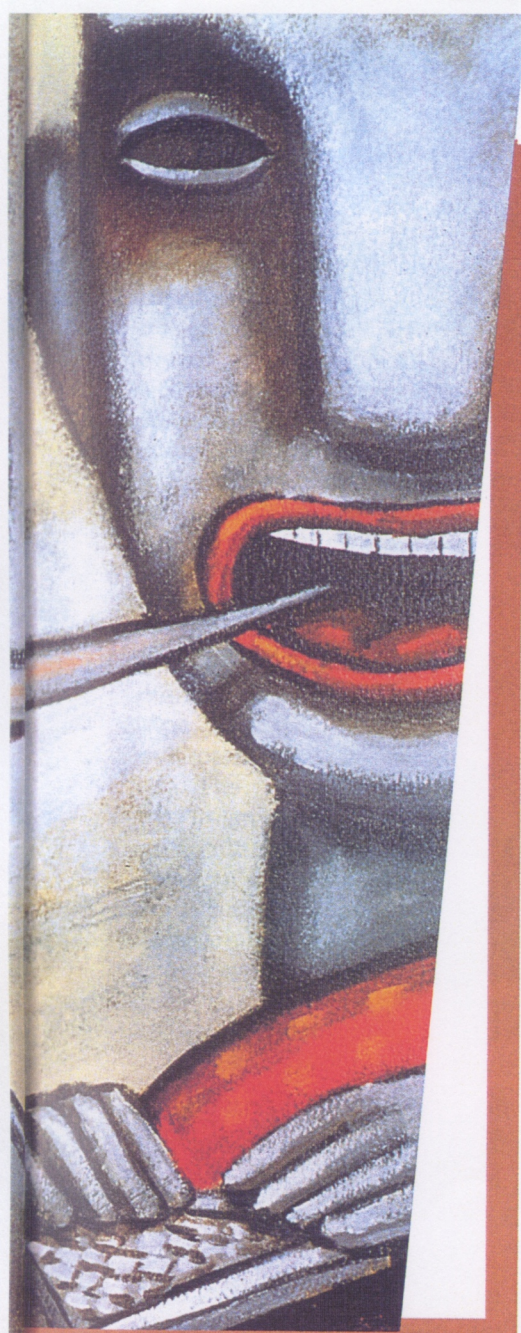


Ruggieri/Image Bank

DEATH SENTENCE

Das Sterben einer Sprache ist an sich nichts Ungewöhnliches. Im ersten Teil unserer zweiteiligen Serie zur Zukunft der Sprachen erklärt DAVID CRYSTAL jedoch, dass mit dem Verschwinden einer Sprache gleichzeitig ein großer kultureller Schatz verloren geht. **medium**



A language dies only when the last person who speaks it dies. One day, it is there; the next, it is gone. Here is how it happens: in late 1995, a linguist named Bruce Connell was doing some fieldwork in the Mambila region of Cameroon. He found a language called Kasabe, which no Westerner had studied before. There was only one person left who spoke it: a man called Bogon. Connell had no time during 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 5 November, taking Kasabe with him.

On 4 November 1995, Kasabe existed as one of the world's languages; on 6 November, 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 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 fewer language in the world on that November day. And if you had known, would you have cared?

There is nothing unusual about a language dying. Communities have come and gone throughout history, and with them their languages. But what is happening today is extraordinary: it is language extinction on a massive scale.

Not all the languages in the world have been properly identified and studied, but, according to the best estimates, there are now about 6,000 of them. Of these, about half are going to die out in the course of the next century. This means that, on average, every two weeks a language dies somewhere in the world.

A survey published in February 1999 by the US-based Summer Institute of Linguistics found that there were 51 languages with only one speaker left — 28 of them 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. In fact, 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by only four per cent of its people. No wonder so many are in danger.

A language with 100,000 speakers is safe, one would think. But that is not necessarily the case. Such a language is not going to die next week or next year; but there is no guarantee that it will still exist in a few generations. That depends on the pressures imposed upon it — in particular, whether it is at risk from the dominance of another language. It also depends on the attitudes of the people who speak it.

