

## PERSPECTIVES

### **On the role of agency, marginalization, multilingualism, and language policy in maintaining language vitality: Commentary on Mufwene**

MARLYSE BAPTISTA

*University of Michigan*

This commentary focuses on three main topics raised in Mufwene's (2017) target article, in addition to language policy, which I propose must be taken into account in order to support language vitality. First, this commentary explores the nature and role of speakers' agency regarding the fate of their language. Second, it addresses whether it is always the case that populations shift because they sense that preserving a language can marginalize them, since this is presented as a possible cause of language loss in Mufwene's article. Third, it reflects on the role of multilingualism in language death. I argue that multilingualism and/or competing languages need not result in language loss but may rather result in language coexistence, as long as each language fulfills a distinct function. Finally, I explore the key role of language planning and policy in determining the life or death of languages, likely to be one of the most effective ways to ensure language vitality, if the right language policy is adopted.\*

*Keywords:* language loss, language vitality, language endangerment, language death, language policy, language planning

**1. INTRODUCTION.** The premise of Mufwene's (2017) insightful and thought-provoking article is the observation that there is in the field a scarcity of documentation about how language endangerment and loss historically impacted different cultures before the colonization of the Americas, Australia, Africa, and other parts of the world. He notes that the focus has been on indigenous cultures in those regions of the world and much less on what has happened in Europe and cultures of European descent. As a result of this discrepancy, Mufwene proposes to shift our attention away from language revitalization proper to examining how small languages can survive and thrive when they coexist with large, dominant languages. In other words, in his view, we have more to gain from understanding more deeply the nature of the ecological ingredients necessary to language vitality than from coping defensively with language loss. Simply put, the flip side to studying language loss is to study language vitality and to unveil the key elements that support it.

Mufwene also advocates moving away from the idea that languages are mere communication systems to the idea that they are communication practices that can be discarded and replaced with new ones to fit speakers' language needs. His view can be reduced to need-based language use. This shift in perspective reduces the value of a given language to its ability to allow speakers to communicate or 'practice' with each other. If that utility is not met, then the language has no reason for being. Mufwene invites us to consider languages as mere communication tools. If we adopt this lens, then one can understand more readily why a given population shifts to another language for a better socioeconomic future and crucially that this shift does not lead to the disappearance of other ethnic and identity markers associated with the language. Such markers can have a lasting imprint on diasporic communities abroad who can still claim to belong to specific ethnic, religious, or cultural communities without speaking the lan-

\* I am deeply indebted to editor Andries Coetzee for his valuable observations and keen insights on the original version of this commentary. Thanks to his meticulous reading of this piece, the last version has greatly improved. All errors remain, of course, my own.

guage associated with such markers. In brief, Mufwene reminds us that language shift does not entail culture shift.

As a result, Mufwene views emerging nativized Englishes as adaptive systems that respond to the communicative needs of their speakers, and as such, he considers these new varieties of English to be beneficial to their speakers. Such benefits lead Mufwene to challenge Michael Krauss's (1992) exhortation to linguists to thwart the progress of language loss by becoming language environmentalists. He questions whether linguists can truly be compared to environmentalists and whether the loss of languages is as detrimental to our species as the damage to our environment. Instead, he asks us to take into consideration the fact that linguists' efforts in revitalizing endangered languages can only be successful if the populations speaking these languages deem it useful to preserve them. In so doing, he invites us to consider the reasons why and how language endangerment and loss can happen.

My comments touch upon the points just summarized and target four core issues raised by some of Mufwene's statements. They all relate to two of his main preoccupations, namely, why and how language endangerment and loss occur and what can be done to ensure language vitality. My first comment concerns the nature of speaker agency with regard to the fate of their language; in other words, what role do speakers play or not play in the survival of their language? My second comment addresses whether it is always the case that populations shift because they sense that preserving a language can marginalize them, since speakers' marginalization is viewed in the target article as a possible reason for language loss. My third comment reflects on the role of multilingualism in language death and specifically on whether creole societies always represent cases where speakers give up both the original languages and cultures to produce new syncretic phenomena. I argue that multilingualism and/or competing languages need not result in language loss but can rather result in language coexistence, as long as each language fulfills a distinct function. Finally, my fourth comment explores the key role of language planning and policy in determining the life or death of languages, a point that Mufwene's article does not discuss, though it is likely to be one of the most effective ways to ensure language vitality, if the right language policy is adopted.

