

Languages around the world are dying and writers should be

# Too few words

**W**HAT SHOULD a writers' festival be celebrating? Writing, obviously. But "writing" has always been one of those ambiguous terms, referring both to means and ends.

Consider: I am writing now in order to produce a piece of writing. My bad writing (in my hand-written notes) might none the less generate some good writing. Some writers might even have used their best writing to produce their worst writing. However, at the moment I am not writing, I am typing. You can see the problem.

Most literary festivals celebrate writing as an end, an achievement. That is why you see the poets there, displaying their latest wares, along with others including novelists, dramatists, essayists — and linguists.

Linguists are always reminding people about the means to the ends. Their focus is on the tools of the writing trade. And on the way professionals use these tools to produce prize-winning products. When it comes to using the special effects of language, linguists know.

It isn't just writing, of course. There are four linguistic modes of communication, not one. The other side of writing is reading; the other side of speaking is listening. To be a writer, you need all four. I doubt if it's possible to write well without first being a respectable reader.

All four functions operate synchronously in the writer. The metaphors writers live by mix terms from different channels. Good writers not only read what they write; they also listen to it. Poets talk about different "voices" in their written work. Reading can mean either silence or speech ("reading aloud"), private activity or public (as in a "play reading"). These days, the distinction between speech and writing in the creative domain is decreasing as more and more "talking books" hit the shelves.

But linguists are not just parasites on literary authors. I shall be doing more at the writers' festival than wandering around with the linguistic counterpart of a butterfly-net and notebok, murmuring "nice one", "lovely specimen", and drawing the attention of passers-by to the language equivalent in poetry, prose and plays of the beautiful patterns on a red admiral's wing.

I, too, have the millennium on my mind. I am using it as an excuse to take stock, to see where we are, where we've been, where we might go next. I shall be ranking priorities. And sounding off about them to anyone who cares to listen.

We believe in numbers ending with one nought, or two, or three. We are impressed with them. So I have 10 linguistic priorities for the new millennium. Ten. A much better word than nine or 11.

Ten priorities, pleas, petitions, personal entreaties, Commandments, if you like. Preferences, if you do not wish me to be so bold. Some of them have been around a long time; some are very recent. Here's a brief account of them. And like the *Decalogue*, they cannot really be ordered, except perhaps for the first

**1** THE TOP priority has to be a greater concern for endangered languages. That's why I've chosen this topic for my talk at the festival, and made it the

subject of my next book, *Language Death* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). Without language there would be no writers. At the festival, we are celebrating the achievements of language. But, with many languages, there will soon be no achievements to celebrate, because they will have disappeared.

Of the 6000 or so languages in the world, at least half are likely to be dead within the next century — that's, on average, one dying every two weeks or so. Australian linguists have done more than most to publicise the plight of these languages. In some

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ould be doing more to help, says linguist **David Crystal**

# S for the future



make this point. But how many bilingual characters in fiction do you know?

**6 WE NEED** to accept change in language as a normal process. This means we should stop seeing it as decay and deterioration, and complaining about it to the press, the prime minister, or whoever we hope will listen. There is probably more time wasted on this issue than on any other in the world of language. Language change is inevitable, continuous, universal, and multidirectional. Languages do not get better or worse, when they change. They just change.

**7 WE NEED** to show greater concern for those who are having difficulties learning their mother-tongue — whether for medical, psychological, or other reasons.

**8 WE NEED** to show greater concern for those who have lost their ability to use a mother-tongue in which they were once proficient. This is the language pathology world too, but now we are talking about the linguistic consequences of strokes, and other forms of brain damage, among the adult population. Aphasia is one of the best-known syndromes.

**9 WE NEED** to bring the study of language and literature closer together. All too often, schools, universities, and language-teaching institutions introduce a sharp boundary between the two. "The language" is taught in one class; "the literature" in another. It's time to allow more language awareness into the literature class, and more literary examples into the language class. Both sides, after all, have a focus on creativity. The creation of new words and sentences is how a language develops and changes; the creation of new discourses is how literature does.

**10 FINALLY**, we need to appreciate, truly appreciate, the value of language in human development and society. Languages should be thought of as national treasures, and treated accordingly. There should be galleries devoted to it, archives and museums, — festivals. The first such major proposal of this kind, the "World of Language" scheme for a language exhibition centre on London's South Bank, next to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, is beached for lack of funding.

Festivals. I am back where I began: Wandering around the writers' festival hoping that something will happen. And what I would really like to see happen is for writers, all kinds of writers, to take on board some of my priorities, and to express them in their own worlds. Where are the plays, novels, and poems about these language themes?

I spent much of 1997 writing a play, *Living On*, to publicise the plight of dying languages. Why did it have to be me? Why not a real playwright? Why is there no novel (as far as I know) on language death? And if there is one, why are there not 10? Where are the bilingual characters? Where are the language-disordered characters? Where is the theme of language in books for children? Where have such topics as linguistic tolerance, dialect diversity, and standard language, been given a literary treatment?

