

Global Essay Competition 2025

Title: MULTIPOLARITY: A world for cultural diversity and language equity

Essay:

Abstract

The extinction of one language is a loss of history, traditions, and an entirely different way of human understanding. It is predicted that almost 90% of the world's languages will be extinct within the next century. While this claim is alarming, the world is unfortunately on that trajectory, with some languages having less than 100 speakers and insufficient means for intergenerational transmission. The rising rate of language extinction can be attributed to globalization, neocolonialism, and the dominance of a few "global" languages and powers. Thus, this impending risk calls for reevaluating how non-geostrategic issues such as cultural extinction can be addressed with the changing world order. With the emergence of new power blocs such as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), in this essay, I discuss the opportunity for these nations to develop soft powers in culture and languages to promote diversity and equity for the life-giving purpose of language maintenance, preservation, and revitalization. As power dynamics shift, rising power blocs in postcolonial countries like India and South Africa can counteract the forces of neocolonialism and linguistic imperialism through their language planning. I highlight how the shifting world and language planning have implications for linguistic independence and conflict avoidance. Considering how politics shape language and given the potential benefits of maintaining equity in culture and language in a multipolar world, I propose three recommendations to leverage language planning for cultural and language equity. First, I argue for prioritizing language preservation through orthography and documentation. Next, I recommend education as a tool for language revitalization. Certain aspects, if not all, of formal education in non-Western nations, should be conducted in Indigenous languages as a way to deepen knowledge of culture and language while also advocating for respect for diversity. Finally, I propose cultural exchange through cultural alliances, as seen in the case of Nigeria and Brazil, instead of cultural assimilation or dominance, as evidenced by colonialism.

Introduction

Our culture and language shape how we think and see the world. The existence of diversity means that we can interpret reality differently and contribute to advancing the world in unique ways (Hussein, 2012). Today, the world faces non-geostrategic issues such as climate change and cultural extinction. Tijjani Muhammad-Bande, the President of the United Nations General Assembly, reported that a minimum of two mother tongue languages become extinct every month (United Nations, 2019). The primary factors threatening diversity include neocolonialism, globalization, and Western culture's prominent hegemony and dominance. Since language is culture, we are almost certain that at least 24 historical and cultural representations disappear yearly, slowly eliminating diversity. The danger of losing one culture or language is not only the loss of words; it is the loss of history, traditions, and an entirely different way of understanding human experience. Now, more than ever, the future of cultural

diversity is uncertain. Thus, with the emergence of more diverse power blocs such as China, South Africa, India, etc., there lies an opportunity to leverage the geocultural diversity of these states to promote heterogeneity in soft powers of culture and languages, resulting in influencing and encouraging an equitable multicultural, multilingual, and inclusive world.

Concepts and systems are not universal; hence, problem-solving across cultures is different (Güss, 2015). It is through the contribution of diverse perspectives that civilization has been built. For example, mathematics is applied to many spheres of life, including but not limited to economics, physics, and statistics. Interestingly, mathematics is not exclusive to where it originated from. If one culture was enough, sophisticated counting, which morphed from what started in Mesopotamia, traveling across many other cultures, to arrive at what we know as mathematics today would have been impossible (Frye, Edzard, & von Soden, 2024). Writing, a highly revered art, shares the same history (Schmandt-Besserat, 2010). It goes without saying that language and culture are two important elements that bring inventions to life. These development examples are possible because of the collaborative narratives of diverse cultures and languages. While multiculturalism has brought us thus far, threats to equitable language diversity have become increasingly alarming over the last century (ELA, 2024). For instance, English, often regarded as the language of globalization, is spoken by almost 1.5 billion people, even though only 400 million are native speakers. With this Englishcentric multilingualism, more than 43% of the world's languages are endangered, and experts predict that 90% could vanish within the next century. Languages such as Xri from South Africa, Babur from Nigeria, Manegacha from China, and Ket from Siberia have declined as their speakers shift toward global languages such as English, French, etc. (Bradley, 2019). The number of speakers of indigenous languages has reduced mainly because of the socioeconomic risk of not embracing the dominant languages.

How does cultural and language hegemony impact the world?