**2. ON THE ROLE OF SPEAKER AGENCY IN MAINTAINING LANGUAGE VITALITY.** My first comment concerns speakers' agency and Mufwene's statement that with respect to language revitalization, 'the success of such efforts depends largely on whether a population WISHES [my emphasis] to save their language (variety) from the threat of another or does not care' (p. e202). He refers elsewhere in the article to other scholars who account for language shift by claiming that 'Native Americans gave up their languages because they lost pride in them' (p. e211). The way such statements are framed assumes that these speakers have agency and awareness of the linguistic situation and take deliberate action to revitalize their language or shift to a dominant one. However, we know from history that language shift does not always result from deliberate or conscious decisions, but at times from impositions by third parties. Large numbers of Native American Indians shifted to English not because they lost pride in their languages or because they WISHED to switch to English but because they were actively prevented from speaking their native languages. Starting in the 1870s all the way to the 1970s, the US government sent thousands of Native American children to boarding schools, effectively banning their languages from use and implementing physical and psychological retribution if the children were caught speaking their native languages (Klug 2012). The Native American Languages Act passed in the 1990s has not been able to bring these languages

back to the level of vitality that they used to have, prior to the US government assimilation measures.

Speakers can find themselves in different predicaments and face distinct outcomes. On the one hand, they can be prevented from speaking their languages, as in the situation just described, and in such cases they have no agency over the fate of their language. On the other hand, they can choose to switch, as in the case of immigrant populations who see it in their children's best interest to switch to the host country's dominant language. There is a third scenario in which unconscious switch may occur, particularly in the case of bilingual speakers for whom one of the two languages gradually and surreptitiously takes over the other one. As we know, bilingualism may occur through military conquest, colonization, nationalism, education, or intermarriage, but even in cases where speakers wish to preserve two languages, a dominant language can gradually and irrevocably eliminate the other one, in ways that do not always come to the awareness of its speakers. Such an unbalanced relationship, which can insidiously lead to the demise of a given language, had not escaped the watchful eye of Quebecois language activist Chaput, who declared with respect to the dynamic between French and English in Quebec:

The more our children become bilingual, the more they use English, the more they use English, the less useful French becomes; and the less French is useful, the more they use English. The paradox of the French-Canadian life: the more we become bilingual, the less necessary it is to be bilingual. This is a path that can only lead to Englishization.<sup>1</sup> (Chaput 1961:39)

Such examples demonstrate that one cannot assume that speakers have full agency over the fate of the languages they speak. It is not always the case that populations are aware that their language is at stake and that they can proactively determine the best outcome for their mother tongue. The situations described above show that speakers can shift language against their will (being forbidden to speak their language)—hence such speakers have no agency over the fate of their language—or in contrast, they may decide to shift if they view such an outcome as playing in their favor socioeconomically (as in the case of immigrants), or the shift may occur in insidious ways, almost unbeknownst to the speakers (as in the case of 'bulldozing' languages like English).

**3. ON THE ROLE OF MARGINALIZATION ON LANGUAGE VITALITY.** My second comment relates to Mufwene's statement that speakers can choose to shift because they feel that preserving a given language can marginalize them. This leaves me wondering whether a speaker feels that their language is marginalizing them because it makes them stand out from a majority linguistic community (to which they would rather assimilate) or because the language/variety they speak is marginalized. In the latter case, one can only ponder why large numbers of marginalized languages/varieties are maintained and even thrive, displaying much vitality in spite of concerted efforts to bring them down. A case close to home is African American English, whose expressive power and vitality in the realms of American literature, religion, the media, and everyday life were fully examined in Rickford & Rickford 2000 and convincingly argued to be very much alive in its speech communities and the American cultural landscape in general. The following

<sup>1</sup> The original quote for this translation is the following: 'Plus nos enfants seront bilingues, plus ils emploieront l'anglais, plus ils emploieront l'anglais, moins le français leur sera utile; et moins le français leur sera utile, plus ils emploieront l'anglais. Paradoxe de la vie canadienne-française: plus nous devenons bilingues, moins il est nécessaire d'être bilingue. C'est une voie qui ne peut nous mener qu'à l'anglicisation' (Chaput 1961:39). I first encountered the English version in Grosjean 1982:17–18, which led me to Saint Jacques 1976:58, which in turn took me to Chaput's original quote, transcribed above.

quote from Rickford and Rickford is an eloquent commentary on the targeted marginalization of African American English (which they label ‘Spoken Soul’) and the great vitality of this variety in the communities where it is spoken and far beyond.

