

Language Modernization vs. Linguistic Protectionism

Using extensive borrowings from English to derive new words as part of modernization vs. using language internal processes to create new lexical items

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Abstract

Since 1991, when the fiercest of all Communist isolations broke and the borders to the world were finally opened, the Albanian language has been undergoing significant changes in its lexicon and, at a certain measure, in its structure. Numerous concepts have found their way into the Albanian knowledge base before an Albanian word was ever found to name them. This phenomenon brought in an avalanche of borrowings from other languages, especially English, Greek and Italian. Some of these words are being naturalized by inflection and transliteration, others are being used as calques, while many of them find themselves in everyday use as foreign words, being eloquently integrated in spoken conversation, but having great difficulty in gaining approval from linguists when seen in written Albanian texts. The invasion of so many borrowings in such a short span of time has alarmed the Albanian linguists to such an extent that some of them are searching arguments to convince the public opinion that the Albanian language in a few years is going to be extinct. Taking into consideration the validity and reliability of the arguments presented by the abovementioned linguists and providing relevant information on the development stages of the life of a language, this paper defends the thesis that the Albanian language is not going to be extinct any time soon, on the contrary, it displays all the characteristics of a vivid, modern language in a very dynamic stage of its development.

Key Words: borrowings, language death, language shift, language survival, language contact, globalization, language extinction.

—Silence as songs are lost for words.
- from 'The Australian'

1. Alarm bells among linguists

Language is a living system in a process of continuous change. It has a life, a personality, it writes its own story. It is born, it can grow, it fades,

and it can die. Some languages are aggressive—they superpose themselves over other languages, assimilating the latter through the centuries. Others appear passive, sclerotic and clearly on their way to extinction. There are other languages still, the odds of which for survival through history have been a million to one, and yet they have resisted and thrived. They move and change, they sell and buy, they interact with their present neighbours, but in the same time retaining dignity and composure.

Sometimes, when a language buys more than it can sell, their speakers get alarmed and start to fear its death. But death has symptoms by which one can identify whether a language is going towards extinction or whether changes and the various transformations it goes through are the expression of nothing less than the vitality of that language and the ability to naturally adapt to the demands of present times.

In an interview for DISAL's New Routes, Professor David Crystal, one of the foremost authorities in language study, answered to a question on what language death is by saying:

A language dies when the last person who speaks it dies. Although some people argue that it dies when the second last person who speaks it dies, because then the last person has nobody to talk to. (New Routes, January 2009)

As one dominant language becomes more economically and socially advantageous to speak than another, some languages are naturally headed towards extinction; for example, centuries ago Old Greek and Latin came to replace many European languages as their use in trade and politics increased.

A book by the title "*Rrezikimi i Gjuhës Shqipe*", (from Albanian: *The Endangerment of the Albanian Language*) has alarmed linguists in Albania and the diaspora. Numerous discussions are being held in online forums and on television and an open letter was addressed to the President, the Prime Minister and the leaders of the main political parties of the Republic of Albania, as well as to the same authorities of the Republic of Kosovo, written and signed by a group of 250 intellectuals with the request to initiate a nationwide program in order to protect the Albanian language from the threat of extinction.

2. The influence of English on other languages

Speakers of world languages are more than ever involved in a personal and very close contact with English through these areas: *business, politics, the internet, the media, and popular culture*.

According to Steele, a vital factor in determining the health of a language is also its *status* in the global system of languages (Steele 11.09.03). Abrams and Strogatz (2003) have presented a simple dynamical system model of language death for a population in which two languages compete for speakers. The model allows the evolution of the system to be predicted, potentially allowing languages that are endangered to be identified at an early stage and appropriate action to maintain them planned. Fluency is well retained in languages that bear a status of high prestige, while for social and economic reasons, a low prestige language is weakened or lost to the younger generations.

Business and politics

In this era of globalization, economic interactions between countries are almost at all times conducted in English, and so is global politics and diplomacy. Every speaker of a language is reached in his/her own home through television broadcasting of news on political developments, being thus in daily contact with the English terms used by diplomats and politicians.