Breton, in north-eastern France, is a classic example of a language shrinking dramatically in numbers. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was spoken by a million people, but it is now down to less than a quarter of that total. Breton can be saved if enough effort is made — the kind of effort that has already helped the Welsh language to recover from a dramatic decline. Without that effort, Breton could be gone in 50 years. In recent times, ▶

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ONLINE

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fieldwork
to cause a stir

Feldforschung
großes Aufsehen
erregen

to mourn sth. [məʊn]

etw. beklagen

extinction

Aussterben

estimate ['estɪmət]

Schätzung

survey ['sɜ:vɪ]

Untersuchung

to publish sth.

etw. veröffentlichen

staggering

erschütternd

to impose pressure

Druck auf etw. ausüben

upon sth.

attitude

Einstellung

decline

Rückgang



The beginning of the end for languages: Columbus lands in America

two other Celtic languages in northern Europe have disappeared: Cornish, formerly spoken in Cornwall; and Manx, on the Isle of Man. Both are currently attracting support, but once a language has lost its last native speaker, resurrecting it is difficult — although not impossible, as we have seen with some of the Aboriginal languages of Australia.

Many things can kill a language, from natural disasters or different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. On 17 July 1998, an earthquake measuring 7.1 on the Richter scale off the coast of East Saundau 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 per cent of the Arop and Warapu villagers were killed.

The people in these villages had been 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 had 1,700 in 1981; and Warapu 1,602 in 1983. By now, the totals for Arop and Warapu will have diminished by at least 500 speakers. In view of the fact that the survivors have moved away to care centres and other locations, will these communities — and thus their languages — be able to survive the trauma of displacement?

The effect of imported disease on indigenous peoples has been established, although the scale of this in the early colonial period is still not widely appreciated. Within 200 years of the arrival of the first Europeans in the Americas, more than 90 per cent of the indigenous

ENGLISH: THE WORLD LANGUAGE?

- English is the first language for around 375 million people in the world, mainly in Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa and the US.
- English is also a second language spoken by another 375 million people in more than 70 countries, including Ghana, India, Nigeria and Singapore.
- In most of the remaining countries, English is also the foreign language that children are most likely to learn at school. The number of foreign learners may now be more than a billion.
- Around 1.5 billion people — a quarter of the world's population — are thought to be able to communicate competently in English.
- English is now the dominant language in fields such as international politics, the media, advertising, and science and technology.

billion Milliarde

population was killed by diseases brought in by both animals and humans. For example, when the Spanish arrived in 1518, the population of central Mexico is believed to have numbered more than 25 million, but by 1620 it had dropped to 1.6 million. Before contact with the Europeans, the population of the New World may have been as high as 100 million. Within 200 years, it had dropped to fewer than one million. Even if a people continues to inhabit its traditional territory, its language may still die as a result of cultural assimilation. The present crisis stems in large part from the major cultural movements that began 500 years ago, as colonialism spread a small number of dominant languages around the world. In North America and Australia, English has displaced many native languages. In South America, Spanish and Portuguese became the dominant languages. In northern Asia, it was Russian. But European colonialism has not been the only cause of the crisis; Arabic has suppressed many languages in northern Africa, for example.

Celtic ['keltɪk]	keltisch
to attract sth.	hier: etw. für sich gewinnen
to resurrect sth. [ˌrezə'rekt]	etw. wieder beleben
Aboriginal [ˌæbə'rɪdʒɪnəl]	der Ureinwohner Australiens
genocide ['dʒenəsəɪd]	Völkermord
earthquake	Erdbeben
to displace sb. [dɪs'pleɪs]	jmdn. vertreiben
to diminish [dɪ'mɪnɪʃ]	sich verringern
survivor [sə'vaɪvə]	Überlebende(r)
indigenous [ɪn'dɪdʒənəs]	eingeboren, Ur-
to appreciate sth. [ə'pri:ʃiət]	etw. richtig einschätzen
to stem from sth.	von etw. herrühren
to suppress sth.	etw. unterdrücken
to assimilate sth.	etw. in sich aufnehmen
endangered	vom Aussterben bedroht
incentive	Anreiz
peer-group pressure	sozialer Druck
emerging	aufkommend
bilingualism	Zweisprachigkeit
to retain sth.	etw. beibehalten
inward-looking	nach innen gerichtet
idiosyncratic	eigen
self-conscious	unsicher
semilingualism	Halbsprachigkeit
monolingualism	Einsprachigkeit

When one culture assimilates another, there are usually three broad stages affecting the endangered language. The first is immense political, social or economic pressure on the people to speak the dominant language. It might be "top-down" pressure, in the form of incentives, recommendations or laws introduced by a government; or it might be "bottom-up" in the form of peer-group pressure or economic necessity.

