

language

The death of a language. The word has the same resonance as when we talk about the death of a person, says linguistics expert Professor **David Crystal**. We need to take steps urgently to prevent a major environmental catastrophe.

A LANGUAGE dies only when the last person who speaks it dies. One day it is there. The next, it is gone. This is how it can happen. A linguist, Bruce Connell, was doing some fieldwork in the Mambila region of Cameroon, West Africa, in late 1995. He found a language called Kasabe which nobody had studied before. It had just one speaker left, a man called Bogon. Connell didn't have time on that visit to find out much about the language so he decided to return to Cameroon a year later to collect some more material. He arrived in mid November, only to learn that Bogon had died on November 5 taking Kasabe with him.

So there we have it: on November 4 Kasabe existed as one of the world's languages. On November 6 it didn't. The event would perhaps have caused a stir in Bogon's village. If you are the last speaker of a language, you are often rather special in the eyes of your community because of what you know, of what you stand for. You are a living monument to what the community once was. But outside Bogon's village, who knew, or mourned, the passing of what he stood for? I didn't notice, and nor did you, that there was one less language in the world on that November day. If you had known, would you have cared?

Why are so many languages dying? There are many reasons, ranging from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide.

I think we should all of us care, and care passionately, and later I'll tell you why. But first we need to appreciate the size of the problem. There is nothing unusual about a single language dying. Communities have come and gone throughout history and with them their language. Hittite, for example, died out when its civilisation disappeared in Old Testament times. That is understandable. But what is happening today, as we move into a new millennium, is extraordinary when judged by the standards of the past. It is language extinction on a massive scale. Not by any means have all the languages in the world been properly identified and studied. That is part of the problem. But, according to the

best estimates, there are some 6,000 languages in the world at the moment. Of these, probably about half are going to die out in the course of the next century. The relevant deduction is sobering: 3,000 languages in 1,200 months. That means, on average, there is a language dying out somewhere in the world roughly every fortnight.

How do we know? In the past two or three decades, linguists all over the world have spent a great deal of time gathering comparative data and when people survey a language, they do not just make notes about its grammar, vocabulary and how it is pronounced. They look too at the number of people who speak it and how old they are. Obviously, if they find a language with just a few speakers left and nobody is bothering to pass the language on to the children, that language is bound to die out soon. We have to draw the same conclusion if a language has fewer than 100 speakers. It is not likely to last very long.

In a 1999 survey (www.sil.org/ethnologue), there were 51 languages with just one speaker left – 28 of them in Australia alone. There were nearly 500 languages in the world with fewer than 100 speakers; 1,500 with fewer than 1,000; more than 3,000 with fewer than 10,000 speakers; and a staggering 5,000 languages with fewer than 100,000. It turns out that 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by just four per cent of the people. It is perhaps no wonder that so many are in danger. It does not take a language long to disappear once the spirit to continue with it leaves its community. In fact, the speed of the decline has been a major finding of recent linguistic research.

An example is Aleut, the language of the Aleutian Islands west of Alaska, surviving mainly in just one village, Atka. In 1990 there were 60 speakers left but by 1994 there were just 44, the youngest in their 20s. If that rate of decline continues, Aleut will be gone by 2010. It will probably live on until the middle of the century, spoken sporadically, until eventually the last few speakers, isolated from each other and lacking the opportunities to renew the language through daily interaction, find they have no-one to talk to. Why are so many languages dying? There are many reasons

death



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ranging from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be decimated or wiped out by earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods and volcanic eruptions. A habitat may remain but become unsurvivable through a combination of unfavourable climatic and economic conditions. Famine and drought are the two chief factors. The historical effect of imported disease on indigenous peoples is also now well-established.

