supposed to communicate with each other on a global forum?
The arrival of a Lingua Franca helps solve the communication issue. Lingua Franca is a word that describes the most commonly spoken language of an era. A millennium ago, the lingua franca was Latin. Now, the lingua franca is English. English is the standard language used in education, trade, negotiations, or anything else that involves global connections. English is a very powerful language, and understanding it allows access to the world.

English is so powerful it is often chosen over indigenous languages. It is more beneficial in a global economy to learn a common language like English, Spanish or Portuguese than to maintain a less common language. For example, one study of Meso-American language speakers in Florida measured the likelihood of parents to teach their children their indigenous tongue. The parents see no use in keeping alive a language nobody else in their area will use, so they often neglect to teach their children it at all. “The language use data combined with the desire for language maintenance seem to predict eventual intergenerational Meso-American language loss among the MesoAmerican speakers in Wiregrass country. With clear economic incentives attached to English, one hundred percent of the respondents wanted their children to learn English. For a variety of reasons, one hundred percent of the respondents also wanted their children to learn Spanish. Pride in Spanish and to its use as a lingua franca among Indigenous peoples of Latin America is common” (Gladwin). For these parents, it is more viable to give their children connections in the American and Spanish cultures present in their lives. Detached from their place of origin, learning a Meso American language in Florida has no benefit for the children. Thus, the language is lost overtime, and with it a loss of culture. The children are adopted into mainstream American or Latino culture, and their roots are forgotten.

At its core, language is spread by teaching it to children. Without children to carry on the tradition of speaking it, a language will die. This trend did not start with the onset of global communication. Unfortunately, racism and contempt for indigenous languages also plays a large part in language extinction. An example of this is found in the colonization of the Americas.
overseas, Europeans brought firearms, disease, and destruction to the Americas. For the native people, it was adapt or die. They had to learn to speak English or Spanish if they wanted to survive, and as time went on, they had to learn these languages if they wanted to trade or gain any money. Adults actively scolded children for speaking an indigenous language, and up until this past century, so did schools. An American child could be physically disciplined for speaking a Native American tongue up until the mid 20th century (Marr). A stigma became associated with native speakers; they were often isolated and poor due to centuries of discrimination and oppression. To the white majority, native speakers were uncivilized, uncultured, and un-American. This stigma still exists today. The only response to this is to either live isolated from the mainstream and choose not to participate in the global world, or to adapt to it and forsake the native culture and language. Globalization makes it hard for small languages to flourish.

A profound example of this loss is found close to home – the Mingo people in West Virginia have lost their language over years of systematic erasure. Native American boarding schools explicitly forbade the speaking of the Mingo language, and centuries of unuse has left the world with one remaining Mingo speaker, who lives in Finland. The Mingo people have no connection to their language, or culture, and have been pushed away to live in poor reservations or ghettos. This is not an environment that encourages rediscovering a lost language, that when ranked globally, does not make the list of economically viable languages (Wells-Jensen). There is not any economic benefit to learning Mingo. However, these people feel lost without a connection to their past, and want to learn it, despite its difficulty. They are eager to learn the language, but how will they practice it? There is nobody to speak this language with, it has no pragmatic use, and nobody even knows it exists. There is no way to assimilate back into the Mingo culture, nor is there any way to raise the next generation of Mingo speakers and bring it back into the world. It is a terrible trap set into place over time that will, for all
intensive purposes, keep this language dead. This kind of extinction happens all over the world and should be stopped. But how is it possible to reverse centuries of language loss?

It seems like a nearly impossible task to fix the problems globalization has caused for languages. Economics unfortunately plays a big role in language preservation. It is expensive to seek out the final speakers of a dying language and create dictionaries for it. Linguists often will not be able to get funding to save a language if it does not have an explicitly global benefit. For example, unless an Amazonian language can teach us about undiscovered plants and medicines, nobody will want to sponsor its recovery (Wells-Jensen). Linguists too often come from a position of privilege or are outsiders. It is hard to give a language and culture due respect as someone from the outside. Re-teaching the languages to people and making them economically viable again is difficult. It also is hard to combat the power English has over people; be it radio, television or accessibility, English is a popular and immersive thing to speak (Saving America's Endangered Languages). The loss of culture and insight into the human experience makes all languages worth saving, however.

