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UNESCO'S ATLAS ON ENDANGERED LANGUAGES AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the overall development of the endangered language around the world in reference to UNESCO's Atlas of World Endangered Languages and reflects on the local context. The focus to local context refers to the current territory of North Macedonia in which it is believed there are 7 endangered languages such as: Adyge, Aromanian, Gagauz (South Balkans), Megleno-Romanian, Judezmo, Romani and Torlak. These languages are classified as endangered but are still spoken in the country. The article also reflects on the status of the Albanian language in North Macedonia by drawing comparisons with two other language varieties such as Arberesh which spoken in Southern Italy and Arvanitika spoken in Greece. The challenges that these minority languages have faced in particular countries should serve as a guide in designing effective language policies in North Macedonia in order for the language not be endangered. In the last section the article report on the phenomena of Globalization in which English has become the global language and at the same time has accelerated the loss of many native languages around the globe.

Key words: Endangered languages, Arbreshe and Arvanitika, Albaninan language in North Macedonia.

INTRODUCTION

When over 10 years ago the renowned The Guardian reported that the “that the last two fluent speakers of the language Ayapaneco aren't speaking to each other” it seemed as unusual news for linguist by knowing the real danger but also value of endangers languages. Having the burden of being one of the last speakers of an almost extinct is a very heavy wight to hold on your shoulders. However. It is not the duty of particular individuals to nourish the language. This is the duty of the institutions. According to the same source there are 68 native languages in Mexico and 364 varieties in the same region that are endangered and could be extinct. The dilemma arises again. Who should be taken responsible for this? Should there be instruments to revitalize the language?

This article aims to reflect om the stages that languages are going through and the challenges that are faced in the process. The topic is more delicate for us particularly when we note that in the list of these languages is also the Arbereshi with only 80.000 speakers and Arvanitika with 50.000 speakers. These are varieties of the Albanian language which was preserved from emigrants moving in South of Italy (Arbreshi) and Greece (Arvanitika) in the 15th century. The situation might be even more dramatic since this report from United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is from 2002. Italy has one of the largest lists of endangered and extinct languages. According to UNESCOs Atlas on endangered languages North Macedonia is listed as a country with seven (7) endangered languages such as: Adyge, Aromanian, Gagauz (South Balkans), Megleno-Romanian, Judezmo, Romani and Torlak. These languages might seem unknown for the region however they have been spoken or speakers of these languages have lived and are still living in the region. None of these 7 languages are extinct yet according to the atlas which means that speakers of these languages are still present among our population. This situation calls for immediate reaction to take measures to revitalize these languages.

Are endangered languages categorized?

It is important to be aware that language do not become endangered overnight. The examples of Arbëreshi and Arvantitika can make us reflect on how unjust language policies can impact and harm languages long-term. According to the UNESCO Atlas of endangered languages there are five categories and those are:

- **Vulnerable** - most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains (e.g., home)

- **Definitely endangered** - children no longer learn the language as a 'mother tongue' in the home
- **Severely endangered** - language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves
- **Critically endangered** - the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently
- **Extinct** - there are no speakers left

In a graph presented by the Atlas you can see how many speakers are per each endangered speaker. The table which is available in <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/en/atlasmap.html#> also has a separate column which reports on the category that each of these endangered belongs to. The number of speakers varies from few thousands to few millions of speakers.

In a study we have published together with prof. Emilia Confronti from University of Cosenza in 2019 in regard to language policies of minorities it was reported that:

Challenges that endangered languages go through are different in different regions, but the most commonly known factor is the loss of native speakers... Language can have quite rich lexical items and pragmatic structure but when there are no speakers to sustain it becomes endangered. Language is the basic tool for communication but as soon this communication has difficulties in expanding its users and the transmission terminates, the language terminates as well. The most common circumstances are: Cataclysmic or population attrition; and when speakers are absorbed by another culture and a different language.

In this regard most of European Union countries have been pro-active in promoting this language diversity and funds were available in this regard. Confronti (20129) notes that ... *Language in Italy is considered a precious and effective tool. Italy is very interested to protect historical linguistic minorities. The freedom of the citizens to express oneself in one's own language is a right enshrined in the Constitution. This has allowed speakers of different mother tongue to learn and preserve their native language to support highly promoted bilingualism in Europe.*

Besides the institutional support there is also a factor that clearly made a difference at the end of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st century and that is Globalization. Today Globalization is considered as the biggest assets of the Economy but has strongly impacted the cultural diversity and has accelerate the death of many native languages. Today even large nations such as Germany or France feel the impact of English language in industries such as technology, food, transportation since many catchwords have penetrated the local languages strongly. Being aware that language is often in a process of continuous change some linguists argue that these does not present a risk. On the other there are more traditional linguists that see the expansion of English language as a threat to small local or native language that suffer from decreasing number of native speakers and revitalization is far in the horizon. David Crystal, one of the most renowned British linguists in his master piece “English as a Global Language” has stated that:

In 500 years', time, will it be the case that everyone will automatically be introduced to English as soon as they are born (or, by then, very likely, as soon as they are conceived)? If this is part of a rich multilingual experience for our future newborns, this can only be a good thing. If it is by then the only language left to be learned, it will have been the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known.