The internet, media and popular culture

The majority of large-scale, as well as small scale and personal business relations are conducted over the internet, which uses English as a primary language. An Albanian speaker, sitting in the comodity of his home, equipped with a computer, a bank account and internet connection, can order a product in the other half of the globe and can expect the item to be delivered to his home address in a reasonable amount of time. The majority of web information is broadcasted in English. More and more people from all countries access English-language websites on a daily basis, being this either a requirement of their job, or done for their personal networking and relaxation. This is shows that there are many people all over the world who are in contact with English through internet and can understand a number of words and expressions, at least that minimal amount that enables them to

browse the worldwide web. The enormous amount of songs and movies performed in English have flooded the audio, visual and online media.

3. English as a high prestige language and the concerns of the linguists regarding their native languages

The issue of globalization and the spread of English is more and more present in political and social debates that range in topic from the establishment of one global language to language purism and the nationalistic protection of the language. A common thread that runs through these discussions is the position of English as a high prestige language in the global system of world languages and the uncontrollable influence it is exercising on the other lower prestige languages of the world. Crystal (1985) estimated that as many as two billion people have some ability in English. That's almost a third of the world's population. Alatis and Straehle (1997) cited a USIA estimate of 700 million users of native and non-native English, and also refer to English being "the most commonly used language at international conferences"; they also cite a British Council number of two billion users of English "with some awareness" of the language. Kachru (2005: 14-15 and 205-7) calculations indicate that English users in India and China alone number 533 million, a population of users "larger than the total [number of English speakers] of the USA, the UK and Canada."

With such unparalleled spread of the language, a frequently voiced concern is the possibility that English may become the "killer" of the other languages of the world. Numerous papers have been written from scholars who express their serious concern about English language becoming a threat of extinction to minor languages and the cause of corruption or transformation for other major languages.

4. Defining the corruption of a language

The concerns regarding the endangerment of the Albanian language come principally by an authentic feeling of patriotism and national identity, but sometimes the spread of such an alarm may have political or ethnic discrimination reasons hidden behind an apparent concern for the language.

The argument that justifies this concern about the health of the Albanian language is mainly the influence of English as a global language as well as the influence of Italian, Greek and other neighbour languages on the

Albanian lexicon, morphology, syntax, and semantics. Such linguists retain that the Albanian language is being corrupted with the entrance of many borrowings and calques, mainly from English.

Some linguists, discussing in the media forums debate that preserving the purity of a language is a national duty and a patriotic obligation. They go on arguing that language does not need to be overpopulated with foreign terms when there is no need to add them to the lexicon. Terms borrowed from foreign languages are considered barbarisms, harmful to the health of the language and to be completely avoided.

The discussion goes further in claiming that whoever uses foreign words gravely damages the national identity, does not have love for the mothertongue, and in the worst cases is either an ignorant or a snobist who is trying to imitate those of higher rank, which in this case are the foreigners. This is often connected to an acute sense of personal inferiority, inadequacy and a tendency to self-diminishment, and despise of the proper native language, resulting in an over-adoration of whoever comes from a Western culture. Fifty years of isolation under Communism have contributed to this reverence and glorification of the Western countries. Thus, the entrance of foreign terms and alterations is considered an act of corruption that destroys a language.

5. The fear of language extinction: a natural resistance to change?

All living languages undergo constant change. Change and adaptability to its speakers' needs is actually a sign that a language is alive. Let's think about Latin—it is being presented to the generations in a deep-frozen state; it is the complete opposite of being dynamic and open to change, all characteristics of a living language.

The argument of the corruption of language may stem from a typical cultural feature: resistance to change. In hundreds of years, there is not a single case in history in which the Albanians of Albania have been aggressors to another nation. Centuries of occupation and war have taught the Albanian people to develop strong internal defense mechanisms in order to survive foreign attacks.

So, changes coming from outside have only been perceived as threats through history. This is actually a point that Communism knew well how

to use in order to convince an entire people to shut the doors to all other countries and consider the entire world a threat and an enemy.

