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CHALLENGES OF STUDYING LANGUAGES AND CULTURES IN THE MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Multilingualism and multiculturalism have been integral aspects of human civilization throughout history, yet they continue to present significant communicative challenges. Jacques Derrida likened the effort to understand others through translation to the reconstruction of the Tower of Babel, emphasizing the difficulty of finding precise expressions across different languages and cultural contexts (Derrida, 1985). This paper argues that learning and studying diverse languages are essential not only for thriving in a multicultural world but also for fostering peace and mutual trust in an increasingly interconnected global society. The central thesis posits that global development trends and intercultural communication should be embraced as opportunities to promote multilingualism rather than as competitive barriers. Drawing on interculturalism theories by scholars such as Zapata-Barrero, Kymlicka, and Vertovec, this paper underscores the importance of creating a superdiverse world where multilingualism ensures cultural-linguistic inclusivity. The study further highlights the necessity of pragmatic approaches to integrate linguistic diversity into global and local policies, particularly in regions like Southeast Europe. By doing so, it seeks to position language studies as crucial to the era of globalization.

Key words: multilingualism, interculturalism, globalization, communication, language studies

INTRODUCTION: MULTILINGUALISM AS A CHALLENGE

The multilingual reality of the modern world testifies to the resilience of languages, their dynamic evolution, and their capacity to survive despite historical challenges and global transformations. Over centuries, languages have adapted to fluctuating circumstances, thriving both within and beyond institutional frameworks. This endurance is closely tied to humanity's inherent need for communication—within one's own linguistic community and across linguistic boundaries. The historical and geographical conditions of a region, along with time's natural progression, have shaped the trajectory of languages. Consequently, languages have developed along diverse paths: some emerging as global or regional powers, others gaining significance as local identities, while many remain limited to oral traditions due to insufficient institutional support (Saussure, 1959:191).

In the current era—characterized by rapid globalization and technological advancements—languages face both opportunities and challenges. The ease of electronic communication, the availability of language-learning resources on mobile devices, and the rise of artificial intelligence capable of creating content in various languages have fundamentally reshaped the linguistic landscape. Despite these innovations, fundamental questions arise: is it worth preserving multilingualism in an increasingly homogenized world? Should linguistic diversity be nurtured in an era where global languages dominate as tools for international communication? The answer is unequivocal: yes (Greenberg, 2017).

Language, even in the age of globalization, is far more than a tool for communication; it is a fundamental aspect of human identity. On an individual level, language represents a person's connection to their environment, serving as a medium for thought, emotion, and cultural expression. On a collective level, language solidifies membership within a community, representing a shared history and political identity. Thus, multilingualism not only enriches personal expression but also strengthens the collective fabric of societies (Friedmann, 2011:275). As Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, language forms the basis of logic and human understanding, shaping our perception of reality (Wittgenstein, 1922:80).

From a philosophical perspective, bilingualism or multilingualism is not merely about linguistic capability. It represents a state of mind and intellectual engagement that transcends the boundaries of a single language. This complexity goes beyond the mechanical acquisition of additional languages; it entails a deeper intellectual and emotional connection to multiple cultural narratives (Baker, 2001:2).

In Europe, linguistic diversity has gained increasing prominence through policies that promote multilingualism as essential to the region's pluralistic and unified identity. The continent's historical and cultural mosaic has necessitated a proactive approach to intercultural communication, particularly as migration flows continue to reshape its demographic and

linguistic profile. The movement of people—both within Europe and from other parts of the world—highlights the urgent need for language policies that accommodate multicultural realities and facilitate integration while respecting linguistic heritage (EP Resolution, 2018).

The Balkans, as a historically multilingual region, offers a distinct lens for examining the complexities of linguistic diversity. The process of nation-building in the Balkans, which began in the 19th century, intertwined language with identity, often elevating it as a defining characteristic of ethno-political boundaries. The fragmentation of Yugoslavia and the subsequent emergence of new states further emphasized the centrality of language in political, social, and cultural discourses. Language rights were often at the heart of conflicts and peace processes, as exemplified by the Ohrid Framework Agreement in North Macedonia, which addressed the official use of the Albanian language to promote peace and institutional functionality (OFA, 2001:6). This historical context underscores that language policies are not simply administrative instruments but pivotal factors in ensuring stability, coexistence, and the equitable functioning of democratic systems (Banac, 1984:32).

