

# Preserving and Revitalising Endangered Minority Languages

## **Summary**

The death of endangered minority languages (EML) is a phenomenon of global proportions, making their protection a critical issue to be undertaken by different states. Reversing the dying status of languages facing extinction is tightly connected to the strong language policy a state can implement. Examples of successful language policies show the various ways in which endangered languages can be preserved and revitalised, while also underlining the importance of joint initiative and cooperation on the part of different bodies and individuals. The aim of this review is to present the reasons leading to the subordination and, consequently, death of neglected minority languages, but most importantly, to highlight examples of language policies which, along with other factors, have contributed to preservation and/or revitalisation of these languages.



## Recommendations

The protection, preservation and revitalisation of endangered minority languages is a multidimensional project including various means and factors to reach its implementation. Taking into consideration the lack of linguistic policies aiming to preserve and revitalise minority languages in many states as well as the successful implementation of relevant policies in a few of them, the following measures are suggested:

1. Establishing a common strategy to be implemented across all states through engaging international or European organisations.
2. Having the countries with strong language policies lead the way.
3. Engaging the linguistic minorities in the revitalisation process.
4. Insertion of EML into the media spectrum.
5. Launching changes in educational legislation in order to incorporate EML into the educational process.
6. Engaging EML in the cultural landscape of the state.
7. Offering EML as an alternative means of oral communication in regional public authorities.

## Introduction

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A language's obsolescence, and consequently its death, is a major issue for the global linguistic community, which recognises this as a serious effect of language subordination. "Language subordination occurs when one language or language variety gains hegemonic power over others" (Cashman, 1999, p. 134).

The guiding force behind a community's native language gradually becoming obsolete is the decreasing number of speakers actively using their language, which could subsequently lead to changes in the established linguistic structures, speech habits, and lexical choices through loanwords from a possibly more dominant or intruding language (Brenzinger and Dimmendaal, 1992). Tsitsipis and Elmendorf (1983) further argue that abandoning a native language for another is often the result of socioeconomic pressure exerted upon a group in its attempt to belong and adapt.

Such language shift<sup>1</sup> constitutes one of the main factors leading to the extinction of minority languages. Dorian (1982) identifies two different factors affecting language maintenance or shift, namely pragmatism and cultural stance. Regarding pragmatism, the speakers of a language keep the language alive because they think that using it allows them to meet their needs more proactively (Dorian, 1982). On the other hand, cultural stance is seen as a condition directly affected by the broader social and historical context to which a minority community belongs while it "develops clear and specific priorities in valuing things cultural" (Tsitsipis & Elmendorf 1983, p. 289).

Language loss as a result of language shift is tightly connected to the notion of the power a language acquires given the sociopolitical, economic and historical conditions of a region. Unequal power distribution is common in the EU nation-states, as the majority language, being the language of the state, overrules other minority languages. In the Greek context, the dominance of the Greek language is accentuated by the non-recognition of any linguistic minorities, which undermines the support and maintenance of identity.<sup>2</sup>

The preservation and revitalisation of EML is certainly linked to strong language policies implemented by states. However, their implementation is a result of many factors, such as the political, economic and societal setting. Engaging the minority group plays a further crucial role, but since many linguistic minorities have not been officially recognised and are often discriminated against or not protected by the state, the latter is the one to take the initiative towards a strong language policy. Often, it seems that linguistic minorities engage in the preservation of their language after they have ensured the security of their community.

<sup>1</sup> Language shift can be broadly described as the process in which the speakers of a linguistic minority gradually replace their language with the socio-politically and culturally dominant language. (Austin & Sallabank, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The sole exception is the recognition of the Muslim minority in Western Thrace as a religious one.

On a global level, the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities state the commitment of the UN to fostering awareness and support of human rights and fundamental freedoms of all individuals regardless of their race, sex, language, or religion, with particular importance given, among others, to linguistic minorities.<sup>3</sup> The Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have respectively committed to protecting and promoting Europe's cultural diversity (Schmidt, 2008). Additionally, most CoE Member States have pledged their commitment to the protection of a diverse cultural heritage since 1992 by ratifying the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML). This charter was a milestone in legislation, since it provides details on measures to actively support the introduction of language rights, use and maintenance in all aspects of socioeconomic and cultural life. For the same reasons, certain states have so far abstained from signing or ratifying ECRML<sup>4</sup> (Schmidt, 2008). The first legally binding CoE document for the overall protection of national minorities was the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), which became active on 1st February 1998. The FCNM is intended to ensure minority participation in all areas of public life, freedom of expression and thought, conscience and religion, access to the media, as well as rights to education and use of one's own language. In the same spirit, the OSCE has been continuously promoting the safeguarding of minority rights in Europe since 1991, paying particular attention to their educational and linguistic rights with the respective publishing of the Hague (1996) and Oslo Recommendations (1998) (Schmidt, 2008). There are, therefore, various helpful international and European instruments. Ultimately, however, it is down to individual states to decide on language policies. These vary widely depending on the context. I now go on to consider examples of good practice that could serve as a basis for stronger general guidelines in this area.

