

## THINKING ON ENDANGERED LANGUAGES TEHLİKEDEKİ DİLLER ÜZERİNE DÜŞÜNMEK

*The world is a perpetual caricature of itself;  
at every moment it is the mockery  
and the contradiction of  
what it is pretending to be.*

George Santayana

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### Özet

Tarih boyunca toplumsal, dilsel ve kültürel süreçlerde çeşitli olumsuz pratikler izlenmiş olsa da, gelecek için umut besleyebilmemiz mümkün gözükmemekte. Bu kısa yazının amacı da, farklı düzeylerde tehlike içinde olduğu düşünülen dillerin durumuna ve bu dillerin durumunu olumsuz yönde etkileyen politik, ekonomik ve toplumsal etmenlere karşın, iyi niyetli çabalarla yürütülen çalışmaların başarıya ulaşabileceğine vurgu yapmak. Çok kolay olmasa da, bu ütopyayı sağlayabilmek tarihsel olarak dilsel ve kültürel haklara ve değerlere ilişkin yerleşiklik kazanmış olumsuz tutumları ve uygulamaları değiştirebilmekten, ciddi ve samimi politik kararları yerel ve küresel olarak uygulamaya koyabilmekten; dolayısıyla yeni bir bilinci 'güç' olarak belirleyerek, bu anlayışı evrensel olarak paylaşılan bir 'bilgi' birimi biçimine getirebilmekten geçiyor. Bunun ne ölçüde gerçekçi olabileceği ise zaman içinde görülebilecek.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** tehlikedeki diller, ikiyüzlülük, güç, ideoloji, politikalar

### Abstract

No matter what different ideology-based negative practices might have been observed on a variety of social, linguistic and cultural issues so far, the future seems not to be without hope. This short piece of writing aims to put an emphasis on the fact that, despite the negative phenomena observed in different parts of the world concerning the languages at various degrees of endangerment, a series of conscious attempts can work out once the well-intended attempts are seriously supported by sincere and well-planned local and global political decisions. Only then can the historically established negative attitudes towards the local linguistic and cultural rights and values be inverted and become part of a collective human truth globally shared.

**Key Words:** endangered languages, hypocrisy, power, ideology, policies

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The following notes are hoped to be developed into a full article for one of the forthcoming issues of *JofEL*. They are no more than a set of preliminary ideas on endangered languages from a human-ethical perspective. I simply want to make an emphasis on one of the inescapable facts of human nature: Wiping things out on the one hand and trying hard to replace what has been wiped out on the other. Such contradictions are endless. A variety of phenomena that have been observed throughout history and that are still observed in many of the human-based practices tell us all about it; say, from the efforts advocating the preservation, restoration and improvement of the natural environment to the awareness-raising health-conscious efforts and simultaneously observed health-threatening acts. For some, all such contradictions are a mere case of hypocrisy, for others a long-termed conflict between the good and the evil, still for some others, a dialectical conception, which means the continuous unity of two opposing world outlooks. Whatever it is, the point applies to many facts today just as it did before, and the case of endangered languages is of no exception.

The link between political thus linguistic imperialism and the phenomenon of endangered languages is obvious. If there is one thing for sure, it is that the world's linguistic diversity was far richer before the European overseas explorations and the following colonial waves were given a start around the 15th century. The Western world dominance over indigenous peoples, their cultures and languages, accompanied by a series of unfortunate massacres, deportation or assimilation, mostly guided by economic, political and missionary drives were no different in the subsequent centuries either. Even the 18th and 19th century decolonialization era meant little in the deep side of the issue, for the radical impacts of cultural and linguistic imperialism had already achieved its subjective purposes long ago. However, what seems to be true is that the reasons for endangered languages, a phenomenon which has been the subject of both scientific and popular discourses, are to be searched for not only among the dusty pages of history but also within the socio-politically and linguistically manipulated local and global strategies of today.

Has the place of early colonialism as practice and imperialism as the idea been replaced by something totally different in the 20th century? A question the answers of which are only explicit. Linguistic imperialism of today's widely spoken tongues, particularly that of English on the one hand, and globally acknowledged economic, political, educational, occupational, etc. policies feeding oppressive processes on the other. All have been extensively studied on. No doubt that policies of oppression as well as racial, cultural, educational, military or economic hegemony, both in the Western side and in different parts of the globe also in the 20th century led to a series of power-related practices, including suppressing linguistic and cultural diversity, which for many today, means an important part of human cultural heritage.

One may easily be driven into thinking that the lately emerged discourses of endangered languages and related efforts put by governmental or non-governmental organizations, academia, native communities, etc. are actually implicit confessions of humanity; they are the confessional discourses of long-termed indifference, neglect, underestimation, self-interest, expedience, etc. They are now accompanied by efforts to save what has been destroyed by the hands of the human subjects. The efforts towards sustaining the linguistic diversity of humanity and giving support to those languages that are in danger or expressions of repentance over those that have already been extinct may now be taken as the discursive representations of a so-called clear

conscience, grown perhaps out of the collective human memory with its embarrassing retrospections. If we are today able to talk about a new awareness at work which emerged during late 20th century, it is either due to this repentance or due to the further development of human cognition, the positive outcomes of which can only be worth appreciating even though those practices in the opposite trend have not yet been totally vanished.

Relying on the Foucauldian notion that knowledge, power and truth are interrelated, we have now reasons to hope for the further development of the type of conscientious power that would validate all human linguistic and cultural properties as parts of the essential knowledge of our truth. Would this be too utopic to be true?

Commitments in the way to enact the linguistic protection and maintenance projects for the languages in danger keep the hopes of humanity alive. However, there are also those anthropologists and linguists who think that linguistic and cultural adaptation is something that inevitably has to occur, particularly due to the effects of globalization. The world is no longer as it used to be, they say. Contrary to the earlier era, future developments towards the decay of national boundaries are likely to intensify cross-cultural and cross-linguistic interactions even more profoundly. The principle 'survival of the fittest' may prove to be correct on the part of the endangered languages as well. It seems that the academic awareness rising, documentation and research practices, which actually establish a firm background, definitely need the establishment and actualization of serious language policies put into effect by the governments both globally and locally. All these languages and cultures as the properties of the common heritage of humanity deserve to be the 'fittest'. Actually, all is a matter of adopted ideology concerning whether or not the local peoples, languages, and cultures should survive on their own or become assimilated within the dominant powers. Whether or not educational policies should support either of the two is again a decision of the powerful. If the precautions cannot go beyond the mask of good intentions, we would let the human history go by as it did before. Then, those who think about the hypocrisy in contradictory human practices can keep on telling the same old story repeatedly narrated throughout the history of mankind.

As academics, let us hope for the best and go on with our scholarly efforts to strengthen the theoretical backbone.