

# Linguistic Diversity in the Modern World: Practicalities and Paradoxes

**Gladys Nyarko Ansah**

*University of Ghana, Legon, University of Brighton, UK.*

## Abstract

*The issue of maintaining linguistic diversity in the world today and ensuring its sustainability in the future has become a near obsession for many professional linguists and organisations. Why is this necessary? And what efforts are being made in this direction? This paper discusses trends in linguistic diversity in the world today in relation to the fear Krauss (1992) and others express about the current trends of language use in the world today? The paper argues that the current efforts by such bodies as the UNESCO in addressing the situation are paradoxical. The essay does this by discussing the practicalities (factors that may be promoting or threatening) of linguistic diversity in Ghana today and in the future. The paper provides some facts on linguistic diversity in Ghana, and discusses some external and internal factors that affect linguistic diversity in Ghana. The paper then links these facts and trends to the facts and patterns of linguistic diversity in the world today, and submits that the patterns of linguistic diversity in Ghana today, reflect the patterns of linguistic diversity in many parts of the world today and argues that the current efforts being made fall short of achieving the ultimate aim due to their inherent paradoxical nature.*

*Keywords:* ← Linguistic Diversity Paradoxes

## Introduction

Linguistic diversity has become an issue of tremendous importance to many governments, specialised organisations and professional linguists in the world in recent times. Several nation states, for example, UK, Australia, Canada have made specific national policies to revitalise minority languages that are perceived not to be safe. These countries vote a lot of money into research related projects (description, codification, publication, dictionary projects etc. by professional linguists) on these languages to ensure this revitalisation. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, UNESCO is one organisation that has become very concerned, almost obsessed, with maintaining or ensuring linguistic diversity in the world today and in the future.

For instance, at the 30<sup>th</sup> session of its General Conference in 1999, UNESCO decided to launch and observe an International Mother Language Day on 21<sup>st</sup> February every year throughout the world with the aim of promoting the recognition and practice of mother tongues, particularly minority ones. Following from this, at its 31<sup>st</sup> General Conference in October 2001, the UNESCO passed the “UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity”. Among other things, this declaration supports cultural rights as defined in Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which also finds support in Articles 13 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, promotes multilingualism, encouraging its application through the following:

“5 - safeguarding the linguistic heritage and humanity and giving support of expression, creations and dissemination in the greatest number of languages;

6 - encouraging linguistic diversity – while respecting the mother-tongue at all levels of education, wherever possible, and fostering the learning of several languages from the earliest age;

7 - promoting through education an awareness of the positive value of cultural diversity and improving to this end both curriculum design and teacher education.”

(<http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php> : 1)

Every year, UNESCO funds several projects as part of its effort to ensuring the maintenance of linguistic diversity in the world now and in the future. For instance, it funded and published the findings of research on measuring linguistic diversity on the internet in 2005. Article II- 82 of the European Union charter of fundamental rights of the Union states: "The Union shall respect cultural, religious and linguistic diversity".

