Linguicide:
Thirty Ways of Killing Languages

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First, The Digital Kill

- In an E-Zine called *'Motherboard*,' we see a 2014 April 1-dateline essay by Ben Richmond titled 'The Internet is killing most languages.'

- Richmond goes beyond the UNESCO 2009-*World Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, and claims that 95% of languages "aren't leaping digital divide." There is no doubt that our misadventure of changing climate and fragmenting habitats have ensured mass extinction of species. But equally alarming is the fact that the "magic of the internet" is killing many human languages.

- Richmond quotes a scientific paper by Kornai A (2013) titled 'Digital Language Death' (PLoS ONE 8.10: e77056. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0077056) published in a volume edited by Eduardo G. Altmann (Max Planck Institute for the Physics of Complex Systems).

- A four-way classification of digital ascent of languages is proposed there in terms of "digitally thriving (T), vital (V), heritage (H), and still (S) languages, roughly corresponding to the amount of digital communication that takes place in the language" – corresponding to Joshua Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) or its EGIDS version, or UNESCO's five-way categorization – Vulnerable, Definitely endangered, Severely endangered, Critically endangered and Extinct.

- Konai's count was based on (i) the size and demographic composition of the language community; (ii) the prestige of the language; (iii) the identity function of the language; (iv) the level of software support; and (v) wikipedia.

- Here, Michael Krauss' famous remark "Television is a cultural nerve gas…odorless, painless, tasteless. And deadly." [15] applies to the web just as well.

- Since no national census measures the size of the digitally enabled population or the digital suitability/ prestige of the language concerned, the assessment of digital vitality is possible to measure by capturing the statistics based on all videoconference (Skype), cellphone use, Twitter handles, Facebook posting and messages, etc.

In contrast to the 8 GIDS and the 13 EGIDS Scales, Konai identifies only four classes of languages - digitally Thriving, Vital, Heritage, and Still, roughly corresponding to the volume of active language use in the digital realm.

Accordingly, the decision tree presented in here will have to be drastically simplified.

He suggested that one could have a decision on whether a language is actively used in the digital realm, and use 2 supplementary distinctions. The primary goal of will be to investigate the dead/alive distinction in the digital domain, with the finer distinctions between degrees of ascent (vital versus thriving) and degrees of death (still versus heritage) seen as secondary.

Bimodal distribution of two-way classifiers.
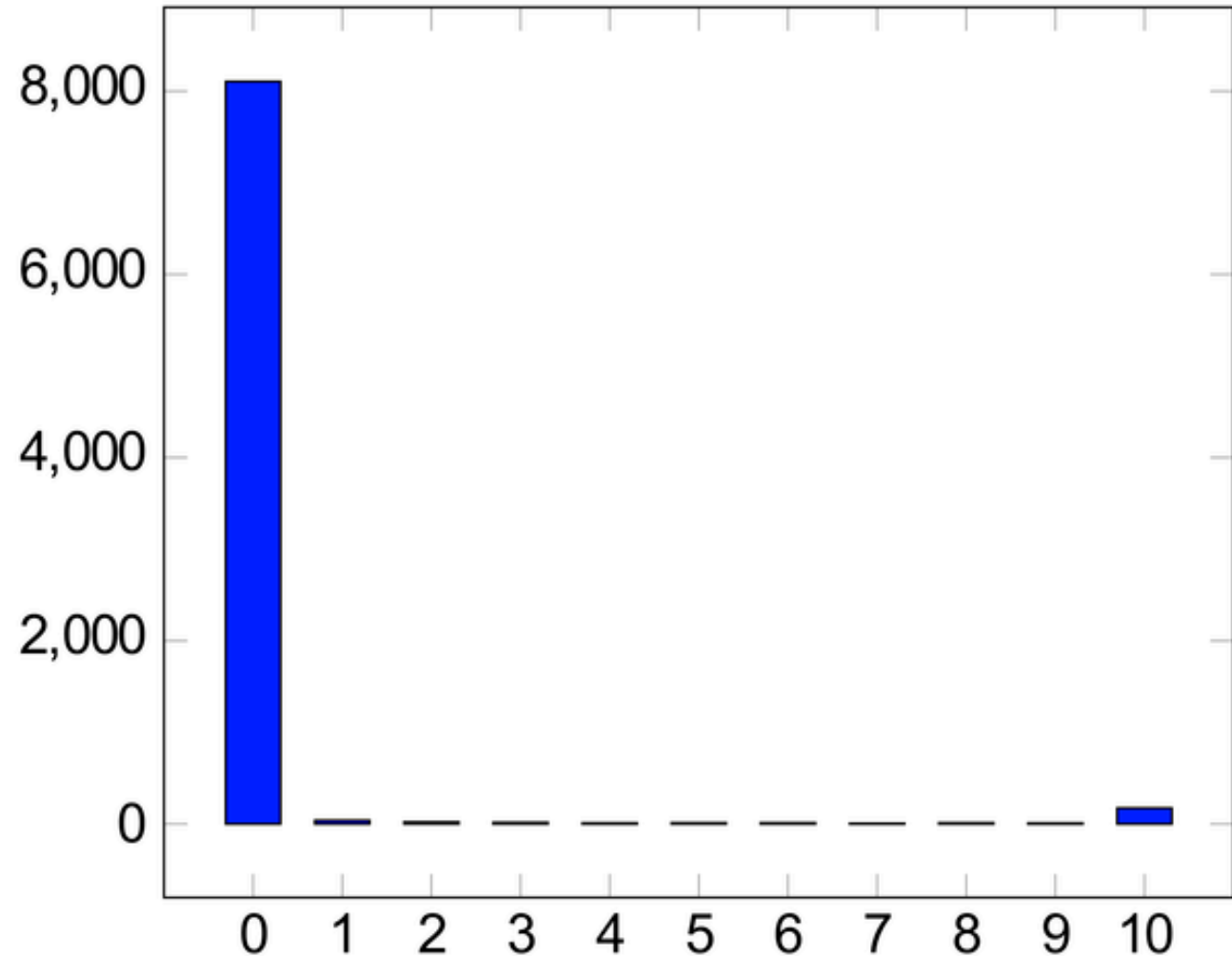
Kornai A (2013) Digital Language Death. PLOS ONE 8(10): e77056. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0077056
http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0077056

