

# **This Tongue Is Not My Own:**

Study Of the Consequences Of Writing Native  
Literature In A Non-Native Language

By

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This work is dedicated to my parents, Irene Chew & Timothy Reilly; Antonio Ong & Michelle Kwan.

And also to the memory of my grandfather, 王天南.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

When Martin Luther translated the Bible from Latin to High German, he did so with the intention of letting the German people read for themselves the very words of God instead of having to rely on secondary sources to interpret scripture. Although only 4 to 5% of Germans were literate at the time, Luther's German Bible spread into almost every genteel German household who believed that owning a copy would confer to them some sort of "middleclass prestige" (Christianity Today Int.). This led to the standardisation of the German language and further solidified German identity. A few centuries later, the Soviet Union would force Russian upon the countries it had taken over in an attempt to eradicate any nationalistic uprisings by having children learn Russian in school. As a result, a generation of people from the Soviet era like the Czechs, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Estonians became effectively bilingual. Although this manoeuvre ended in failure, the Russians had guessed rightly that subduing foreign countries would require replacing their native languages with Russian. Even today, Russian is still a useful to the traveller of Eastern Europe because many of the Eastern European countries still have large populations of Russian speakers— although the language has a tendency to incur more distasteful sentiments than naught.

Language has always been one of, if not the most important identifying feature of diverse human cultures. What makes a nation distinct from another? Native language will most certainly be a distinguishing mark of identification for a people, along with social norms, rituals and celebrations. The book of Genesis in the Old Testament records an account of how in order to stop men from completing the tower of Babel and thereby elevating themselves to the position of God, "the LORD confused the language of the whole

world. From there the LORD scattered them over the face of the whole earth” (New International Version. Gen. 11. 1-9). Whether this is believed to be a historically genuine fact or not, there is no doubt that we live in a world of great linguistic diversity.

In 2000, David Nettle and Suzanne Romaine estimated there to be “approximately 6,000 languages in the world, but there are only about 200 countries” (Nettle and Romaine 21). Only nine years later, the *Ethnologue* puts the number of known living languages in the world at 6,909— an almost fifteen percent increase. While this statistic may hint at a growing number of languages, the reality is quite the opposite. In fact, the fifteen percent increase is mostly credited to new discoveries and archiving of languages that have already existed. Unfortunately, as new languages are being discovered year to year, hundreds enter an endangered state and face extinction within the century.

Desperate efforts are being made by linguists at The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) to capture the scope of linguistic diversity before too much damage is done. SIL’s efforts to catalogue the world’s languages before they disappear may have missionary purposes, but their task is one of gargantuan scale and relevance to the human race. Because languages also act as a depository for shared information and knowledge, losing a language may mean losing precious expertise and information about the maintenance of a very specific geological environment. For example, in traditional fishing cultures like in Hawaii, Tahiti or Palau, species of fish are named according to spawning cycles or even medicinal uses. If these languages are to die out, so will the collective knowledge of how native species in the seas around them may be effectively managed and benefitted from (Nettle and Romaine 73-75).

Yet even as SIL tries to identify new languages in remote places, they face a difficult question right from the start— what exactly constitutes a language anyway? In China, Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew are considered dialects even though they are distinct and may be compared to how French, English and Spanish relate to one another. Is it because they do not have separate writing systems from the nationally-recognised main system of Mandarin? To a foreigner, the contrasts between these cultures may be very minute and to lump them into the same category of “Chinese” is easy. However closer scrutiny beyond the surface will reveal unique organisation of society, rituals, habits and characteristics. So how, despite their linguistic and geographic proximities, do languages such as Bulgarian and Russian, Welsh and Scottish escape from being labelled as “dialects” instead?

Aside from the dilemma of distinguishing languages from dialects, there is also the confounding phenomenon of a handful of dominant languages pushing into and thereby replacing thousands of other languages. The reasons for this fairly recent occurrence in human history are still being analysed by linguistic theorists who can only guess at why and how it is happening. Therefore, this paper will tackle one of the many questions that may pose a clue— what are the consequences of writing native literature in a non-native language? Since a language is only “living” if it is currently in use and being passed on to future generations, then writing about one’s own culture in another language must have an impact on the survival of one’s native tongue. Any student of other languages understands that mastering a language requires extensive usage on a regular basis. Without everyday use, a language dies along with its functionality and necessity. Consequently, by choosing to write in a foreign language, one unwittingly creates a piece of work that is promoting that



language's usage while simultaneously cutting short the lifespan of our own unused language. What most of us do not realize is that in the death of a native tongue, much more is lost than linguists have even begun to grasp.

## Chapter II: What Constitutes A Language?

In any discourse about languages, a fundamental dispute about what defines a language usually crops up. Today, “scholars are recognizing that languages are not always easily nor best treated as discrete, identifiable, and countable units with clearly defined boundaries between them (Makoni and Pennycook 2006). Rather, a language is more often comprised of continua of features that extend across time, geography, and social space” (*Ethnologue*). Therefore in identifying a language, it is necessary not just to mark linguistic discrepancies, but also to consider the history, culture and political landscape of the people who use it. This becomes an exceptionally complicated task when socio-political lines are blurred and giving status to native tongues conflicts with interests in encouraging national identity through language consolidation. At the root of this debate lies the fact that there is no universally-accepted method of demarcation between what is a language and what is a dialect. While one would very easily be able to distinguish Chinese and Portuguese as completely different languages, it may not be as easy to tell whether closely-related tongues such as Serbian and Croatian should be granted the status of “language” or just labeled variations of a common tongue since they are almost identical linguistically and are simply political offspring of the breakdown of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

In *The Story of Language*, Mario Pei proposes three conventional methods of differentiating between whether a tongue is to be labeled a language or dialect. The first, from a political standpoint, would define “a language [as] what is officially accepted as the national form of speech, and a dialect [as] what does not have such acceptance.” From a linguistic point of view, “one might say that a language is a form of speech that has given rise to a literature, a dialect one that has not”; and the “third reply is that there is no intrinsic