One thing that can be done is to work around English as a Lingua Franca. One way to do this is to create a democratized global pidgin English (Fiedler). A pidgin English will be a mixture between English and various other languages. This will make it more accessible to many groups of people who would otherwise have to learn an entirely new language. For example, it is easier for a Spanish speaker to learn a Spanish-English hybrid than to learn English all together. This also creates a pidgin language that would be spoken only in situations of global importance, like business and economics. In the private life, it would be easier for native languages to survive.

Hiring interpreters at global forums also can help reduce the importance of English. Studies have shown that people in a global assembly who have learned English as a second language have less understanding of the proceedings than native English speakers. This shows that learning English is not always a bandaid solution. When an interpreter was hired in, the understanding of the events became
much more clear for the non-English speaker. If there were interpreters for many different kinds of languages, we might hear a language like Qechua spoken at the next United Nations meeting. This action promotes unity, respect, and will allow participants to keep their native language (Fiedler).

Immersion schools are becoming more popular around the world, too. Language evolution starts with children, so if children actively learn and speak an endangered language in school, they are more likely to carry it on. This creates an environment in which it is acceptable and encouraged to speak a language, and an environment in which they are surrounded by the language. New Zealand has some of the most successful Maori immersion schools in the world. In the early 1900s, ninety-five percent of Maori children spoke the language. By the 1970s, that number dropped to 5%. Now, there are about 13,000 middle school students enrolled in the program (Calman). The language and culture is kept alive through these children. If schools like this are encouraged and found everywhere, it would help bring back languages in their original locations.

Finally, there are acts anyone can do at their own pace and time. Things like the Ester Martinez Native Language Act encourages funds to be delegated to Native American language and culture preservation programs (Cultural Survival). There are ways to support local ethnolouges and create online dictionaries filled with words from dying languages. Volunteering to learn about different cultures and supporting people as they speak different languages is something anybody can do. The support one can give to native speakers as they try to make their language relevant again is vital. For example, one of two of the last native Yaghan speakers in Chile has published a book called *Hai Kur Mamashu Shis*: “I want to Tell you a Story.” This book is full of stories, proverbs, and language from native people from Tierra del Fuego – a people who are nearly all gone due to genocide from the Spanish colonialists. Buying this story keeps the Yaghan culture alive in one more person. One last thing anyone can do is to encourage people to speak their native tongue, and to ask them to teach some
things about their language. Inclusivity and acceptance can make a small difference for one or two people, but that difference has the potential to effect generations as it grows.

It is my hope that I can encourage someone to learn more about languages and how to preserve them. I have created an animation that abstracts language evolution in the Americas, and that will hopefully spark emotion and motivation to take action in its viewers. There are a variety of reasons languages go extinct, but Lingua Franca focuses on one common scenario of language erasure. Colonialism has influenced language evolution all over the world. From across the sea, a more globally established language can wipe out a smaller, more isolated language group. Genocide, disease, enslavement, or punishment can drive peoples to forget their native tongue. In modern times, parents will not pass along their language to their children because they believe it is more beneficial in a global economy to learn a language of business. When children stop learning languages, the languages become extinct.

Linguists today are trying to preserve these dying languages, but often the cultures surrounding these languages are lost and it is not feasible to speak this language with anyone. It is up to us to try and encourage the preservation of language and culture and create a world where people can feel free to speak the languages of their heritage.

These ideas are reflected and abstracted in the animation Lingua Franca. The influence of foreign powers is represented by a silver virus, which changes anything it touches to silver. The specific circumstances behind the spread of the silver virus are vague, because this situation has happened across the world, not just in one specific area. However, the houses, the forests, and the character designs are based on the Taino people of Cuba. Careful research has gone into creating culturally appropriate outfits and houses. Lingua Franca can be a reflection on colonization, the spread
of global commerce, pop culture, or an assortment of other things. However, I created this piece with language distribution specifically in mind.