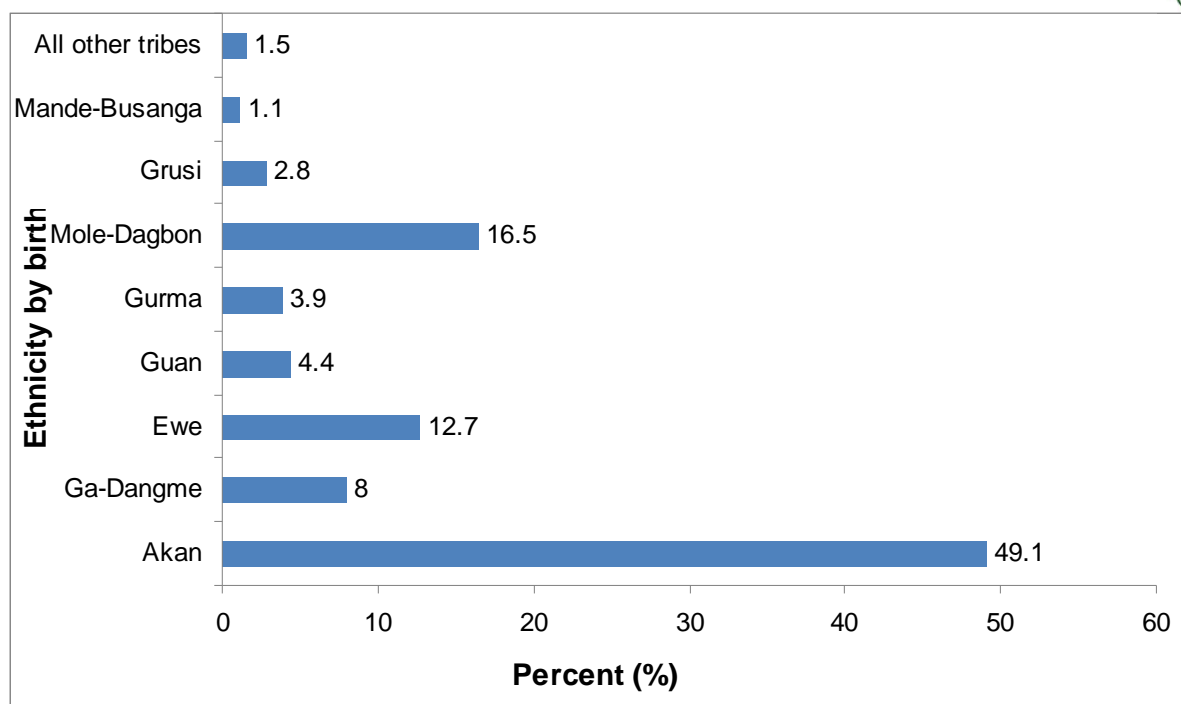
Again, many professional linguists, in collaboration with funding organizations (for example, Legon Trondheim Linguistics Project) commit a lot of time to all kinds of language revitalization projects such as adult literacy projects of minority languages. Why are people worried about linguistic diversity? And why are there so many great efforts to maintain or ensure linguistic diversity when everybody speaks at least one of the many languages in the world? In other words, what is the cause for alarm when multilingualism is the norm in many nations or cultures of the world today? These concerns have arisen from the fear that the world will lose much of its current linguistic diversity within the next century (Krauss 1992). What are the current trends in linguistic diversity in the world that raise this alarm? What are the factors that contribute to the current trends of linguistic diversity in the world today? What are the implications for the state of linguistic diversity in the world in the future? Why should the facts of trends in linguistic diversity in the world today cause any fears or worries?

This essay discusses trends in linguistic diversity in the world today in relation to the fear expressed by Krauss (1992) and others, and argues that the current efforts by such bodies as the UNESCO in addressing the situation are paradoxical. The essay does this by discussing the practicalities (factors that may be promoting or threatening) of linguistic diversity in Ghana today and in the future and argues that the patterns of linguistic diversity in Ghana today reflect the patterns of linguistic diversity in many parts of the world today. In the second section, I provide some facts on linguistic diversity in Ghana and the factors that affect linguistic diversity in Ghana. Section three then links these facts and trends to the facts and patterns of linguistic diversity in the world today. Section four outlines the practical issues that make the current efforts at ensuring or maintaining linguistic diversity in the world now and in the future paradoxical. Section five concludes the essay by linking linguistic diversity to cultural diversity and the need to maintain linguistic diversity in the world today and in the future.

## Linguistic Diversity in Ghana

The term 'linguistic diversity' is used here to describe the use or existence of multiple languages or linguistic forms in human communities. The phenomenon is particularly studied in linguistic anthropology, which studies language diversity as a natural product of cultural diversity. Gordon (2005) records 83 languages (belonging to the Volta-Congo, Proto Tano language groups) in Ghana with a speaker population of a little over 20 million people spread over 10 geographic regions. The official web page of the Ghana government lists 9 of these languages as government sponsored. These are Akan, Dagbani, Dangbe, Dagbane, Ewe, Ga, Gonja, Kasem and Nzema. This means that government makes budget allocations for the development of these languages (teacher training, curriculum development and publications). For example, the Bureau of Ghana languages, a government publishing institution since 1951, published material in these languages for pedagogical purposes when Ghana's language policy on education was "the child's native language during the first three years of primary education".