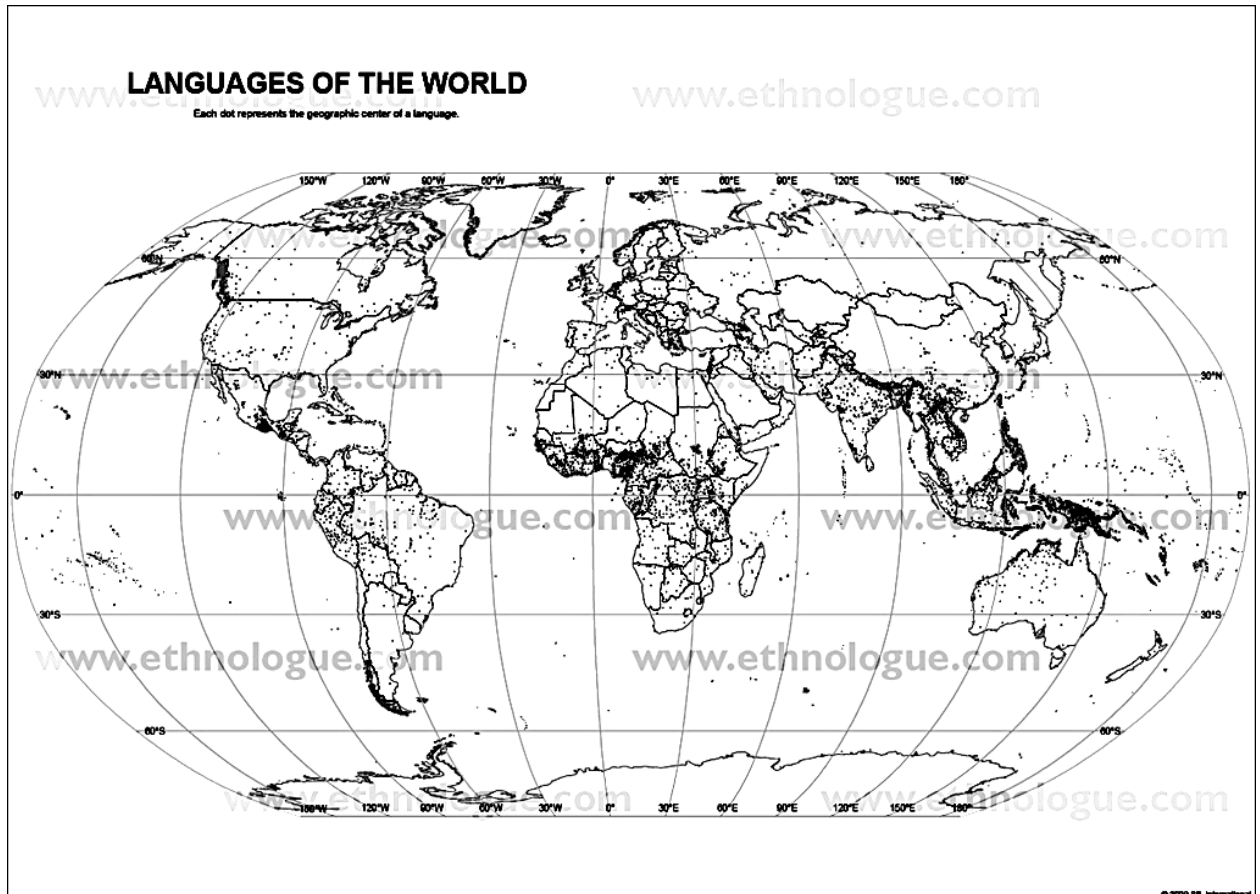
difference between a language and a dialect, the former being a dialect which, for some special reason, such as being the speech form of the locality which is the seat of the government, has acquired pre-eminence over the other dialects of the country” (Pei 47). Unfortunately, all these positions are flawed since they do not apply equally to all peoples and nations of this world that seek proper recognition for their particular tongue. For example, if languages were defined according to their official status in a nation, then prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, languages such as Ukrainian or Belorussian would not have existed even though they have been in use for a long time. Also if literature is evidence of a language, then virtually all Native American tongues will end up being labeled as dialects instead since they do not pass on information through writing.

Currently, in compiling the *Ethnologue*— the most comprehensive encyclopedia about all known languages in the world— researchers adhere to three principles in negotiating fault lines between languages and dialects. The first criterion for varieties to be identified as languages instead of dialects is that it may not be mutually intelligible with another variety. Secondly, if there are gross similarities between two varieties, “the existence of a common literature or of a common ethnolinguistic identity with a central variety that both understand can be a strong indicator that they should nevertheless be considered varieties of the same language”. Thirdly, even if speakers of two varieties should be able to understand each other without much difficulty, they should still be considered separate if they have established themselves so.

Based on these guiding principles, the *Ethnologue* has compiled a list of 6,909 known languages to date and this staggering number does not even include dialects or varieties in languages. Yet even now, more and more languages are being identified in

isolated parts of the world annually. Unfortunately, most people are quite unaware of the large extent to which linguistic diversity exists on this earth since most of the educated world only communicates in a few dominant languages such as English, German or French. Even linguistic scholars may only be able to name less than a hundred languages (Nettle & Romaine 27). With such lack of awareness then come suppositions like “everybody in France speaks French” or “everybody in Brazil speaks Portuguese”; whereas in actuality, 25 separate languages are recorded to exist in France and 236 in Brazil (Ethnologue).

Another lesser-known fact is that language diversity may vary depending on a region’s global position and subsequent climate. That Brazil has almost nine times more languages than France is no accident as the maps below will demonstrate— there are strong correlations between biological and linguistic diversity.



(Ethnologue). Here, each highlighted dot represents the location of each living language listed in the *Ethnologue*, Darker patches show areas of rich linguistic diversity.

## The 25 Biodiversity Hotspots



([info.k4health.org](http://info.k4health.org)). This map highlights areas in the world that are rich in biodiversity.

In both maps, concentrations in linguistic and biological diversity are found along the equatorial belt with regions towards the poles waning. This pattern evidences that more languages are likely to be found in tropical Brazil with its thousands of species of wildlife than in temperate France. Indeed, in these hotspot regions along the equator, we find 50 to 90 percent of the world's species as well as almost 60 percent of all the world's languages (Nettle & Romaine 32). Sadly, not only are linguistic diversity and biodiversity commonly bound by location, they also face the same crucial threat of endangerment and extinction.

Over the years, more people are beginning to grasp the consequences of extensive deforestation in places like Brazil or Indonesia. However while scientists lament the irreversible damage done to ecosystems, it is not yet common knowledge that the

hundreds of languages that exist or are yet to be discovered in these regions are under threat of extinction as well. Linguists who are well aware of this matter are thus racing against time to research and record as many languages as they can before their last speakers disappear forever and the language with them. In this case, linguistic researchers and biological scientists share many common enemies since the threats to linguistic diversity and biodiversity largely overlap (Nettle & Romaine 41-49). Much of this destruction usually comes in some push for development from third-world to first-world living standards. This includes clearing land for farming and mineral extraction which subsequently ends up displacing people and wildlife from their native soil. Once dispossessed, native populations of living creatures, humans, animals and plants alike face endangerment because their niches of living have been destroyed. The case for the preservation of earth's biodiversity has more or less been made. From oxygen-producing swaths of forest to undiscovered medicinal treasures, the benefits of maintaining the millions of species which inhabit the lands and oceans not just far outweigh that of their destruction— it is essential to our human survival. Less strikingly obvious however, are the arguments for preserving languages.

To many, the importance of maintaining linguistic diversity could seem nothing more than a selfish philosophical or religious fancy without long-term benefits; and in some respects, that may be true. However like centuries-old forests, languages are actually filled with hidden troves of knowledge and meaning and are “enmeshed in a social and geographical matrix just as a rare species is enmeshed in an ecosystem” (Nettle & Romaine 79). Although the intrinsic value of native tongues is not as discernable as that of natural habitats, research has shown that the two cannot and should not be viewed as separate issues. From a Western perspective, tribes of indigenous peoples without first-world luxuries are

often regarded as backward and underdeveloped. This is rather ironic considering that indigenous peoples have managed to survive in and maintain their local ecosystems for centuries without serious environmental repercussions as we see in the industrialised Western world today. Much of the local knowledge of these so-called backward societies actually far surpass that of modern science— an example given in *Vanishing Voices* by how

“centuries before there were marine biologists and scientific methods of classifying fish and other marine life, Pacific Islanders were passing down orally their accumulated knowledge about the behaviour of each of hundreds of varieties of fish. According to some scientists, Hawaiians probably knew more about the fish of their islands when Captain Cook first arrived in 1778 than scientists know today. Indeed, Hawaiians have now forgotten more of that local knowledge accumulated and handed down orally over the past 2,000 years than western scientists will ever learn” (Nettle & Romaine 56)

Unfortunately, the death of these native Pacific Island languages often incurs loss of information on wildlife and natural habitats since “detailed knowledge of the environment ha[d] been encoded in patterns of naming of fish, fish behaviors, fishing practices, and technology. When these words are lost, it becomes increasingly difficult even to frame problems and solve them in any but the dominant culture’s terms and scientific classification schemes, which are not always adequate to the task” (Nettle & Romaine 77). As each subsequent new generation of fishermen remember less and less of their forefathers’ valuable vocabulary, they begin to rely on words and environmental management ideology coming from the west. The result of this language loss then spells disaster for local ecosystems as in the case of the Pacific reef areas which were overfished due to “the impact of western technology on traditional fishing practices in small atoll communities” (Nettle & Romaine 71). From this example, we can clearly see how for centuries, the delicate task of managing ecosystems responsibly depended on the generational transfer and accumulation of folk wisdom through a shared language. Indeed this is not an isolated instance. In

communities around the world that have remained almost untouched by outsiders for thousands of years, people are often very much in tune and knowledgeable about their surroundings and pass on their know how through language, songs and folktales.

