



Predictability of language death: Structural compatibility and language contact



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ABSTRACT

Thousands of the world's languages are said to be rapidly vanishing (Abrams and Strogatz, 2003), and the issue of language death has emerged as one of the most significant phenomena for linguistic study. Research on language loss and death has, however, focused mostly on European-related languages and historical cases have not attracted due attention (Mufwene, 2001, 2004). Moreover, of the many factors argued to be of importance in causing language death, to the best of our knowledge, little reference has been made to language-internal factors. This study explores the historical outcomes of contact between Arabic–Persian and Arabic–Egyptian languages to shed more light on language maintenance or death under contact situations. Providing evidence from languages in contact and analyzing data from Persian–Arabic bilinguals, we explore why Egyptian Coptic died but Persian survived after the invasion of Arabs, and bring up a tentative hypothesis that the surface structural compatibility of the two languages in contact may lead to drastic changes and the possible death of the less dominant and less prestigious language. Structural equivalence/congruence or lack thereof is also suggested as a constraint on the competition-selection process of Mufwene's (2002) feature pool hypothesis.

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1. Introduction

Research on language loss and death has focused mostly on European-related languages (languages in European colonies, minority languages in Europe, etc (Mufwene, 2001, 2004).), and not only has less attention been paid to non-western languages, but historical cases have not attracted due attention-even in Europe. Nonetheless the outcomes of contact between major languages in history, like contact between Arabic and Persian/Egyptian languages, can help us shed more light on language maintenance or death under contact situations.

Coptic, for instance, as the latest form of Egyptian,¹ survived from 1st century AD up until about the 17th century AD. Taken together, Coptic and earlier forms of Egyptian (attested since 3200 BC) represent one of the oldest and continuously recorded languages ever known (Allen, 2013). As a spoken language, it persisted during Persian rule from 525 to 332 BC, and during the dominance of Greek language and culture from 332 BC to mid-seventh century AD, while affecting and being affected by

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¹ Different forms of Egyptian include: Archaic Egyptian (before 2600 BC), Old Egyptian (2600–2000 BC), Middle Egyptian (2000–1300 BC), Late Egyptian (1300–700 BC), Demotic (7th–5th century AD), and Coptic (4th – to about 17th century AD) (Allen, 2013).

those languages at some levels. Because of their alliances with Greeks against the Persians, Egyptians accepted Greek language and culture (Khalid, 2005; Allen, 2013) after the invasion of Alexander the Great (332 BC). Even after the Roman takeover of Egypt in 30 BC, the main language of government was still Greek. By this time, most ordinary people in Egypt knew some Greek. The Roman Empire and its successor state, the Byzantine Empire, held Egypt until about 700 AD.

However, after all these years of Greek dominance (more than a millennium) and despite the positive attitudes of Egyptians towards Greek culture and religious conversion of most Egyptians to Christianity, Coptic as the last form of Egyptian language survived with changes in its vocabulary, and minor changes in its syntax.

The Arabic army entered Alexandria on July 14th 642, but it did not enforce Arabic on the population, at least during the early years of its dominance (Butler, 1978; Yücesoy, 2015). However the process of changing Arabic from a 'minority governing language' to the language of the majority took only about six centuries. In this process, large groups of speakers shifted from their own language to Arabic, and Coptic became extinct (Versteegh, 2001). The question, therefore, is why Coptic, which persisted and survived Greek dominance for more than 1000 years, died gradually after the dominance of Arabic in about 600 years?

On the other hand, Persian, as the language of the southwestern Persian tribes (Old Persian 559 to 331 BC) gained the status of the official language (from the 6th century BC), and continued to be spoken in the Empire as Middle Persian (from 331 BC) up until the Arab invasion in 653 AD. For many centuries to come, Persian was dominated by Arabic, the language of power, politics, science, upper class, and rulers. In the meantime, Classical Persian (9th to 13th centuries) was the only form of the language which was used in the writings of poets, but only in the eastern Islamic nations (Frye, 2007, 2008). Even in these states, in addition to many borrowings from Arabic, the Arabic writing system was also adopted.

The Persians, therefore, gave up their script and most of their vocabulary (estimated from 50% to 90%) in favor of Arabic, to the extent that Brown (1902) believes that writing Persian, devoid of any Arabic, is as difficult as writing English without using Greek, Latin and French. And as Barqanisi (2007) mentions, 'an Arab can read a Persian book that has 90 of its content words borrowed from Arabic and not understand much'!

Why could Arabic, regardless of all these many years of dominance and influence on Persian, not structurally change or abolish Persian while it was the language of religion, accepted by the learned people and societies and upper classes, and understood by ordinary people of the time? To delve into this question and the death of Coptic, in section 2, first the idea of language death and the relevant background literature will be discussed. In section 3 a review of the literature on language contact and its outcomes will be provided; then empirical evidence will be reported and analyzed from Persian and Arabic contact in Iran in section 4. Finally, section 5 will be devoted to the discussion of the questions. We will also discuss the hypothesis that code-switching and/or borrowing, as the major outcomes of language contact, may be used as possible predictors of language survival or death.

2. Language death

The death of a language is commonly defined as the loss of the competence in a language at community level (Crystal, 2000; Mufwene, 2004), which is rarely abrupt but mostly gradual and protracted, affecting its speakers at different times and in different manners. One form of sudden language death happens when the speakers of a language die (e.g., by genocide) and that language is no longer naturally available to the generations to follow (Trask, 1994; Hagège, 2000).

The most frequent route for the death of a language is perhaps a more gradual, protracted one under contact situations in which the language is not able to compete with the other language/s. In today's world, with the development of high tech transportation and communication systems, competition (and sometimes coexistence) among languages of the world has exponentially increased. Many more languages are in danger of losing ground to more powerful and prestigious ones (Abrams and Strogatz, 2003; Trask, 1994).

Since the 1980s and Dorian's (1989) book on language contraction and death, research on language loss and death has focused mostly on European-related languages (e.g., languages in European colonies or minority languages in Europe) (Mufwene, 2001, 2004). However less attention has been paid to the death of non-western languages and languages that died in the past centuries. In order to revisit the factors that are hypothesized to influence language endangerment and death, a brief review of those factors is presented in the next section.

2.1. Factors influencing language death

Of the many factors involved in this phenomenon, economic globalization or linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) has recently been over-emphasized and, as Mufwene (2004: 202) rightly puts, it has prevented researchers from studying what must have occurred to languages 'during the earliest political and economic hegemonies in the history of mankind'. Globalized languages either at the international level (e.g., English) or at the local level (like the local/national official/formal languages enjoying higher status and prestige) invade weaker languages and gradually 'kill' those minority languages by dominating them and replacing their functions and domains (e.g., Fasold, 1987; Crystal, 2000; Wang and Minett, 2005). Mufwene (2004), however, believes that globalization as 'an economic network of production and consumption' (p. 208) affected the death of only a few languages at the global level. At the local level globalization seems to have exerted the most influence on minority languages, because the chosen formal/official/dominant language "gradually penetrated the private domains of citizens' lives to the point where it became almost everybody's vernacular" (p. 209).

Language and educational policies adopted based on various linguistic and ideological orientations (Crawford, 1995; Dorian, 1999; Grimes, 2002 to name a few) may lead to differences in the status, prestige and function of the selected and

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