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## MINORITY LANGUAGES IN DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

This paper contains an overview of printed and online publications concerning a relatively new cultural phenomenon — the increased presence of minority languages and dialects on the Internet. Particular attention is given to the educational, linguistic, and technological aspects of the 'digital divide' preventing lesser used languages from access to the means of digital communication. The study shows that the use of local languages on social networks has a symbolic value reaffirming a sense of personal and collective identity. Among researchers there are both optimistic and pessimistic views on the role of online presence in revitalising endangered languages.

**Key words:** *minority languages, digital communication, social networks, digital divide, globalisation, cultural identity, revitalising a language.*

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## МІНОРИТАРНІ МОВИ В ЦИФРОВІЙ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ

**Актуальність.** Нинішня глобалізація загрожує існуванню мов малих етнічних груп, що зумовлює необхідність вивчення ролі інтернету в захисті їх від подальшого занепаду.

**Мета** статті — дослідити сучасне ставлення науковців до відносно нового культурного феномену — дедалі більшої наявності міноритарних мов і діалектів в інтернеті.

**Методологія.** У розвідці застосовано методи опису, зіставлення та узагальнення.

**Результати.** Дослідження показало, що цифрова комунікація є ідеальною можливістю для носіїв міноритарних мов не обмежуватись побутовим спілкуванням. Висвітлено освітні, лінгвістичні та технологічні проблеми «цифрового поділу», які перешкоджають використуванню мовам доступ до засобів цифрової комунікації. Для усунення такої нерівності потрібно: подолати негативне ставлення до деяких мов, які не мають офіційного статусу; проводити толерантну освітню політику; надавати загальний доступ до засобів цифрової комунікації; створювати, у разі необхідності, системи письма для мов, що існують лише в усній формі.

**Новизна.** Стаття є першою спробою здійснити огляд друкованих і електронних публікацій стосовно ролі інтернету у відродженні міноритарних мов.

**Практичне значення.** Матеріали і висновки дослідження можна використувати в процесі викладання соціолінгвістичних та культурологічних дисциплін, а також під час визначення перспектив використання діалектів української мови в онлайнівій комунікації.

**Висновки.** В умовах звуження сфер функціонування міноритарних мов і скорочення кількості їх носіїв останні можуть дістати доступ до ширшої

аудиторії через інтернет. Ця парадоксальна ситуація являє собою новий соціолінгвістичний феномен: природне спілкування мовами місцевого значення поступається віртуальним контактам. Відзначено як оптимістичні, так і песимістичні погляди щодо ролі інтернету у відродженні мов, що перебувають під загрозою зникнення. Зазвичай використання місцевих мов у соціальних мережах має символічну цінність і підтверджує відчуття особистої та колективної ідентичності.

**Ключові слова:** *міноритарні мови, цифрова комунікація, соціальні мережі, цифровий поділ, глобалізація, культурна ідентичність, відродження мови.*

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### **МИНОРИТАРНЫЕ ЯЗЫКИ В ЦИФРОВОЙ КОММУНИКАЦИИ**

Приведен обзор печатных и онлайн-публикаций, касающиеся нового феномена — все большего присутствия миноритарных языков и диалектов в интернете. Особое внимание уделено образовательным, лингвистическим и технологическим аспектам «цифрового раздела», препятствующего языкам с ограниченным числом носителей иметь доступ к средствам цифровой коммуникации. Исследование показало, что применение местных языков в социальных сетях имеет символическую ценность и подтверждает чувство персональной и коллективной идентичности. Отмечено как оптимистические, так и пессимистические взгляды исследователей на роль онлайн-присутствия в возрождении языков, находящихся под угрозой исчезновения.

**Ключевые слова:** *миноритарные языки, цифровая коммуникация, социальные сети, цифровой раздел, глобализация, культурная идентичность, возрождение языка.*

**Problem statement.** Minority languages are described by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (1992) as numerically small languages with no national official status. According to the Charter all linguistic groups irrespective of the number of speakers have the same rights to access information in their own language. Nowadays it means that access to the Internet and other digital information and communication systems should be guaranteed to speakers of less common languages.

Today's linguistic situation in online communication is characterised by a shift from the dominance of English to a growing presence of minority languages and even dialects on the Internet. In this context, the theoretical issue of 'globalisation vs local identities' opposition acquires practical dimensions: language scholars and sociologists are concerned with the possible role of the Internet in protecting endangered languages from further decline. Accordingly, **the aim** of this article is to provide an overview of recent publications on the subject treating some of its ideological, ethical, technological, and linguistic aspects.