Not only do languages harbour vital knowledge about local ecosystems, they are also crucial socialisation tools. After years of research, sociologists now believe that language is even essential to proper brain development. In sociology, this is known as the Symbolic-Interactionism perspective. One of the first theorists to posit this idea is Herbert Mead who believed that children learn to construct a “self” by socialising and relating to their environment through symbolic meaning in language (Mead 135-147). “The development of language, including a name for self, makes possible the process of playing at and taking the roles of specific others... In this manner, as the child acquires a richer sense of the content and structure of group activities, he or she develops a fuller sense of self” (Hewitt 128). Because human beings are naturally social creatures that thrive on interaction with others, language learning is as crucial to the healthy development of an infant such as mastering basic mobile tasks like walking or grasping things with their hands. A famous instant of this is Genie, who was a thirteen year old girl discovered in the 1970s by social workers to have grown up isolated in a room day and night for more than ten years of her life. Completely deprived of human interaction except when her parents came in the room to feed her, Genie had learnt no language and was infantile in her speech and motions. Her mental and physical abilities were severely limited as a result of this lack of socialisation and she was never able to form deep human relationships even after being rescued from her dysfunctional parents (Garmon). Although Genie’s is an extreme case, it serves as a chilling example of how we would not be able to function naturally without language.



Yet perhaps the most intangible value of languages lie in its worth as a means of identity and pride. Since the French Revolution ended, the rather modern concept of nationalism had swept across Europe and later the rest of the world. Consequently, political attention began to focus on preserving the integrity and marked difference between one language and another so as to solidify national identities.

“In 1790, the first decrees of the French Revolutionary government were translated into the minority languages of France (Provençal, Breton, Basque, Catalan, German, Italian, etc.) and the use of these languages was encouraged, but later this policy was reversed with the statement: ‘French will become the universal language, since it is the language of liberty. Meanwhile, let it become the language of all Frenchmen’” (Pei 261).

Even up until the 1970s, birth certificates were denied children with Breton names in an effort to make them more French (Nettle & Romaine 141). Today we witness the consequences of such policy— French is spoken by over 67 million people while Basque, Provençal and Breton are endangered languages. Similarly, halfway across the globe in Taiwan, attempts are being made to distinct Taiwanese as a separate language instead of as a dialect of Min Nan Yu. Although there are very few linguistic differences between Taiwanese and Min Nan Yu and mutual intelligibility is high, the government of Taiwan is still bent on creating a solely Taiwanese national identity based on the recognition of Taiwanese as a separate entity from anything related to mainland China, including Min Nan Yu of Fujian and Fuzhou areas (China Post). Here, the meditation on language versus dialect is particularly relevant since dialects seem to be commonly valued as lesser than languages. As a result, dialects are generally limited to household use and are not taught in schools or used at the workplace. This puts dialect speakers at a possibly vulnerable position in larger society since their tongue may be regarded too inferior to be granted official

language status. A dialect speaker may then suffer being ostracised and denied equal rights as other ethnic groups in his/her country.

Perhaps the reason why human identity is so intimately connected to language is because variations in speech may be instantly picked up to identify whether or not a person belongs to a certain ethnic group. A famous instant of this is found in the biblical book of Judges when the Gileadites were seeking to kill the Ephraimites. To identify any surviving Ephraimite who was attempting to cross the Jordan River, the Gileadites would ask him to pronounce the word “Shibboleth”. If he pronounced it “Sibboleth” because he could not pronounce the “sh” sound, that instantly marked him out as an Ephraimite and he would be killed instantly (New International Version. Judg. 12. 4-6). Similarly, Muscovites might be able to pick up odd inflections in fellow Russians’ speech that indicate that they are from another large city like Saint Petersburg and most Americans can instantly recognise the Southern drawl. Some may even be discerning enough to exact the state from which a person hails, just by listening to them speak. Accordingly, people thus unconsciously profile each other according to the way they speak if they are not readily distinguishable by visible physical dissimilarities such as skin colour.

Another instance of people finding their identity in language is portrayed in the movie *Lost In Translation* where Bob Harris and Charlotte are bound together in friendship despite their vast differences in age and social status because they share a grasp of American English and culture. Throughout the first scenes of Bob arriving in Japan, Bob’s discomfort with the Japanese culture steadily grows even though all the Japanese people he’s met are friendly and respectful towards him. They are constantly bowing, shaking his hands and acknowledging his presence. However all that Bob is able to see are the contrasts between

himself and everybody else. He stands out as the tallest man in an elevator of Japanese men, his body does not fit into the Japanese-sized shower and nobody seems to understand him when he announces that he is tired. In a culmination of language divide, Sofia Coppola has Bob at a shoot for a whiskey commercial when the director gives these instructions to him in Japanese: “Mr. Bob-san. You are sitting quietly in your study. And then there is a bottle of Suntory whiskey on top of the table. You understand, right? With wholehearted feeling, slowly, look at the camera, tenderly, and as if you are meeting old friends, say the words. As if you are Bogie in "Casablanca," saying, "Cheers to you guys," Suntory time!” However when Bob turns to his translator, he is simply told, “he wants you to turn, look in camera. O.K.?” Incredulously, Bob then asks the Japanese translator “is that all he said?” (Coppola). The overwhelming sense of alienation that Bob is now beginning to feel suddenly dissipates when he meets Charlotte at the hotel bar and they are able to understand each other’s feelings without saying much. There, Bob gives Charlotte a strange recount of how he ended up in Japan: “my wife needs space, I don’t know my kids’ birthdays. Everyone wants Tiger Woods, but they could get me, so I’m here doing a whiskey commercial”. Ironically, while the Japanese cannot understand Bob when he’s speaking clearly, Charlotte is able to instantly pick up the essential meaning of his peculiar answer and simply affirms his emotion with an understanding “oh” (Coppola). Throughout the rest of the movie, Bob and Charlotte are never able form deeper relationships with other people during their stay in Japan because they alone understand each other’s language and beyond that, essential cultural messages that transcend the spoken word.

Arguably, advanced language could be the key to human dominance on this earth. Unlike other organisms, we are able to communicate with each other; store and pass on

information for hundreds of generations as well as foster close-knit bonds based on a single identity founded in common language. “We are not like frogs. The differences are manifold, but the most interesting is that we have language and frogs don’t, and having a language enables us to get insight into the mind” (Smith 45). If languages and dialects were to gradually disappear someday, leaving behind only a remnant of the thousands that are estimated to exist, it would be a mammoth loss to societies in every corner of the globe. As a species, we humans may then ultimately find ourselves at the mercy of untamed nature when we lose control of our environments along with the loss of our languages.

### Chapter III: What Makes A Mother Tongue?

Preceding this exploration into writing in non-native languages, we must first look at how people identify their native language. In the Oxford Dictionary, a mother tongue is defined as “the language a person has grown up speaking from early childhood.” But what of instances where a person grows up speaking several different languages? Are all those languages to be considered their mother tongues? Or what if they grew up speaking dialects? Are those dialects still to be defined as mother tongues since they were not languages to begin with? While these questions may seem extraneous to the topic of writing in foreign languages, they certainly relate to that of preserving one’s own native language because different people define what their mother tongue is differently.