In this light, studying multilingualism today remains not only relevant but imperative. It provides insights into the ways linguistic diversity can be harmonized with the demands of globalization, fostering a world that values both unity and diversity.

MONOLINGUALISM VERSUS MULTILINGUALISM

Monolingualism, when mentioned, often brings to mind the image of an individual who speaks only one language—the language they identify with, the one in which they communicate with others and express their thoughts. This singular language is not just a medium of communication; it forms the core of their identity and existence. Derrida, in his exploration of language, describes monolingualism as a deeply rooted phenomenon, likening it to an intrinsic part of one's being: "Monolingualism is the one according to which I describe my breathing, it is my element. Not a natural element and not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat" (Derrida, 1998:2). In this view, language becomes an inseparable part of human life, akin to a natural habitat that shapes the individual's intellectual and existential identity.

However, this philosophical interpretation of monolingualism does not necessarily equate to the exclusion of other languages, nor does it imply that individuals cannot coexist with other languages. Derrida's analysis delves into the complex relationship humans have with language—not as possessors but as speakers within a given context. The language one speaks is not truly "owned" but is rather an existential inheritance. It is shaped by the circumstances of its acquisition—family, culture, education, and the broader societal context—and, as Derrida notes, "I have only one language, and it is not mine" (Derrida, 1998:2). This is the paradox of language: we are shaped by it, yet we do not fully control it.

Monolingualism, however, can be influenced by external factors, particularly when it arises from isolation or dominance. Isolation often results in the perpetuation of a single language, which becomes deeply embedded in the identity of a community or nation. Yet, it is also closely tied to colonialism—both territorial and linguistic. Colonialism, in its various forms, has historically imposed a single dominant language upon diverse communities, effectively erasing or suppressing the languages of the colonized peoples. Derrida's own experiences, growing up in Algeria as a Jewish child excluded from French citizenship, exemplify the trauma of being deprived of one's linguistic heritage. His sense of displacement was not just cultural but linguistic, as the language of his upbringing—Arabic—was marginalized in favor of the colonial French, which he was forced to adopt to gain access to education and societal participation (Nagy-Zekmi, 2011:56). This experience underscores the profound impact language has on identity and the politics of belonging.

In this context, monolingualism imposed by colonial powers is not simply a preference but an act of linguistic oppression. It reduces the richness of cultural diversity to a single, homogeneous expression, thus undermining the multifaceted nature of human identity. Language, in this sense, becomes an instrument of domination, reflecting the power structures that dictate whose voice is heard and whose is silenced.

This form of linguistic oppression can be observed across various historical and geopolitical contexts, where the imposition of a single language serves to consolidate power. Derrida's experience highlights the trauma of being denied the language that was intimately tied to his identity, emphasizing the philosophical and emotional dimensions of linguistic control. The concept of monolingualism, therefore, extends beyond mere linguistic preference to encompass broader social, cultural, and political struggles.

Despite the dominance of monolingualism in many parts of the world, the human need for communication often transcends linguistic boundaries. It is in the natural human inclination to overcome language barriers and seek mutual understanding that the potential for multilingualism arises. While monolingualism represents one facet of human existence, the ability to speak and understand multiple languages is essential for fostering intercultural dialogue and maintaining peace. The historical and philosophical foundations of monolingualism reveal that it is not simply a neutral linguistic choice but a condition shaped by historical events, power relations, and societal structures. In contrast, multilingualism offers a more inclusive framework for understanding human identity and communication. By embracing multiple languages, individuals and societies can expand their horizons, foster mutual respect, and build bridges between cultures (Grover, 2023:753).

Multilingualism, therefore, is not merely an intellectual exercise but a practical necessity in today's interconnected world. As societies become increasingly diverse, the ability to communicate in several languages is not only a personal asset but a collective strength. It promotes social cohesion, enhances cultural exchange, and ensures that the voices of minority languages are not lost in the overwhelming tide of global communication (Aronin&Singleton, 2008:3, 2012).

Thus, the challenge of multilingualism is not only about preserving linguistic diversity but also about navigating the delicate balance between unity and diversity in a globalized world. The rise of global languages like English has prompted debates about linguistic hegemony, yet this global shift must not come at the expense of local languages and identities. Multilingualism, in this sense, becomes an essential tool for maintaining cultural diversity and ensuring that all languages—and the communities that speak them—are valued and respected (Zapata-Barrero, 2017:3).

INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF MULTILINGUALISM/MONOLINGUALISM

Throughout history, language policies have been deeply intertwined with political and social structures, with many societies experiencing an ongoing struggle for linguistic supremacy. This competition for dominance between languages often manifests in the form of policies that either promote the use of a single language or suppress linguistic diversity. While the linguistic hierarchy within these policies varies depending on regional and historical contexts, the underlying theme remains the same: the relationship between language and power is inextricable.

In this global context, monolingualism often emerges as a consequence of colonial legacies, where the imposition of a dominant language served to consolidate the power of the colonizing nation. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the historical processes of language standardization, where the institution of a single, official language becomes a symbol of authority and unity. Derrida's work on the philosophy of language explores this dynamic, suggesting that the promotion of monolingualism often accompanies political and ideological efforts to establish linguistic hegemony (Derrida, 1996:38). The logic of monolingualism, in this sense, reflects a desire to create homogeneity within a society, erasing the multiplicity of voices and perspectives that contribute to cultural and linguistic diversity (Aronin, 2022).

The imposition of a single language—whether through legal frameworks, educational systems, or media outlets—becomes a form of exclusion, marginalizing the languages and cultures that do not conform to the dominant norm. This linguistic exclusion is often presented as a means of fostering national unity and social cohesion. However, as Derrida suggests, this pursuit of linguistic uniformity often disguises the inherent violence involved in suppressing linguistic diversity. By establishing one language as the standard, societies risk dehumanizing individuals who speak other languages, relegating them to the margins of political and social life.

Monolingualism, particularly when institutionalized, also reinforces the political notion of the nation-state, where language is often used as a tool for defining and preserving national identity. The development of monolingual nation-states in the 19th century was closely tied to the idea of a homogenous linguistic community. This concept of linguistic unity was central to the formation of modern European states, where language served as both a cultural marker and a mechanism for consolidating political power. As Balibar (1991:96) points out, ethnicity and language were often fused in the process of nation-building, with language becoming the primary criterion for defining the boundaries of a nation.

However, the push for linguistic homogeneity often overlooked the linguistic diversity present within these states. In regions with multiple ethnic groups and languages, the imposition of a single official language effectively marginalized minority languages, often resulting in tensions and conflicts (Bieber, 1999:33). These policies, initially designed to strengthen the unity of the state, often led to the exclusion of linguistic minorities and the erasure of their cultural identities. This exclusionary logic was not only a product of colonialism but also a continuation of colonial structures that sought to impose one language over others. The legal and institutionalization of monolingualism became a means of controlling the social and political landscape, effectively ensuring that the linguistic and cultural rights of minority communities were subordinated to the dominant majority.

In the context of Southeast Europe, the process of nation-building in the 19th century involved the creation of monolingual states, a legacy that still influences language policies today. The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent formation of new nation-states in the Balkans presented unique challenges for language policy. Many of these new states, particularly in the case of Yugoslavia, grappled with the complexities of multilingualism and the political implications of language use. While Yugoslavia initially adopted a policy of linguistic equality, the rise of nationalism in the 20th century led to the prioritization of certain languages over others. The division of Yugoslavia into separate republics further exacerbated these tensions, with language becoming a central issue in the formation of new national identities (Meadwell, 2001).

The breakdown of Yugoslavia and the subsequent wars in the Balkans highlighted the role of language in the construction of national identities and the functioning of state institutions. The Ohrid Framework Agreement, signed in 2001, was a significant step in recognizing the linguistic rights of minority groups, particularly Albanians in North Macedonia. This agreement, which established Albanian as an official language alongside Macedonian, serves as an example of how language policies can help promote peace and stability in regions marked by ethnic and linguistic diversity (OFA, 2001:6).