In the majority of cases, people fight against change because they perceive it as a threat and they fear to lose something they value. So, when a language goes through the dynamics of its normal life cycle, including here the processes of vocabulary expansion, change occurs and perhaps the hidden reason behind this fear of the Albanian language going towards extinction may be essentially a cultural resistance to change.

6. Why a word borrowed long ago is a better word than a recently borrowed one?

What makes a word sound better than another one?

The reasons seem to be two: habit and prestige. These seem to be the criteria upon which one borrowing is considered as naturalized and another borrowing an intruder.

When discussing about the issue of borrowings, many people argue that recently acquired foreign terms should not be used in the Albanian language, because they threaten the existence of the language, but on the other hand it is okay to use borrowings that now own an Albanian citizenship. For example, it is normal to use the words *kompjuter*, *hotel*, *internet*, *kalendar*, *doktor*, *televizion*, *radio*, *kamera*, *disk*, *sport*, but it is considered lack of faithfulness to your mothertongue to use the words *akses* (*access*), *efiçencë* (*efficiency*), *anunçoj* (*announce*) etc.

When asked what to do in order to prevent the language from being extinct, people will give an answer that suggests the urgency to stop using foreign words and choose a native word instead. But the truth is, many native words are old borrowings that have been naturalized in the Albanian lexicon. As every other language, Albanian has had influences from many languages including Latin, Southern Slavic languages, Turkish, Italian, Greek, and French. So, instead of saying *T-shirt*, the word *bluzë* is suggested from many linguists, which is actually a very old loan word of the year 1788, from French *blouse*.

Strangely, older borrowings sound better than new ones. The reason is because people are used to them.

This also depends on who gives the opinion on which one is a better word to use: the interviews conducted for the purpose of this study showed that for people over forty years old, older borrowings sound better, while for teenagers and people in their twenties, a word like *T-shirt* sounds much better. Words like these sound good, because they are *cool*.

There is a category of newly acquired words that are having no problems to be accepted, mainly because they are being used by superiors or who is in authority. For example, even the older generation is using the English word *ID*, with the English pronunciation [ai di]. The reason is because the Prime Minister and the politicians are using it instead of the Albanian word *letërnjoftim*. The same phenomenon is happening with words like:

New word	Old word	Translation
influcënë	= ndikim	- <i>influence</i>
determinant	= përcaktues	- <i>determinant</i>
impakt	= ndikim	- <i>impact</i>
definicion	= përkufizim	- <i>definition</i>
i marginalizuar	= i anash-lënë	- <i>marginalized</i>
neglizhencë	= mospërfillje	- <i>negligence</i>

The use of new borrowings instead of older ones is also happening at the University of Vlora. The new Rector of the University has brought in words like *provost*, *syllabus*, *kampus*, *tutorial*, *kalkulus* etc. and everybody is widely using them. These words are a typical example of very new borrowings that have immediately found their naturalization in the Albanian vocabulary. They sound good, because they have prestige.

7. Reasons for borrowing or creating new words

Ismail Kadare, a prestigious Albanian writer who recently won the Prince of Asturias Award in Literature, is also a coiner of new words in the Albanian language. His novels, apart from being deep with thought, are also enriched with new and revived words from the old roots of Albanian. As the prize jury said in a statement following the announcement of the award:

Giving life to old myths through new words, he expresses all the grief and dramatic load of conscience.

Talking about language, Ismail Kadare emphasises that a major role in the process of language is played by two categories of people: politicians and actors. These categories of people—and I will add here a third one, journalists—are public speakers and as such, they forge the everyday language of the whole nation. The public speakers' decisions to use a foreign word depend on these factors:

- the amount of message transmittability and comprehensibility intended by the speaker;
 - his/her intention to communicate;
 - sometimes the specific purpose of a public speaker is to not communicate, to be vague so they say what they want to say, but they do not say what they really mean;
- the speaker's level of grammar knowledge, spelling, and correct language use.