## Examples of language policies: Preservation and/or revitalisation of endangered minority languages

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Although language attrition and death have long been common among endangered minority languages around the world, evidence from past and recent studies indicates that a strong language policy could, in fact, reverse language shift, change the speakers' attitudes towards their own language, and restore the living status of minority languages. In what follows, I outline five examples of significant efforts to preserve and/or revitalise endangered languages from Europe and Africa.

<sup>3</sup> "Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities", derived from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/minorities.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> Greece is among the states that have not committed to ratification and have neither ratified nor signed the ECRML ("Parliamentary Assembly", retrieved from <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/4d8b18322.pdf>)

## The case of Cypriot Arabic in Cyprus

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One such example is the recent effort to revitalise Sanna, also known as Cypriot Maronite Arabic, a moribund language of approximately 900 speakers originating from Kormakitis village in the Northern part of Cyprus.<sup>5</sup> Sanna gained its official recognition as a minority language by the Republic of Cyprus in 2008, while it has also been under the process of documentation and revitalisation since 2013, a project run by the Cyprus Ministry of Education and Culture. The first primary school for Maronite children and teachers was established in 2002 in a suburb of Nicosia, while the further establishment of an annual Summer Camp in the area of Kormakitis has led to a spike in interest within the younger CA speaking community (Karyolemou, 2019). Karyolemou's (2019) study shows how these revitalisation efforts have positively influenced the language attitudes of the CA speaking community even though these action plans leave much to be desired in terms of efficacy and planning. The establishment of educational organisations allowed older CA speakers to perceive their language as part of an official educational program for the first time, while younger people became interested in learning it (Karyolemou, 2019). Moreover, the lifting of border restrictions on the Turkish Cypriot side in 2003 allowed more Maronites to return to Kormakitis, aiding the dwindling numbers of the community. However, such return waves require a solid-proof plan of action to sustainably revitalise the language. A good example of this is the 2019 initiative to offer regular CA classes to repatriated children in Kormakitis (Karyolemou, 2019).

## The case of Arbresh in Sicily

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In the same vein, important initiatives have been taken on the protection and promotion of Arbresh, the endangered language of Piana degli Albanesi, Sicily, which has been facing attrition and language shift towards the dominant Italian language. A regional law in 1998 on the protection of linguistic minorities - which was, however, modified later on - as well as the national law No 482 for the protection of the Albanian language and culture minorities in 1999 were considered very significant steps towards the preservation and promotion of the language (Derhemi, 2002). Derhemi (2002) advocated for the need and importance of a language policy plan that would include the codification of Arbresh and the introduction of its written form in educational institutions, as the language policy domain also plays a crucial role to the deceleration or even the reversal of the linguistic attrition process. However, it is not clear whether the above legislation measures and suggestions have come into practice (Van der Jeught, 2016). It should be also noted that the sociolinguistic status of Arbresh relatively benefits from the fact that the entire community, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds, opts for this language as an informal means of communication, despite variations in the degree of linguistic

<sup>5</sup> Kormakitis village is the only village where CA is still spoken and which along with other Maronite villages is situated approximately 30 kilometers northwest of Nicosia "forming a linguistic enclave within a surrounding Greek speaking and, nowadays, Turkish speaking area" (Karyolemou, 2019, p. 4).

competence (Derhemi, 2002). This is accentuated by the fact that the Arbresh community of Piana degli Albanesi holds strong language loyalty and positive attitudes towards their language. It would be thus interesting to see the future results of language policy implementation in such cases of minority languages.

### **The case of Naro in Western Botswana and Eastern Namibia**

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Another case of a successful effort towards the revival of a minority language after its documentation, can be found in Africa. Batibo (2009) reports the long-term efforts to revitalise the minority languages of Africa with a special focus on the Naro minority language spoken in Western Botswana and Eastern Namibia. The Naro Language Project launched by Reformists located in the village of D'kar in the 1980s contributed to the language system's description, increased literacy rates, and translation of the Bible. Batibo (2009) attributes the success of these documentation efforts predominantly to the community's high motivation and involvement in recording their language along with the collaboration among language experts, non-governmental organisations and Church groups providing "combined expertise, experience and resources" and securing enough funding (Batibo, 2009, p. 202). As a result, the Naro language has not only been revitalised but has also attracted second language speakers, who are motivated by the easy access to Naro publications. The Naro language has come to be one of the dominant languages in Botswana, since it is now partly used in the public domain and has gained a second language status (Batibo, 2009).