Again, translations of important national information or material for example, on health, the constitution etc. are published in these languages. Out of these 9 languages, only 5 (Akan, Dagbani, Ewe, Ga, and Nzema) are used in national media (radio and television). Even then it usually takes the form of summary translation of national news or specially designed educative programmes on issues of national concern (health, agriculture, policies, elections etc) at certain times of the day or week. According to recent population studies figures (Ghana Statistical services 2002), the ethnic grouping distribution of Ghana's population indicates that a few ethnic minorities are natives of many of these languages. For instance, the Akan ethnic group alone constitutes 49.1% of the national population; Mole-Dagbani 16.5%; Ewe 12.7%; Ga-Adangbe 8%, and Guan 4.4%. Since these ethnic groupings are language based, what these facts indicate is that, 90.7% of Ghana's population speak only 6.2% (5) of Ghana's 83 languages as natives with only 9.3% of the population speaking the remaining 93.8% (78) languages. (See fig. 2.1 below).



**Fig. 2.1. Ghana's population distribution based on ethnicity.**

In addition to these languages, English is the official language in Ghana. Again, Ghana shares borders with three Francophone countries – Togo, Burkina Faso and Cote D'Ivoir. Even though there is no formal national language in Ghana, bilingualism (not only in English or French and another Ghanaian language but also in two/more Ghanaian languages) is very common in Ghana. For instance, many speakers from minority ethnic groups are bilingual in ethnic majority languages. For example, about it is not exaggeration to speculate that over 60% of Ghana's population speak Akan (as natives or non-natives). Obeng (1997) describes the linguistic situation in Ghana as highly heterogeneous with the development of forms of diaglossia. He cites English, Akan and Hausa (an immigrant language from northern Nigeria) as having emerged as the most important lingua francas in Ghana.

Gordon (2005) describes all the indigenous languages of Ghana as living languages. Therefore, one would assume that these languages should be safe languages as well with no threats to linguistic diversity now or in the future in Ghana. The next section outlines factors that affect linguistic diversity in general and discusses how specific factors are potential threats to linguistic diversity in Ghana now and in the future.

## Factors Affecting Linguistic Diversity

Factors that affect linguistic diversity are of two kinds: those that promote linguistic diversity and those that threaten it. Crystal (2000) identifies such factors as large number of speakers, language prestige, literacy and literary status of a language as promoting linguistic vitality and diversity. Nationalism and Governmental support (language maintenance and national language policy) are other factors that may promote linguistic diversity. On the other hand, genocide or natural disasters that either kill all of a language's speakers or scatter them in such a way as to completely break up the language community have been identified as threats to linguistic diversity (Crystal 2000). Even though these factors are threats to linguistic diversity, Crystal argues that language shift, which may result from small number of speakers, governmental support- language policy and language planning, lack of prestige in language use, and more importantly, lack of economic power in language use is the main factor threaten linguistic diversity.

These factors may be either is internal or external to the language community. External forces are usually socio-political and economic in nature and tend to threaten more than promote linguistic diversity, for example, colonization, globalisation, urbanisation and modernisation. Even though they may

have socio-economic and political undertones, internal factors tend to be survival of the fittest products of cultural plurality and multilingualism.

## Internal Forces

In Ghana, multi-ethnicity has promoted linguistic diversity (multilingualism or bilingualism). However, multilingualism is not mutual (not every language enjoys the status of having second language speakers). For instance, the most widely spoken Ghanaian language (both as L1 and L2) is Akan. However, two out of three Akans are more likely to non-bilinguals in two Ghanaian languages. The language enjoys this status because it has the largest native population with a track record of vibrant social, economic and political developments even before the emergence of modern Ghana (see charts.... above). It is an important language of trade in Ghana and in widespread use beyond its borders. (Dolphyne 1988).

