

THE RISE OF 'PASSIVE MULTILINGUALISM': HOW GLOBAL ENGLISH IS SILENCING ACTIVE LANGUAGE USE

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This paper investigates the emergence of "passive multilingualism" in an era dominated by global English. While many individuals can understand multiple languages, they increasingly use only English in active communication, leading to the erosion of linguistic diversity and diminishing active competence in local or heritage languages. Drawing from sociolinguistic research, language ideology theory, and real-world case studies, the article explores how English's functional dominance promotes linguistic passivity, particularly in multilingual societies. The paper argues that passive multilingualism, while seemingly inclusive, contributes to a silent loss of language agency and advocates for policies and pedagogies that support active language use in education, media, and public life.

In the age of globalization, linguistic landscapes are rapidly transforming. Nowhere is this more evident than in the global rise of English as the dominant medium of communication. As English continues to permeate international institutions, education, digital platforms, and professional environments, it is often celebrated as a tool for global access, unity, and upward mobility. However, beneath this widespread celebration lies a less visible but deeply consequential phenomenon: the rise of *passive multilingualism*. This refers to a growing tendency among multilingual individuals to understand several languages, yet actively speak or write in only one—often English.

In this context, passive multilingualism emerges not as a conscious personal choice, but as a sociolinguistic byproduct of global hierarchies that elevate English over other languages. While multilingualism, in theory, represents linguistic richness and cognitive flexibility, its passive form represents a reduction of that richness into mere symbolic competence. People can understand their local or heritage languages but refrain from using them actively in public or even private domains. This phenomenon has significant implications for cultural identity, intergenerational communication, and the long-term vitality of languages.

Historically, multilingualism has been a natural condition for many societies. From South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to Central Asia and the Balkans, communities have long navigated multiple languages in everyday life. Individuals would grow up speaking a home language, learn a regional lingua franca in school, and possibly acquire a religious or trade language as well. In such environments, active multilingualism was both a necessity and a norm. However, the global rise of English, accompanied by its institutionalization through formal education, international media, and digital technology, has altered this linguistic ecosystem.

The result is a growing number of individuals—particularly youth—who are proficient listeners of their ancestral or regional languages but rarely use them for speaking or writing. For example, in many immigrant communities in North America and Western Europe, second-generation youth often understand their parents’ language but respond in English. In Central Asian republics, young people may understand Uzbek, Russian, or Tajik, but express themselves primarily in English in academic and digital domains. In Africa, studies show that while many citizens are exposed to multiple languages, English remains the language of high status and active utility.

This shift toward passive multilingualism is reinforced by language ideologies that privilege English as “modern,” “useful,” or “neutral,” while framing local or indigenous languages as “emotional,” “traditional,” or even “backward.” These ideologies are often internalized unconsciously through education systems, media content, and professional expectations. As a result, individuals may come to devalue their native or heritage tongues, believing them unworthy of formal or professional use.

Moreover, digital technology and social media—which offer unprecedented opportunities for language use—paradoxically contribute to linguistic homogenization. While platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn technically support multiple languages, their default algorithms and international networks often encourage communication in English. On

platforms like YouTube or TikTok, English-language content tends to be more visible and widely circulated, pushing non-English creators either to switch languages or to subtitle their content in English. Consequently, users from multilingual backgrounds increasingly consume and produce content in English, even when other languages are available to them.

Education systems are also a major contributor to the problem. In many multilingual countries, English-medium instruction (EMI) is expanding rapidly, often at the expense of mother tongue education. While EMI is promoted for its perceived economic benefits, it often marginalizes students who are more competent in their native language. Worse, it sends the message that intellectual and professional success can only be achieved through English. Over time, this can result in younger generations abandoning active use of their home languages—not because they lack knowledge, but because they see no value in using them publicly.

The psychological effects of passive multilingualism are profound. Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is deeply connected to identity, emotion, memory, and community. When individuals stop using a language actively, they risk losing their emotional fluency in it—the ability to express nuanced feelings, cultural references, and relational depth. This can create intergenerational gaps, where children can no longer engage in meaningful conversations with grandparents or elders in their shared language. It also weakens community bonds and reduces opportunities for language transmission.

