University of Bologna

Master’s Degree in Language, Society and Communication

**Language Power and Disappearance: A Sociolinguistic Perspective**

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### ****Abstract****

This thesis explores the sociolinguistic mechanisms that explain why some languages achieve dominant status while others face marginalization or extinction. Grounded in R.A. Hudson’s Sociolinguistics (1996), the study examines how language power is socially constructed through processes of standardisation, institutional support, and cultural prestige, rather than through intrinsic linguistic superiority. Drawing on Einar Haugen’s model of language standardisation, the work analyzes the role of education, media, and state policies in shaping linguistic hierarchies.

Special attention is given to the phenomenon of language shift and language loss, with particular focus on the Kazakhstani context. In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, many young people are more proficient in Russian than in Kazakh, a pattern rooted in decades of Russification and reinforced by continued socio-economic advantages attached to the Russian language. This case study illustrates the complex interplay between colonial history, national identity, and language policy in multilingual societies.

Through theoretical analysis and comparative case studies—including the global spread of English, the revival of Hebrew, and the decline of indigenous languages—this research shows that language survival is closely tied to power, identity, and access. The thesis calls for a more critical and inclusive approach to language planning, one that values linguistic diversity as central to cultural and social equity.

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### ****Introduction****

Language is not only a tool for communication—it also reflects power, identity, and social inequality. In many parts of the world, dominant languages expand their influence, while smaller languages face marginalization or extinction. These changes are not due to linguistic superiority, but rather to social, political, and historical factors.

This paper explores why some languages become powerful while others disappear. Using R.A. Hudson’s Sociolinguistics as a main source, it examines how language prestige is constructed through institutions such as education, media, and government. The study also draws on Einar Haugen’s standardisation model to show how dominant languages are deliberately shaped and supported.

To illustrate these ideas, the paper includes real-world cases: the global rise of English, the decline of Indigenous languages in Canada, the revival of Hebrew, and the continued dominance of Russian over Kazakh in Kazakhstan. These examples highlight how language shift is influenced by identity, access to power, and social value.

## ****Theoretical Framework: Language, Power, and Society****

### ****1.1. Sociolinguistics and Language as a Social Construct****

Sociolinguistics views language not only as a system of grammar and vocabulary but as a **social practice shaped by context, power, and identity**. According to R.A. Hudson (1996), language must be studied within the society that uses it, because linguistic behavior is always influenced by social factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, and status. The idea that a language exists independently of its speakers is, in Hudson’s words, a simplification that hides the complex relationship between language and social life.

In this view, language is a **social construct**—its forms, functions, and prestige are all determined by the way people use it and perceive it. Sociolinguistics thus shifts the focus from what a language is to how it is used, valued, and maintained within a community.

### ****1.2. Language vs. Dialect: A False Dichotomy****

One of the most persistent myths in common thinking is the clear-cut division between “language” and “dialect.” Sociolinguists like Hudson challenge this distinction, showing that what is called a “language” is often just a **prestigious dialect** backed by political or institutional power. Conversely, what is labeled a “dialect” may be just as complex, but lacks official recognition.

A well-known saying illustrates this point: “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” This highlights that the status of a language is not based on linguistic features but on **social and political power**. In practice, mutual intelligibility is not a consistent criterion—many dialects within one “language” are unintelligible (e.g., German dialects), while some “separate languages” are mutually intelligible (e.g., Serbian and Croatian).

### ****1.3. Prestige and the Myth of Linguistic Superiority****

Hudson emphasizes that all natural languages are **equal in expressive power**, but not in **social value**. Prestige is socially assigned to certain varieties—usually the standard or elite dialect—based on historical and institutional support. This creates a widespread myth that some languages or ways of speaking are “better,” “cleaner,” or “more logical.”

In reality, so-called “inferior” dialects or minority languages are often stigmatized not because of linguistic reasons, but because of the **low social status of their speakers**. Education systems and mass media reinforce these biases, contributing to the **marginalization of non-standard varieties** and accelerating language shift.

