

The world's languages are disappearing at an unprecedented rate: in 100 years' time, an estimated 3,000 will be extinct. But does it matter as long as people can communicate? **David Crystal** explains why linguistic diversity is key to our survival

# Death sentence

**A** language dies only when the last person who speaks it dies. One day it's there; the next it is gone. Here is how it happens. In late

1995, a linguist, Bruce Connell, was doing some field work in the Mambila region of Cameroon. He found a language called Kasabe, which no westerner had studied before. It had just one speaker left, a man called Bogon. Connell had no time on that visit to find out much about the language, so he decided to return to Cameroon a year later. He arrived in mid-November, only to learn that Bogon had died on November 5.

On November 4, Kasabe existed as one of the world's languages; on November 6, it did not. The event might have caused a stir in Bogon's village. If you are the last speaker of a language, you are often considered special in your community. You are a living monument to what the community once was. But outside the village, who knew or mourned the passing of what he stood for?

There is nothing unusual about a single language dying. Communities have come and gone throughout history, taking their languages with them. But, judged by the standards of the past, what is happening today is extraordinary. It is language extinction on a massive scale.

According to the best estimates, there are now about 6,000 languages in the world. Of these, about half are going to die out during the next century. This means that, on average, there is a language dying out somewhere in the world every two weeks or so.

A survey published in February by the US Summer Institute of Linguistics established that there were 51 languages with only one speaker left - 28 in Australia alone. There are almost 500 languages in the world with fewer than 100 speakers; 1,500 with fewer than 1,000 speakers; more than 3,000 with fewer than 10,000 speakers; and a staggering 5,000 languages with fewer than 100,000 speakers. Ninety-six per cent of the world's languages are spoken by only 4% of its people. No wonder so many are in danger.

Even a language with 100,000 speakers is not necessarily safe. It will not die next week or next year; but there is no guarantee that it will still exist in a couple of generations time. That depends on the pressures being imposed upon it - in particular, whether it is at risk from the dominance of another language. It

depends on the attitudes of the people who speak it.

Breton, in north-east France, is a classic example of a language reducing dramatically in numbers. At the beginning of the 20th century it was spoken by a million people; it is now down to less than a quarter of that. Breton can be saved if enough effort is made - the kind of effort that has already helped Welsh to recover from a dramatic decline - otherwise it could be gone in 50 years. In recent times, this has already happened to two other Celtic languages in northern Europe: Manx, which was formerly spoken on the Isle of Man, and Cornish. Both are currently attracting support, but once a language has lost its last native speaker, resurrecting it is difficult.

Many things can kill a language, from natural disasters to cultural assimilation and genocide. On July 17 1998, an earthquake off the coast of East Saundun province, Papua New Guinea, killed more than 2,200 people and displaced a further 10,000: the villages of Sissano, Warapu, Arop and Malol were destroyed; some 30% of the Arop and Warapu villagers were killed. The people in these villages had been identified as being sufficiently different from each other in their speech to justify the recognition of four separate languages, but the numbers were very small: in 1990, Sissano had only 4,776 speakers; Malol was estimated to have 3,330; Arop 1,700 in 1981; and Warapu 1,602 in 1983. The totals for Arop and Warapu will

have diminished by at least 500 speakers. Moreover, as the survivors have moved away to care centres and other locations, will these communities (and thus their languages) survive the trauma of displacement?

Even if a people continue to inhabit their traditional territory, their language may still die as a result of cultural assimilation. Much of the present crisis stems from the big cultural movements that began 500 years ago, as colonialism spread a small number of dominant languages around the world.

When one culture assimilates another, the sequence of events affecting the endangered language is usually characterised by three broad stages. The first is immense pressure on the people to speak the dominant language. The second stage is a period of bilingualism: people become increasingly efficient in their new language while still retaining competence in their old. Then, often quickly, bilingualism starts to decline, with the old language giving way to the new. This leads to the third stage, in which the younger generation increasingly finds its old language less relevant.

This is often accompanied by a feeling of shame about using the old language, on the part of the parents as well as their children. Those families that do continue to use the language find there are fewer other families to talk to, and their own usage becomes inward-looking and idiosyncratic, resulting in "family dialects". Within a generation, healthy bilingualism within a family can slip into self-conscious semilingualism, and thence into monolingualism.

It is too late to do anything to help many languages where the speakers are too few or too old and where the community is too busy just trying to survive. However, many other languages are not in such a serious crisis. Often, where languages are endangered, things can be done to revitalise them. There are successful examples in Australia, North America and Europe.

The conditions have to be right for there to be a likelihood of success: the community itself must want to save its language; the larger culture of which it is a part needs to have a respect for minority languages; there needs to be funding for courses, materials and teachers.

Is language death such a disaster? Surely, you might say, it is simply a symptom of more people striving to improve their lives by joining the modern world. So long as a few hundred or even a couple of thousand



Long lost... Dorothy Jeffrey (1685-1777), who is generally held to be the last speaker of Cornish, portrayed in an engraving by R Scraden

languages survive, that is sufficient. No, it is not. We should care about dying languages for the same reason that we care when a species of animal or plant dies. It reduces the diversity of our planet. In the case of language, we are talking about intellectual and cultural diversity, not biological diversity, but the issues are the same.

