

Bridging the Gap at the Expense of Widening the Divide: An Effort to Preserve and Prosper Indigenous Peoples

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Faced with questions of “What is a language worth?” and “Does the ability to provide for one’s family outweigh the destruction of culture?”, governing bodies across the globe are grappling with the double-edge sword of preserving vs. prospering Indigenous peoples.

With some linguistic experts estimating a loss of a majority of indigenous languages by the end of the century, and ever-growing health and economic crises plaguing Indigenous peoples, proper legislative action to promote prosperity and preservation is desperately needed. After an examination of legislative outcomes and currently proposed solutions, it is clear this situation is far from being solved. However, the global community is in dire need of an answer before it is too late.

In 2010, the number of Indigenous people across the globe totaled 370 million, a number only slightly smaller than the whole of the United States (“Who Are Indigenous Peoples?”, United States Census Bureau). Located in over 70 countries, these people are facing a crisis (“Who Are...”). As a third of the poorest rural citizens, their health, their land, their culture, and their language are under attack (“State of the World’s...”). In an effort to combat this rapid downfall of some of the world’s oldest communities, governments in the last 50 years have been taking responsibility to minimize the ongoing consequences of imperialism and racially degrading integration policies of the past (or in some cases, the present). One of the biggest arguments facing these governing bodies centers on bilingual education and preparation for the workforce. In an increasingly global society, education and knowledge of one of the top three languages (Chinese, Spanish, and English) spoken

in the world is an undeniable asset - but at what cost (“Most Spoken Languages in the World | Statistic”)? How much is a language worth? In an effort to save the culture, identity, and community associated with a native tongue, these linguistic endeavors are greatly reducing the prosperity of non-English speaking peoples. However, by instilling the necessity for a global language, we are stripping away the essence of who our neighbors are. With some linguistic experts estimating a loss of a majority of indigenous languages by the end of the century, and ever-growing health and economic crises plaguing Indigenous peoples, proper legislative action is desperately needed. The issues we have been grappling with over the past half a century are not the flesh wounds they have been made out to be. They are deep wounds in need of dire attention from a remedy yet to be found.

An article published by *The Economist* in early 2011 titled “Tongues Under Threat,” examines the

phenomena of rapidly disappearing Indigenous languages, specifically in South Africa (1). Given the subheading “English is dangerously dominant,” the writer expresses concern about the overly popular presence of English in a country that is comprised of only 8% of fluent speakers (“Tongues...”). During South Africa’s period of Apartheid (discussed in more detail further on), only Afrikaans and English were deemed the official languages, exclusively isolating “Pre-colonial African languages” to remote portions of the country (“Tongues...”). However, even among the “black townships and tribal ‘homelands’” English was preferred over mother tongues as it was seen as “a symbol of advancement and prestige” (“Tongues...”). This preferential treatment of English has continued into modern times, creating a language disparity between white and elite black South Africans who predominately speak Afrikaans and English and poorer black South Africans who are typically fluent in only their native language (“Tongues...”). One of the more alarming statements of this article details the widespread prevalence of English, showcasing the societal disadvantage placed on non-speakers:

Not only is it [English] the medium of business, finance, science and the internet, but also of government, education, broadcasting, the press, advertising, street signs, consumer products and the music industry. For such things Afrikaans is also occasionally used, especially in the Western Cape province, but almost never an African tongue. The country’s Zulu-speaking president, Jacob Zuma, makes all his speeches in English. Parliamentary debates are in English. Even the instructions on bottles of prescription drugs come only in English or Afrikaans (“Tongues...”).

With such a high emphasis on a minority language, the de facto linguistic segregation and its destruction must be considered for the approximately 80% of citizens who neither identify with English nor Afrikaans. Aware of this dominance, *The Economist* seemingly asks the question, “What will become of South Africa’s tribal languages?”

A country with 11 official languages - Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Pedi, Sotho, English, Tswana, Tsonga, Swazi, Venda, and Ndebele - South Africa is a

prime example of a country trying to unite its people following a tumultuous history under apartheid and a long history of colonization (“Tongues...”). Acquiring the Dutch “Cape Colony” (a portion of what is modern day South Africa) and other large tracts of land in the 1800s, Great Britain began to settle the area much to African opposition (*Colonialism in Africa - World History in Context*). Following the suppression of an uprising, society became segregated, dominated by whites, and saw many Africans forced to live on reserves (*Colonialism in...*). When the country gained its independence in 1910, colonization had wreaked havoc on the land and its people, causing a large divide in the new nation (*Colonialism in...*). In 1948 the National Party, an all-white caucus, rose to power in South Africa, bringing with it a wave of segregationist policies termed “apartheid,” an Afrikaans word meaning “apartness” (“Apartheid | Definition...”, “Apartheid – Facts...”). The legislation was not only designed to separate the white minority from the non-white majority, but also went a step further to separate non-whites from each other, a ploy to decrease political power and divide along tribal lines (“Apartheid – Facts...”). Similar to segregation in the United States, nonwhite South Africans were forced to use separate public facilities and by 1950 interracial marriage was officially outlawed (“Apartheid – Facts...”). Additionally, the Population Registration Act of 1950 was implemented to classify all South Africans by race, breaking the population down into 4 categories: White, Bantu (black Africans), Coloured (Mixed race), and Asian (Indian and Pakistani), furthering the divide between the majority and minority (“Apartheid – Facts...”). Equally important but perhaps more devastating was the forceful removal of an estimated 3.5 million black South Africans from their homes and their displacement to government-sanctioned land that saw many of its inhabitants succumb to poverty (“Apartheid – Facts...”). Following years of opposition to segregationist legislation, which saw the rise of famous names such as Nelson Mandela, and pressure from the international community, a new constitution was implemented and a coalition government established in the 1990s hoping to reunify a divided country (“Apartheid – Facts...”).

