Why Should a Dying Language Be Saved?

Lyndi Tsering

As globalization leads to the extinction of many minority languages, should minority language speakers continue to preserve their language or give it up to adopt a majority language? I argue that minority language speakers should be educated in both their heritage tongue and the majority tongue of their country in order to both preserve the language and culture of their ethnic identity and provide opportunities for them in the globalized economy. After addressing the issues surrounding the conversation of dying languages, including the global response and minority mentalities, I present ideas for bilingual education and the establishment of market demand to incentivize minority language learning.

From the time of my birth, my trilingual father spoke to me in his native Tibetan tongue. This tongue became as much a part of my daily vernacular as English, the language of my mother and the country which claimed almost my entire identity. Around the age of four, I began to realize that no one in my life except for my father understood these words. In fact, since I knew that my father spoke to everyone else in English, my bilingualism in Tibetan seemed entirely superfluous. I began to answer his Tibetan with my English, and slowly but surely, I lost all but a few phrases of a language that once possessed half of my vocabulary.

Fourteen years later, I regret throwing away a part of my heritage that I viewed as unnecessary. At the same time, my studies of Chinese and English still seem far more relevant in today's world than studying an at-risk language such as Tibetan. These antithetical views within myself have brought me to ask: why should a dying language be saved?

In a world that is rapidly globalizing, the increasing need for international relevancy and mobility has spurred on the extinction of hundreds of the world's minority languages. Governments introduce minority children to dominant, nationalized languages in mandatory public schools. Many parents from linguistic minorities encourage their children to invest their time in studying marketable languages that will give more opportunities, albeit at the cost of their heritage. Those in the younger generation grow up feeling that learning the majority language versus their minority language is a choice between the modernity and economic opportunity that they associate with dominant cultures and the backwardness they associate with their own minority heritages (McCarty). Many certainly take pride in their heritage and fight fiercely for their cultural rights. Others, like my four-year-old self, fail to see the value in preserving their cultural language, seeing it as a remnant of the past. The current and future younger generations of minority people groups should be educated both in the language and culture of their ethnic identity and in the linguistic and vocational skills needed to enter into our increasingly globalized economy. While cultural preservation is certainly

vital to human flourishing, economic relevancy can simultaneously be achieved by educating minority students in the majority language of their country of residence. Minority language speakers need to be equipped with both high levels of proficiency in their native language, in addition to the majority language in their country, in order to have the opportunity to find their places in a globalized society without losing their heritage.

With the increase of globalization and the blurring of ethnic lines (both racially and culturally), languages that previously were exclusively spoken among their populations are now at risk of extinction. In her essay, "The Global Extinction of Languages and Its Consequences for Cultural Diversity" (Romaine 31-46), Suzanne Romaine first discusses the decrease in biological diversity, and therefore the alarming decline in linguistic and cultural diversity as a result.

Unfortunately, statistics agree with the trends observed by both Romaine and much of the young minority population. According to the Endangered Languages Catalog (ELCat), 46% of the world's living languages are at risk of becoming extinct. Of these at-risk tongues, 9.2% have fewer than 10 speakers and are therefore likely to die out soon. Romaine blames this threat on the increasing rates of globalization. Some researchers would disagree, arguing that globalization leads to "the flow of culture, customs, practices, and norms" which leads to greater diversity (Abderrahman Hassi et al.). However, it is exactly this flow and pursuit of global relevancy that is leading to the homogenization of language and culture. The theory that flow of culture leads to more diversity may be true in that it leads to more awareness of diversity. However, I predict that it is precisely this flow that will lead the loss of cultural group identity. People will (and already do) adopt one another's customs, losing the uniqueness of their own in the process (Romaine 31-46). The flow will pour into a global "melting pot" that will result in a generally homogenous global culture as Romaine surmised.