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**Previous research.** The issue of small languages survival in the digital age attracts attention of authors specializing in various fields of science. A wide range of articles dealing with problems arising from an increasing presence of minority languages on the Internet is presented in (Danet & Herring, 2007). The topics discussed in the volume focus on such matters as the structural properties and writing systems of local languages involved in digital communication, and how these features affect Internet use. Also analysed are some related issues as measuring language choice and diversity on the Internet, machine translation and code switching in the multilingual digital environment. A series of case studies of specific social media developments in minority languages are described, for instance, in (Jones & Uribe-Jongbloed, 2013). The book also contains a chronological review of the development of minority language media worldwide. The relationship between the ‘minority’ status and group identity as well as such issues as language decline, maintenance and revival, the dynamics of minority languages, and the ecology of language on the basis of four case studies are examined by John Edwards in (Edwards, 2010).

Other areas of research touch upon such controversial questions as the symbolic nature of the use of minority languages in digital communication (Cultural and linguistic diversity in the information society, 2003) and an uncertain future for some of them despite their online presence (Perlin, 2014). The chances for dialects to establish themselves in online communication are the subject of some Internet publications (e.g. Burger, 2014). The linguistic material of such publications range from Welsh, Catalan, Galician, Basque, Egyptian Arabic to Scots, Scottish Gaelic, Frisian, Hawaiian, Sardinian as well as various German and Austrian dialects.

**The main text.** According to UNESCO sources, there are about 172 million English speakers and 163 million non-English speakers online. Over 50 % of Web users speak a native language other than English (Cultural and linguistic diversity in the information society, 2003). In spite of the obvious fact that linguistic diversity on the Web is increasing, English remains the dominant language of online communication. Some authors even speak of “intellectual colonialism” (Warschauer, 2002) preventing smaller languages from expanding the range of their activities. At the same time, people from smaller ethnic and linguistic groups need a place where they can share their interests and concerns. The Internet seems to be an ideal means for such communication.

Theoretically, any minority language or dialect can be used on the Internet and Internet-based communication systems. Meanwhile, however, about 95 percent of all languages are not present in cyberspace. The UNESCO Atlas of

Language in Danger currently includes data on 2,465 endangered languages. Accordingly, some researchers use the term ‘digital divide’, i.e. “the unequal distribution of access to digital information sources and services” between members of larger and smaller linguistic groups (Perlin, 2014). In the opinion of most researchers, the following steps should be taken to overcome this disparity and make the Internet really multilingual:

- change the **public approach** to some languages having no official status;
- analyse the **content and form** of the existing presence of smaller languages on the Internet;
- study the **structural properties** of the languages newly used in online communication;
- explore the **state of information and communication technology** in the areas where a particular minority language is spoken. (*Measuring linguistic diversity...*, 2005)

The issue of public approach to the use of minority languages in online communication was the theme of some recent international conferences and seminars (e.g. “Multilingualism in Cyberspace: Indigenous Languages for Empowerment” in San José, Costa Rica, November 2015; UNESCO “European Language Diversity Forum” in Donostia-San Sebastian, Spain, December 2016; “Seminar on Minority Languages in New Media: Towards language revitalisation in Europe and Africa” in Birmingham, April 2017). At the meeting in San José it was pointed out that many minority languages were in danger. The participants emphasized the need for understanding access to information in cyberspace as a human right and underlined the importance of the presence of smaller languages on the Internet for their sustainable development. The main objective of the 2016 forum was analysing the current difficulties, looking for practical solutions to the problem and opportunities for further progress. The forum also called upon the world community to show tolerance for the use of the minority language in a wide range of activities, including the use of new social media. The term ‘new media’ refers, primarily, to online communication platforms such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, etc.

In the opinion of some researchers, in the countries with the ‘one nation, one language’ policy, “...it is private associations with little means, or intergovernmental organizations with no clear mandate, that have to come in and do the work”. (*Measuring linguistic diversity...*, 2005).

Another important aspect of studying the role of the Internet in revitalising endangered languages is the examination of actual minority language use online. There is evidence that the language choice of a multilingual Internet user to a great extent depends on his/her social

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connections and on the type of social network (Morris & Cunliffe, 2012). On average, the more formal the medium, the less often a minority language is used. It is understandable because minority languages and dialects have traditionally been used in informal communication. Authors report that the choice of language by a bilingual speaker depends on the target audience and the type of communication. While discussions on serious topics are conducted in the dominant language of the country, in exchanging short remarks (often with a touch of warmth or humour) users may switch to the minority language. Thus, in online communication we can observe a kind of diglossia, with people using a majority language in more formal e-mail communications and a combination of English, the official language of the country and a local dialect in informal e-mail messages and online chats. As a rule, a minority language is more likely to be chosen when addressing somebody who uses the same language or dialect. (Burger, 2014). One can speak, therefore, of a certain 'division of labor' between different languages in the process of online communication.