Every aspect of my animation symbolizes an aspect of the language spread. The silver virus comes from overseas, just as the Spanish, English, and Portuguese did years ago. The fruit that the main character holds represents the means to learn and continue speaking language. Fruit is food; it is eaten to survive, just as language is spoken. Both eating and speaking involve the mouth, and the fruit and the language are often specific to only one area. The protagonist returns to her village to find chaos; how do people react to having their language taken? Some are sad, some are angry, and some accept it. Despite what the adults think, however, it is the children who are effected by a new language first. They speak what is most often spoken to them, and will be the first ones to learn a new language and forget an old one. The central tree in the village is the core of their traditions and the bearer of the fruit they eat. It represents the last stronghold of their culture. When it turns gray is when the village as a whole has decided to abandon their native language, in order to survive. There is no more nourishment for their native language, so in order to survive they must eat silver fruit. The green girl is the only green person left at the end of the animation – what does she do? This is left up in the air. She may become the last native speaker of the language and when she dies, the language goes with her. However, she left her last green fruits on the beach, in order to be discovered by an outsider – a foreign linguist. This linguist takes and preserves all the green artifacts he finds, in order to keep the culture alive in whatever way he can. However, the isolated items he finds cannot compare to the green civilization that once existed. What happens next is also up in the air. Does he plant the green fruit and let it grow? Does he eat it for himself? Whatever action the viewer believes to be right is the action they should take themselves. Follow the linguist’s story in your own shoes.
Continued in this vein is a series of six digital prints called “I Speak.” It features portraits of six different people from six different continents speaking six different dying languages. These images are frozen on a page, yet they demonstrate speaking, as the subjects are drawn saying, “I speak” in their language. The viewers in Northwestern Ohio will likely never encounter these languages or hear them spoken, much like in the drawings, yet they still speak. The background of these images contain dictionaries of their languages, which more often than not, are poorly displayed, old, and chopped up pieces of a dictionary online. These dictionaries are hard to read, hard to find, and offer no insights on pronunciation or accentuation. The only access we have to these languages here is through these disconnected and inaccessible word banks: which is not enough. It is my hope through this series that I will provide more tangible exposure to these languages, associate a face with a language, and make the viewers realize that these speakers exist outside of the online dictionaries we can see.

Finally, after receiving critique on the “I Speak” series, I decided to create the coloring book “Cuento del Mundo.” The audience I presented the “I Speak” series to wanted more motivation and interactivity in the piece. They asked the following: “Why should we care about these languages? Do you expect us to learn a new language entirely? How can you tie in culture and language and make this easy to grasp for me?” The conclusion I reached was to create something that would force its audience to read it and interact with it. By coloring a page in a book, the participant is forced to pay attention to the lines of the drawing and the narrative it follows. The book follows the narrative of the Mayan creation myth detailed in the Popol Vuh, and will have Spanish and Mayan words blended in with the English retelling of the story. Every last person has a creation myth of their own, so the best way to unify all peoples of all cultures is to share a creation myth. I chose to retell the Mayan creation story because as citizens of Northwestern Ohio, due to the current cultural and political climate of our country, I believe the most ostracized groups of people we regularly come into contact with are
Muslims and Mexican immigrants. Arabic and Spanish are far from being considered endangered languages, however, but the next closest branch vulnerable of languages associated with these groups would be Quechuan language groups – or Mayan languages. I want this story to raise acceptance, tolerance, and be a part of the spread of unseen culture and language. If the stigma behind these groups can be removed, the language can flourish and human knowledge can be shared.