### ****1.4. Haugen’s Standardisation Model****

To explain how a language gains dominance, Hudson draws on Einar Haugen’s (1966) four-stage model of standardisation:

1. **Selection** – Choosing one variety (often urban or elite) as the “standard.”
2. **Codification** – Creating grammar books, dictionaries, and spelling norms.
3. **Elaboration** – Expanding the language for use in science, law, and administration.
4. **Acceptance** – Gaining social approval and widespread use.

This process shows that standard languages do not emerge naturally—they are **constructed through deliberate policy and institutional investment**. Once a language is standardised, it gains access to schools, government, and media, becoming a symbol of national identity and power. Meanwhile, non-standard varieties are pushed to the margins or entirely excluded.

**2. Mechanisms of Language Dominance**

**2.1. Language and Political Power**

Language dominance is closely linked to political authority and institutional control. According to Hudson (1996), language reflects power relationships in society, and dominant languages often rise not because of their linguistic features, but due to the influence of powerful states or groups that use them. When a particular language becomes the language of government, law, or administration, it gains symbolic prestige and access to key social domains, while others are pushed to the margins.

Historically, colonization has played a central role in this process. Colonial languages such as English, French, and Russian were imposed as official languages in multilingual territories, replacing or suppressing indigenous varieties. The dominance of these languages was often enforced through legal systems, military control, and elite education. As a result, language became a tool of governance, exclusion, and social hierarchy.

**2.2. The Role of Media, Education, and Institutions**

Once established, a dominant language is further reinforced by institutions such as media, schools, and public administration. Hudson (1996) notes that language spread depends not only on direct enforcement but also on its use in institutions that shape everyday life. Standardised varieties are taught in schools, used in exams, and adopted by the press and broadcasters, which gives them an aura of correctness and modernity.

Education plays a particularly powerful role: when children are taught in a dominant language and punished or discouraged from using their native tongues, language shift accelerates. Similarly, media outlets amplify the reach of the dominant language by broadcasting news, entertainment, and official messages almost exclusively in that variety. Over time, speakers of minority languages may internalize the belief that their own language is less useful, less correct, or even inferior.

**2.3. The Global Rise of English**

The rise of English is a clear example of how language dominance operates at a global level. English is now the primary language of international business, science, diplomacy, and technology—not because it is inherently superior, but because of historical and geopolitical factors. The expansion of the British Empire, followed by the cultural and economic dominance of the United States, positioned English as a global lingua franca.

Hudson (1996) explains that the spread of English reflects institutional choices and global inequalities. Countries that seek integration into international markets or academic spaces often promote English in their educational systems, sometimes at the expense of local languages. This can result in **linguistic homogenization**, where smaller languages are increasingly sidelined in favor of English, even in daily communication.

**2.4. Case Study: Russian Language Domination in Kazakhstan**

The situation in Kazakhstan offers a powerful example of language dominance through both historical and institutional means. During the Soviet era, Russian was imposed as the primary language of administration, education, and urban life, while Kazakh was relegated to rural or informal settings. As a result, Russian gained prestige and functionality across the country, especially in cities.

Even after Kazakhstan gained independence in 1991, the dominance of Russian has continued. Russian remains the language of business, science, and much of the media. Although Kazakh is the state language, many young people—especially in urban centers—speak Russian fluently while having limited proficiency in Kazakh. This linguistic reality is deeply rooted in **state structures, educational policy, and the social value assigned to Russian** during and after the Soviet period.

Sociolinguistically, this reflects Hudson’s argument that **language dominance is socially constructed and institutionally maintained**. Russian’s continued prestige in Kazakhstan is not the result of linguistic features but of historical power structures and ongoing practical utility. Today, many Kazakhs experience linguistic insecurity when using their national language in formal settings, reinforcing the symbolic power of Russian even in an independent Kazakhstan.

**3. Language Shift and Language Loss**

**3.1. Causes of Language Shift**

Language shift refers to the process by which a speech community gradually stops using its native language in favor of another. According to Hudson (1996), one of the primary causes of language shift is **social pressure**—speakers may abandon their native language when it no longer gives them access to education, employment, or upward mobility. When a dominant language becomes essential for economic and social advancement, minority languages begin to lose ground.

