A taxonomy of policies which a state can adopt towards minority languages (Cobarrubias 1983: 71) distinguishes between the following:

(a) attempting to kill a language;
(b) letting a language die;
(c) unsupported coexistence;
(d) partial support of specific language functions;
(e) adoption as an official language.

The first policy is overtly linguidal; the second and third may be covertly linguidal. Linguicidal policies have at times been overt, for instance US policy in Pacific islands such as Guam in the early twentieth century (Kloss 1977). Calvet (1974) describes French colonial overtly linguidal policy as 'glottophagie' ('linguistic cannibalism', dominant languages replacing and extinguishing dominated languages) and in 'la guerre des langues' (1987), 'linguistic warfare' is not a metaphor but the reality of the politics of language and relations between languages (see Mateene 1985, Phillipson 1992, for further analyses).

Linguicide or linguistic genocide is the extermination of languages, an analogous concept to physical genocide, whereas language death is the withering away of languages, by analogy with natural death (see Language Death). Linguicide, by contrast, implies that there is an agent involved in causing the death of languages. The agent can be active ('attempting to kill a language') or passive ('letting a language die', or 'unsupported coexistence', also often leading to the death of minority languages). In liberal ideology, only an active agent with the intention to kill languages would cause linguicide, whereas the other two would fall within the domain of language death. Linguicide is the extreme end result of linguicism (linguistically argued racism) at group level. Seen from the perspective of a conflict paradigm, the causes of linguicide and linguicism (see Linguistic imperialism; Discrimination and Minority Languages) have to be analyzed from both structural and ideological angles, covering the struggle for structural power and material resources, and the legitimation, effectuation and reproduction of the unequal division of power and resources between groups based on language. The agents of linguicide/linguicism can also be structural (a state, e.g. Turkey vis-a-vis Kurds; an institution, e.g. schools; laws and regulations, e.g. those covering linguistic rights or the position of different languages on time-tables in schools; budgets, e.g. for teacher training or materials in certain languages) or ideological (norms and values ascribed to different languages and their speakers). There is thus nothing 'natural' in language death. Languages cannot be treated in an anthropomorphic way, as organisms with a natural life-span. Language death has causes, which can be identified and analysed.

When the United Nations did preparatory work for what was to become the International Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (E 793, 1948), linguistic and cultural genocide were discussed alongside physical genocide, and were seen as serious crimes against humanity. When the Convention was accepted, Article 3, which covered linguistic and cultural genocide, was voted down and is thus not included in the final Convention of 1948 (see Capotorti 1979, 37). What remains, however, is a definition of linguistic genocide (in Art. 3, 1) as

Prohibiting the use of the language of the group in daily intercourse or in schools, or the printing and circulation of publications in the language of the group.

But the present Convention has two definitions of genocide which describe most indigenous and minority education in the world:

Article II(e), 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'; and
First language attrition and loss have been described fairly extensively in research literature and fiction. Sandra Kouritzin (1999) describes many cases in Canada where immigrant minority children have lost a language within one generation so that they as adults, for instance, are no longer able to speak to their parents. Lily Wong Fillmore has described the consequences for families in the U.S.A. (1992). Peter Mühlhäusler discusses results of linguistic imperialism in the Pacific (1996). Pirjo Janulf (1998) shows in her longitudinal study that of those Finnish immigrant minority members in Sweden who had had Swedish-medium education, not one spoke any Finnish to their own children. Even if they themselves might not have forgotten their Finnish completely, their children were certainly forcibly transferred to the majority group, at least linguistically. This happens to millions of speakers of threatened languages all over the world. For hearing minority students education through the medium of a dominant majority language often leads to the students using the dominant language with their own children later on. Over a generation or two the children are linguistically and often also culturally assimilated, forcibly transferred to a dominant group. Since there are no alternatives in formal education (i.e. schools or classes which teach mainly through the medium of the threatened indigenous or minority languages), the transfer happens by force. For it to be voluntary, alternatives should exist, and parents would need to have enough reliable information about the long-term consequences of the various choices. None of these conditions are usually fulfilled for indigenous or minority parents and children, i.e. the situations where children lose their first language, can often be characterised as genocide.

Since most Deaf children are born to hearing parents, parents and children do not have the same mother tongue by origin, and many of the Deaf children will in their turn have hearing children. Deaf children of hearing parents are in many countries still taught through oral methods, i.e. taught lip-reading and speaking in a dominant majority language, to the exclusion of a sign language. They are not learning their 'own' language, a sign language, which is for all Deaf children the only type of language through which they can express themselves fully, i.e. it is their mother tongue by competence. Thus both hearing indigenous and minority children and Deaf children, taught predominantly through the medium of a dominant oral majority language, are undergoing linguistic genocide: both groups of children are forcibly transferred from their 'own' language group to dominant majority language group.

Some countries commit linguistic genocide openly and brutally, and Turkey is the most blatant example in the contemporary world (see Skutnabb-Kangas & Bucak 1994): imprisonment, torture and killing of thousands of people, in addition to threats, hefty fines and confiscation of Kurdish books, journals and property. But linguistic genocide is today mostly committed in more covert and sophisticated ways, e.g. in educational systems. Here the use of a minority language is prohibited more indirectly, by ideological and structural means. The use of a minority language is in fact prohibited 'in daily intercourse or in schools' every time there are minority children in day care centres and schools, but no bilingual caretakers and teachers who are authorized to use the languages of the minority children as the main languages of teaching and learning in child care and at least primary education. This is the situation for most immigrant and refugee minority children in all Western European countries and in the US, Canada and Australia. Immigrant minority education in these countries is thus guilty of linguistic genocide, as defined by the UN. So is the education offered to most indigenous first nations, and to numerically large but politically dominated groups in most African and many Asian countries (see Skutnabb-Kangas 2000 for details in the claims; see Brock-Utne 1999 for Africa). Dominant or majority languages expand at the expense of dominated (or minorized) languages when minority language speakers are forced to learn dominant languages in a subtractive way (instead/at the cost of their own languages), where it would be perfectly possible to learn them in an additive way, adding competence in dominant languages to maintenance and further development of their own languages.

Subtractive learning of dominant languages turns these into killer languages, whereas additive learning would support the maintenance of linguistic diversity. Widespread linguicide, and, occasionally, language death are fatal for linguistic diversity and, through that, also to biodiversity on earth (Harmon, forthcoming, Maffi et al. 1999, Maffi (ed.) 2001). Through linguicide, we are also in the long run seriously undermining the prerequisites for life on the planet.

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