

A Comparative Study of Language Policies for Minorities in Italy vs. Macedonia

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Abstract

This article analyses language rights in the larger language context between Italy, a country who is well established in language minority rights sphere in European Union and Republic of Macedonia. Language diversity is an on-going process impacted by migration and globalization. In this regard, this paper analyses the language policy development of the same language but in two different context. The first scenario is Arbreshi/Albanian language spoken in Southern Italy after their immigration from Albania in the 15th century, and the Albanian language spoken in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Although it is the same language, the dynamics of globalization, absence of economic opportunities, local and the international political context and the status of a minority language in both countries have stirred the same language in different directions in Italy and Macedonia. The study investigates the possible scenarios that these languages could be considered endangered as a result of assimilation in Southern Italy or massive emigration which the case in Macedonia is. The biggest challenges seem to be the disability to fight in the aggressive economic race and are lacking vitality and policy mechanisms to survive. The study investigates how languages are overpowered because they do not present an economic factor in their community and as a consequence they first lose their rank in the local community and consequently they lose their chance for revitalization. The paper also analyses the current legal status of these languages in both aforementioned countries and possible scenarios of being endangered languages as a result of urbanization and economic competition in this globalized reality.

Keywords: Minority language policies, Italy vs. Macedonia, urban languages, endangered languages, globalization

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the power of language is enormous. The role that language has in providing communication bonds has impacted strongly the economic development but also advancement of science. In this great race for “new language territories” and “economic influence” there are language that cannot maintain the tempo and as a result of these new circumstances they first lose their popularity among the native speakers and as result of these new circumstances they gradually lose their speakers.

There are few cases in which certain languages expand and English is one of them. Here are some statistics regarding the great expansion of English language:

In a study entitled “Supporting the British economy through teaching English as Foreign language”, a team of “Capital Economics for UK” has reported that the English language teaching(ELT) sector supports approximately 26.650 jobs throughout England only and it results to a net tax return of US \$281 million to government capitals. In 2014 only from student spending and tuition, accommodation and other living expenses in the ELT sector, the British government has collected an estimate sum of US \$ 3.48 billion. It seems that this industry grosses more than Coca Cola or Vodafone company together and is challenging to some extent the industry of BP(British Petroleum)in regard to its 18.000 UK employees.

As a result of this new reality, many other languages are dying. According to Poshka(2018)this could not be considered a conscious and purposeful neo-colonialism of English language since the expansion is not managed by any government nor kingdom, but in the name of integrated market-economy it has clearly opened common ground for expansion through the process of globalization, market economy, education, Hollywood, internet and lately through the social media.

According to Turin(2012),...*the Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger released by UNESCO in early 2009 claims that more than 2,400 of the over 6,500 languages spoken around the globe today are in danger of disappearing. The UNESCO consulting team ranked these vanishing voices on a sliding scale from vulnerable to extinct (Moseley, 2012): noting that many such speech forms will cease to be used as communicative vernaculars by the next generation of speakers, and that many of these languages are entirely oral (or signed) and have no established written form, so are at risk of disappearing without trace.*

2. How do Languages Become Endangered?

Challenges that endangered languages go through are different in different regions but the most common 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

When speakers are absorbed by another culture and a different language.

Unfortunately, most of these processes are irremediable and revitalizing a language is a challenge that not many cultures manage to achieve. According to Turin (2012) based on ... *conservative estimates, 97% of the world's people speak 4% of the world's languages. Conversely, 96% of the world's languages are spoken by 3% of the world's people. Over 1,500 languages—one quarter of the total number of living speech forms—have fewer than 1,000 speakers...we now know that at least 50% of the world's languages are losing speakers, some of them at a dramatic rate... Up to 90% of the world's speech forms may be replaced by dominant regional, national or international languages by 2100...* . There are a number of factor that impact the process such as economic development, migration, demography of population, but foremost it is the globalization process that is quite evident in the last few decades.

3. Current Status of Albanian Language in Macedonia

The language rights issues or the “law on usage of languages” has been constantly a burden for the daily politics in Macedonia in the last three decades in post-communist Macedonia. This human rights issue although has gone through a number of modifications as a law it still presents an impractical and a highly polemic topic in the daily life of the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia. On one side you have the Albanian community, which is second largest community in the country that aims to make the Albanian language an official language which would serve as the second official language in the country after Macedonians, and on the other side Macedonian politics that sees this issue as a threat for their identity and the overall national cohesion.

A strong argument that Albanian community uses through their political elites is that making Albanian language official is in line with the implementation of the Ohrid Agreement signed in August 2001 and should not be manipulated or lose its values in the “legal corridors” of the constitution.

A brief historical and legal overview

The first Constitution of the independent Republic of Macedonia which was voted 1991 was restrictive in terms of language rights of the Albanian language and therefore Albanian representatives elected for the parliament in 1991 did not vote the newly proposed constitution.