This is a clear vision and warning of linguist that although he sees English as his native language, he considers that if just one language survives the Globalization this would be considered an intellectual disaster since language is not only a communicational tool but also a transmitter of culture, esthetic values, tradition, folktales and many more ideals collected in centuries. In this process leaving behind all these precious values by just switching to one global for economic or influential purposes would be considered a great lost for humanity and its history. In this regards it seems that English language has the strongest impact and is leading the globalization trends. In the following section a historic overview of the development of English language will be provided.

The Developments of English among Albanians in North Macedonia

The geographical territory of North Macedonia has been through different cultural stages and different political regimes. There are not many clear records regarding the formal process of EFL teaching in the country before the World War II. As it is known during the WWII there has been serious efforts to promote joint education programs in territories of the

western part of North Macedonia and Kosovo led by Ernest Koliqi, the minister of Education of that period. In this regard, besides the regular educational process it was planned a more wholistic approach toward linguistic matters by introducing a foreign language in the programs. However, we should not forget that the influence of English in mid-20th century was not as strong as it is now in our globalized reality. Nevertheless, signs of language knowledge were evident in the Southwestern part of the country in which the migration process to USA had already started. This region includes the cities of Debar, Struga and Prespa. The new wave of migration has started from the Korca region which is bordering this region and the first registered Albanian national evidenced in USA in Boston's registrar office is Koli Kristoforo from Korca in 1889. This is reported in Harvard's encyclopaedia of American Ethnic groups by Stephan Therstrom in 1980. This cultural transaction opened new windows for an early expansion of the English language in this region. The Struga, Dibra and Prespa region in North Macedonia are important in this regard since the "army" of educators from these region were among the first pioneers who spread educational practices in a formal system throughout the Western part of Macedonia during and after the WW II.

Similarly, to Albania the first attempts to formalise the ELT process in then Socialist Republic of Macedonia was done after the establishment of the State Universities in Skopje in 1949 and in Kosovo after the establishment of the University of Prishtina in 1969 as part of the former Yugoslav federation. From this period onward the foundations of the formal ELT education program are set among Albanians in North Macedonia.

The Albanian language in North Macedonia has gone through a number of challenges in the last seven decades as well. While English was becoming more popular the Albanian language lost its popularity in the Yugoslav federation. The Serbo-Croatian language became the language of the prestige. Most of the publications, media and research was first published and distributed in that language. The Serbo-Croatian language also became part of the primary school curricula, and it was a tool for integration and possible prosperity. In this context the Albanian language became a second order language. In North Macedonia there was just one daily newspaper in Albanian language named FLAKA which often promoted the propaganda of the time. All written correspondence in the judicial, medical, and educational system was only in Macedonian language. This continued over 6 decades until the promotion of the law of languages which was partially amended for few times after the year 2010. Currently the language is partially protected by the law but also from the Language Implementation Agency which was established recently. According to its statute the main objective of the agency is to

preserve, promote and protect the legal requirements and the linguistic right of all citizens through advancement of language policies and unification of the administrative terminology in cooperation with relevant experts and institutions in and out of the country.

Globalization as a factor for endangering languages

In our globalized world English language influences are everywhere from media and the public sphere to transportation, food, and technology. It is not very clear if it is stimulated as a necessity or as a way to sound appealing. This might lead to a new interdisciplinary study between Education, Psychology and Sociology in order to identify if these borrowings are inevitable or maybe a way to attract attention of different audiences by sounding chic or impressing professional audiences. In both cases there are no doubts that English language is substituting lexical items in the process, particularly the less-used lexical items and forms, but also it inputs terms that are new to our dictionary such as technical terms related to technological developments and inventions.

CONCLUSION

From what it was stated above it is clear that the Atlas of Endangered languages aims to evident the drastic cases but also raise awareness in regard to these processes. Although English and few more languages are in the process of expansion there are a large number of smaller languages that are in geographical congestion. Stopping these negative trends is challenging since revitalization of a language is difficult if the number of the speakers is decreasing. As reported in the send part of the article a stronger focus was put to the local context and the language policies in North Macedonia. The relationship between native speaker of Albanian language in North Macedonia with English language was seen from a historical but also political perspective. The language policy focus in the last two decades have switched from the ethno-centric perspective towards a more human-rights oriented language policy in which the write to speak and use Albanian language should be seen more as a human rights issue instead of political matter. Globalization will follow its trends, but it becomes our duty as educators and policymakers to reverse the trend and provide more space to native languages in order for the language to be revitalized and gain its well-deserved statute.

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