Neocolonialist legacies - anglophone, lusophone, francophone, hispanophone - heavily influence the global linguistic landscape. Considering the French language's colonial legacy, the dominance of French in postcolonial territories minoritizes indigenous languages, increasing the potential for language endangerment and language inequity. This hegemony contributes to neocolonial and racialized tendencies that minoritize other languages and their speakers (Flores, 2015). Nigeria, with over 520 indigenous and three majority languages, chose English as its only official language after independence. What this means for education is that teaching must be done strictly in the English language (Nigerian Educational Policy, 2014). To most Nigerians, English is not a mother tongue, which means when a child is enrolled in school, they encounter a language they have neither spoken nor engaged with. They are faced with multiple tasks: learning a new language, learning to learn a new language, and thinking in a new language. Consequently, such a student is at a disadvantage for being unable to speak English. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Nigeria and other postcolonial African countries are at the top of the list of countries with the lowest literacy rate. Research has repeatedly shown that students perform better when taught in their mother tongue (Nishanthi, 2020).

Finland, a country with a significantly higher literacy rate, teaches students in Finnish, their mother tongue. Nigeria and other postcolonial African countries could consider the benefits of students learning through a language they already know; however, high English proficiency has been linked to higher income (Ufier, 2015). Therefore, while we see the importance of language diversity and equity in education, the opportunity cost of trading off diversity is economic stability.

The dominance of Western influence has bred an English-centric multilingualism that sabotages the very purpose of diversity (Piller, Zhang & Li, 2020). In academic discussions, these languages are often labeled “world languages,” emphasizing their perceived superiority (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 2010). In Hong Kong, a special administrative area of China, English and Cantonese are the languages of education. Although Cantonese is highly valued in the community, the English language mostly determines and evidences Hong Kong students’ access to quality higher education and better career prospects (Peng, 2005). Academic success is determined with reference to performance and proficiency in the English language. While the idea is to prepare students for a global world, mandatory proficiency in English serves as a gatekeeper to opportunities. While it may be utopian to think that all languages will hold equal power, a shift toward multipolarity potentially deconstructs which languages are perceived as competitive advantages by redefining and diversifying the languages that are economically favored (Childs, 2020).

Multipolarity: Opportunities or Risks?

After over a century of bipolar and unipolar dominance, multipolarity is emerging in global affairs. One might argue that this shift is not unprecedented; the fifteenth-century European power centers exemplified superpowers that satisfied colonial ambitions. The legacy of colonialism has left a profound impact on many nations, eroding their cultural identities and indigenous languages. Countries such as Nigeria, Senegal, the Philippines, and Angola have experienced linguistic imperialism, resulting in language endangerment. Today, we observe emerging power brokers, particularly the BRICS, each representing different continents, races, cultures, and languages, allowing us to rethink the world order as multipolar. Their rise prompts us to evaluate whether this multipolar world will enable cultural coexistence or perpetuate dominance.

South Africa and India, for instance, represent the co-existence of various languages and cultures; perhaps we may reference them as posing opportunities for multiculturalism where more languages are respected. South Africa recognizes 12 official languages - including sign language - showing its commitment to embracing its history (Alexander, 2024). Similarly, India, another rising power bloc, has 22 official languages (Santoshini, 2023). In both cases, multiple indigenous languages at the federal level show reasonable equity among languages, which enforces their intellectualization and documentation. While further changes may not occur in these regions, other countries in Asia and Africa may embrace their multilingualism at the federal level, leading to the maintenance and revitalization of more languages. Hence, I highlight how the shifting world order may influence the language climate.

1. Diversity for Linguistic Independence

In December 2023, the tension-filled relationship between France and Mali, a former colony, ceased, and France withdrew its military forces and presence from Mali. Following that, Mali dropped French as its official language, taking its first step toward decolonizing its territory. For Mali, this is a statement of linguistic independence and freedom (Rédaction Africanews with AFP, 2024). Although Russia is Mali's ally, there is no reason to believe there is a threat of language dominance since Mali has maintained only its indigenous languages. Burkina Faso, another former French colony, removed French as its official language in 2024, returning its people to their roots (Rédaction Africanews with AFP, 2024). As evidenced by Mali and Burkina Faso, African countries show a trend of linguistic independence linked to politics and a desire for autonomy and cultural diversity. Bromham et al. (2022) stress that language and biodiversity, although overlooked, are paramount for creating a balanced and equitable world. Leaders must acknowledge language diversity's sociopolitical and economic significance in a multipolar future. The emerging geopolitical landscape could empower multiple nation-states, enabling shifts away from a single dominant language toward politically recognizing indigenous languages, which can support decolonization and preserve cultural history.