According to the Concise Oxford Companion to the English Language 1998, general reasons for borrowing words are:

- (1) **Close contact** in especially multilingual situations, making the mixing of elements from different languages more or less commonplace.
- (2) **The domination** of some languages by others (for cultural, economic, political, religious, or other reasons), so that material flows 'down' from those 'high' languages into 'lower' vernaculars.
- (3) **A sense of need**, users of one language drawing material from another for such purposes as education and technology.
- (4) **Prestige** associated with using words from another language.
- (5) A **mix** of some or all of these. Individuals may use an exotic expression because it seems to them to be the most suitable term available, the only possible term (with no equivalent in any other language), or the most impressive term.

8. Levels of language health

In order to decide whether the Albanian language is indeed in threat of extinction, we need to have a look at the symptoms of a language headed towards extinction.

Crystal (2000) and Krauss (1992), identified the following levels of language health:

Safe	the language is living and dynamic.
Potentially endangered	fewer children are learning the language.
Endangered	the youngest good speakers are young adults, few or no children are learning the language.
Seriously Endangered	the youngest good speakers are 50 years old or older.
Moribund	only a small number of very old speakers.
Extinct	no speakers.

The *Living Tongues Institute For Endangered Languages* calculated the level of endangerment of the languages of the globe dividing the different categories in *language hotspots*, according to a set of criteria. Anderson and Harrison (2007) think that the level of endangerment of a language is not necessarily determined by the number of speakers. They argue that even a relatively small number of speakers can maintain a language, if those speakers include young children and the language is used in all parts of daily life. A language in threat of extinction has only old speakers and has not been passed on to younger generations.

Extinct	No speakers
Moribund	Youngest speakers over age 60
Highly endangered	Youngest speakers over age 40
Endangered	No children speak the language
Threatened	Small community undergoing shift. Not currently endangered but a small change in circumstances could lead to endangerment.
Thriving	Stable or growing community with speakers of all ages who use the language in all or most spheres of life

Anderson and Harrison (2007) also calculate the level of documentation in a language. They rank the amount of information that exists about a language, such as writing systems, grammars, dictionaries, texts, and audio and video materials. Only materials that have been published and are in print, and have been translated into a widely-known language are

counted. These materials are ranked on a five-point scale, with a language receiving a point for:

1. Texts with translation
2. Short scholarly articles
3. Descriptive grammar
4. Lexicon (word list) or dictionary
5. Audio/Video materials with annotation

9. Albanian as a strong, dynamic living language

Albanian is spoken fluently as a mothertongue by almost four million monolinguals inside the borders of Albania, and by more than six million people including the members of the diaspora, mainly concentrated in Kosovo, Turkey, the Republic of Macedonia, Greece and Italy (Arbereshe); and also by immigrant communities in many other countries, mainly the United Kingdom, the USA, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Children in Albania learn their native language with no interference from foreign languages. People of all ages use Albanian in every aspect of their daily life. Publications in Albanian, in the form of books, scholarly papers, journals, dictionaries, translated writings, are abundant in bookshops and libraries.

Albanians are internationally known for their language prowess, but the status of such languages is always that of *foreign languages*. The Albanian language does not compete with any other languages in its own territory. It has no enemies, no natural predators.

Although accepting influences from modern languages, especially English, to meet its speakers' needs for modernization, such borrowings are subject to the existent rules of grammar and phonetics.

10. Conclusion

If language can be compared to a living organism, then it can also bear the analogy of a human body with its muscles, ligaments and skeleton. What are then the vital organs of a language? Every language has a lexicon and a phonetic system woven, held together and kept alive and functioning by systematic rules of grammar. Every language breathes in

and out words through time according to the needs of its speakers. Giving and taking words from other languages will not kill a language as much as the increase of body muscle can kill a human organism.

The vital organs of a language consist in its grammar. Words can come and go in the same speedy way that ideas, messages, mentalities, beliefs, habits of the speakers come and go, but grammar is what holds a language together.

So, as far as a language does not lose its grammar, its capability to change and adapt, and its speakers, that language is strong, thriving, and ready to be around for a long time.

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