Cultural assimilation is a bigger threat. Much of the present crisis stems from major cultural movements which began 500 years ago as colonialism spread a small number of dominant languages worldwide. The point hardly needs to be stressed about English which has displaced so many languages – but what's often forgotten is that English isn't the only language which has dominated in this way. In South America, it was Spanish and Portuguese. In northern Asia, it was Russian. Arabic has suppressed many languages in northern Africa and in sub-Saharan Africa, local tribal conflict has been a critical factor.

Can anything be done? Obviously it's 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 to care about their language. But many languages are not in such a serious position. Often, where languages are seriously endangered, there are things that can be done to give new life to them. The term is 'revitalisation'. A community, once it realises that its language is in danger, can get its act together and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalise. Everything has to be right, of course, for there to be a likelihood of success. The community itself must want to save its language, that's the absolute first step. There has to be a genuinely felt communicative need among the community. The culture of which it's a part must need to have a respect for minority languages. There needs to be funding, to enable courses, materials and teachers to be introduced. In a huge number of cases, there need to be linguists to get on with the basic task of putting the language down on paper. That's the bottom line, getting the language documented –

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recorded, analysed, written down. There are two reasons for this. The obvious one is educational, the need for literacy. But there's a second reason and this is all to do with why we should care about dying languages at all. We should care for the very same reason that we care when a species of animal or plant dies. It reduces the diversity of our planet. We're talking about the intellectual and cultural diversity of the planet, not its biological diversity, yet the issues are the same. Enshrined in a language is the whole of a community's history as well as a large part of its cultural identity. The world is a mosaic of visions. To lose even one piece of this mosaic is a loss for all of us.

We can learn so much from the visions of others. Sometimes the learning is eminently practical, such as when we discover new medical treatments from the folk medicine practices of an indigenous people. Sometimes it's intellectual – an increase in our awareness of the history of our world such as when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. Of course, very often we learn something new about language itself – the behaviour that makes us truly human. That's why it is so important to document these languages as quickly as possible. With every language that dies, another precious source of data about the nature of the human language faculty is lost and there are only about 6,000 sources in all. Nevertheless, not everyone believes we should preserve them. Some people think that the multiplicity of the world's languages is a curse rather than a blessing. Indeed, you'll have heard the phrase 'the curse of Babel', referring to the time when God supposedly punished humanity for its pride by making people speak different languages. Ah, if only we had just one language in the world, whether English, Esperanto or whatever, we'd all be better off. There'd be no misunderstanding. It would be a new reign of world peace.

That argument sounds very attractive. If only it were so easy. But the fact of the matter is that a monolingual world would not bring peace any more than it comes to monolingual countries today. Quite the contrary. Look at all the really big trouble spots of the world in recent decades – Cambodia, a monolingual country; Vietnam, a monolingual

country; Rwanda and Burundi, almost alone in Africa for being monolingual countries. All monolingual countries have had their civil wars. If people want to fight each other, it takes more than a common language to stop them.

It's the other way round. If you want to have a peaceful world, one of the first things you have to do is pay attention to people's rights within society and to their identities as communities – and the chief emblem, or badge of a community is its language. A sensitive policy of multilingualism and a concern for minority languages are much more likely to lay the foundation for peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence.

Could we save a few thousand languages just like that? Of course, if the will and funding were available. So how much would it cost? Well it's not cheap, when you think of what has to be done – getting linguists into the field, supporting the community with language resources and teachers, getting grammars and dictionaries of the language out, writing materials for use in schools and all over a period of several years because it takes time to revitalise an endangered language. Conditions vary so much that it's difficult to generalise, but a figure of £30,000 a year per language can't be far from the truth. That sounds like a lot. But to put it in perspective, if we devoted that amount of effort over three years for each of 3,000 languages, it's equivalent to just over one day's OPEC oil revenues.

Languages are like people, in one way, as I said at the beginning. But in another way they're quite different. 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. It's worth remembering: when a language dies which has never been written down, it is as if it has never existed.

**For more information, contact the Foundation for Endangered Languages at www.ogmios.org.
David Crystal's book *Language Death* is published by Cambridge University Press.**