It took 14 years until the discussion on human rights was on the table again after the ethnic tensions in 2001. The status of Albanian language changed in article V and VIII. Also article 7 supplemented with amendment V and it stated that "The Macedonian language and its Cyrillic script are official in the entire territory of the Republic of Macedonia and in international relations. Another language spoken by at least 20% of the citizens is also the official language and its writing, as defined in this article". Article 48 also states that: “The Republic guarantees the protection of the ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious identity of all communities”.

From a first glimpse, it seems that things are well covered from the legal perspective, but in fact implementation created a serious challenge for the Albanian language. Firstly, the Albanian community was not happy with the term “20%” since it seemed to ridicule an

ethnic group that has deep roots in the society in regards to historical, cultural and economic perspectives. Secondly, this kind of approach restricts its institutional usage and narrows the right of usage in the sphere of publications, communication and international relations and promoted the sense of inequality in the society.

In an egalitarian society the language policy goes in favor of equality of languages which seems to be deliberately misused in the Macedonian context. The need for language policies to be equal is evident in all spheres in order not to damage the already fragile inter-ethnic relations.

In 2018 the law was amended again and voted in the parliament and Article 2 of this law expanded the list of institutions and services where the Albanian language will be used in parallel with the Macedonian language, namely the Macedonian and then the Albanian. Ironically, this time it is the president of the country Mr. Gjorge Ivanov, who is not signing the law although it was voted by the majority of the members of the parliament. This type of political irresponsibility describes best the absurdity of the Balkan politics in general, and the politics in Macedonia in particular in which human rights are seen as an obstacle instead of an opportunity.

If Macedonians do not agree or feel that Albanian language should be equal then it will never be equal in terms of the system implementation. Language should serve as a tool for prosperity and communication, and not as an instrument for discrimination. As long as human rights such as the language rights of one ethnic group are considered a danger for the country or danger for the dominant population, then the whole situation is absurd. More human rights, does not translate to less human rights for the other ethnic group but a liberal cohesion that is very needed in the Balkans.

4. Current Language Policy in Italy

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 men of different mother tongue to learn and preserve their native language to support highly promoted bilingualism in Europe.

The Italian experience to adapt itself to the presence of Italo-Albanians has develop a greater awareness of culture and language diversity. This has created a culture favorable to diversity and has not constrained the Italo-Albanian population to deny cultural identity and to forge the language. In fact, the immigrant in contact with the Italian land has learned Italian language and culture were able to integrate.

Identity is recognized differently depending on the circumstances because it belongs to a single group but with different characteristics. The group is understood in the sense of singularity and falls within boundaries enclosed in an already existing reality that conditions the human who is immutable and easily redefines and identifies himself or herself. Also the exchange of thoughts, cultures and languages ads more value to the process.

Linguistic freedom consists in the possibility for the individual to choose the language in private conversations, meetings, publications and this is very important to be recognized. This freedom allows the member of the community to use his/her favorite language and the only recommendation is the use of national/majority language in acts of public authority.

It is important to aspire to use mother tongue in every field and in every form of communication, in relations with institutions, services, media and schools, as well as in connection with the own territory (including the original toponyms). This means that each man wants to be oneself, to recognize oneself in a specific group, to express in this way its opinion, to be able to take advantage of services in a fair way and therefore not suffer discrimination on the basis of their own linguistic and cultural specificities.

The linguistic rights are part of the fundamental human rights. They support the human being in philosophical, cultural, legal and political terms. It also plays an important role in regards to heritage transmission such as the orality that compares ancient ethnographic background, fairy tales, the traditional folk tales, develops autonomously.

5. The Status of Arbëreshë in Southern Italy

In South of Italy there are 50 Italo-Albanians small towns and they speak Arbëresh as their linguistic variant. These migrants have chosen the South of Italy because at that time it was depopulated by the earthquake and the many plagues deaths. Arbëreshis have repopulated the existing areas and haven't built new ones.

The socio-economic conditions of southern Italy of the 15th century greatly degraded however ecclesiastical and land barons favored the establishment of these immigrant groups (De Leo: 1981). The linguistic variant spoken by the Arbereshe is linked to the tosco dialect of the Albanian, which is the official language of the native motherland which is Albania.

As Savoy states, the Albanian variety belongs to the Indo-European languages, in particular they share many morphosynthetic features with the other Balkan languages, the vitality of the Arbëresh language is good even though their use is sensitive to Italian sociolinguistic conditions that see the strong standard language pressure.

Italo- Albanians speak a series of dialects, all of which belong to the Albanian language group they are present in Calabria, Sicily, Basilicata, Apulia, Molise, Campania and Abruzzo.