The institutionalization of multilingualism, especially in countries like North Macedonia, represents a significant shift in language policy. The inclusion of Albanian as an official language in North Macedonia, alongside Macedonian, marks a shift towards recognizing linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a challenge. The Law on the Use of Languages, passed in 2019, provides a legal framework for the promotion and protection of linguistic diversity in the country. This legislation not only facilitates communication between ethnic communities but also ensures that linguistic rights are respected, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

In conclusion, the institutionalization of multilingualism and the recognition of linguistic rights is essential in fostering peaceful coexistence and promoting social stability. By acknowledging and respecting linguistic diversity, societies can build stronger, more inclusive communities that reflect the richness of their cultural heritage. In the context of globalization, multilingualism serves as a vital tool for preserving cultural diversity and ensuring that all voices, regardless of language, are heard and valued (Kymlicka&Patten, 2003:5).

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDIES OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGES

The study of different languages in universities and other educational institutions plays a crucial role in understanding human diversity and the intricacies of cultural communication. Multilingualism and intercultural understanding have become increasingly important in a globalized world, where individuals and societies are constantly interacting across cultural, linguistic, and national boundaries. The value of studying different languages extends far beyond merely acquiring communication skills; it is integral to fostering cognitive flexibility, cultural empathy, and critical thinking.

First and foremost, language studies provide insights into the linguistic structures, grammatical rules, and cultural norms that govern communication in different languages. This deep understanding helps students develop their ability to think analytically and critically about how language shapes human thought, behavior, and social interactions. It encourages them to approach the world not just through their native language but through the perspectives and idioms of other languages and cultures.

In countries like North Macedonia, where linguistic diversity is a defining feature of the national landscape, the importance of language studies cannot be overstated. Universities such as the State University of Tetova, the Southeastern European University, and Mother Theresa University offer language programs that allow students to study not only their own language but also the Albanian language, thereby enhancing their linguistic repertoire and intercultural communication skills. These programs are crucial in promoting multilingualism and cultural understanding, as they provide students with the tools to engage effectively with different linguistic and cultural contexts.

The opening of these universities in the Albanian language in North Macedonia has had a profound impact on multilingualism in the country. It has allowed for greater access to higher education in the local language, contributing to a more inclusive academic environment. These institutions have become centers of multilingual research and academic collaboration, reflecting the importance of linguistic diversity in higher education. The programs they offer span a broad range of disciplines, including natural sciences, medical sciences, technical studies, and socio-economic sciences. This diversity enriches students' academic experience and enhances their ability to engage with the world beyond their local context.

However, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of students enrolling in traditional language and philology programs, even as the overall number of higher education institutions has increased. This trend can be attributed to various factors, including demographic shifts, changes in the labor market, and societal expectations (State Statistics Agency, 2024). The emphasis has shifted toward programs that are directly linked to job market needs, such as technical sciences and international business. This shift should be considered within the

broader context of language policy and its impact on academic programs and institutional priorities.

Moreover, the implementation of the Law on the Use of Languages in North Macedonia (2019) has created new opportunities for students to study and use the Albanian language in official contexts, particularly in public administration and other state institutions. This has increased interest in language studies and translation programs, as the demand for linguistic expertise grows in an increasingly multilingual society. Inter-university cooperation, joint programs, and joint degrees in translation and language studies for administrative purposes have become strategic priorities for promoting multilingualism and enhancing students' language skills.

The study of languages should not be viewed solely from the perspective of market demand and adaptation. It also holds intrinsic value in terms of cultural heritage, intellectual exploration, and contributing to global stability. Multilingualism helps bridge cultural gaps, fosters empathy, and enriches individuals' cognitive abilities. It is essential for understanding different cultural narratives, histories, and social practices that underpin human interactions. It allows individuals and societies to engage deeply with the complex realities of cultural diversity, equipping them to navigate and understand cultural differences and similarities in a meaningful way.

Furthermore, multilingualism plays a key role in global stability and peace-building efforts. In regions with complex linguistic and cultural backgrounds, multilingualism can help build bridges between different communities, allowing for more effective communication, understanding, and cooperation. By promoting a multilingual approach to education, societies can create more inclusive and resilient communities that respect cultural diversity and contribute to global peace and stability.

The importance of multilingualism extends beyond linguistic training. It is also about equipping individuals with the skills and perspectives they need to adapt to changing global conditions. In a world where technological innovation, globalization, and migration are shaping the future, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures and languages is a crucial asset. Multilingual individuals can leverage their language skills to engage with global markets, international organizations, and diverse communities, contributing to a more interconnected and dynamic world.