Even though there is no official legislature on Akan as a national language, in practice, it is. This is because it is the fastest growing Ghanaian language in terms of acquiring non-native speakers. Why would many non-ethnic Akans want to speak at least some form of it anyway? For practical and socio-cultural reasons, much of private economic activity (markets, shops, transport etc) is dominated by the majority ethnic Akans. Many private radio and television stations (even outside ethnic Akan lands) are Akan-based - about 95% of their programmes are produced in Akan. Again, the Akan group is seen as a socio-politically powerful group. Pre independence Akan groups had powerful kings, for example, the Asantehene. During the struggle for independence, four of the "Big Six" were Akans. Again, out of the ten presidents and heads of state Ghana has had since independence, six have come from this group. Finally, the coastal states of the Akan group are known to be the citadel of formal education in Ghana, creating many great national scholars such as Sir Kobina Arku Korsah, Ghana's first Black Supreme Court judge. In short, Akan seems to be enjoying this status of vitality because it is a dominant culture and language in Ghana to the point that it is almost odd both in Ghana and within the neighbouring countries to be Ghanaian and not 'know Akan'. That is not to say that people are not speaking other languages in Ghana. There are! However, the rate of shift to Akan is worrying to many people in Ghana, especially linguists and minority ethnic leaders.

In spite of this apparent vitality of Akan, there are many ethnic Akan children in Ghana, especially in urban and peri-urban centres who do not speak Akan or any Ghanaian language for that matter. Again, the literacy rate in Akan and the other Ghanaian languages is sinking, almost non-existent in younger generations. Why are ethnic Akans and Ghanaians in general abandoning their native tongues? What language are they shifting to? In a pilot study conducted within Accra-Tema metropolis, the nation's capital, Ansah and hMensa (2005) found that for the average urban child, the language for the domains of school, religious gathering, and entertainment and even home was English. Among other things, they identified multilingualism in urban centres and mixed marriages as some of the motivations for this shift. Thus, while urbanization may promote linguistic diversity (by promoting bilingualism), it may also threaten linguistic diversity through shift and convergence. However, I think the actual motivation for the shift in Ghana is socio-economic in nature and external to the linguistic context in Ghana.

## External Forces

Colonisation in Ghana has promoted linguistic diversity in Ghana. In pre-colonial times, less politically powerful linguistic groups that were conquered by more powerful ones were completely assimilated into the conquering culture. For example, the Denkyira and Akwamu states (linguistic groups) got completely submerged into the Asante and Akyem sub cultures and language of Akan. However, colonisation by the British put both powerful and weak states together under a more powerful rule, allowing various ethnolinguistic groups to co exist in a multilingual state. However, the linguistic legacy of colonisation, the adoption of English as an official language is a real threat to linguistic diversity in Ghana.

English is an incentive to the urban child in Ghana for two major reasons. One, the high level of multilingualism with no official national language makes English the automatic lingua franca, especially, among the educated. English is a preferred lingua franca because it has no ethnic attachment and therefore brings no ethnic tension which is characteristic of multi-ethnic societies across the world.

Secondly, and most importantly, the government's 2002 English only language policy on education meant that to be able to enrol in any school, the child must be able to speak English. This makes the motivation for shifting to English more socio-economic than merely finding a 'safe' alternative to meet communication needs in a highly multilingual nation.

While many renowned linguists in Ghana, for example, Professor L.A Anyidoho, the then head of the Department of Linguistics, University of Ghana, Legon, objected to and debated the government's 2002 language policy, many parents welcomed the idea. The parents recognised that English is a very important language not only for social reasons (it is prestigious to be able to speak English); but is also economically prudent to do so. No matter how brilliant a child is, he could not receive any appreciable level of formal education if he did not pass examinations in English. Since skilled employment requires knowledge of English language but not any Ghanaian language, what is the incentive in learning or speaking one?

For the government, this policy makes a lot of economic and practical sense. Phillipson (1992:8) argues that "language policies are determined by the state of the market (demand) and force of argument (rational planning in the light of available facts)". Like many developing countries that depend heavily on foreign aid, it is prudent to position oneself to be able to make use of aid in the form of donation of educational material (books, computers, and even trained or skilled personnel), and most of these aid come from English speaking countries (Britain and USA).