Diversity occupies a central place in evolutionary theory because it enables a species to survive in different environments. Increasing uniformity holds dangers for the long-term survival of a species. The strongest ecosystems are those which are most diverse. The need to maintain linguistic diversity stands on the shoulders of such arguments. If the development of multiple cultures is a prerequisite for successful human development, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, because cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written languages. Encapsulated within a language is most of a community's history and a large part of its cultural identity. "Every language is a temple," said Oliver Wendell Holmes, "in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined."

Sometimes what we might learn from a language is eminently practical, as when we discover new medical treatments from the folk medicine of an indigenous people. Sometimes it is intellectual, as when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. Sometimes it is literary: every language has its equivalent – even if only in oral form – of Chaucer, Wordsworth and Dickens. And of course, very often it is linguistic: we learn something new about language itself – the behaviour that makes us truly human, and without which there would be no talk at all. Ezra Pound summed up the core intellectual argument: "The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension."

Not everyone agrees. Some people accept the Babel myth: that the multiplicity of the world's languages is a curse rather than a blessing, imposed by God as a punishment for the overweening pride of humanity. If only we had just one language in the world – whether English, Esperanto, or whatever – we would all be better off. World peace would be established.

Let us leave aside the question of whether there ever was a single language pre-Babel. (Genesis 10 suggests that there was not, as it lists the sons of Japheth "according to their

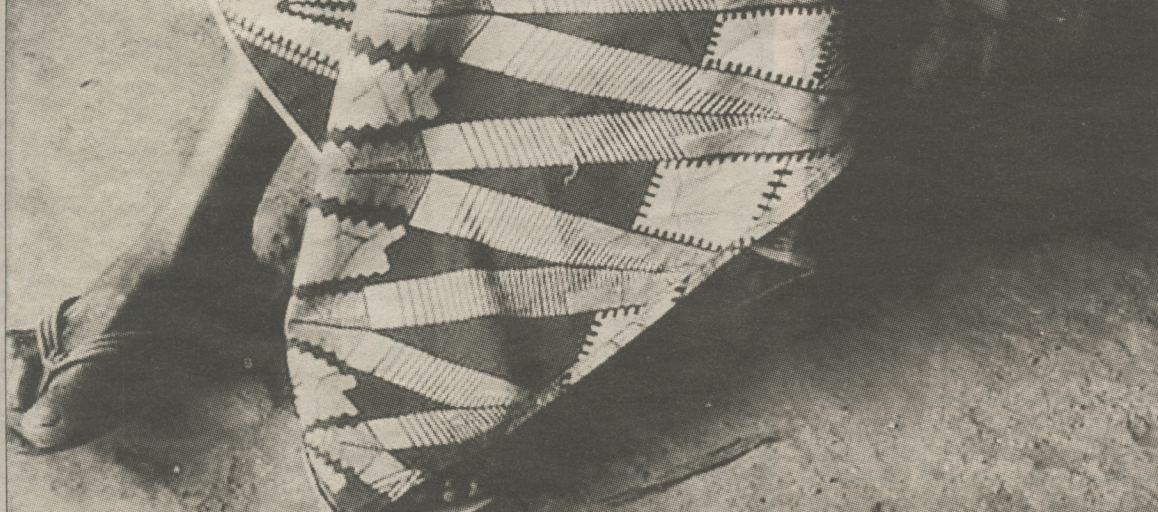


countries and each of their languages" long before the Babel event.) A monolingual world would not bring peace. All the big trouble spots of the world in recent decades have been monolingual countries - Cambodia, Vietnam, Rwanda, Burundi, Yugoslavia, Northern Ireland. And all big monolingual countries have had their civil wars. If people want to fight each other, it takes more than a common language to stop them.

The common reaction among the members of a community two generations after the one which failed to pass on its language is: "If only my grandparents' generation had..." The first generation is, typically, not so concerned as its members are still struggling to establish their new social position and new language. It is their children, secure in the new language and in a much better socio-economic position, with battles over land claims and civil rights behind them, who begin to reflect on the heritage they have lost. The old language, formerly a source of shame, comes to be seen as a source of identity and pride. If their language has gone, unrecorded and unremembered, there is no way they can get it back. By contrast, if a modicum of effort has been devoted to language preservation, even in the most difficult of circumstances, it leaves the option open for future generations to make their own choice.

Can we save a few thousand languages, just like that? Yes, though it would not be cheap. To save a language you must get linguists into the field, support the community with language teachers, publish grammars and dictionaries, write materials for use in schools - and all over a period of several years. Conditions vary so much (for example, between written and unwritten languages) that it is difficult to generalise, but a figure of £40,000 a year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount over three years for each of the 3,000 endangered languages, we would need about £360m to make a real impact. It sounds a lot, but it is equivalent to just over one day's Opec oil revenues in an average year.

During the 1990s, several organisations were established to try to raise funds. In Britain, the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) was started in 1995, and there are similar organisations in the US, Germany, Japan and elsewhere. A Unesco project is also under way. The problem, in all cases, is funding. In 1998-99, the FEL had only £1,600 to give out. Out of the 30 applications the organisation received, it was able to support only four.



**Oral history . . . Yaga , right, a relative of Cameroon's last Kasabe speaker**

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID ZEITLYN

to support only four altogether.

Languages are like people, in one way, as I said at the outset – but in another way they are not like people at all. When people die, they leave signs of their presence in the world, in the form of their dwelling places, burial mounds, and artefacts – in a word, their archaeology. But spoken language leaves no archaeology. For, when a language dies, which has never been written down, it is as if it has never been.

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