In the context of modern-day Europe, the rise of global languages, particularly English, has sparked debates about the future of linguistic diversity. As globalization accelerates, the question arises: how can smaller languages survive in a world increasingly dominated by global lingua franca? Multilingualism, as a philosophical and practical approach, offers an antidote to the homogenizing forces of globalization. By fostering an appreciation for linguistic diversity, societies can ensure that all languages—regardless of their global prominence—continue to thrive.

In conclusion, the study of languages and multilingualism is essential for understanding the human condition in all its complexity. It fosters empathy, cognitive flexibility, and critical

thinking, enabling individuals and societies to adapt to change, interact with diversity, and thrive in a globalized world. It is an academic and cultural imperative that enriches human experience, deepens our understanding of the world, and prepares individuals to become global citizens. In an era marked by rapid change and global interconnectedness, multilingualism is not just a skill but a fundamental human experience that enables us to connect with each other across linguistic, cultural, and national divides.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In today's rapidly changing world, where the forces of globalization seem to be pushing for a unified global language, the importance of multilingualism remains indisputable. The question often arises: Is it still worth investing in multilingualism when a global lingua franca, like English, dominates communication worldwide? This paper has argued that multilingualism is not only relevant but essential, both as a practical necessity and as a fundamental expression of human identity and cultural diversity.

As we have explored throughout this paper, language plays a central role in shaping individual and collective identity. It is through language that people connect with their cultures, understand their histories, and form relationships with others. The idea that multilingualism is simply a tool for communication is far too limiting. It is, in fact, a means of understanding the world in all its diversity. By learning and speaking multiple languages, individuals open themselves to multiple perspectives, gaining insight into cultures and worldviews that would otherwise remain inaccessible.

While the dominance of global languages like English has undoubtedly facilitated international communication, it should not come at the expense of the linguistic diversity that characterizes the world's societies. As we've seen in the context of North Macedonia and Southeast Europe, the imposition of a single language over others can have profound political, social, and cultural consequences. Language policies that favor one language over others often lead to the marginalization of minority languages, suppressing cultural identities and potentially fueling ethnic and political tensions. The cases of linguistic exclusion and oppression, whether through colonialism or nationalistic agendas, demonstrate that language is not just a tool for communication but also a marker of power and belonging.

At the same time, the benefits of multilingualism are manifold. Multilingual individuals possess the cognitive flexibility to navigate different cultural contexts, adapt to diverse environments, and communicate more effectively with people from different linguistic backgrounds. In societies that are increasingly diverse, multilingualism helps build bridges between communities, fostering social cohesion and intercultural understanding. Moreover, multilingualism contributes to the stability and peace of societies by ensuring that the voices of minority groups are heard and respected, as seen in the recognition of Albanian as an official language in North Macedonia through the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA, 2001).

The study of languages, particularly in the context of higher education, remains critical. Language programs in universities do more than teach grammar and vocabulary; they provide students with the tools to think critically about language's role in shaping society. These programs encourage intercultural dialogue, promote empathy, and cultivate a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between language, culture, and identity. By investing in language studies, societies not only preserve their linguistic heritage but also equip future generations to engage with the world in a thoughtful, inclusive, and effective manner.

Looking ahead, the future of multilingualism is closely tied to the recognition of linguistic rights and the promotion of language policies that reflect the diversity of global societies. As globalization continues to reshape the world, it is crucial that multilingualism is not viewed as a challenge but as an asset—a resource that enhances cultural exchange, promotes mutual respect, and ensures that all languages, large and small, are valued equally. The survival of small languages and cultures in an increasingly globalized world is not only possible but necessary. Their preservation enriches the global landscape, making it more vibrant and diverse.

In conclusion, the value of multilingualism goes far beyond economic or pragmatic considerations. It is a philosophical and cultural imperative that must be embraced in the face of global change. Multilingualism enables individuals to bridge the gaps between cultures, foster deeper understanding, and preserve the richness of linguistic diversity for future generations. It is an essential component of global citizenship, promoting peace, stability, and cultural richness in an ever-changing world. Therefore, it is not only worth studying and preserving multilingualism but essential to our shared future. The challenges posed by globalizing forces should not lead us to overlook the deep and enduring value of linguistic diversity. On the contrary, they should inspire us to protect and promote multilingualism as a cornerstone of human progress and intercultural harmony.

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