When we speak of native languages, images of tribal communities may come to mind— primitive communities of indigenous people who for centuries have perpetuated their languages in generational discourse. While it may be easy to view them in a vacuum and visualize societies that speak and understand only one language, people in almost every part of the world are actually multilingual to some extent or another. Of course, this conclusion draws on a certain allowance that dialects may be considered as different tongues as well. Even in Papua New Guinea— one of the last places on earth where linguists believe language and diversity to still be closest to their unaffected primordial states, villagers tend to be fluent in “the vernacular, a lingua franca, and three or so other local languages... linguist Bill Thurston relates how he was left in the company of a six-year-old while the village men went off to look for wood to cut for flooring. The boy brought plants collected from the vicinity and told Thurston the name of each in four different languages” (Nettle & Romaine 86).

Although multilingual communities may be found in various parts of the world, in highly industrialised countries such as Britain and the United States, we are more likely to find a majority of monolingual people. If we inquired of the mother tongue of citizens who have lived for generations in these countries, the reply would almost always be a clear-cut answer— English. But for the millions of first, second or even third generation immigrants, the answer may not always be so easy to decipher. Take Singaporeans for example. In this first world city-state where eastern and western cultures clash; second, third or even fourth generation immigrant citizens are generally bilingual— fluent in both English and their mother tongue. Yet this declared bilingualism may be considered erroneous because many Singaporeans do not speak grammatically or phonetically sound languages as their speech has been affected by different co-existing cultures. This phenomenon may also be observed in the Hispanic communities in America where first generation children of immigrants tend to speak neither proper English nor Spanish; instead, they blend their tongues to form a unique speech known as Spanglish.

For multilingual people around the world, one factor is almost always found in common— they live in areas where different cultures interact and engage. As a result, children are exposed to different languages in school and their parents at the workplace, from what is spoken at home. For tribal communities or villages, encounters with people outside cultural boundaries due to trade or war will also expose natives to foreign tongues. Out of necessity to communicate with others in their surroundings, people will then endeavor to learn languages that were not taught in the home. Indeed, the home environment and the outside environment are contrastingly marked places for polyglots, with different feelings and language connotations attached to separate situations. Autobiographies such as

Mexican-American Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger Of Memory* share how Rodriguez's early childhood was spent speaking "*Español*: [his] family's language... the language that seemed to him a private language" (Rodriguez 15). For Rodriguez, his "family had conveyed its intimacy through a set of conveniently private sounds" (Rodriguez 25) whereas "English (*inglés*), rarely heard in the house, was the language [he] came to associate with *gringos*" (Rodriguez 13). In her essay *Mother Tongue*, Chinese-American writer Amy Tan echoes Rodriguez's sentiments about a "language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the kind of language [she] grew up with" (Tan 309).

Evidently, Rodriguez and Tan's experiences with language are intricately entwined with the places they use them in. As children growing up in vastly different environments from home (private) to the outside world (public), they unconsciously shape their identities with relation to family and community according to the amount and ways of usage in these settings. Because

"we organize or adjust our behaviour toward things and persons by means of symbols, and these symbols come to embody a plan of action... they also indicate the significance of things for human behavior and they organise behavior toward the thing symbolised. Some writers have gone further, pointing to a general attitude toward the world that is implicit in language use and therefore common to all those who use language" (Lindesmith, Strauss & Denzin 73).

Therefore, where and how often people communicate in a certain language determines their views on whether or not it is to be considered their mother tongue. For "third-culture kids" such as army brats or immigrant children, this question may not have direct answers since they may be more fluent in a language that they do not use primarily in the home (Shields).

They also frequently move from one environment to another and may not be able to fully anchor themselves in a particular community before having to leave again.

After having established one's identity with relation to self and others through language, one may also attach special sentiments to these languages. To illustrate this fact, Rodriguez comments on how after he had "turned to English only with angry reluctance... [he] came to feel guilty. (This guilt defied logic.) [He] felt that [he] had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close" (Rodriguez 30). This guilty feeling would then serve to confuse a person's sense of identity. Thus, although Rodriguez is more able to express his thoughts in English, a sense of allegiance to his family's heritage may prompt him to declare Spanish as his mother tongue instead. Or he may choose to list both Spanish and English as his mother tongues.

To aid in their deliberation on determining what is their mother tongue, people may also consider the usefulness of their languages to convey meaning and emotion. In writing her bestselling novel *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan "sought to preserve the essence, but not either an English or Chinese structure. [She] wanted to capture what language ability tests can never reveal: her [mother's] intent, her passion, her imagery, the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts" (Tan 314). Thus Tan writes stories using her mother's "broken" English and Chinese, disregarding set rules about the English and Chinese language and instead, blending the two to produce what she literally considered her mother's tongue. Tan's choice in using these "watered-down" languages is based on her observation that this is the best way to communicate her mother's innate feelings. Parallels may be drawn between Tan and Rodriguez in their sensing that languages are like windows into a person's culture and soul. To gain access to his relatives' and parents' intimate realm,



Rodriguez must speak the kind of Spanish he did growing up. As for Tan, there is no other tongue that could adequately evoke the same heartfelt responses, the same instinctive meaning as the “broken” English she heard her mother speak while growing up.

While the choice of what one considers as one’s mother tongue may seem arbitrary to society, this could not be further from the truth. Faced with the decision to either perpetuate one’s mother tongue or a second language, chances are that sentimentality will drive people toward preserving their mother tongues over non-native tongues. Therefore, these meditations on mother tongue identification are actually concomitant with language preservation since they directly influence which languages are more likely to be passed down. As Amy Tan portrays her mother’s convoluted way of expression in *The Joy Luck Club*, she inadvertently gives that “broken” English Chinese speak an identity that will resonate for future generations of Chinese American immigrants. Thus, the cultural connotations that come with her chosen mother tongue will also be preserved in text that may outlive its author to see its continuation in the future.

#### Chapter IV: Why Do People Become Fluent In More Than One Language?

In the previous discussion about mother tongues, polyglots were the main focus of the debate. This brings us to the next crucial issue: how and why people come to be polyglots in the first place. As in most things in life, people are either forced or given a choice to do something. Thus, fluency in more than one language may be explored as a bone of contention between nature and nurture. Are people really free to choose what they speak? Or are they merely victims of environmental, social and political change? Perhaps some would disagree and maintain that we have ultimate control over what languages we want to speak. But as the following discourse will demonstrate, this may not be always the case when societies collide and people are circumstantially forced to acquire languages besides their own native ones.

One of the most prevalent circumstances that causes inevitable language shift is territorial intrusion and subsequent human population loss. In *Vanishing Voices*, Nettle and Romaine take readers back to the Holocene period where most peoples were hunters and gatherers. These hunter-gatherer societies were generally smaller and had less livestock due to their nomadic way of life. In order for them to survive adequately off the land, hunter-gatherers had to constantly move from area to area when the food supply got low (Nettle & Romaine 101-108). Their ability to communicate with each other through common language also helped to seal close relationship bonds that were crucial to teamwork in hunting (Maryanski & Turner 64-67). Around 9000 BC however, agricultural societies began to emerge and people stayed in one place, growing their food and hoarding livestock to survive instead of moving from place to place. As agricultural centres grew bigger and spread, hunter-gatherers often returned to a spot to find that their territory had been taken over by

organized farming and where therefore pushed out towards the fringes of these lands. Another direct consequence of this Paleolithic burst in agricultural activity around the globe was population booms in agricultural societies that dwarfed the existing populations of hunter-gatherer societies by almost a hundredfold. Therefore, even if hunter-gatherers wanted to oust their intruding neighbours, they were unable to do so because of the huge disparity between their tiny populations and the substantial ones of farming communities. Thus, the vicious cycle set in motion saw hunter-gatherers at an unfair disadvantage in maintaining their way of life next to their fellow farming human beings. This unfair disadvantage is further exacerbated by an “equilibrium trap”— which means that

“In a world of hunters and gatherers, people who move toward farming do not do better than their rivals, and so hunting and gathering will not usually be replaced by farming. On the other hand, in a world of farmers, hunters and gatherers cannot displace them, because of their slow rates of reproduction. However, where one or a few societies are forced through the equilibrium trap from hunting to farming, they will cover the rest like a flooding tide” (Nettle & Romaine 109-111).