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The Measurement

- One possible method of classification was to set some thresholds so that languages over One lakh digital natives were considered thriving, those with fewer (but not zero) were considered vital, those with zero L1 speakers but more than say, 100 L2 speakers were considered heritage, and the rest still. This method was commendably simple, but it was obviously arbitrary.
- Konai claimed that the method followed here allowed for discovery: He took some prototypical examples from each class, and used a standard machine learning technique & maximum entropy classification to create a classifier that reproduced these seeds.
- Once the model is trained, he used it to classify the rest of the population, and tried to make it error-free. Further, he checked the effectiveness of the method both by internal and external criteria, such as comparison with other classification/clustering techniques.
- As the examples of Classical Chinese, Sanskrit, or Latin show, even extinct languages can be digitally better resourced than many in the traditional sense thriving, but digitally impoverished languages. Here 84 languages that unquestionably vital were manually selected. From these, two disjoint seeds – V_0 (40 languages) and V_1 (40 lgs).
- Typical examples of the first type included Banjar, Slovak, Guaran, Assamese, Belarusian, Kyrgyz, Chichewa, Armenian, Hausa and Latvian. The second type with H_0 seed had unambiguous Heritage languages – Aramaic, Old Church Slavonik, Coptic, Manx, Ancient Hebrew,Classical Chinese, Sanskrit and Syrian, etc. The ones with H_1 seed included Old English, Avestan, Cornish, Geez, Latin, Mandaic, Pali, Classical Armenian, & Anglo-Norman.
- The paper concluded that 95% of the world's languages wouldn't be able to leap "digital divide." In other words, Internet is a cause for eventual disempowerment of many mother-tongues.

Secondly, Colonization Kills

- Wiki defines **Colonialism** as "the establishment of a 'colony' in one territory by a political power from another territory, and the subsequent maintenance, expansion, and exploitation of that colony."

- The expansion begins because of mercantile interest on the external groups but becomes more ambitious as tim passes.

- This results in an unequal relationship between the Colonizers and the Indigenous people of the colony.

- This inequality is political but it soon spreads to other areas as well, especially in the languages used by the 'Masters' and by the 'Colonized.'

Thirdly, When Globalization Kills

- Danny Hieber (2012) had observed that Michael Krauss (1992), in his "The World's Languages in Crisis," observed that in 8000 BC, there were perhaps 20,000 odd languages in the world but only 6,909 today that are rapidly disappearing.