Arbëresh is an ancient language that maybe precedes the birth of many Italian dialects and which has resisted external pressures thanks to the natural morphology that hosted it. It has survived until the contemporary day being transmitted orally and today thanks to politicians who recognized it as historical minorities and the linguists' work that have fought for the preservation of their mother tongue.

Arbëresh, in recent years has been very important because the administrative acts of the municipalities were translated into minority languages and was taught through extracurricular studies in the schools of the particular territory. Unfortunately in the present, the economic incentives have been reduced and that imply a considerable loss.

A recommendation is that the Arbëresh must be institutionalized at least in the schools in order for schools not to be a tool that assimilates the linguistic minorities. The consequences are very obvious, many students speak a truly poor Arbëresh, which is strongly influenced by Italian in both syntax and lexical items. If this development continues, and if there is no end to the assimilation policy by the majority, Arbëresh will be a dead language in two or three generations. Until now the language has been transmitted orally but as a result of globalization the dynamics have changed and the language needs to be truly revitalized and not neglected.

The life of Arbereshi in Italy has always been characterized by an economy based above all on agriculture. This difficult living conditions forced many arbëreshë to emigrate.

The Italian law 482/99 allows the written and oral use of the protected language in the offices of public administrations, however these local administrators have very few funds and have not yet managed to institutionalize an internal linguistic expert. The extent of available funds it is not enough to make the phenomenon reinforce itself. This is particularly evident with the Arbreshi language since there are many villages who speak this particular language and the funds are not sufficient. The fact that the language until today has been transmitted only orally requires facilitation through the schooling system.

6. Conclusion

Can integration help or encourage assimilation? Very often in the name of integration and economic development, many minority cultures leave their natural habitat in search for a better life. This “integration” clearly might provide better living conditions but the presence of the local culture would slowly diminish. In general, language mediates the communication process but also transmits oral literature in the form of lyrical or epic poetry, poems, traditional maxims, spells, myths spells and folk tales. These values can also be musical such as songs, instruments of musical genres etc. and cannot be transmitted if the languages are lost or assimilated. As Turin (2012) states “oral traditions...and when elders die and livelihoods are disrupted, it is such creative expressions that become threatened”.

In this ever-changing world there will always be tendencies to one culture dominate the other and more and more languages will be endangered. It becomes the duty of the linguistic community to find modes to preserve these languages, just as it is the duty to of to protect endangered species. It is a characteristic of the human nature to adjust and adapt with the new settings in order to survive or integrate but leaving behind a native language would also threaten the speech code of oral tradition that is created through centuries. It becomes our duty as linguists to raise awareness on the issue. What seems to be forgotten in this context is that languages are not only diversity tools that promote social and economical stability or integration but are also the main carrier of cultural heritage and identity. In this strive for integration, multiculturalism and globalization the collateral damage are the ethnic or the minority languages. They seem to not fit in this aggressive economic race and are lacking vitality and policy mechanisms to survive. These languages do not find setting that is user-friendly, and sometimes are whitewashed by not being a factor in the economic impels and as a result they first lose their importance and attractiveness and unfortunately later-on

they lose their chance for revitalization. European language policies need to provide more solidarity toward minority or ethnic languages in urban Europe in order to create basic survival conditions.

There are a several global organizations that promote these projects in global level but it requires a larger effort from the linguistic professionals in Europe to pursue language documentation, revitalization in the communities in which there are endangered languages. Some of these languages are not endangered in their native countries but also according to Endangered Language Alliance (ELA), in New York City an immense linguistic diversity in quantity as high as 800 languages are threatened in urban areas as a result of globalization and migration. According to the Endangered language Catalogues (ELCat2015) there are 180 countries in which languages are threatened to vanish in the 21 century.

Language rights are human rights and if every country has signed several human rights conventions, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, then it is clear that there should not be doubts in regards to language usage and its application. From cases mentioned earlier it seems that Italy has understood its role and responsibility very well and is using all possible instruments to nurture and promote minority languages, endangered languages and their heritages which are strongly attacked by globalization. Minority languages in Italy are Occitans, Ladins, Sardo and few others. They are all historical languages and more money is dedicated by the state for this historic languages. On the other hand the italo-albanians although spread in 50 small towns in the South of Italy there is not much funding to support it fully. The use of the minority language in public life, both administrative and domestic, contributes to raising the status in the eyes of its speakers. In fact, only the vehicular use of the protected language guarantees its renewal and vitality, meaning the Albanian language does not have this commodity in Macedonia although it is spoken by over 30% of the population in the country. The situation might be different in Italy but not enough funds dedicated to Italo-Albanians. Language policy should exist to nurture and develop languages in order to progress and transmit the values and the heritage that each language has in the world. From the magnitude and dynamics in which globalization is developing it is evident that many languages will be endangered and using language policies to promote language rights help in saving and revitalizing the endangered languages and promote an egalitarian society.

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