Gradually, as hunter-gatherer societies were being pushed out from farming areas, so were the languages that they spoke. While some hunter-gatherer communities were ousted and others absorbed into agriculture, the ones that persisted certainly had to do so by acquiring understanding of the dominant language. Not being able to communicate with the dominant farming communities would place hunter-gatherers at a distinct handicap; therefore they have little choice but to learn another language besides their mother tongue.

In modern times, displacement of peoples still plays a heavy role in causing multilingualism. The various Native American tribes for example, since the creation of

America as a nation, have almost been wiped out by disease and genocide in addition to being pushed out of their lands (Carnes 13-19). To survive, many of those left have adapted by learning the language of their colonial masters while holding on to their own. Those who were canny enough to assimilate and voluntarily learn English would find themselves in secondary power positions as mediators or translators between the Natives and the colonialists. However “those that learned English involuntarily were eventually confined to reservations” (White). Unfortunately, the bilingualism that resulted within Native American cultures has gone so far as to cause the extinction of many Native American languages. Because languages are carriers of culture, injecting the English language into a Native American community would no doubt efface certain traditions and replace Native American words over time. Before contact with the colonialists, Native American languages primarily did not have any form of script. However, with the introduction of English and writing, a new phenomenon of Native American writers emerged. “Most interestingly, is that the intended audience of their writing often excluded their own people. Many of the earliest Native American writers wrote for an audience other than their own people since few Native Americans could read English. Ultimately, the writers became advocates of and for their tribes and communities, often using the newcomers' language to protect their people and land” (White). In addition to this creation Native American literature, is the forcing of subsequent generations to learn the English language at the expense of their own by having them

“taken as children, often forcibly and without the consent of their parent, to a boarding or residential school. Often, the only time the students went home was during the summer, though many did not go home until after they had been in school for ten to twelve years (Bell 8). In some cases the return home meant being unable to speak to family and friends because they no longer remembered

their ancestral language. Older family members who did not go to school did not speak English, thus creating a linguistic barrier. This transition represents the dark period of assimilationist efforts to annihilate all vestiges of ancestral languages and customs with a strict and punitive English-only policy. Various punishments followed for the violation of speaking ancestral languages, including whippings, mouth washings, and verbal put-downs (Achneepineskum 2). The schools were often hundreds of miles away from students' homes, and upon arriving to the school, the children had their hair cut, had to wear uniforms, and lost their names due to being renamed with Anglo or Christian names (Friesen, Archibald, and Jack 64). Such is the milieu into which the current Native American writers' transition" (White).

As history has proven, this has certainly occurred in many Native communities, most of which have disappeared forever; and many more tongues are looking set to disappear in the coming years as well thanks to brutish colonial policies.

These sweeping social changes could be also said to be a direct consequence of shifting economic forces in Native American communities.

“Let us consider a relatively self-sufficient minority on the fringes of the national economy. As time goes by, one may detect increasing involvement in the cash system, and increasing use of the national language, which seems to be a simple choice. However, the national government’s insistence on taxes paid in cash will force the minority workers to sell some goods or labor for money. But every good sold for money is one removed from the traditional system of barter, so households may need to start importing food to make up the difference. To secure imported food one needs money, which means selling more into the cash economy, which means less time and produce left for household production. This is a self-fueling cycle whose most likely outcome is integration of the minority into the national economy” (Nettle & Romaine 93).

Therefore, as more and more Europeans took over their forests and plains, Native Americans have had little choice but to learn the language of their dominant conquerors—

English, so that they could participate in the cash economy and earn money for the food they cannot hunt or grow anymore. Those who did not learn the dominant language were left to dwindle away in reservations with drastically reduced means to support themselves. “The harsh truth was that the frontier tribes had long ago abandoned a culture based upon stone, animal skins and bone and become dependent on the goods offered by the colonists” (James 85). As a result, Native Americans were forced to purchase all manufactured goods such as guns and knives from the colonists, usually by trading unfair use of their land or crops. Their need to trade then further fueled the use of English in Native tribes.

Politically, since the Native American tribes have lost their ruling power to the American government, they have little choice but to use English to communicate with their new colonial masters, often for negotiation purposes. Concurrently, they must also continue to speak their native tongues within their internal political realms because of cultural leadership practiced in the tribes. Yet Native Americans aren't the only people who have had to become fluent in other languages because of their changing circumstances. As mentioned in the previous chapter, immigrants and their children have also had to assimilate by adopting the language of their new host countries alongside the ones they already speak. Without learning those new languages, they would not be able to function normally in society for the same reasons that fringe minorities would not be able to survive next to a dominant culture.

As for peoples in dominant cultures or power positions, they have greater freedom in the tongues they choose to speak. Take the educated middle-class for example. Chances are, they are already doing well in the economy they participate in and do not need to make serious changes to their language acquisition in order to survive. However, a few

factors may play into their choices in learning foreign languages. One of the first is to anticipate future cultural changes in the economy. We may observe this in schools around the world today where more and more students are opting to learn Chinese as a second language in expectation of Chinese dominance in the future global economy. Likewise, in China, English is the top second language choice for students who are hoping to snag better-paying jobs that usually require some understanding of English. Although some may observe that this scenario is no different from the assimilation example given by immigrants or disadvantaged fringe societies, there is some distinction here. For immigrants and subdominant societies such as the Native Americans, the generational timeframe for choosing between assimilation and dissimilation is shortened by dire living conditions. There is very little allowance for people to not assimilate to the dominant culture by learning its language since it is a matter of survival. As for more privileged peoples, most of who can afford the time and money to get formal education, there is no immediate fear of losing every means of living if they don't learn another language.

For those who are to a large extent, immune to social, political and economic pressure, becoming fluent in another language would most likely be a choice made in the pursuit of knowledge. Whether it is out of a personal interest in a particular culture or a genuine wish to identify with a certain group of people, there are certain considerations that could influence which kind of languages one may want to learn. One of these are the “aesthetics of language”, which Mario Pei describes as “a treatise on the beauty of languages divorced from their literary output, and of words separated from their semantic associations” (Pei 190). Therefore, a student may consider Portuguese to be an utterly lovely sounding language and thus deem it worthy of pursuing simply based on his/her appreciation of it. But

what exactly is it that makes a language more pleasing to a person than another? Perhaps it is the cultural connotations that are attached to languages that shape a person's view. So if a person wanted to seem more "cultured" in the Western sense, he might choose to study one of the Romance languages like French, but probably not Swahili, which is associated with a third-world country.

Ultimately, these examples of how people choose or are forced to become fluent in more than one language only serve to highlight a philosophical problem that has not found an answer to this day— to what extent does free will exist? Indeed, the truth remains that nobody can actually force air through someone's vocal chords to physically force him to speak in a different tongue. But one can indirectly, by threatening this person's means of sustenance, make him pick up foreign languages. Or through propaganda, one may also convince people that certain foreign languages are worth pursuing even though immediate benefits are not very obvious. However, as we have shown, one can indirectly force an individual to learn foreign languages controlling their way of life, indeed threatening their very economic and political survival— often to the point of the exclusion and/or decay of their own. Whichever the case, it is undeniable that people's choices in adopting other languages besides their own rarely operate in an unaffected vacuum. In some way or another, the scales almost always seem tipped in favour of dominance— the cultures that are biggest, fastest and strongest are usually the ones whose languages enjoy greater privileges. Hence, people will have strong biases towards assimilation in order to escape being ostracized beyond their surviving limits.