For a fact, the world has changed and education must equip the child to be able to meet the challenges of modern life, for example, the use of modern technology and information systems, (the use of the internet and computers) for both personal and national development. Again, for international trade, as an exporter, Ghana is required to meet the consumer market standards, including packaging and labelling in the language of the consumer market. However, as an importer, she is to be equipped to digest consumer information in the manufacturer's language. Since Ghana's economy depends on import of raw material and import of manufactured products to and from English speaking countries, knowledge of the English language is vital to the sustenance of the economy.

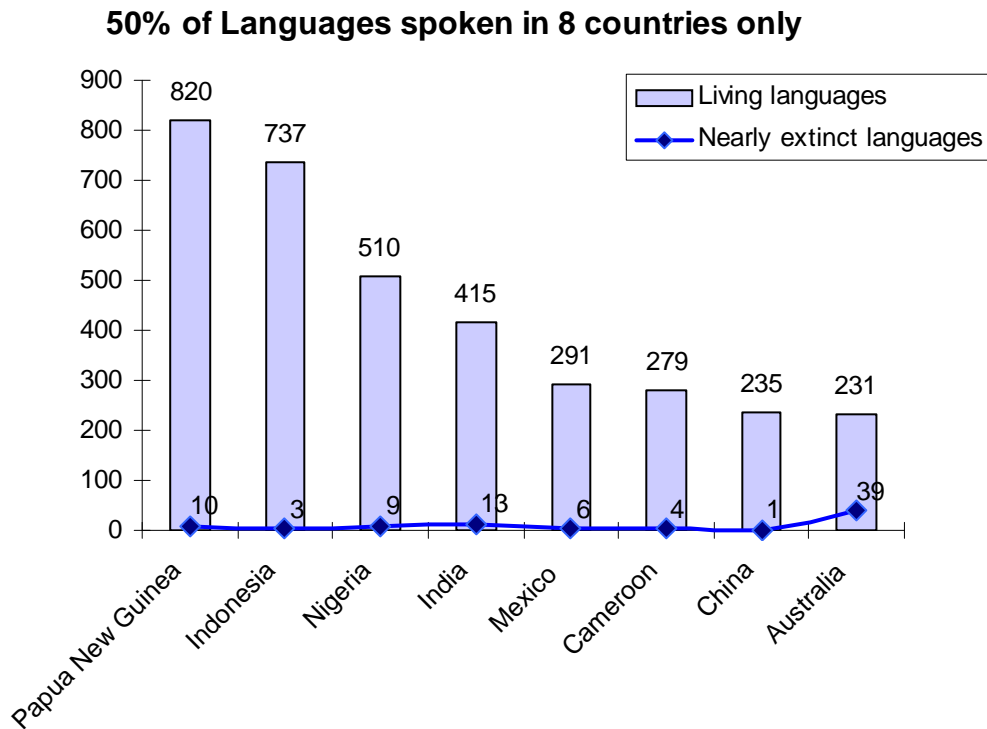
Again, the globalisation of the world makes this language policy prudent. To be part of the global village (be able to participate in international conferences, summits, etc.) Ghanaians ought to be able to communicate well in a language other than a Ghanaian language. Thus, globalisation, modernisation and economic prudence are the external factors that affect and are potential threats to linguistic diversity in Ghana in the future. How do these facts reflect patterns of linguistic diversity in the world today? The next section links the patterns of linguistic diversity in Ghana to patterns of linguistic diversity in the world today.

## Linguistic Diversity in the World

According to statistics Gordon (2005), there are about seven thousand (6912) known languages in the world spoken by the world's population of close to seven billion people, 6, 646, 307,182 (the population division of the International Data base of the US census bureau).