A decade later, James Baldwin, legendary author of *The fire next time*, described Black English as ‘this passion, this skill ... this incredible music’. Now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Spoken Soul these writers exalted is battered by controversy, its very existence called into question. Though belittled and denied, it lives on authentically. In homes, schools and churches, on streets, stages and the airwaves, you can hear soul spoken every day. Most African Americans, including millions who, like Brown and Baldwin, are fluent speakers of Standard English, still invoke Spoken Soul, as we have for hundreds of years to laugh or cry, to preach and praise, to shuck and jive, to sing, to rap, to shout, to style, to express our individual personae and our ethnic identities. (Rickford & Rickford 2000:3–4)

From this quote emerge three main facts that clearly attest to the resilient vitality of Black English, in spite of its stigmatized status. The first is that it permeates all areas and layers of African Americans’ lives by virtue of fulfilling the expressive needs of its speakers. Second, in spite of being the target of marginalization, it thrives and crosses boundaries by finding its place in unexpected, formal domains such as schools and churches. Third, one reason for this vitality is that Black English is at the very core of most African American speakers’ ethnic identity. Since many of these speakers are bidialectal, they are able to code-switch between the language that shores up their identity and the mainstream language that gives them access to the wider world.

As Mufwene’s article is concerned with both why and how language loss occurs and language vitality is maintained, Black English is a great example, providing insights into why African Americans have preserved their variety for hundreds of years. They have been able to use two varieties of the English language to navigate two worlds, one that allows their identity to be reified and the other that allows their social status and livelihood to be maintained. The complementarity of these two linguistic codes could explain why African Americans have not given up on a variety that could potentially marginalize them; marginalization is not in this case a factor.

The same goes for creolophone speakers who could have given up on their creoles on the basis that their colonial past has wrongfully cast these languages in a demeaning light. However, there is growing evidence that a number of creolophone societies are currently undergoing far-reaching educational changes leading to the representation of creoles in education (Migge et al. 2010), a testimony to the strong identity marker that these languages represent for their speakers. For instance, the University of Cape Verde in Cape Verde islands has recently launched a master’s program in Creolistics, training linguists and educators to teach future generations of Cape Verdean children in their native creole, next to Portuguese. It is a well-known fact that all languages go through cycles of rise and fall where they are in turn acclaimed or dethroned (Vulgar Latin was marginalized with respect to Classical Latin, French was marginalized with respect to Latin, etc.), so it should not be surprising that the status of many creoles is on the rise.

In sum, given these trends, it seems that marginalized languages are often associated with language vitality rather than with language death because, crucially, they are the locus of their speakers’ identity.

**4. HOW MULTILINGUALISM INTERACTS WITH LANGUAGE VITALITY.** Remaining on the topic of creole languages, my third comment addresses the role of multilingualism in language death and relates specifically to Mufwene’s statement that creole societies reflect cases where these populations gave up on both of the original languages and cultures to produce new syncretic phenomena (the creole language). One should remember, however, that it is often the case that creole languages evolve next to their lexifiers (Palenquero next to Spanish, Réunionnais next to French) or next to their sub-

strates; Guinea-Bissau creole, for instance, remains spoken next to its source languages, which are Balanta, Fula, Mandjak, Mandinka, and Papel. Guinea Bissau is in this respect a good example, illustrating that some members of the speech community have access to and still use the original source languages that contributed to the formation of the creole. This is a case where source languages remain in place while contributing to the formation of a new language that serves the purpose of a *lingua franca*. I would like to argue that being conferred a unique purpose is the key reason why creoles can coexist in a friendly competition with their source languages. Whenever languages coexist in complementary distribution, speakers do not have to give up the original languages or cultures. In my view, situations of multilingualism do not have to result in language death (in contrast to the situations Mufwene refers to), as long as each language in the ecology fulfills a distinct communicative purpose. Although in multilingual settings not all languages may be equally valued, they each serve a specific function, and that unique function ensures their use, and their use, in turn, ensures their survival.