## Chapter V: Why Do People Write In Non-Native Languages?

While people are not entirely free to choose which languages they are fluent in, those who are fluent in more than one language are still given a choice between writing in their native language or not. Authors like Thiong’O Ngugi Wa and Ha Jin have all written in their own native languages/dialects as well as in a non-native language, namely English. As individuals, their personal reasons for penning their thoughts in English may be contrasted with the organized efforts of missionaries to spread the gospel through Bible translations. Notwithstanding the fact that writers all write for a specific audience and it is this audience that largely inspires an author’s choice in language, authors may also prefer to write in a non-native language if it better expresses their meditations. However as we will see with Ha Jin, writing in a non-native language may also sometimes be a good way to preserve a message for the future. It is thus the future that all writers look towards since books and literature are excellent vehicles for preserving thoughts to outlive their thinkers.

Years after he had been writing in English, Kenyan writer Thiong’O had an epiphany that he had been writing in a non-native language under the presumption that it was the only language he should be writing in. In his famous book *Decolonising the Mind*, Thiong’O explains that as a colonized subject, he had accepted the “fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in [Kenyan] literature... to a greater or lesser degree” (qtd. in Thiong’O 1128-1129). Such “fatalistic logic” did not come by suddenly, but was rather a product of Thiong’O’s childhood experiences with the relations between the English language and Gikuyu, his mother tongue. In colonized Kenya, Gikuyu obviously had to take the backseat in reverence of the English colonisers. Traces of Gikuyu were stamped down on school grounds by corporal punishment or humiliation. On the other hand, the usage of

English was encouraged and rewarded to create a bias towards English as a superior language (Thiong’O 1131-1132). “The language of an African child’s formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was foreign... There was often not the slightest relationship between the child’s written world, which was also the language of his schooling, and the world of his immediate environment in the family and the community” (Thiong’O 1135). In such an environment did Thiong’O learn the tools of his trade; therefore it comes as no surprise as to why he would initially write essays in English rather than in Gikuyu or Kiswahili— another Kenyan language. It is only much later on when he realizes that “language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world” (Thiong’O 1134) that Thiong’O begins to question his identity and place in the world— “what kind of African? One who has internalized the colonial world outlook or one attempting to break free from the inherited slave consciousness?” (Thiong’O 1148) Having thus chosen his identity as the latter, Thiong’O now writes in his native languages in abandonment of English.

The second author mentioned, is Ha Jin of Chinese descent who also attained widespread success from his English writings portraying life in communist China. In a New York Times article, Ha Jin explains that

“if [he] wrote in Chinese, [his] audience would be in China and [he] would therefore have to publish there and be at the mercy of its censorship. To preserve the integrity of my work, [he] had no choice but to write in English. To some Chinese, [his] choice of English is a kind of betrayal. But loyalty is a two-way street. [He feels he has] been betrayed by China, which has suppressed its people and made artistic freedom unavailable. [He has] tried to write honestly about China and preserve its real history. As a result, most of [his] work cannot be published in China” (Ha Jin)

For Ha Jin, the military attack on students at the Tiananmen Square tragedy in 1989 had indicated what sort of future his writing might have if he were to write in Chinese. Since he sought to “write honestly about China and preserve its real history” (Ha Jin), it would be unwise to use Chinese, the mother tongue of the Chinese Communist Party who was seeking to suppress news of true events. Consequently, he decided to follow Nabokov and Conrad’s examples in switching to English to protect his work from being rewritten for propaganda interests. Clearly, Ha Jin’s self-imposed role as a literary historian points him towards writing for a future audience— assuming that this audience will still be able to pick out Chinese cultural meanings from among his English sentences. But there is a sense of separation between the people whose lives are immediately relevant to Ha Jin’s discourses on communist China and those who have not personally experienced it for themselves. Because the audience of Ha Jin’s books is likely to be of the latter category, it may mean a bittersweet sort of triumph in Ha Jin’s flight from Chinese writing to English.

These cultural meanings are the main focus of contention when speaking of Bible translations. To date, at least one book in the Bible has been translated from Greek or Hebrew into 2,454 languages worldwide. Even though this number is less than half the number of languages estimated to exist in the world, those languages account for almost 90 percent of the world’s population. United Bible Societies credits this extraordinary feat to the invention of Johann Gutenberg’s movable type, which allowed for the widespread printing and distribution of books (United Bible Societies). Obviously, the goal of Biblical translation is to spread the Christian gospel. But why do people bother to translate the Bible into so many distant languages instead of just the major dominant languages that seem to be

taking over the world anyway? Because translation of even a single book out of the sixty-six in the Bible may take years to complete, this arduous process would seem daunting to even the best zealot. Still, this has not stopped the number of translations from escalating profoundly in the last two centuries. In fact, most of the 2,454 translations were completed during this time period (United Bible Societies). In this case, sharing the gospel in a people's native tongue will definitely make the message clearer and more attractive than forcing them to learn Greek or Hebrew. Using the Hindi Bible as an example, Homi K. Bhabha observes that "the value of English in the offering of the Hindi Bible... is the creation of a print technology calculated to produce a visual-effect that will not 'look like the work of foreigners'... so that natives may resist Brahmin's 'monopoly of knowledge' and lessen their dependence on their own religions and cultural traditions'" (Bhabha 1180). The results of converting the Bible—a text usually associated with India's colonial master into Hindi is that Christianity is now the third-largest religion in India (Office Of Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India).

Today, many immigrants may also have to write in non-native languages in school or at the workplace. Although this might mean that their children may not be as fluent in their mother tongues by the time they grow up and writing in their new adopted language may be more comfortable. Like the later generations of Native American writers, these children may in time write with confidence in these non-native languages without being "self-conscious about their... language fluency, style or competence" (White). Their audience will also gradually shift from a primarily non-native to a native one as more members of their community learn to read in the new language. However when these changes are more developed and they "find themselves in "an English-dominant society,

even within their own communities... the issue of cultural identity [will] become increasingly problematic” (White). From an African perspective, Thiong’O echoes this identity crisis by questioning,

“how does it want the ‘New Africans’ to view themselves and their universe? From what base: Afrocentric or Eurocentric? What then are the materials they should be exposed to: and in what order and perspective? Who should be interpreting that material to them: an African or non-African? If African, what kind of African? One who has internalized the colonial world outlook or one attempting to break free from the inherited slave consciousness?” (Thiong’O 1148).

Here, we see that the conflict in writing in a non-native language is not simply a linguistic problem of semantics, but also a steeply cultural one. Many authors such as Richard Rodriguez, Ha Jin and Thiong’O feel some degree of guilt when they write in a different language because of their original ties to their own native tongues. In switching languages, the writer must lose some part of his identity.

Unfortunately, unlike Thiong’O, it is not every writer that has the luxury of returning to his/her roots, especially when the effects of time have been detrimental to their native languages. As with Ha Jin, these writers have no choice but to forge a new road in a sort of cultural no man’s land; “It’s basic, instinctive. As the hunger artist said, ‘You know, I couldn’t find food for myself,’ so in that sense, he’s a failure in real life. This is the beginning of his art. Like the hunger artist, you can only fast” (Binelli). Only when the guilt abandoning one’s native language has been overshadowed by the benefits of writing in a non-native language will an author then pursue that painful choice given his equal fluency in both native and non-native languages.