- One thing that kills smaller languages is globalization, a nebulous term used disparagingly to refer to either global economic specialization and the division of labour, or the adoption of similar cultural practices across the globe.

- For globalization to succeed, it has to be mounted on a language platform that is universally acceptable. So, with dress, designs, fashion, trends in each field, this enabling language also spreads – at the cost of not-so-fashionable speech forms.

- Although globalization is not always the cause of language decline everywhere, it is seen as a result – at the end of the line.

- There was a time when the inter-societal or inter-cultural relationships were minimally interactive. That was the situation across national boundaries as well.

- But this minimalist relationship has now been replaced by Globalization with increased linkage of societies in economics, technology, politics, culture, and language. It is difficult for an economy or society to stay in isolation now.

- With external trends and forces, external languages or expression systems make inroads. That march is the beginning of an end for local languages.

Fourthly, Trade & Economy of a Speech-Group

- Trade in a capitalistic set up usually gravitates towards greater market and bigger profit, and attempts to kill any other type of competition that may come from the local cultural products or practices. This is true in dress-making, weaving, designs of various kinds as well as in painting, sculpting or music. At the initial stage, it generally does not affect languages.

- On the contrary, because of trade at the regional levels, many new lingua francas arise resulting in a a stable and healthy bilingualism – for a while - between the local languages and the regional trade language. This may also result in new pidgin languages.

- It is only when the Trade routes are firmed up and Economy stabilises, the State may intervene as a regulator, and adopt a trade language as the official mode of expression.

- In a fit of linguistic nationalism, the State may foist upon its citizens a trade language that can become a "killer language."

- However, the killing effect starts only when inter-generational transfers of regional/local/mother languages stop – not because of mere domination of a major widely spoken language.

Fifthly, Debar L$_2$ in Schools & You'll Kill MTs

- Misty Adoniou, a literacy and TESL specialist from the University of Canberra, correctly pointed out that our politicians, bureaucrats, and schools simply ignore the power of bilingualism among students, and insists on children using only the language of the school (be it Standard English or 'Manak Hindi').

- Our bilingual children often speak more than two languages. Cognitively, being bilingual means that they are the most advantaged learners in our schools.

- Bilingual brains are more flexible, more creative, and better at problem solving.

- Yet, too many of these learners occupy the under-achiever rank in our schools. The moot question is – how do our schools fail so many intelligent learners?

- Many of these bilingual students speak English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EALD). In some urban schools, 100% of the school population are EALD students.

- Not surprisingly, a large number of students used to fail in Hindi First Language in matriculation examination in Bihar when Maithili was considered to be a dialect of Hindi and the Maithili-speaking students were forced to take the test in Standard Hindi, or Khariboli.

- It would appear we are so busy defining them as problems that need to be "fixed" that we have lost sight of the fact that they are the most linguistically savvy learners in our schools.

- We give them the same national tests that we give native speakers of English or Khariboli, despite the fact they are only part way through their journey to learn the language of power.

- Through neglect, we "kill" the languages children bring with them into Kindergarten - essentially a free natural resource - whilst simultaneously trying to introduce new languages in the final years of schooling. This strategy is illogical, expensive and has a long record of failure.

Sixthly, How SPEECH VARIETIES SPLIT & MERGE

Ludwig von Mises (1919: 46-47), in his *Nation, State, and Economy* (Online edition, 1983, Ludwig von Mises Institute) says:

> "In primitive times every migration causes not only geographical but also intellectual separation of clans and tribes. Economic exchanges do not yet exist; there is no contact that could work against differentiation and the rise of new customs. The dialect of each tribe becomes more and more different from the one that its ancestors spoke when they were still living together. The splintering of dialects goes on without interruption. The descendants no longer understand one other.... A need for unification in language then arises from two sides. The beginnings of trade make understanding necessary between members of different tribes. But this need is satisfied when individual middlemen in trade achieve the necessary command of language."

Sixthly, Aggregation from a Nomadic Life Kills

- One knows that the extremely rural communities are drawn to the relatively easier lifestyle in cities, until sometimes entire villages are abandoned. With the urban lifestyle, the language of the city would also be adopted.