2. Avoiding Conflict Through Respect for Diversity

Rosecrance (1966) suggested that multipolarity could reduce conflict. Beyond education and cultural solidarity, cultural and language diversity plays significant roles in conflict. Language hegemony has historically been a catalyst for conflict, as seen in the Sri Lankan civil war, where the introduction of English to the Tamil population heightened tensions (Anandakugan, 2020). Giving English education access to a group was an unfair advantage that caused inequality and ethnic tension, leading to the Cold War. Perhaps the conflict could have been deflated if the British had aimed for a cultural exchange instead of cultural assimilation. Interestingly, studies have shown that there is a better chance of resolving conflict when native languages or dialects are used since interlocutors share a similar worldview due to their culture (Keysar, 2023). A diverse linguistic landscape, where multiple languages coexist and are respected, may help promote an equitable recognition of diverse cultures and their rights.

What can be done?

Taking into account how politics shape language and given the potential benefits of maintaining cultural and language diversity in a multipolar world, the following recommendations are proposed to leverage language planning effectively:

1. **Prioritize Language Preservation through Orthography:** When a language is neither documented nor spoken, it is bound to be forgotten. This is the case for many indigenous languages. Africa must invest in documentation and intellectualization to save local languages from extinction. A feasible approach is to incentivize writers, researchers, and cultural critics to create literature in indigenous languages. A worthy example is Boubacar Boris Diop, who

decided to write only in Wolof, his mother tongue. Diop, after visiting the Rwanda Genocide Memorial, realized how the former colonial masters' languages were designed to erase the African people's history and culture (Seck, 2018). While there are currently few readers of Diop's book written in Wolof, the author makes a good point about writing in these languages to secure their histories for future generations. These documented languages will be useful literature for educational use in the future.

2. **Introduce Indigenous Languages in Education:** Education policies should support multilingual instruction that respects students' language backgrounds. Policies, such as those in Nigeria, that mandate instruction in a language other than a student's mother tongue can restrict integration in school and negatively impact the development of a cultural identity and overall academic success. This challenge is particularly pronounced in multilingual societies, where students struggle with the dual pressures of mastering a global language like English while remaining connected to their cultural roots. This issue can be addressed in national language planning by integrating local languages into the curricula. Subjects such as history and literature can be taught in the regional languages, giving students a deepened knowledge of their history and traditions. Additionally, students can learn to respect diversity when embracing their unique identities.
3. **Promote Cultural Exchange over Assimilation:** Colonialism and linguistic assimilation have crippled cultural diversity in the world. For heterogeneity to arise, leaders must actively plan for cultural exchanges in arts, media, and education. Most narratives in this century are single-sided, from the West. Like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) said, single-sided stories are incomplete. For a balanced story, we must exchange cultures and perspectives. For instance, Bahia, the city with the largest Black population in Brazil, is known to have many people of Yoruba heritage who were descendants of those taken during the slave trade. Yoruba is one of the prominent cultures in Nigeria. Therefore, there is a historical relationship between Brazil and Nigeria. In 2018, the monarch of the cradle of the Yoruba ethnic group, Oba Ooni Adeyeye Enitan Babatunde Ogunwusi of Ile-Ife, visited Bahia and unofficially declared the city Yoruba's capital in the Americas (Travae, 2018). In 2023, the same monarch declared the Quilombos Yoruba territory, establishing the first official Yoruba territory outside Nigeria for those with Yoruba heritage (Ebuka, 2023). While Brazil and Nigeria do not share the same language, they maintain a strong cultural link, exemplified by the Yoruba language serving as a liturgical language for many diasporans and Afro-Brazilians.

A shift in global powers affects geostrategic and non-geostrategic aspects of the world. Yet, language and culture are often left on the sidelines of discussions around the expected impacts of political changes. However, language diversity and equity have tremendous implications for education, the economy, and politics, as highlighted in this essay. With the emerging power blocs, many non-Western countries, particularly postcolonial regions, may leverage multipolarity as a resource for developing their soft powers to promote cultural and linguistic equity.

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***Declaration**

This essay was written exclusively for this contest; the idea presented is the author's own. The author acknowledges using Grammarly to spellcheck and proofread the essay's content.

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