Language is too important to be left to any one group, even if they are linguists. It is certainly the responsibility of writers. And I cannot help but

JIM PAVLIPIS

language, whether spoken or written, formal or informal, regional or social, domestic or professional. It means being concerned about standards of excellence, while recognising that language reflects many needs and activities.

One of the purposes of language is to express identity, as we have seen; another is to foster mutual intelligibility. This means that language has to be clear, care has to be taken to avoid ambiguity, and subtleties of expression have to be carefully managed.

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AND  
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in a special tribute to  
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Of the 6000 or so languages in the world, at least half are likely to be dead within the next century — that's, on average, one dying every two weeks or so. Australian linguists have done more than most to publicise the plight of these languages. In some cases, revitalisation is possible, and some fine examples of this process have already been seen in this country. In others, all that can be done is urgent documentation, both of the language and of its oral literature, before they disappear for ever. For when a language that has never been written down dies, it is as if it has never been. All writers should be reflecting on this, and doing something about it.

**2** CLOSE behind comes a greater concern for minority languages, even if they are not in any global sense endangered. All languages express the identity of the people who speak them, but for those who find themselves to be a small part of a large community, the role of language is especially important. They want to see their language treated with respect by the dominant culture; they want opportunities (which usually means funding) to use

their language in public and see it valued. A writers' festival values language. It is professionally dishonest for writers to deny the achievements of their own language, denying the same opportunity to others.

**3** WE NEED to promote a greater concern for accents and dialects. Here we are too ready to accept the variety of forms that language takes as it varies from one part of a country to another. We don't have to personally like a form, any more than we have to like a piece of music or literature. But we should not condemn many have done, condemning all urban accents as ugly, rough, or slovenly. Beryl Bainbridge has some notoriety in the United Kingdom for her novel when she hammered "the mangled language spoken in Birmingham and Liverpool" as "a characterisation who makes her living out of perceptively characterisation could subscribe to this. I would have expected novelists to do this, to see the truth, to capture the essence of these accents and dialects. Dickens was a good time.

You can speak or write well or badly in any dialect, rural or urban. Writers should demonstrate this, and not publicise their own prejudices or acting as linguistic vigilantes.

**4** AT THE same time, we need to promote a concern for the expressive range of language. This means valuing all varieties and s

language in public and see it valued. Writers' festival values language. It would be normally dishonest for writers to take pride in events of their own language while the same opportunity to others. NEED to promote a greater concern for all accents and dialects. Here we are talking about a need to accept the variety of forms a language takes from one part of a country to another. We don't have to personally like all these accents any more than we have to like all kinds of literature. But we should not go round, as we have done, condemning all urban dialects as rough, or slovenly. Beryl Bainbridge achieved notoriety in the United Kingdom this year when she hammered "the mangled language" of Birmingham and Liverpool. How a person expresses her living out of perceptible differences in language could subscribe to this is beyond what we would have expected novelists to do better than to tell the truth, to capture the expressive power of accents and dialects. Dickens did it all the time. He could speak or write well or badly in any accent, rural or urban. Writers should be celebrating this, and not publicising their snobishness or acting as linguistic vigilantes. At the same time, we need to promote a greater concern for the expressive range of a language, and for valuing all varieties and styles in a

language, whether spoken or written, formal or informal, regional or social, domestic or professional. It means being concerned about standards of excellence, while recognising that language reflects many needs and activities. One of the purposes of language is to express identity, as we have seen; another is to foster mutual intelligibility. This means that language has to be clear, care has to be taken to avoid ambiguity, and subtleties of expression have to be carefully managed. There has long been a concern in schools for children to master a "standard" language, in which the focus is on the sounds, grammar, and vocabulary that facilitate national (and, these days, international) intelligibility. In the past, this was all too often seen as a replacement for a local dialect. Writers can do a valuable job in helping everyone see the value of both. WE NEED to become more multilingual in our thinking, and in our abilities. There are still too many cultures that are monolingual in temperament. These, ironically, are the disadvantaged ones. Although culturally dominant, reflecting their colonial pasts, they are missing out intellectually by failing to make a second language a routine part of growing up. And the benefits, as people are beginning to learn, can be economic as well as personal. Writers, through their characters, are in the best position to

own worlds. Where are the plays, novels, and poems about these language themes? I spent much of 1997 writing a play, *Living On*, to publicise the plight of dying languages. Why did it have to be me? Why not a real playwright? Why is there no novel (as far as I know) on language death? And if there is one, why are there not 10? Where are the bilingual characters? Where are the language-disordered characters? Where is the theme of language in books for children? Where have such topics as linguistic tolerance, dialect diversity, and standard language, been given a literary treatment? Language is too important to be left to any one group, even if they are linguists. It is certainly the responsibility of writers. And I cannot help but wonder: if more writers took these messages on board, would the ideas not start getting across to the general public more effectively than when promulgated by linguists alone? Writers' festivals are just the places where such things could start to happen. Now that would be a real cause for celebration. I feel another priority coming on. **11** WE NEED writers to be writing more about language — writing about writing, therefore, and also about reading, speaking, listening, and the whole enterprise of language study. **12** WE NEED to... Damn. *David Crystal reflects on dying languages on 28 August at the Malthouse.*