## Chapter VI: What Makes One Language More Dominant Than Another?

When discussing language dominance, it is impossible to not also raise the issue of cultural dominance because the two are inseparable in terms of cause and effect. Therefore, when one language gains dominance over another, it is usually a direct consequence of that culture having more power and prestige in that particular society. Like a canary in a coalmine, language dominance signals cultural dominance. The French philosopher and political/cultural historian Michel Foucault illustrates this when he writes about how dominance “not acquired once and for all by a new control of the apparatuses nor by a new functioning or a destruction of the institutions; on the other hand, none of its localized episodes may be inscribed in history except by the effects that it induces on the entire network in which it is caught up” (Foucault 550). Which means to say, complete domination occurs through the seeping influence into the culture an entity is seeking to subject, not through forced physical overthrow. In this vein of thought, cultural and language dominance manifests itself in several different “localized episodes” like prolific literature, widespread usage in various everyday life “institutions” as well as greater emphasis on preservation by way of education whether in or out of the home.

The first of these conditions for language dominance— an existing broad base of literature, seems to be one that immediately places languages without a system of writing at a disadvantage. As we have seen with the Native American languages, their lack of a writing system meant that if Native American literature were to be produced, it was more likely to be written in English than in their mother tongues. However Robert Pattison posits that it is not so much the existence of script that promotes a language’s usage but rather how that culture chooses to use its written word. For example, while many scholars propose Johann

Gutenberg's invention of the movable type to be one of the major catalysts for the expansion of Western civilisation, Pattison reminds us that centuries before Gutenberg, the Chinese had been writing and producing books as well, albeit at a slower rate. Yet even when the Chinese began printing books, they chose to restrict the number of books that could be produced, as opposed to the Westerners who were trying to find "wider and wider audiences" (Pattison 88-89). Currently, the influence of Western literature has reached and overwhelmed the shores of every continent in the world. Its cultural dominance may be reflected in the required reading lists of English departments in almost every university in the world. Keynote authors of Western discourse such as Shakespeare or Conrad are studied widely while equally apt native authors are usually reduced to an area in literature along the lines of "ethnic studies". On the other hand, Chinese literature has not enjoyed such global academic recognition because there was never a policy to "spread the word" to begin with. Chinese writing has always held a sacred place in the echelons of society, to be cherished and maintained by the educated elite. Hence, we may conclude that the copious existence of Western literature is actually driven by the cultural propensity to expand, not simply its available technologies.

The second condition for a language to be dominant is its rampant usage in various institutions such as religion, politics, academia and economics. In China, even though hundreds of dialects and languages exist, its billion-person population is still dominated by Mandarin Chinese. In China, Mandarin (Beifanghua), Wu, Yue (Cantonese), Min, Kejia (Hakka), Xiang and Gan are all major dialect groups "of which Mandarin is by far the largest... with its native speakers accounting for the majority of the Chinese population" (Chen 2-3). Mandarin or its current form known as "Putonghua" or "Guoyu"

did not come into dominance by chance. In fact, it was part of an engineered effort by the Chinese government to unite the nation under one script and one tongue in the 1940s to 1950s. In order to introduce the usage of Putonghua all over the country, specific measures were taken to ensure it would “become the language of instruction in all schools... the working language in government at all levels... the language used in radio and television broadcasting, and in cinemas and theatres... [as well as] the lingua franca among speakers of various local dialects” (Chen 27). After over half a century, Mandarin has successfully replaced every other major dialect countrywide as the top Chinese language of choice for road signs, religious texts, etc. This result has been devastating for the other dialects as they now have narrower contexts of usage. The only places where people still speak their mother tongues and dialects are now constricted to private life at home or informal settings. Nettle and Romaine calls this “language death ‘from the top down’”, where “the language retreats from official institutions and public domains like the courts, the church, and perhaps the worlds of commerce and politics first, so in the end it is restricted to use in the home and perhaps among friends” (Nettle & Romaine 91). Because languages flourish best when in utilized in the full scope of society, “top down” language death symptomizes domination of one language over another.

A third indication of dominance is the willingness of a particular society to preserve the language by way of generational transfer. In this case, literature may be considered a method of generational language transfer; but others include children’s education and an overall attitude of partiality for a language over another. Since “linguistic capital, like all other forms of capital, is unequally distributed in society... the higher the profit to be achieved through knowledge of a particular language, the more it will be viewed



as worthy of acquisition” (Nettle & Romaine 30-31). For example, Hispanic minorities living in America may prefer to give their children better future economic opportunities by having them educated in the dominant language. They may even give their children English names to fit into a predominantly English society. Like countless other immigrants, Richard Rodriguez’s parents wanted the best for their son and “agreed to give up the language (the sounds) that had revealed and accentuated our family’s closeness... ‘*Ahora*, speak to us in *ingles*,’ [his] father and mother united to tell [him]”. Their belief in their son’s future being rooted in English led to their willingness to sacrifice; for after all, “what would they not do for their children’s well-being?” (Rodriguez 21) As a consequence, Rodriguez, almost entirely educated in English, may only now be able to write effectively in English; and most importantly, he is more likely to pass English on to his children than his mother tongue. Thus, the dominance of the English language is asserted first through his parent’s economic viewpoint and subsequently through Rodriguez’s education.

The common thread tying all these conditions of language dominance together therefore, seems to be a conscious movement directed towards using one language more than the other. Behind every dominating language or culture is a classic case of “survival of the fittest”— where the entity with greater power and position to render their tongue more desirable does so and succeeds. As Thiong’O notes about colonial domination, “economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others” (Thiong’O 1135). Hence, “it is the final triumph of a system of domination when the dominated start singing its virtues” (Thiong’O 1137), preferably in the imposed foreign language of the colonisers.

## Chapter VII: What Are the Consequences Of Writing In A Non-Native Language?

From the discussions of how people are induced to learn and write in non-native languages, we now move to expound on the consequences of doing so. Because cultural dominance plays such a key role in determining sociolinguistic patterns, the significance of writing in non-native languages may be split into two categories— the first is of writing about dominant cultures in a non-dominant language and the second is of writing about non-dominant cultures in a dominant language. An example of writing about dominant cultures in a non-dominant language would be like writing about English culture in Gikuyu. As for writing about Gikuyu history in English, that would be an example of writing about a non-dominant culture in a dominant language. In both cases, the dynamics of puissance are actually unevenly balanced in favour of the dominant culture; so that no matter the situation, whether writing about native or non-native cultures in a foreign language, cultural benefits will almost always elude the subdominant writer.

In the first case of writing about a dominant culture in a non-dominant language, the surficial intention is usually to educate the non-dominant culture about the dominant one. In other words, a book written in Gikuyu about the English customs and traditions would no doubt serve to open a window to people who understand Gikuyu but not English. A simple example of this would be Bible translations, where thousands of native communities worldwide have been given access into Jewish and Western tradition via the Old Testament and New Testament. Although Hebrew and Greek are not exactly dominating cultures in their own right, the explosion of Bible translations in the past 200 years have primarily been bolstered by the efforts of expansionist Europeans, especially the colonizing British. As Homi K. Bhabha illustrates, “the Bible translated into Hindi, propagated by Dutch or native

catechists, is still the English book” (Bhabha 1172). As a carrier of Western culture, the Bible translated into non-dominant languages then carries with it Western ideology, more so especially since the Bible is a religious text. The product of this is the further spread of Westernization at the risk of deposing the native cultures that it has infiltrated.

Less obvious perhaps are the consequences of writing about non-dominant cultures in a dominant language. The instances of this are numerous— from Native American to immigrant literature, most of the colonized world writing in the language of their colonial masters today do so since it is a surer way to gain recognition in the academic world, among other reasons. For one, Native Americans who write about their cultural experiences in English have now made known their uncomfortable feelings about the way the American government treated their ancestors. In the 1970s, an “Indian Literary Renaissance” created a stir when “Amer-Europeans who had assumed that the Indian problem had long since been solved and Indians assimilated became aware of continued Native presence and grievances in North America” (Weaver 122-123). Their written voices thus helped to clear a misunderstanding about the state of Native American cultural affairs; to let their Western oppressors know that not all was well on the home front.