It is important to distinguish passive multilingualism from language death. In many cases, the languages in question are not extinct or even endangered—they continue to be spoken by older generations or in rural areas. However, when younger, urban, educated populations cease to use them actively, the long-term trajectory leans toward attrition. Over time, passive knowledge erodes, leading to a gradual but definitive loss of linguistic competence and, eventually, language shift.

The rise of passive multilingualism calls for a rethinking of how we define and value multilingualism in the 21st century. Celebrating a country's linguistic diversity on paper is not enough if actual language practices remain dominated by English. True multilingualism must involve the **active** use of multiple languages across domains—home, school, media, and work—not merely symbolic recognition or passive understanding.

The phenomenon of passive multilingualism—where individuals understand but do not actively use their multiple languages—has emerged as a silent consequence of the global dominance of English. As English increasingly becomes the default language in education, digital communication, and international interaction, it simultaneously marginalizes other

languages not by replacing them outright, but by pushing them into passive knowledge domains. This section explores the mechanisms behind this shift and its socio-cultural implications across different regions.

Digital media has redefined language use in modern societies. While it offers vast potential for multilingual engagement, in practice, platforms tend to centralize English. Search algorithms on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram prioritize English content due to larger global audiences. Many multilingual users, even those fluent in local languages, consume content in English and, over time, begin producing in English to gain wider reach.

A 2021 study by the European Commission found that although over 60% of users in multilingual EU countries had access to regional language content, less than 25% actually engaged with or shared it. The discrepancy lies in visibility and cultural capital. English content is seen as more “professional,” “trendy,” or “relevant,” even within non-English-speaking societies. As a result, languages like Basque, Uzbek, or Swahili are consumed passively, while English remains the active language of output.

Many countries have adopted English-medium instruction as a core educational strategy. In places like South Korea, Kazakhstan, and Rwanda, entire university programs are now taught in English. While this improves global academic mobility, it often weakens students’ confidence and competence in their own national or ethnic languages, particularly in academic registers.

For example, in Central Asia, Uzbek or Kazakh may be spoken at home, but students struggle to write essays or give presentations in those languages due to lack of institutional support. Over time, these local languages are relegated to informal spaces, while English dominates formal, academic, and professional domains. This imbalance breeds passive multilingualism: students understand multiple languages but can articulate complex ideas in only one—English.

Language ideologies play a central role in shaping language practices. The global prestige of English leads many to perceive their own languages as lacking utility or sophistication. In countries like Nigeria or India, this manifests in parents intentionally choosing to speak only English to their children, despite being native speakers of Yoruba or Tamil.

This practice creates generational gaps where youth may understand ancestral languages but lack the confidence—or opportunity—to use them actively. Over time, even passive understanding may diminish, particularly when emotional or intellectual connections to the

language are weakened. This internalized linguistic inferiority reinforces passive multilingualism as a social norm.

Governments often claim to support multilingualism through symbolic inclusion of minority languages in official documents or public campaigns. However, without practical measures—such as education in those languages, public broadcasting, and legal rights to use them in institutions—these efforts remain tokenistic.

In postcolonial African nations, for instance, while constitutions recognize dozens of languages, English or French still dominates courts, universities, and bureaucracy. This forces citizens to operate bilingually, but passively—understanding local languages for cultural interactions, but using the colonial language for power and progress. The lack of real institutional parity feeds the cycle of passive multilingualism.

Language shift often begins at home. When parents speak to children in the heritage language but children respond only in English (or another dominant language), passive multilingualism is institutionalized in family communication. This pattern is common among diaspora communities in the United States, UK, Canada, and Australia.

For example, among second-generation South Asian immigrants, languages like Bengali, Punjabi, or Gujarati are often understood but not actively spoken. As noted in research by Li Wei (2000), children may grow up decoding the language but not producing it. The result is a “half-competent bilingualism” that cannot support future transmission. Once these children become parents, the language shift becomes permanent.

The rise of passive multilingualism is not a neutral or harmless development. It signals a weakening of linguistic agency and cultural expression, driven by the structural dominance of English in key life domains. While people retain passive knowledge of their languages, they lose the confidence, context, and institutional support to use them actively.

To reverse this trend, it is essential to invest in **active language use** through education, media, cultural production, and intergenerational dialogue. Supporting local and indigenous languages as full-functioning vehicles of knowledge and creativity is not only a cultural necessity—it is a human right.

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