To summarize my thesis, languages are a vital component to human culture and development. Languages and culture are hard to separate, but they are being cut from each other more and more as we come closer to creating a global culture. While a global culture supports connectivity in many ways, it excludes isolated language pockets from becoming involved in global politics, and it encourages the speaking of a select few languages instead of nourishing all languages on earth. While it is hard to combat the extinction of languages through globalization, I encourage the reader to support any language growth they can. Get involved and make a difference in protecting the earth’s heritage.
Bibliography


Wells-Jensen, Sheri Beth. Personal interview. 28 Oct 2015.

To watch the animation, Lingua Franca, please visit this link: https://vimeo.com/151520048

Below, for online submission, here are the “I Speak” series of art and the Cuento del Mundo illustrations.
BEFORE THERE WAS ANYTHING

THE WORLD WAS A DARK COLD OCEAN
ONLY THE HEART OF THE SKY
HURACÁN
AND
GUCUMATZ
DOWN BELOW
WERE SURROUNDED BY LIGHT
THE PAIR DECIDED TO CREATE
THE DAWN THE DUSK AND
PROVISIONS FOR OTHER GODS
Humans were to be their ultimate creation
But first they had to shape the earth
Their words became reality
The gods filled the earth with greenery and gave homes to the deer and birds.
The gods commanded
the animals to worship
but no sound
would come from
their mouths

ALAH SPEAK

POOPOO
The gods were upset and decided to punish the animals. They were banished from their homes to make way for a creation that could worship properly.
THE GODS TRIED TO SCULPT A HUMAN MADE OF MUD
BUT IT CRUMBLED LIKE DUST
THE GODS WHO HAD GROWN IN NUMBER
DECIDED TO PERFORM A DIVINATION
ON HOW TO CREATE HUMANS
THE TWO GRANDMOTHERS USING MAIZE AND TZ’ITE A RED CORAL SEED DIVINED THAT THE NEXT HUMANS WOULD BE MADE FROM WOOD
THE WOODEN PEOPLE WALKED TALKED AND MULTIPLIED

BUT THEY DID NOT POSSESS MINDS OR HEARTS CAPABLE OF WORSHIP.
THEIR BODIES WERE RIGID AND THEY DID NOT THINK OR BLEED.
A GREAT FLOOD PURGED THE WORLD
OF THE WOODEN EFFIGIES
AND LEFT THE LAND COVERED IN A
DARK RAIN
WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE PEOPLE WAS
BROKEN AND SHATTERED
THE DOG’S TURKEYS GRINDING STONES AND HOUSES
INSULTED THEM AND BLAMED THEM FOR THEIR MISFORTUNES
THE WOODEN PEOPLE FLED INTO THE WOODS
THEIR BODIES BROKEN
AND THEIR FACES UNRECOGNIZABLE
THEIR DESCENDANTS BECAME
SPIDER MONKEYS
SIMILAR TO PEOPLE
BUT SEPARATE
IN FACE AND MIND
K'QY
MONKEY
The gods still needed a creation to recount their tales. The fox, coyote, and parakeet suggested sculpting the next human out of maize.

K’oy
Monkey
THE FIRST HUMAN HAD **MAIZE** FOR FLESH AND **WATER** FOR BLOOD

HE WAS FILLED WITH ALL THE SWEETEST FRUITS AND VEGETABLES THE ANIMALS COULD FIND
THUS THE FIRST PERFECT HUMANS WERE MADE

VINIL

PERSON
THE FIRST FATHERS SAW ALL THE WORLD AND KNEW VERY MUCH
THEY THANKED THE GODS FOR THEIR
GREAT KNOWLEDGE
The gods decided that humans would become too powerful once they multiplied so they blurred their vision.
THE FOREFATHERS COULD NOT SEE AS FAR AS THEY ONCE COULD.

THEIR KNOWLEDGE WAS LOST.

BUT THEY KEPT A SMALL AWARENESS OF THE GODS WHO GAVE THEM WIVES AND THE EARTH TO INHERIT.

V CHVN THAN TO KNOW.
THE FOREFATHERS AND THEIR WIVES GREW INTO WHAT HUMANS ARE NOW

THUS IS THE BIRTH OF THE

K'ICHE