- The first case of massive language die-off was probably during the Agrarian (Neolithic) Revolution, when humanity first adopted farming, abandoned the nomadic lifestyle, and created permanent settlements – a kind of aggregation in fixed regions.

- For all nomadic groups, 500 or fewer speakers per language has been the norm. Like the people who spoke them, these languages were constantly in flux. No language could grow very large, because the community that spoke it could only grow so large itself before it fragmented. The language followed suit, soon becoming two languages.

- Permanent settlements or demographic aggregation changed all this, and soon larger and larger populations could stably speak the same language.

Seventhly, Urbanization Kills

- Haven't we come across speakers of the same mother-tongue using English and/or Hindi in public spheres or in an urban setting?

- Danny Hieber (2012) says that "If a Gikuyu and a Giryama meet in Nairobi, they won't likely speak each other's mother tongue, but they very likely will speak one or both of the trade languages in Kenya — Swahili and English. Their kids may learn a smattering of words in the heritage languages from their parents, but by the third generation any vestiges of those languages in the family will likely be gone."

- Soon, Urbanization became an important factor in language death. To be sure, the wondrous features of cities that draw immigrants — greater economies of scale, decreased search costs, increased division of labour — are all made possible with capitalism, and so in this sense languages may die for economic reasons.

Eighthly, Certain kind of Fantasies Kill

- In both Socialist and Fascist Utopia, there exists a Fantasy about "one state, one nation, one people" – something all democracies abhor and fight against.

- Any attempt to seriously pursue with this fantasy as a political agenda may kill smaller languages – all deviants and differences.

- In the world stage, the minority nations will have to learn to remain independently thinking, without being dictated by political bosses. If they cannot find out how to do that and are easily swayed by the more numerous and arguably more powerful, they must agree to eventually give up their languages.

- If they retain the fire within, it is rather their language(s) that would define their identity and contribute to their solidarity.

Ninthly, "Die Naturally if Abandoned"

- In an 2010-essay 'Globalization, dying languages and the futility of saving them,' [http://www.inst.at/trans/17Nr/1-3/1-3_agwuele17.htm], Anthony Agwuele (Universität Leipzig, Germany) observed that the prime function or use of language has been communication. Another exciting function of language is that of recording and embodying the experiences of a speech community. The last function is that thought is dependent on language.

- Being a carrier of culture and its contents, language marks its identity. It is both as a trajectory and a repository of their cultural experience, practices and history. Speakers of a language use it to reflect the social conditions and practices sanctioned by them.

- It is inevitable that there would be inequity between the world of a majority language and the worlds of all minority speech varieties around it, and that the weak languages will be politically dominated by the mainstream languages in interaction. In a majority-minority configuration, even in democracies, the politics of size or number would ensure that there would be no neutrality in the interaction of the two worlds. Rather, the mainstream languages would always be privileged.

- Agwuele argued that the activities such as documenting human heritage; undertaking language typology, particularly in the absence of writing; conserving human history; satisfying intellectual curiosity as well as folkloristic pleasure, etc. are pointless, because "if a language dies, i.e., [it] is abandoned by its speakers because it cannot aid them on the global stage, there is no basis for the preservation of such a language."

- So, the moral of the lesson is that if abandoned, let an endangered language die its natural death.

Tenthly, Disaster & Death of Languages

- Languages with a small or ever diminishing number of speakers, living in isolated pockets – with location being both socially and geographically isolated – can also die when their speakers are wiped out by genocide, disease or other natural disasters.

- Biological factors could also wipe off an entire linguistic group.

Eleventhly, State-Sponsored Genocide

- Language death can be faster, when the State plans for or promotes language genocide.

- Devalue a language and it dies.

- This happens when children are taught to avoid their parents' language for reasons such as work opportunities and social status.

- At times, minority language groups live on and survive better when the speakers try to isolate themselves against a majority population by using various strategies. Historically, governments have always promoted language death, not wishing to have minority languages to deal with, and make provisions in law or in their budget.

Twelfth, Ecology & Language Sacrifice

- The processes of language birth and death show, as Mufwene (2001) argues, because of certain socio-economic conditions that could be described as "ecological."

- For instance, the birth of creoles in the plantation settlement colonies of the Atlantic and Indian Oceans is a concomitant of language shift among the African populations who developed them.