Other factors include **urbanization**, **migration**, and **state policy**. As people move to cities or emigrate, they often adopt the dominant language of their new environment. Furthermore, language shift can occur when official policies promote one language at the expense of others, as was the case in colonial contexts or under centralized regimes like the Soviet Union.

**3.2. Intergenerational Transmission and Stigma**

The most critical factor in language maintenance is **intergenerational transmission**—the passing of a language from parents to children. Hudson (1996) emphasizes that once a generation fails to learn the language fluently, the process of language death accelerates rapidly.

Stigma plays a key role in this process. If children associate their home language with **poverty, backwardness, or lack of education**, they may resist learning or using it. This stigma is often internalized, as dominant languages are presented as modern, correct, and powerful, while minority ones are seen as limited or outdated. Parents who want the best for their children may therefore stop speaking the minority language at home, even if they themselves are fluent.

**3.3. Education and Linguistic Insecurity**

Hudson highlights the **educational system** as a key mechanism of language shift. When children are taught only in the dominant language, their exposure to their native tongue becomes limited to informal or domestic settings. This diminishes the vocabulary and contexts in which the native language can be used, leading to **linguistic insecurity**—a feeling of inadequacy or self-consciousness when using one’s own language, especially in formal contexts.

For example, speakers of stigmatized dialects or minority languages may avoid speaking them publicly, fearing correction or ridicule. Over time, this leads to a reduction in fluency, loss of confidence, and eventual abandonment of the language altogether.

**3.4. Case Study: Indigenous Languages in Canada**

The situation of Indigenous languages in Canada offers a clear illustration of the mechanisms of language shift. According to the **Assembly of First Nations (AFN)**, of more than 70 Indigenous languages in Canada, the vast majority are endangered. The Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) identified **residential schools** as a major cause of language loss: children were forcibly removed from their homes and punished for speaking their languages.

As a result, many Indigenous families experienced a **break in language transmission**. Parents, fearing the trauma they experienced, chose not to teach their children their ancestral languages. The result is a generation of youth who may identify as Indigenous but cannot speak their heritage language.

Hudson’s theory aligns with this case: the educational system, combined with stigma and state power, led to a shift away from native languages toward English and French. Efforts at revitalization are now in progress, but the damage of earlier policies is deep and lasting. The Canadian case shows how language loss is never a simple linguistic process—it is always connected to **power, identity, and trauma**.

**4. Language Revitalization and Resistance**

**4.1. Reviving Endangered Languages: Key Strategies**

Language revitalization refers to efforts to reverse the decline of a language and promote its active use. Hudson (1996) notes that such processes are not purely linguistic but deeply social and political. A language can be revitalized only when its speakers find value and pride in its use and when institutional support is available to enable learning and practice.

Key strategies include:

* **Language nests**: immersion programs for children in endangered languages (e.g., Māori in New Zealand).
* **Bilingual education**: integrating indigenous languages into school curricula.
* **Community involvement**: involving elders and fluent speakers in teaching.
* **Government policy**: formal recognition and funding for minority languages.

These strategies only succeed when accompanied by **a shift in public attitudes**, moving from shame to pride in linguistic heritage.

**4.2. Case Study: The Revival of Hebrew**

The revival of Hebrew is one of the most successful examples of language revitalization. Once considered a “dead” liturgical language, Hebrew was **reconstructed and modernized** in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Jewish communities, especially under the leadership of **Eliezer Ben-Yehuda**.

According to Hudson (1996), Hebrew’s success was possible due to unique circumstances:

* It was deeply tied to **national identity**.
* There was **a strong political movement (Zionism)** committed to its use.
* A new generation of children was taught Hebrew from birth in **immersive environments**.
* It was supported by the establishment of a **state (Israel)** that made Hebrew its official language.

Hebrew’s case shows that revitalization is not only possible but can lead to full linguistic recovery—even for a language that lacked native speakers for centuries.

**4.3. Role of Identity and Grassroots Movements**

Hudson emphasizes that **language is closely tied to identity**, and communities are more likely to resist language loss when they view their language as a symbol of cultural or political autonomy. Grassroots movements—led by speakers themselves rather than imposed by external institutions—are particularly powerful.