Language is one of the primary keys to preventing the death of culture. As Romaine explains, the right to linguistic choice can be equated with more commonly known human rights such as health, food, and education by emphasizing the importance of cultural identity to human thriving. Citing studies in which mental health, and even suicide rates, seem to be tied to the loss of culture among marginalized minorities, she argues that cultural preservation should be prioritized for the wellbeing of minority peoples, which I affirm. If the lack of linguistic rights is hindering human flourishing to the point of death, then this is clearly an issue of human rights, and should be addressed with urgency.

While much of my research and observation will be applicable to most at-risk language situations, I have chosen to focus my study on the Tibetan language in China as a case study in recognition that every minority language scenario looks different and therefore cannot be generally covered within the scope of this paper. I have specifically selected Tibetan because the Tibetan language (and dialects) was the national language of Tibet until it was annexed as a region by China, becoming the Tibet Autonomous Region, or the TAR. Almost seventy years later, the effects of Chinese influence combined with intense Tibetan nationalism and the increasing pursuit of global efficacy have made the region an active and multi-faceted study subject. I hypothesize that if the Tibetan language continues to be taken out of the educational system, and if the trend of pursuing globalized success outweighs the unifying power of nationalism, the Tibetan language will cease to be spoken.

One of the greatest insurances of the future of the Tibetan language is in the hands of overseas Tibetan communities. Without the benefit of living in a town with a Tibetan majority, these communities cling to their language and speak it regularly amongst themselves as a means of preserving their culture and passing it on to their children. They recognize that their language unifies; it creates a shared identity beyond mere ancestry and genetics. Whether this looks like formal language classes or conversations over meals, the effect is the same: the tongue of their homeland lives on. While it is not within the scope of this paper to delve further into the continuation of the Tibetan language in ex-pat communities, I will include the role of Tibetans outside of China in the solution to the preservation of the language within China.

In her article on linguistic rights, Romaine briefly discusses the opposing economic argument

for linguistic and cultural assimilation with the citation of one study that demonstrated a correlation between "cultural attachment" and a better than average socioeconomic status (ABS). However, she generally glosses over the dilemma with romanticist ideas of culture and tradition. This is problematic, as economic and educational concerns are the primary reason most minorities turn to majority languages. Some members of minority language communities, feel that they must give up their native language for the majority or national language in order to achieve higher education and economic advancement (Kirt). While one statistic about economic wellbeing in an American-written paper may persuade Western scholars that the language switch is not problematic, it will not be enough to affect the feelings of minority individuals.

Parents strive not to merely help their children become successful citizens in their linguistic community, but to achieve social and economic advancement in the majority population. The documentary "Valley of the Heroes" exposes this mentality when young students at a government school in China tell the filmmakers about a Tibetan classmate. This young girl had been beaten by her mother for wanting to learn Tibetan. Her mother believed that her pursuit was a waste of time since her Chinese was not "strong enough" (Kirk). Thinking of their own language as inferior to Chinese is precisely the mentality that could allow Tibetans to let their language become extinct.

While prioritization of Chinese language study over Tibetan can be detrimental to cultural and linguistic preservation, the reverse can be harmful as well. Many children in rural areas of the Tibet Autonomous Region are exclusively educated in the Tibetan language. In nomadic and farming communities, all six years of the available primary education are taught in Tibetan. The Chinese government tried to initiate some bilingual programs to introduce Chinese and Tibetan in primary school, all of which fizzled out due to lack of teachers and enthusiasm. While learning in their native language is certainly important, students in these areas are hindered in their higher-educational pursuits as all secondary education is taught exclusively in Chinese. This results in high dropout rates as students transition to junior high school, especially by students who must travel a great distance to attend school or even stay at a boarding school, sacrificing work time in the pastures that could significantly benefit their families (Postiglione 4-5).

In order to save the at-risk Tibetan language, Tibetan young people must be convinced that they do not have to make a choice between remaining a part of their native culture and integrating into the modern world. Beyond merely recognizing the need, the next generation of Tibetans need to take ownership and initiative for the preservation of their own heritage so that they can continue the legacy of valuing their culture. While it is critical for those in the West to understand and advocate for the urgent protection of linguistic rights, it is equally important to involve those whose rights are themselves at risk in the active preservation of their culture.