However, in an ironic twist, by writing in the language of their oppressors, non-dominant cultures are actually unconsciously participating in an important culture perpetuating ritual— that is, creating literature for the dominant discourse. Even if the subject matter is Native American culture, the vehicle of communication is still English and this language carries with it “culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world” (Thiong’O 1134). Therefore, by writing in English, Native Americans and other

subdominant groups are placing their thoughts within an English paradigm and looking at themselves through English-coloured glasses. The resulting view is hence a distorted one. In Bhabha's words, "a Polish émigré, deeply influenced by Gustave Flaubert, writing about Africa, produces an English classic" (Bhabha 1172). In reality, it matters little a person's heritage or subject matter if a Western engine drives the ideologies behind his/her writing; and since these ideologies are inherent in the English language itself, upheld by its syntax and vocabulary, writing about a native culture in English would still perpetuate English culture in the literary form. Recognising this ironic situation, Thiong'O decided to switch back to writing in his Gikuyu mother tongue after *Decolonising The Mind*. What he had also become aware of were the effects of English usage in the academic realm on the preservation of Gikuyu. Because Gikuyu was not a language of academic choice and students were still educated in English, the decline of his mother tongue seemed inevitable. In order to reverse this trend, Thiong'O knew that he had to sustain the usage of Gikuyu by writing in it (Thiong'O 1126). Writing in English would only serve to cut the legs from under his ethnic identity by shortening the lifespan of this mother tongue.

The issue of sustaining a language's lifespan is one that has been hotly debated in the recent decades. If language dominance may be engineered as it was in the case of Putonghua or Mandarin in China, could language sustenance not be planned as well? On a smaller scale, language students will find that through constant usage and immersion in the culture whose language they are learning, they will be able to remain relatively fluent in those languages. However once a prolonged period of disuse or disengagement occurs, it will disrupt their learning and many students will find that they have forgotten most of what they have learnt before. Similarly, language sustenance on a larger scale is based on those

principles of community, regular use and transmission to future generations. For a language to be self-sustaining, the community within which it is used should be self-sustaining as well. What this often means is that a community has to first undo its heavy reliance on a larger economy if it is already depending on one. This ensures that leverage within sociopolitical realms are more evenly balanced and people have freer choices to make between which language to use— their native tongues or the dominant language. Indeed, Nettle and Romaine quote Jonathan Pool in that “a planner who insists on preserving cultural-linguistic pluralism had better be ready to sacrifice economic progress” (Nettle & Romaine 155).

However, as Nettle and Romaine also prove, this is not the only condition to language sustenance as proven by the successful language revivals among the Hawaiians or Maori— both of which are cultures that are still operating heavily under a dominant foreign system. As we mentioned in the previous chapters, linguistic dominance in public arenas is particularly detrimental to minority languages as the benefits of using the subdominant language becomes increasingly sparse. Therefore, some of the first policies in reversing language death among the Hawaiians and Maori were to restore the usage of their native languages in public realms such as school, the workplace, religion, etc. (Nettle and Romaine 176-183). Now that a more equal power balance between the dominant and subdominant languages have been established and diglossia is not as unfair a conflict as before, Hawaiians and Maori have more autonomy in terms of which language they prefer to transmit to their next generations. Such choices may manifest in which languages they would name their children in, to raise their children speaking and perhaps even to record family history in. The last of these linguistic transmission methods is especially poignant since it hits so close to home. Say for example, one wanted to draw a family tree and write

about the lives of his parents and grandparents. If this person were fluent in both his mother tongue and a dominant foreign language, should he write in his mother tongue to preserve the cultural identity of the past generations before him? Or should he write in the dominant language so as to ensure that future generations after him may be able to understand his message more readily, assuming that the future generations grow up with the dominant language as their mother tongue instead? Fortunately, there is also always an option to do both, as Russian American author Nabokov has done, by translating his own work in Russian into English for a wider English-speaking audience (Ha Jin).

While each case results in a unique set of either “positive” or “negative” consequences, those perceptions depend on whose perspective we are looking through— the dominator or the dominated. From a philosophical point of view however, the argument could be made that there is no intrinsic moral value to be found in either set of circumstances. Indeed, before writing in any foreign language, one should consider that “without the language, we’ll die as a people, without the language we’ll lose our culture and history” (Nettle & Romaine 182). That is why writing about native literature in any non-native language will ultimately defeat the whole purpose of the work, which is to preserve the customs, traditions and ideologies of the native culture.

## Chapter VIII: Conclusion

It is important to bring to light the detrimental effects that writing native literature—the histories, symbols, and values it carries—in non-native languages has on the plight of endangered languages as a whole. In Chapter II, we mentioned how the considerable diversity in languages that exist on this earth are worth their preservation in ways that scientists and scholars cannot even enumerate right now. Once a language dies, it very often disappears forever without hope of resurrection. Along with its death is the possible loss of all the collective knowledge that those indigenous people have gathered about their surroundings for centuries and even millennia. Besides the immediate cultural and political ramifications of language loss, that kind of knowledge may prove invaluable in time to come when mankind needs solutions in medicine, ecological management, science, etc. Because such knowledge is stored in the richness of indigenous languages, language preservation may well be a crucial step in ensuring a sustainable ecological future for the earth.

Granted, some may counter-argue that the benefits of language preservation are disputable according to the famous biblical account of the building of the tower of Babel. If God himself said “if as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan will be impossible for them” (New International Version, Gen. 11. 6), wouldn’t that indicate that consolidating the thousands of world languages into a few dominant ones is better? Wouldn’t having one world language to champion unity among mankind instead of creating marked differences mean less war, less conflict and more constructive activity between nations? There are no right or wrong answers to this question simply because history has never allowed us to observe whether language consolidation

would indeed promote peace and goodwill on earth. However, one should look to the evidence we already have and realize that language diversity has helped mankind to adapt and survive for thousands of years. Indeed, it is only in very recent human history, sometime after the French Revolution, that nationalism became the uplifted banner for language consolidation. Since then, language diversity has been lessening at a thrilling pace, starting in Europe and working its way around the world. The physical byproduct of this movement is then flourishing industrial activity as more and more people begin to speak the same languages; so devastating that we may observe a rapid pillaging of the earth's natural resources, even to the threat of our own species. Even more subtle and poignant, is the transferring of this dominant destructive mindset through Western languages into subdominant cultures that held their surroundings sacred. It may be wise therefore to preserve as many of the earth's existing languages as possible since they are intimately tied to the environment and may provide clues on how to avert irreversible ecological disasters.

In language preservation, cultural dominance must be taken into account because it is cultural dominance that indicates the direction to which power and bias will flow. If a society is being taken over and held subject to another, it is most likely that its indigenous language will undergo such treatment as well. The dominant language will replace native tongues in public spheres and eventually private ones as well, uprooting the identities of the people who speak those subjugated tongues and causing dissonance within ethnic communities. At some point, after these societies have been "colonized", they will no longer be able to speak in their original mother tongue as fluently as before. Instead, preference for the dominant tongue will be manifested in their propensity to writing in that foreign language because it appears to be more economically rewarding.



In truth, there may be a million factors that ultimately influence the death of a language and culture, most of which are beyond human control. However, authors writing literature with an interest in their own cultures should always bear these issues in mind when they are recording ethnic history, whether in fictional or non-fictional forms; because as a tiny rudder steers a large ship, so do seemingly tiny language choices steer the destinies of our cultures. Therefore, since the weight of language preservation rests in the pen, let him who writes wield it in full accountability of his responsibility and desires.

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