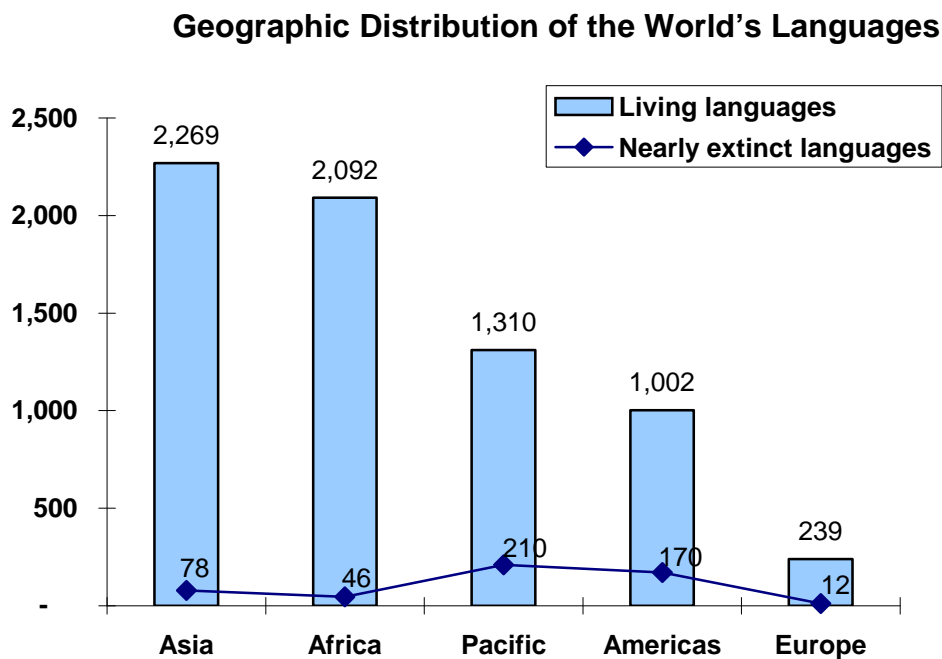
While less than ten thousand people (0.00015%) of the world's population speak 52% (about 3640) of the world's languages as natives, over a 100 million people (40%) of the world's population speak only eight languages (0.1%) as their native language. In all, while a great majority of the world's population (94%) speak only 5% of the world's languages as their native languages, only a few people of the world's population (6%) speak the remaining 95% of the world's languages as their native languages. For example, 50% of the world's languages are spoken in 8 countries only. The following charts explain the distribution of the world's languages in relation to native speaker populations: Figure 3.1





**Fig. 3.1 50% of World's languages spoken in 8 countries only.**

In terms of geographic distribution (see figs. 3.1 and 3.2), the less developed regions of the world are the most linguistically diverse (speak most of the world's languages). However, language extinction rates also seem to be higher in the more linguistically diverse regions (16% in the Pacific as against 5% in Europe the least linguistically continent. What this indicates is that, there is a gradual shift in language use in the more linguistically diverse regions of the world.



**Fig. 3.2 geographic distribution of the world's languages**

It has been speculated in many quarters that the world is gradually shifting towards speaking English. And indeed, this may be so because the poorer regions of the world – Africa, Asia and the Pacific, a shift to English is prudent for the same or similar reasons as identified in the Ghanaian context. For the rest of the world, English has a dominant position and role in science, technology, medicine, education, computers, research, books and software, transnational business and trade, aviation entertainment and sports (Phillipson 1992). I have attended international academic conferences where speakers of French origin, even though had the option to present their papers in French chose to do so in English no matter how imperfect their English was because that way they would have more audiences.

Thus, globalization and modernization are real threats to linguistic diversity in the world today and more so in the future. In other words, even many of the so-called safe languages of the world today, not only the likes of Akan in Ghana with only local status but also other languages of international status like French, have the potential to be endangered if the current trends of language use continue. This is what has called for frantic efforts to at least ensure the current level of diversity is maintained in the future. So what efforts are being made?

## **Language Maintenance and Vitality - The Practicalities and Paradoxes**

In this section, I outline some efforts at maintaining linguistic diversity in the world and argue that there are practical issues that make these efforts paradoxical. Crystal (2000) identify the following themes in language revitalization: giving a language prestige, wealth and power; giving the language a strong presence in education system; giving a language a written form and encouraging literacy; and access to electronic technology. To a large extent, this is what government, research bodies and the UNESCO are doing. For instance, one of UNESCO's efforts at maintaining linguistic diversity in the world is its commitment to bridging the digital divide by forming an inclusive information society in the light of the fact that language, a fundamental medium of all communication, "is the medium through which all information society exchanges occur" (Paolillo et al 2005). To this end, UNESCO funds projects to ensure linguistic diversity in information technology.