Most dialects and endangered languages function in oral form, whereas digital communication presupposes writing. Many dialects exist as unwritten varieties of languages with systems of writing other than the Roman alphabet. In their attempts to communicate online in their own tongue, dialect and minority language speakers come across with difficulties. One of such obstacles is the absence of a compact, critical mass of native speakers. For instance, the speakers of the Hawaiian language are scattered in small communities over six different islands. There is only one tiny island of Ni'ihau, with only 200 inhabitants where Hawaiians can communicate with each other in their own language. As a consequence, Hawaiian families sometimes lack motivation for the serious effort required to learn and use Hawaiian, especially when need the English language in order to get jobs and survive (Warschauer, 2002). However, a strong motivation makes it possible to overcome technical barriers. There are reports about using a romanized version of Egyptian Colloquial Arabic in informal e-mail messages and online chatting. This new form even includes the use of numbers to represent phonemes that are not easily rendered in the Roman alphabet. With Arabic operating systems improving and expanding, it is to be expected that more Egyptians will be able to communicate online in their own dialect using Arabic script. (Warschauer, 2002). Similarly, in written communication speakers of various German dialects have to rely on unsystematic phonetic principles which, however, can be regarded as a step towards elaborating a unified writing system.

One of serious obstacles on the way to introducing a language with no official status into online communication seems to be the system of education adopted in the relevant country. In Egypt, for instance, university courses in computer science, engineering, medicine, and information technology are taught largely in English (Warschauer, 2002). In Europe, dialects are practically never taught at schools. About 50% of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home ((Danet & Herring, 2007). No wonder that many educators consider such languages and language varieties not prepared for the ranges of activities beyond everyday life. Accordingly, some social linguists distinguish between languages that are 'information rich' and languages that are 'information poor' with regard to online content and services (Kelly-Holmes, 2004).

Another aspect of the 'digital divide' concerns a set of technical issues: the presence of and physical access to information technology; the existence of interfaces in the user's mother tongue; the availability of the relevant human and financial resources. According to Warschauer (2002), many native Hawaiians lack computers or even phone lines in their homes, thus making it difficult to expand Hawaiian language Internet use throughout the broader community. (It should be noted, however, that since that time the provision of the indigenous population with information technology must have changed for the better. Comparatively cheap smart phones are available practically everywhere today). A survey conducted in 2004 showed that there was a digital and linguistic divide between internet users in richer and poorer countries, manifesting itself not only in the different degrees of accessibility of the internet, but also in the amount of resources available to provide services in local languages. For example, in 4 poorer countries Internet users tend to rely on English-medium sources whereas users in richer countries are able to access information in their own language. Thus, as Internet resources become increasingly available in the users' own languages, English language use decreases (Kelly-Holmes, 2004). At the same time, some researchers point out that one should not expect too much from information technology: "...technologies more often serve to amplify trends that already exist, or create new possibilities, rather than to bring about particular results". (Warschauer, 2002)

In their efforts to revitalise lesser used languages enthusiasts pin their hopes on young native speakers. The National Plan for Gaelic (Scotland) emphasises the necessity of promoting the use of the digital technologies to provide high-quality learning for talented young people through the medium of Gaelic. Computer education for Native Hawaiian children is

being introduced in Hawaii. Says a Native Hawaiian educator: “In order for Hawaiian to feel like a real living language, like English, it needs to be seen, heard and utilized everywhere, and that includes the use of computers.” (Warschauer, 2002).

In the opinion of modern researchers, the Internet is not neutral. It tends to privilege the wealthy, the well-educated, and the English speaking. However, the monopoly of standard American and British English online is undermined by a powerful phenomenon – Individual and national need of cultural identity (Warschauer, 2002). Today’s linguistic policy of the European Union is characterized, on the one hand, by encouraging learning English, and by supporting the development of regional and minority languages, on the other. Studying the cases of online language choice by bilingual speakers, one should always consider the cultural identity aspects. Thus, the Internet has “...a language-ideological function in that it can be a means for lesser used and smaller languages to strengthen their identity as independent languages and it can provide them with more prestige” (Warschauer, 2002). Switching to his/her native minority language or dialect in the process of communication, the bilingual Internet user reaffirms a sense of personal and collective identity. Thus, the local language becomes symbolically charged, i.e. acquires symbolic value.

**Conclusion.** As to the real effect of online presence on the future of minority languages, the opinions of researchers differ. Most authors represent the view that the Internet is a convenient tool contributing to the revitalization and developing of minority base of languages and dialects. In contrast, there are pessimists who argue that the social base of smaller languages is the home, the family, the village, rather than the digital world. Here one can speak of an IT age paradox: on the one hand, the areas of functioning of endangered languages in real life are narrowing, and the number of native speakers is diminishing; on the other hand, through the Internet minority languages get access to a wider audience. The new sociolinguistic phenomenon is intriguing: natural (physical) communication in smaller minority languages seems to be giving way to virtual (electronic) contacts.

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