Many scholars, reporters, and individuals recognize the need for language preservation. However, though they (like Romaine) present compelling points in favor of language preservation, they fail to present any viable solution to what she considers to be a rapidly spreading global crisis. Most of her work seems to be a call to action aimed at the English-speaking Western world, but without clarifying what this action should be. This audience may be the reason that Romaine spends little time addressing the opposing argument of the potentially harmful impact of becoming isolated by exclusively speaking a minority language. Both she, an American-born English speaker, and her audience can adopt the Romanticist view of the large-scale preservation of culture without worrying about the potential individual repercussions because they themselves have only experienced being part of the majority. To them, the idea of learning one's own language and culture seems easy and natural. In actuality, though, many Tibetans and other minority language speakers experience both internal and external issues that should be taken into consideration in order to ensure the future of the Tibetan language.

As I discussed earlier, government schools in major Tibetan regions are ceasing to teach the Tibetan language. The PRC government is phasing the Tibetan language out of the education system

in predominantly Tibetan regions of the country to switch to Chinese and add on English as a third language. For children who grow up speaking Tibetan, the switch in language from early childhood to the beginning of school is challenging and creates a division between cultural and educational life. The dominant language (Chinese, in this case) becomes the language of education and modernity. This is especially true in light of the fact that the Tibetan province has the highest illiteracy rate of any region in China at approximately 41% in 2016 (National Bureau of Statistics of China).

From the time Tibet became an autonomous region of China in the early 1950s, those in the United States and other nations have been hesitant participants in matters of Tibet on any level. Most of the West does not want to offend China, and therefore, does not act. Some positive progress has been made under Chinese rule over the TAR, such as increased educational opportunities, technology, and wealth within Tibet. Certainly, any attempt by Tibetans to secede from China would be far more costly than beneficial. While Tibet should undeniably remain a part of China, the Chinese government needs to take steps to consider the needs of Tibetans, both now and for the future. Additionally, if those in the West genuinely care about saving the dying languages of the world, they must address the source of the problem and enact solutions, not merely discuss it on an academic level.

Additionally, it is very important that when protecting a language, the economic development a people group desires does not become inaccessible. In Tibet, for example, great achievements in the arts, writing, architecture, and other academic achievements have existed for thousands of years based in the Tibetan language. Today, though, it would not be possible for Tibetans to obtain some of the technology they desire or to participate in tourism or other major industries without a proficient knowledge of the Chinese language. While I do believe that all Tibetan children should receive a comprehensive education in their native tongue, I would not propose keeping Chinese out of their educational system, as this would prevent many from obtaining a college education (though educational opportunities and degree availability is improving in Tibetan universities) and participating in the globalized economy. The ability of Tibetans to gain international attention and efficacy would also be hindered.

The only way to ensure the future of the Tibetan language is to keep it in schools – not as a secondary language course, but as a language students use to engage in education. Public schools in Tibetan regions of China should be completely bilingual. As Gerard Postiglione discusses, the current ultimate agenda of the Chinese education system is competency in Tibetan, Chinese, and English. The languages of classroom instruction, however, are inconsistent and are therefore leading to a failure of the system for many students (Postiglione 4-5). In the first year of primary school, all classes should be taught in Tibetan. In second grade, a single Chinese class should be added to introduce Tibetan children to the language. By fourth grade, another class could be taken in Chinese in addition to the specific language class. Tibetan should be continually taught as a language as well as used for other classes. Half of the classes could be taught in Chinese and the other in Tibetan by high school on a rotating basis. Math and science would be in Chinese the first semester and in Tibetan the next semester, so that students would have a diversified education in both languages. History and art could rotate on the reverse cycle, and other languages such as English and Japanese would be offered as optional foreign languages. By high school graduation, the students of these schools would have a fluent level of proficiency in both Chinese and Tibetan, and be prepared to enter into academia and career paths using either one.