The second stage is a period of emerging bilingualism: people become increasingly efficient in their new language while still retaining their competence in their old language. 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 identifies with the new language and finds its old language less relevant.

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



**Making friends:
is respect for
differences
more important
than having the
same language?**

Can anything be done? 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. Many other languages, however, are not in such a serious crisis. Often, where languages are endangered, things can be done to revitalize them. There are successful examples in Australia, North America and Europe.

The conditions have to be right, however, for there to be a good chance 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; and there needs to be funding for courses, materials and teachers.

But why should we care? 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; and as long as a couple of thousand or even a few hundred languages survive, that is sufficient. But 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. Most people now accept that biodiversity is a good thing; but linguistic diversity has not enjoyed the same publicity.

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 that are most diverse. If the development of multiple cultures is necessary for successful human development, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, because cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written languages.

TELL US YOUR VIEWS!

- ☛ Do you believe it is important to preserve lots of different languages?
- ☛ Should the world instead move towards a common language?
- ☛ If so, should that language be English, or should it be a neutral language such as Esperanto?

We would like to hear your views on these subjects and other aspects of David Crystal's article. Please send your comments by 20 April to:

**Spotlight Verlag
Spotlight Redaktion (Language)
Fraunhoferstraße 22
82152 Planegg
Deutschland**

We will print a selection of your comments in the June 2000 issue of SPOTLIGHT, along with comments on next month's article on the way English is changing. From the readers who send in comments, ten will receive David Crystal's latest book, *Language Death*, which will be published by Cambridge University Press in July (for details, see page 20).

Sometimes, what we might learn from a language is practical, such as new treatments from the medical practices of an indigenous people. Sometimes it is intellectual: an increase in our awareness of the history of our world; for example, when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilizations. 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 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.”

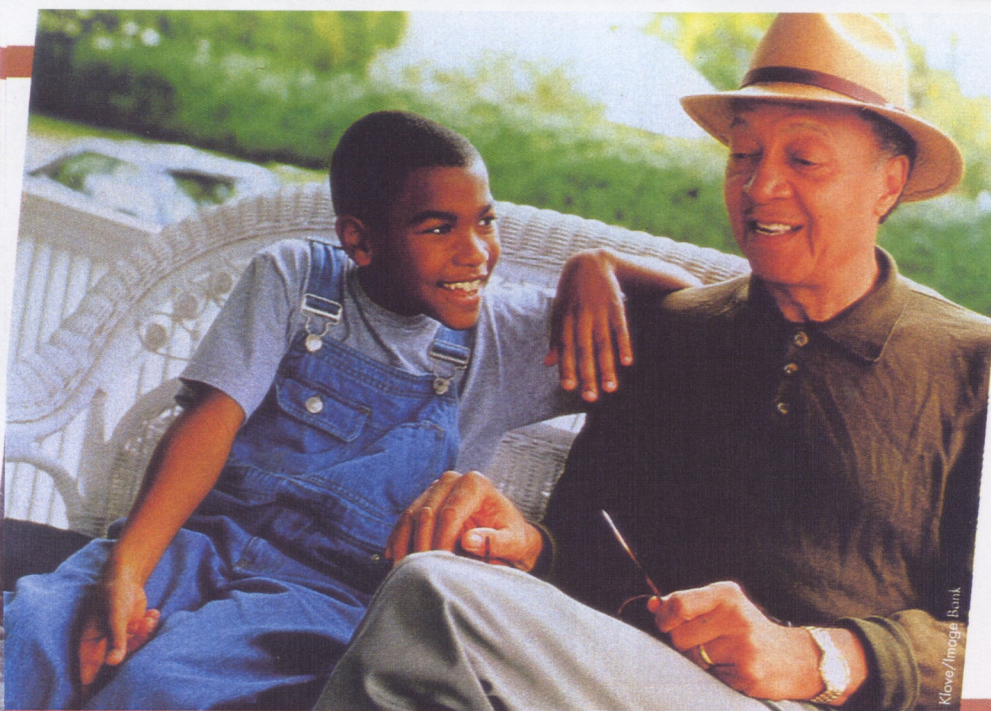
funding	Mittel
to strive to do sth.	danach streben, etw. zu tun
species ['spi:ʃi:z]	Art(en)
diversity	Vielfalt
biodiversity	Artenvielfalt
environment	Umfeld
uniformity	Einheitlichkeit
preservation	Erhalt
to transmit sth.	etw. überliefern
link	Verbindung; hier: Verwandtschaft
oral	mündlich
comprehension	Verständnis
curse	Fluch
overweening	maßlos
to be better off	es besser haben
to promote sth.	etw. fördern
sensitive	einfühlsam
foundation	Fundament
proverb ['prɒvɜ:b]	Spruchwort
welfare	Wohlergehen
oppression	Unterdrückung
disturbance	Unruhen