### **The case of Basque in the Spanish side of the Basque Country**

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The solid and long-term language policy followed by the Basque Country in Spain towards Basque is deemed by Cenoz and Gorter (2006) as key to shaping the region's linguistic landscape.<sup>6</sup> For the past 40 years, the Basque Government has taken action towards promoting Basque in education, government services, the media and private companies, while Basque has been one of the official languages - the other one being Spanish - in the Basque Autonomous Community since 1979 (Cenoz & Gorter, 2006). It has succeeded among other things in reversing language shift to a certain extent, meaning that a certain percentage of people have started using Basque more than Spanish, yet the language is still at risk, and thus, further actions are required to maintain momentum. Currently, around 40,000 adults are registered to take Basque lessons annually, which is crucial since it suggests that the growing number of people able to read and understand the language (Gorter, Aiestaran & Cenoz, 2012). The results of the study indicate the effect a strong language policy can have on the presence of a minority language in a region but also show that this might not tip the scale of the prominence of a minority language in oral communication (Cenoz and Gorter, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> The linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration is defined as "the language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings" (Landry and Bourhis, 1997, p. 25).

## The case of Võro in Estonia

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The Võro language, a formerly endangered Finnic Uralic language, is mostly spoken in south-eastern Estonia by approximately 57.000 speakers. It has undergone processes of revitalisation, standardisation and institutionalisation following the rise of the Võro movement consisting of activist speakers and intellectuals (Brown, 2019). At the same time, the Võro Society VKKF, village groups, and local organisations work on the documentation of the language and foster the use of the language in all domains (Brown, 2019). More particularly, Võro has been included in education programmes, from pre-schools (1-2 days per week where Võro is a medium of instruction) to primary education (a number of schools in South Estonia teach Võro-related subjects), while Võro literature is being taught at a secondary level. Furthermore, the language is used in the instruction of all university Võro-language courses (Brown, 2019). Võro language instruction is a project undertaken by Võro Institute and the municipalities of the area. Võro Institute has a key role in the preservation and revitalisation of the language by engaging in policy development, sociolinguistic research, development of educational materials and fostering cultural heritage (Brown, 2019). Since the 1960s, the language has been featured in some local papers, mostly in pejorative jokes, while later on, media content websites being funded by the Ministry of Culture featured opinion articles published in Võro (Brown, 2019). The first newspaper written entirely in Võro, *Uma Leht*, was launched in 2000. Since 2005, the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) transmits 5-minute news reports weekly, besides some television series and documentaries in Võro (Brown, 2019). The good language policy along with individual efforts from scholars, speakers and volunteers have contributed to the promotion of the Võro language and culture as well as the progressive engagement of the Võro community. However, it seems that further steps should be taken in the future especially towards the intergenerational transmission of the language as well as the inclusion of it in the national educational curriculum (Brown, 2019).

## Policy implications

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In the international and European contexts certain bodies such as the UN, CoE and OSCE have indeed taken important steps towards the protection of the rights of minorities. However, the implementation of the ECRML is decided individually by the member-states, leaving the adoption of such policies to the discretion of each state. For this reason, although there are countries adopting strong language policies there are still others which do not take any action to protect their linguistic minorities and their languages. Hence, a common policy crafting should be considered in the future in order to protect linguistic minorities even within states that –for instance– have not yet signed or ratified the Charter. Under the umbrella of a common strategy, all states could apply strong language policies,



as mentioned above, in order to enable the preservation and revitalisation of their EML and, consequently, respect linguistic human rights, achieve equality among the different cultural and linguistic groups of their population, and ensure their preservation and protection. A common strategy towards linguistic minorities would primarily protect the speakers and their languages in countries where there has not been any initiative towards this direction. Thus, certain countries implementing a good language policy could lead the way towards preserving and revitalising the cultural and linguistic heritage in more countries. In the same vein, relevant international organisations should give serious consideration to drafting this common strategy for the preservation and revitalisation of endangered languages, based on the examples of good practices outlined in this brief.

What is more, what seems to be critical is the inclusion of the linguistic minority in the process of revitalisation. Also critical in the revitalisation process are the linguistic attitudes of the speakers towards their language. In this regard, it is crucial either to reverse negative attitudes or enhance positive ones. Hence, it can be seen that it is vital to include the speakers in the revitalisation process in order to support them to adopt more positive attitudes. Moreover, in cases where the speakers already hold positive attitudes towards their language, they could themselves become agents of the revitalisation process along with experts and the support of the state.

Successful implementation of good language policies has shown the importance of several essential factors towards the protection of EML. Namely, very important is the insertion of the EML in the broader media spectrum, both printed and digital, including online social media platforms. Additionally, as mentioned in the aforementioned cases, organised efforts should be made by the states through changes in the educational legislation in order to insert the EML into the various domains. For instance, minority languages could be taught at schools and universities either as a medium of instruction or as a second language for young or adult learners. Furthermore, the incorporation of the minority languages into cultural events and actions related to the protection of cultural heritage as well as their adoption for use by official state actors where the minority communities are located seem to be crucial.

The aforementioned significant efforts of language preservation and revitalization also suggest other measures to be taken, including funding, the documentation of EML, the minority community's engagement and collaboration with language experts for these processes. Last but not least, having cultural and research institutes and other associations participate are all supporting factors that could restore the language to living status and contribute to its revitalisation.



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