There is one other point on this topic that Mufwene makes that I would like to briefly address. Mufwene states that speakers of heritage languages in Hawaii ultimately shifted to English, modifying it into Hawai'i Creole English. While one cannot deny the dominant presence of the English language in Hawaii, one must also note the robust presence of other dominant languages, a number of which contributed to the genesis of Hawaiian creole (for instance, Japanese and Tagalog). Indeed, a governmental report<sup>2</sup> on the languages spoken in Hawaii reveals that at least 130 languages are spoken today in the state. In the population, 326,893 individuals (25.4% of Hawaii's population) speak a language other than English at home. The top languages are Tagalog, with 58,345 speakers, Ilocano, with 54,005 speakers, and Japanese, with 45,633 speakers. The report also discloses that in the state of Hawaii, 48.8% of those who speak another language at home speak English less than 'very well'. This shows that the very languages that contributed to the development of Hawai'i Creole English (which has become the *lingua franca* of Hawaii) not only merged to produce this new language but also survive and coexist in the same environment. This is evidence that competing languages in the multilingual setting that Hawaii represents have not resulted in language loss but instead in language vitality. I would therefore advocate for a distinction between multilingual settings where multilingualism can lead to language loss and those situations where multilingualism results in the long-term coexistence of competing languages. I propose that one of the predictive factors of whether a multilingual situation results in language loss or language vitality is whether each of the coexisting languages fulfills a distinct function/purpose in that particular linguistic ecology. Hawai'i Creole English and its source languages (Japanese, Tagalog, English) coexist and thrive because they each fulfill specific functions in that linguistic environment, Hawai'i Creole English having become the *lingua franca* of Hawaii next to English.

**5. LANGUAGE POLICY AS THE BEST WARRANTY FOR LANGUAGE VITALITY.** I now turn to my fourth comment, which addresses the role of language planning and language policy, a point that Mufwene does not discuss in his target article but which plays a key role in promoting or inhibiting language loss.

Language planning involves governmental intervention that influences language development and language use. It usually entails the implementation of an official language whose officialization is paired with the design of a normative orthography,

<sup>2</sup> [http://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/census/acs/Report/Detailed\\_Language\\_March2016.pdf](http://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/census/acs/Report/Detailed_Language_March2016.pdf), accessed July 27, 2017.

grammar, and dictionary for the guidance of writers and speakers. These are the staples of language planning, but most importantly for the topic at hand, language planning can also be the locus of a range of ideological stances: linguistic pluralism, linguistic assimilation, vernacularization, and internationalism (Cobarrubias 1983, Daoust 1997). Governments implement linguistic pluralism when they allow the coexistence of different languages in the same environment, therefore giving these populations the right to cultivate and maintain their languages. Such is the case of Belgium, where French has official status in the south, Flemish in the north, and German in the east (Daoust 1997:441). The same linguistic pluralism was adopted with the US Bilingual Education Act of 1968 in order to meet the needs of immigrant students, and in Canada where both French and English are the official languages of the country (Daoust 1997:441). Canada has implemented as part of its language planning two effective measures. As just mentioned, it has implemented the personality principle by adopting two official languages for the entire country, but crucially, it has also implemented the territorial principle for the Province of Quebec, specifically by declaring the French language its only official language (Daoust 1997:441). Although such a measure could be perceived as assimilationist at first (given the exclusion of English), it is actually pluralistic, as it protected the survival of the French language against the threatening dominance of English in the country.

At the opposite pole of such policies is linguistic assimilation. In France, Napoleon effectively put an end to many of the regional patois by choosing Parisian French as the exclusive language variety to be taught and spoken in schools. The French academy also contributed to the demise and disappearance of the patois by imposing orthographic rules and rules of pronunciation, all in the name of 'purism' and with the intent of protecting one particular variety of the French language. Linguistic internationalism consists in allowing a colonial/foreign language to be the official language of a country when it fulfills specific purposes. For instance, the Haitian government implemented French as an official language of Haiti next to Haitian Creole, because it viewed it as beneficial to the economic development of the country, French being the language of communication with economic allies. Linguistic internationalism is implemented in most creolophone societies. Finally, linguistic vernacularization occurs when an Aboriginal language is chosen to become one of the official languages of the country, as in the case of Madagascar, where Malagasy (the country's vernacular) and French are now the two official languages (Daoust 1997).