Not everyone agrees. Some people accept the Babel myth: that the multiplicity of the world's languages is a curse rather than a blessing, God's 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 the result.

This is nonsense. Let us leave aside the question of whether there ever was a single original language. 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. Many of 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.


We are far more likely to promote a peaceful world by paying attention to people's rights and to their identities as communities; and the main emblem 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 coexistence. We should, perhaps, reflect on the Slovakian proverb: “With each newly learned language, you acquire a new soul.”

If food, welfare and work are lacking, then people will direct their energies to economic growth. The same applies if military conflict, political oppression or civil disturbance threaten people's daily lives. In that light, language preservation seems like a luxury. But the hope



heritage ['hɛrɪtɪdʒ]	Erbe
unrecorded	nicht aufgezeichnet
modicum ['mɒdɪkəm]	Minimum
to devote sth. to sth. [dɪ'vəʊt]	etw. einer Sache widmen
circumstance	Umstand
to vary ['veəri]	sich unterscheiden
to generalize	verallgemeinern
impact	Einfluss
to be under way	in Vorbereitung sein
application	Antrag
via ['viə]	durch
archaeology [,ɑ:kɪ'ɒlədʒi]	Archäologie; hier: sichtbare Überreste
honorary professor	Ehrenprofessor(in)
editor	Herausgeber(in)

**Generation game:
language as a
source of identity
and pride**

 You can hear
more comments from
David Crystal on this
month's cassette

is that there will come a time when healthy and well-fed people will want to look at the "quality" of their lives, not just its "quantity". At that point, they will want to revive their cultural traditions and language.

At that point, it may be too late. "If only my grandparents' generation had..." is a common reaction among the members of a community two generations after the one which failed to pass on its language. 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, 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 a language has gone, unrecorded and unremembered, there is no way of getting it back. By contrast, if a modicum of effort has been devoted to language preservation, even in the most difficult of circumstances, this leaves the option open for future generations to make their own choice.

Can we save a few thousand languages, just like that? Yes, if the will and funding are made available. How much would it cost? It is not cheap. You must get linguists into the field, support the community with language teachers, publish grammars and dictionaries, and write material for use in schools. All this must be done over a period of several years. Conditions vary so much — for example, between written and unwritten languages — that it is difficult to generalize, but a figure of £40,000 a year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount over three years to each of the 3,000 endangered languages, we would need about £360 million to have a real impact.

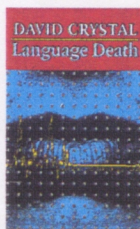
During the 1990s, several organizations were established to try to raise funds. In Britain, the Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL) was started in 1995, and there are similar organizations in the US, Germany,

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 spend. Of the 30 applications it received, it was able to support only four.

In one way, as I said at the beginning, languages are like people. But in another way, they are not like people at all. When people die, they leave signs of their presence in the world via their archaeology. But spoken language leaves no archaeology. When a language which has never been written down dies, it is as if it had never been. ■

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David Crystal is honorary professor of linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor. His books include *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language and English as a Global Language*. He is also the editor of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia and The Cambridge Biographical Encyclopedia*. His latest book, *Language Death*, will be published by Cambridge University Press in July: ISBN 0-521-65321-5, £14.95. The Foundation for Endangered Languages is at www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/Philosophy/CTLL/FEL/ Its German branch is at www.uni-koeln.de/gbs/



NEXT MONTH : THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH

In the second half of our language series, David Crystal looks at the changes taking place in English, and asks what the language will be like in the future. Will it break down into so many different versions that the people who speak them will be unable to understand each other? Or will one version of English take over the world?