- Likewise, the emergence of American English(es) is concomitant both of the gradual loss of especially continental European languages that came in contact with English in North America and of the restructuring of English varieties brought over from England (regardless of whether linguists factor in influence from the other languages)

Thirteen, Languages do not, Competence Dies

- Languages are not and cannot be issued Birth or Death Certificates.

- As communal phenomena, the processes of emergence or disappearance of languages are protracted, spanning over several generations, which is why the concept of "language birth" is a misnomer, says Chaudenson R. (2001) in his *Creolization of Language and Culture* (London: Routledge). There are no pregnancy or delivery stages here.

- Likewise, language death is a protracted change of state, used to describe community-level loss of competence in a language.

- The loss is a process that does not affect all speakers at the same time nor to the same extent.

- Under one conception of the process, it concerns the statistical assessment of the maintenance versus loss of competence in a language variety among its speakers. When none uses or can use it in speech, it is supposed to be "dead."

Fourteen, The Classical Death?

- Many interesting questions arise in this context: Are Classical Sanskrit and Classical Latin dead languages?

- There may still be many who could speak it or write in it, or even create texts, even though none inherits it from one's mother.

- Further, in the case of the evolution of a language into a new variety, what is the relationship between language death and language birth?

- Could we consider these processes as two facets of the same process?

- In case of other organisms, one requires a healthy balance between the rate of birth and death of species.

- In this case, expecting a balance would be difficult as there could be many socio-economic or historical or geo-political reasons for splitting of languages or emergence of new speech forms, and these are not always commensurate with disappearance of earlier speech varieties.

Fifteen, McDonaldization of Culture kills

- George Ritzer (1993) in his *The McDonaldization of Society* (Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press), shows that this process of McDonaldization can have many manifestations, and Junk-journalism – serving a set of inoffensive and trivial news nicely packaged in palatable proportions – is an example of this trend.

- The thesis of McDonaldization thesis in cultural arena is like promoting a kind of homogenization of culture worldwide.

- As four primary components of McDonaldization, Ritzer mentions: **Efficiency** (overcoming one's hunger in minimum time), **Calculability** (Forget variety or subjectivity – convert all products into high quality measurable items), **Predictability** (Standardized and Uniform services in all parts of the world), and **Control** (taking away the art from cooking - standard replacement of human by non-human technologies).

- Use of modern-day jargons and txt-ing styles in languages that take the form of communication to a form that almost define elitism and being mod(ern) could surely kill the vitality of our languages.

- In a recent TED-talk [https://genius.com/John-mcwhorter-txting-is-killing-language-jk-annotated], John McWhorter argues that texting spells the decline and fall of any kind of serious literacy, or at least writing ability, among young people in the United States and now the whole world today.

- The telegraphic style associated with casual speech of some communication systems lure the new generation so much that there could be a gradual shift over to this language of convenience.

Sixteen, Loss of Prestige Kills

- Del Hymes (1964) in 'Two types of linguistic relativity: Some examples from American Indian ethnography' (*Sociolinguistics*, WilliamBright, ed, 114-167)

- Salikoko S. Mufwene (2004) in 'Language Birth and Death' [Annu. Rev. Anthropol.33:201–22]: This explanation is consistent also with why indigenous languages in former exploitation colonies of Africa and Asia have been losing grounds not to European colonial languages but to (new) indigenous vernaculars (former lingua francas) associated with new indigenous urban life, such as Swahili in much of East Africa, Town Bemba in Zambia, Lingala in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo and of the Republic of Congo, Wolof in Senegal, Malay in Indonesia and Malaysia, and Hindi in India. Globalization has not affected former exploitation colonies in the same way it affected former settlement colonies. Several factors contribute to making these new indigenous languages more realistic targets than the European colonial ones, for instance, the high rate of illiteracy, the scarcity of jobs requiring command of European languages, the fact that other jobs are accessible with command of an indigenous lingua franca (which is acquired by oral interaction with speakers of the language), and the fact that an inspiring urban culture is expressed also in the same non-European lingua franca. Below I return to this topic. Invoking lack of pride or prestige to account for the loss of minority languages and of the langues minorees ´ fails to explain why the Romance languages evolved from Vulgar Latin (the nonstandard variety) rather than from Classical Latin; why, where Latin prevailed, it was not offset by Ancient Greek, despite the higher prestige of the latter even among the Roman elite; and why Sanskrit is dead, or dying, despite all the prestige it carries relative to other Indic languages.