Each of these language ideologies has one of two outcomes. It leads either to the long-term vitality of a language (linguistic pluralism, internationalism, and vernacularization) or to the disappearance of one language at the profit of another (linguistic assimilation). Consequently, language policies and their underlying ideologies are a force to be reckoned with when it comes to predicting the vitality or loss of a given language.

**6. CONCLUSION.** In conclusion, there is no doubt that Mufwene's target article forces the reader to think outside the box by developing a historical vision of the cycles of life and death that languages have undergone across cultures, and not just within indigenous societies. If language loss is to be avoided, Mufwene's article fulfills its mission in challenging us to find the key ingredients to language vitality. In my own reflection, such a challenge has prompted me to single out strong identity marking and the distinct function that a language fulfills in its speech community as two important factors predicting language vitality. With respect to the first factor, I have argued that the marginal or dominant status of a given language is not a predictive factor for its long-term vitality but rather whether speakers view it as a marker of identity. As for the second factor,

I propose that multilingualism need not be equated with language death, since it can promote language vitality as long as each language in the linguistic environment fulfills a distinct function. In this commentary, I have also emphasized that although speakers may not always have agency over the fate of their language, governmental language planning and policies do have an impact (if implemented long term) on whether a language thrives or dies. For instance, in the United States, an 'English-only' policy in states where Hispanic populations are dominant can have devastating consequences for the representation and visibility of Spanish and other languages spoken by immigrant populations.

Mufwene's target article is a fresh reminder of the complexity of the dynamics involved in human interactions and the wide range of factors that affect such interactions: the different power dynamics between speakers, the historical background and time periods during which contact between speakers take place, and their attitudes toward their language all weigh in the balance. It is this broad view of the linguistic ecology that can help us avoid unwarranted generalizations and account more accurately for a particular linguistic situation. This has been the motto of scholars such as Annegret Bollée (2005), who has consistently reminded us that each language has its own history, supported here by Mufwene's concluding remark that 'processes of [language endangerment and loss] have not occurred uniformly everywhere, because the dynamics within the language ecosystems of different polities are not identical' (p. e219).

If one of the ultimate goals of Mufwene's article is to improve linguists' theorizing and theoretical framework on language endangerment and loss, then two of his observations could be potentially considered to be good predictors of language shift: (a) Mufwene observed that speakers' awareness of the socioeconomic advantage carried by a given language can trigger shift. (b) A language taking over domains of usage that used to be reserved to the other language can trigger shift. I would only add two caveats to these predictors. With respect to (a), language adoption may occur but may not necessarily lead to language shift if the other language is a strong identity marker, as in the case of speakers of African American English, who adopted mainstream English to complement African American English. With respect to (b), one should keep in mind that the language taking over domains of usage can either be a dominant language or a vernacular that gains grounds with its speakers. Speakers' behavior and language attitudes are ultimately the trump cards that determine whether the shift takes place.

Mufwene's article has led me to ask more questions than I can provide answers to, always the sign of a truly thought-provoking paper. Daunting questions that are far from resolved include: How does the competition between languages result in some languages losing out to others, whereas in other cases, there is long-lasting language coexistence? When and why does a language cease to be an identity marker? When considering Native American languages, what circumstances led to the subsistence of languages like Navaho and the demise of others like Montana Salish? What can speakers do to ensure language vitality? What can populations concretely do to channel and guide the governmental language policies affecting their mother tongues? There are indeed many more questions than answers about why some languages thrive whereas other die, but Mufwene's article has fulfilled its goal in forcing us to face difficult questions regarding language vitality, the one thing that we linguists all support.

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Linguistics Department  
611 Tappan Street  
462 Lorch Hall  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, MI 48109  
[baptism@umich.edu]

[Received 9 July 2017;  
accepted pending revisions 9 July 2017;  
accepted 31 July 2017]