Examples include:

* The **Welsh revival**, which gained momentum from community-driven campaigns.
* The **Gaelic revival** in Scotland, supported by cultural festivals and local schools.
* Indigenous movements in North America and Australia that frame language as resistance to colonization.

These efforts demonstrate that **revitalization is most effective when it is participatory and identity-driven**.

**4.4. Digital Tools for Language Preservation**

Modern technology offers new tools for preserving and promoting endangered languages. These include:

* **Mobile apps** (e.g., Duolingo for Navajo and Hawaiian).
* **Online dictionaries and corpora**.
* **YouTube channels and social media** for creating youth-oriented content.
* **Virtual reality and AI-based chat tools** to simulate real language interaction.

While Hudson (1996) did not write in the age of digital media, his insights suggest that **any method that increases a language’s use in daily life strengthens its survival**. Today, digital platforms offer visibility, accessibility, and community-building potential that can help minority languages thrive.

**5. Language, Identity, and Belonging**

**5.1. Language as a Symbol of Group Membership**

Language plays a central role in expressing and shaping identity. According to Hudson (1996), language not only communicates ideas but also signals **social belonging**. The way people speak indicates their association with certain groups—ethnic, regional, social, or political.

Using a particular language or variety can serve as a **badge of identity**. In multilingual societies, people may consciously select a language or dialect to show allegiance or distance from a group. For example, young Kazakh speakers might choose Kazakh over Russian to assert national pride, or vice versa to signal modernity or urban affiliation.

**5.2. Code-Switching and Self-Positioning**

**Code-switching**, the practice of alternating between languages or varieties in conversation, is a key strategy for managing identity. Hudson (1996) explains that code-switching is rarely random: it reflects the **speaker’s social context, goals, and audience**.

Speakers may switch languages to:

* Show solidarity or distance
* Signal a change in topic or formality
* Align with or challenge authority

For instance, in a family setting, a bilingual youth might speak Kazakh to grandparents and Russian to siblings, positioning themselves between tradition and modernity. Code-switching is not a sign of linguistic confusion but of **sociolinguistic competence**—the ability to adapt to social norms through language.

**5.3. Identity Conflict in Multilingual Youth**

Multilingual youth often experience **conflicting identity pressures**, especially when their heritage language is socially marginalized. As Hudson (1996) observes, the **prestige or stigma** associated with a language can affect how young people feel about their identity.

In Kazakhstan, many young people grow up fluent in Russian, while their knowledge of Kazakh remains limited. This can lead to a sense of **detachment from national or ethnic identity**, especially if they feel judged for not speaking Kazakh “well enough.” At the same time, their Russian identity may feel partial or externally imposed.

Such identity dilemmas can lead to linguistic insecurity, selective silence, or rejection of one language in favor of the other. But they can also inspire **hybrid identities**, where youth blend languages, accents, and cultural references to create new forms of belonging.

**6. Conclusion**

This mini paper work has explored the sociolinguistic processes through which language becomes a site of power, exclusion, resistance, and identity. Drawing on Hudson’s framework, it demonstrated that:

* Language is deeply embedded in social structures.
* Dominant languages gain power through institutions and prestige—not inherent superiority.
* Language loss occurs through political pressure, educational systems, and stigma.
* Revitalization is possible through community-driven efforts and identity revaluation.
* Language choices shape and reflect how individuals see themselves and others.

To support linguistic diversity and counter language loss, the following recommendations are proposed:

* Promote bilingual education from early childhood.
* Legally recognize and fund minority and heritage languages.
* Train teachers to value and incorporate students’ home languages.
* Support grassroots language movements and digital revitalization tools.
* Raise awareness of language-based discrimination and stigma.

Language is more than a tool for communication—it is a **mirror of society** and a **key to identity**. As shown through case studies and theoretical insights, the survival or disappearance of a language is never neutral; it reflects deeper power dynamics, historical legacies, and cultural choices. Following Hudson’s call for a socially grounded view of language, this work hopes to contribute—however briefly—to the understanding of how language shapes who we are, and how we belong.

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