It is vital for children to grow up learning in their own languages so that they see them as useful and not inferior to more widely-known languages. If only the secondary language is used in academic settings, children will grow up seeing their traditional language as useless rather than as a medium for producing art, academic writing, and thought. The majority of academic work and writing created by Tibetans is no longer in the Tibetan language. With a strong linguistic education, Tibetan will continue to be used as a language not only for speaking, but also for writing, researching, and creating by proficient, well-educated native speakers.

The issue, however, is the resistance of the Chinese government to such plans. The Chinese government argues for their central government education programs by citing the disastrous literacy rate of Tibet, as previously mentioned. In response to this issue, the government has created preferential programs that allow Tibetans to attend college at a reduced cost and offer government-run boarding schools in an attempt to make secondary education more accessible to rural children. While these initiatives have dramatically increased the number of Tibetan children who attend school (N.A.), and thereby the opportunities for them to pursue higher learning, they have also given the Chinese government exclusive power and control over the content of the education system. The issue of government influence is a significant conversation, but a more in-depth analysis is beyond the scope of this case study.

If the current trends of increased desire for global relevancy and success continue at the current rate, the Tibetan language is at risk of growing extinct in the near future. Without bilingualism, Tibetans will be unable to preserve culture and heritage, achieve advancements in their own language, and enter into the growing global economy. Free nations must use their power to create opportunities to encourage language and cultural preservation. Similarly, it is the responsibility of the Chinese government to enact a comprehensive bilingual education system that will prepare the next generation of Tibetans for success.

While external assistance can change the education of Tibetan children, the Tibetan people in the TAR need to create the need for higher education in Tibetan within their society. Education will equip the next generation with the tools needed to succeed as highly educated Tibetan adults. However, if there is no demand in the job market for high-level language proficiency, students are less likely to invest time in the language. The production of books, songs, and films in Tibetan will create jobs and give young people an incentive to study their native language. Research projects and studies should be conducted in Tibetan. Tibetans need to initiate this demand for skilled language speakers in order to maintain its relevancy.

One example of a successful initiative to increase literacy and jobs is the Tibetan Arts and Literature Initiative (TALI). The organization has a presence in both the United States and China, and publishes children's books and animations created and illustrated by Tibetans and Tibetan-Americans. The bilingual (English and Tibetan) literature appeals to Tibetan Children in both the Tibetan Autonomous Region and in the United States as a way to gain linguistic and cultural proficiency. In addition to creating exchanges and collaborative opportunities for Tibetan artists and writers, TALI trains Tibetan teachers to more effectively educate their students within the People's Republic of China.

TALI combines both the educational aspect of language preservation and the need for further cultural development in the Tibetan language. More Tibetans should support TALI and create their own new projects, businesses, and initiatives with the purpose of creating an economic demand and cultural forum for highly educated Tibetan speakers.

Artistic development is important, but it represents only one aspect of Tibet. I want to stress that in my arguments for higher education and career opportunity, I am not claiming that this is the only form of valuable cultural representation of the Tibetan people. Nomadic and agrarian lifestyles are a beautiful form of Tibetan culture, celebrating the connection between Tibetans and the Earth, and the past, the present, and the future. Increasing the accessibility of higher education should not be seen as an attempt to end or diminish the value of these lifestyle, but rather a way to complement it with the development needed for Tibetan culture to thrive into the twenty-first century and for centuries after.

Tibetan culture is diverse and beautifully multifaceted. One common denominator between people in the cities and the mountains, in the TAR and around the globe, is the mother tongue that they all share. This unifier must not be lost, but protected, cultivated, and shared with generations to come.

Language stands as one of the most crucial parts of cultural development and preservation. While it is important for everyone to have the opportunity to join in the globalizing world economy if they should so desire, diversity and heritage must not be lost in the process. In this rapidly changing, globalizing, homogenizing world, all of us must open our hearts

to new cultures and new people without losing ourselves in the process.

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