

Short definitions of mother tongue

CRITERION	DEFINITION
ORIGIN	the language one learned first
IDENTIFICATION a. internal. b. external	a. the language one identifies with b. the language one is identified as a native speaker of by others
COMPETENCE	the language one knows best
FUNCTION	the language one uses most

(Skutnabb-Kangas 1984, 18)

Discussion of the definitions

” For **linguistic majorities** (e.g. speakers of Norwegian in Norway, or speakers of Japanese in Japan) all the definitions usually converge. They have learned Norwegian/Japanese first, they identify with Norwegian/Japanese, are identified by others as native speakers of Norwegian/Japanese, know Norwegian/Japanese best and use Norwegian/Japanese most. Thus, a combination of all the definitions can be used.

If **linguistic minorities** live and work where the majority language dominates, the majority language usually becomes their most used language in most formal domains and often also informally. Therefore it is not fair to use a mother tongue definition by function – they have not chosen freely to use the majority language most. The expression ‘not fair’ here means that the definition does not respect linguistic human rights, and here especially the right to choose freely what one’s mother tongue is.

If **linguistic minorities** get their education in submersion programmes, i.e. through the medium of the majority language, the majority language often becomes the language they know best in most more formal domains. Therefore, it is not fair to use a mother tongue definition by competence either.

Often a combination of mother tongue definitions by origin and by internal identification is a good mother tongue definition for linguistic minorities.

But there are exceptions where not even this is a good, fair and respectful definition. One important exception is forcibly assimilated Indigenous or minority children. If the forcible assimilation has taken place already in the parent or grandparent generation, it is not fair to use a mother tongue definition by origin either, because the parents have not spoken (or have not been able to speak) the mother tongue (e.g. Saami or Maliseet or Ainu) to the children. In this case a mother tongue definition by internal identification can be the only possible fair definition.

Another important exception is the Deaf. 90-95% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. If the children were to get a good education, they would learn Sign language early on, and get most of their formal education through a Sign language. In this case, children and parents do not have the same mother tongue. For most Deaf children the fairest mother tongue definition is: the language that they identify with (often, at least later on, also in combination with an external identification: the language that they are being identified as native speakers of by others).

For Deaf children, a Sign language is the only language that they can express themselves fully in. They cannot do this in any spoken language, except in writing. Therefore we can, for them, also add a modified definition by competence: The mother tongue is the language that

they identify with and that they can express themselves fully in.

But what if a Deaf child (or an Indigenous child) is NOT one of those fortunate ones whose parents have used the mother tongue by identification from the very beginning, and where the child has had most of her education through this mother tongue? What if the child does not know the mother tongue by internal identification? My claim is the following: It is possible to identify with a language that one does not know. It is possible to have a mother tongue that one does not have (any or 'full') competence in.

If this were to be accepted in international law (and it has not yet been tried in court), those few rights that exist in mother tongue medium education and in learning the mother tongue as a subject, would also apply to Indigenous children in various revitalisation programmes, and to Deaf children.

When forcible assimilation has led to a language being seriously endangered ('dying', 'moribund', in need of revival) or 'neglected' (endangered, in need of revitalisation), the strategy could (or should?) be to ONLY use a mother tongue definition by internal identification, when demanding full Linguistic Human Rights for individuals and collectivities, regardless of whether the individuals are receptive or productive users or non-users. In my view, the same might apply to Deaf children. This certainly requires proper information packages to hearing parents of Deaf children.

At the same time as we are working for the right to mother tongue medium education, where the mother tongue is defined by self-identification, claims for compensation for mother tongue loss should be raised in courts.”

This extract comes from pp. 86-88 in the article Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (2008). Bilingual education and Sign language as the mother tongue of Deaf children. In Kellett Bidoli, Cynthia J. & Ochse, Elana (eds). *English in International Deaf Communication*. Bern: Peter Lang, 75-94. The article is the English version of Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (2008) (in Japanese). Bilingual education and Sign language as the mother tongue of Deaf children. In Japan Deaf Children and Parents Association (ed.). *Deaf Children Grow Bilingually*. Tokyo: Seikatsushoin, 35-77. When I gave the paper in Tokyo in English, I used a Power Point which clarifies the definitions somewhat more – it can be downloaded here as soon as Stefano Keller and I have sorted out some technical problems with it: [Bilingual education and Sign language as the mother tongue of Deaf children. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Tokyo lecture](#). The pdf version can be downloaded [here](#). My 2000 book has a much longer discussion of the definitions on pp. 105-115: Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education - or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Mahwah, NJ & London, UK: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 818 pp. (see http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/en/most_recent_books.html for a list of contents, and for the new 2008 Southeast Asian version).

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