However, as noted by *The Economist*, this

reunification has not been particularly successful:

Under the 1996 constitution, all 11 of South Africa's official languages 'must enjoy parity of esteem and be treated equitably'. In practice, English, the mother tongue of just 8% of the people, increasingly dominates all the others... despite the government's repeated promises to promote and protect indigenous languages and culture. ("Tongues" 1)

In a country dominated by a language that ostracizes the majority of its population, there have been many discussions about the best way to preserve the many varieties of African tongue and to continue to encourage prosperity among its speakers. In 2010, the South African government agreed to require students who are not native English speakers to be taught in their mother tongue for the first three years of school and then progress to either Afrikaans or English ("Tongues" 1). However, studies have shown that, the older one becomes, the harder it is to master a new language (Schmid 1). This raises the question "are we increasing the disadvantage non-English speaking students experience in a country already foreign to them"? While some may argue the answer to this problem lies in teaching English at the beginning of primary school to increase the time students are exposed, this technique was previously proven unsuccessful. As another country struggling to bridge the linguistic gap among its indigenous population and English-speaking population, Canada's amended educational system brought about disastrous results.

In the *Indian Education Paper Phase One of 1973*, the Canadian education department returned control of education to Aboriginal society after many years of cultural genocide, but only if the First Nations agreed to adopt "provincial curricula" (Brady 355). As Mai Nguyen, a professor at York University writes, "In almost all of these provinces, these curricula are developed away from Aboriginal communities, without Aboriginal input, and written in English" (237). Even more so, it was estimated since 1992, during the time of this policy inaction, that approximately "75-80% of off-reserve Aboriginal children attend non-Native schools controlled by

the provincial governments," a consequence that not only "resulted in the failure of Aboriginals to achieve higher education and employment," but also saw communities unable to "recover their losses or transform their nations using their legitimate knowledge and language" (Brady 355, Nguyen 236, 237). During this period, instruction in English – whether in the name of helping or harming – accelerated the already rapid disappearance of indigenous culture and language. When legislation was finally enacted that favored Aboriginal control over decisions regarding education, the Aboriginal Peoples Study of 2001 reported that 38% of students who benefited from at least three sources of cultural ties inside and outside the classroom were able to speak and comprehend an Aboriginal language (Turcott and Zhao 19). A percentage found to increase the more access students have to those aware of the cultural workings of the Aboriginal peoples (Nguyen 239). Conscious of the cultural and educational benefits experienced by students who are instructed in their native tongue, some may argue that no further examination of this issue is necessary. On a surface level, that assumption would garner many concessional nods. However, a deeper understanding of the economical implications states otherwise.

In 2004, a research effort published in *The Review of Economics and Statistics* examined the economic disadvantages experienced by those who do not speak the dominant language of their country's workforce. For this case, an examination of English and its importance in the workplace was conducted stating, "strong language skills almost certainly increase the range and quality of jobs...supported by numerous studies which suggest a positive association between English-language ability and earnings" (Bleakley and Chin 481). Additionally, another study analyzing Indigenous peoples in Bolivia, the acquisition of Spanish, and economic standing found that "monolingual Spanish speakers earn about 25% more than those who speak both Spanish and an indigenous language" (Chiswick et al. 365). Exploring the income disparity even further, this study also broke down earnings by gender, "...women who speak only an indigenous language earn about 25% less than the bilingual speakers (Chiswick et al.

365). This data is particularly important due to the dominance of unmarried indigenous women seeking out work, a percentage that is significantly larger than married women who tend to have husbands entering the workforce in their place (Chiswick et al. 364). Without an understanding of the dominant language used in the workforce, “bilingual speakers may be penalized in the labor market because of a poorer proficiency...” (Chiswick et al. 365). This becomes an instant economic disadvantage that not only effects families with multiple breadwinners, but also greatly effects households only able to rely on one person to bring in income. For a population already experiencing some of the highest rates of unemployment and suicide, we are once again faced with a tug-of-war that leaves both sides on the losing team (“State of the...” 2).

Translating these studies back to South Africa, a country on the precipice of experiencing similar cultural and economic consequences for its indigenous populations, along with many other countries, we are once again presented with the questions of “what is a language worth?” and “how do protect it from disappearing?” Rajend Mesthrie, a linguistics professor at the University of South Africa, was asked, “Will South Africa’s black languages suffer the fate of the six languages brought by the country’s first Indian settlers 150 years ago?” (“Tongues...”). To which he replied:

For the first 100-odd years, South Africa’s Indians taught and spoke to their children in their native tongues. But English is now increasingly seen as “the best way forward”. Today most young Indians speak only English or are bilingual in English and Afrikaans, though they may continue to chat at home in a kind of pidgin English larded with Indian and Zulu (“Tongues...”).

We have reached a legislative stalemate that leaves the world community staring down the barrel of some sobering statistics: “Predicted extinction rates range from 50 to 90% of the world’s 6,900 languages by the end of this century” (Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine) and “A substantial body of research indicates that indigenous peoples fare far worse than non-indigenous populations with

respect to numerous other health indicators such as morbidity, life expectancy, diabetes, cardio-vascular disease, etc.” (Romaine 34-35). Acting too hastily by enacting legislation that fails to address all sides of this complex and wide divide between prosperity and preservation will only quicken the pace at which these statistics move from numbers on a page to harsh realities. However, neglecting these vulnerable populations at a time of considerable need would further establish their seemingly low-ranking in the hierarchy of global prosperity. By approaching this intricate problem in a manner that is not only measured but also cautious, a solution that proves effective in both prosperity and preservation may be found. An answer is out there – we just need to enact it before the divide becomes irreparable and populations become extinct.

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