One important sub- theme in this commitment is " multilingualism for cultural diversity and participation for all languages in cyber space" (Paolillo et al 2005). Obviously, this is not an achievable project for all nearly 7000 languages of the world. Thus, even in this great effort, a lot of minority languages will be neglected. And even if this were achievable, the question is 'how many of these languages have literary status, and how many native speakers of minority languages are literate in these languages? Even if they were literate in their languages, how many of them, will have access to this modern information technology, for example the internet? And who is going to fund such projects? The UNESCO, though a powerful international organisation, has financial limitations. In addition, the people whose languages need revitalisation are either technologically or financially not rich enough to self-fund such projects.

The more important question to ask is are the people whose languages are becoming 'non safe' willing to go back to their languages when the social and particularly the economic factors that are driving them to shift persist? For example, (Abrams and Strogatz 2003) Submit that even though the UK government has put great efforts into revitalising Welsh, parents in Wales (Like those in Ghana) still want their children to speak English for the opportunity it brings, for " if they only speak Welsh, they're not going to be able to move to London and get good jobs". Thus, it is paradoxical (no matter how genuine or frantic the effort) to spend a lot of money and energy to revitalise or encourage people to speak languages they perceive not to be advantageous in any way, particularly economically.

## **Conclusion**

My initial question still remains, so why must anybody feel obliged to prevent the world from becoming monolingual? Will linguistic homogeneity not ensure less ethnic conflicts and problems communication

barriers bring? The former president of Iceland, and UNESCO's goodwill ambassador for languages, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, thinks linguistic diversity must be promoted for the following reason:

"Everyone loses if one language is lost because then a nation and culture lose their memory, and so does the complex tapestry from which the world is woven and which makes the world an exciting place".

For a fact, language impacts culture and vice-versa. In other words, language and culture are so closely linked in several ways. For example, language, like culture, is a phenomenon that makes humans unique and different from other species. They define human identity. The Human species are able to preserve and create histories, art, learning and so on through culture and language. Our ability to both create and preserve these things as well as express them are vital to the evolution or development of the human species. Of course, the world is the way it is today because it is populated by different people who speak different languages and do different things that other people can learn to do too. That is to say that there seems to be so much to do and learn in the world today because there are so many different (cultures) ways of doing things. If culture defines human identity and language is an integral part of culture, then the same motivation that drives us to preserve human identity should drive us to preserve the various languages there are whatever it takes.

## References

- Abrams, D.M. and S.H. Strogatz (2003). Modelling the dynamics of language death. *Nature*, 424:900.
- Ansah, G.N and P.A. Mensa (2005) English Language and the Job Market: A sociolinguistic Study of Language Shift in Ghana. A paper presented at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Faculty of Arts Annual Conference.
- Crystal, D. (2000). *Language Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Dolphyne, F.A. (1988) *The Akan (Twi-Fante) Language. Its Sound Systems and Tonal Structure*. Accra: Ghana Universities Press.
- European Union (2004). The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the Union. *Official Journal of the European Union*. C310 Vol. 47 (December 2004). EU Publication Office
- Ghana Statistical Services (2002). *2000 Population and Housing Census Summary Report*. Accra: Ghana Statistical Service, 22-23
- Gordon, Raymond G, Jr. (ed), 2005. *Ethnologue: Languages of The World, (15<sup>th</sup> edn)*. Dallas, Tex: SIL International. Online version: <http://www.ethnologue.com/>.
- International Data Base of the US census bureau (2008) <http://www.census.gov/cgi/ipc/idbagg>
- Krauss, M (1992). The World's Languages in Crisis. *Language* 64, 4-10.
- Obeng, S.G (1997). An Analysis of the Linguistic Situation in Ghana. In *African Languages and Cultures*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1997), 63-81.
- Paolillo, J., Daniel Pimienta, Daniel Prado, et al (2005). *Measuring Linguistic Diversity on the Internet*. France: UNESCO
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, <http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php>