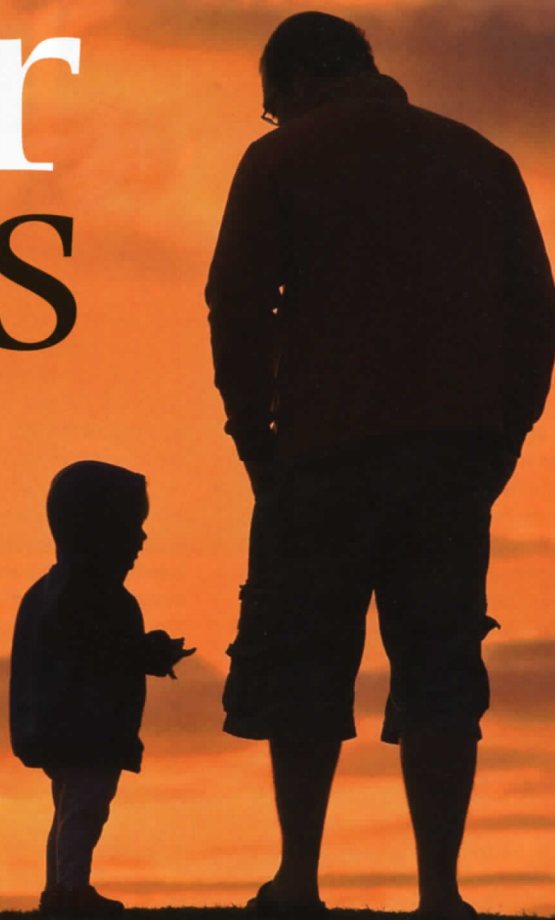


Lost for words

Why are some languages disappearing and what does the future hold for the people using them? What are the key languages for the next 10-20 years for the business world?

David Crystal explains



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

The figures speak for themselves – according to the best estimates, there are some 6,500 languages in the world at the moment. And of these, about half – some say more, some say less – could 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 every two weeks or so.

How do we know? In the course of the past two or three decades, linguists all over the world have spent a great deal of time gathering comparative data. There have been major surveys, and large language atlases have been published. And when people survey a language, they do not just make notes about its grammar and vocabulary; they look at the number of people who speak it, and how old they are. The surveys suggest that over 50 languages have just one speaker left. About 500 languages have less than 100

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speakers; 1,500 have less than 1,000; over 3,000 have less than 10,000 speakers; and a staggering 5,000 languages have less than 100,000. Obviously, if a language has just a few speakers left – and even 100,000 is not a huge number – and nobody is bothering to pass it on to the children, that language is bound to die out sooner or later.

Why are so many languages dying? There are many reasons, ranging from natural

disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be destroyed by earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and other cataclysms. A habitat may remain but become unlivable, through a combination of unfavourable climatic and economic conditions; and the historical effect of imported disease on indigenous people is well-known. But cultural assimilation is the greater threat. Much of the present crisis stems from the major cultural movements which began 500 years ago, as colonialism spread a small number of powerful languages around the world. English has displaced many languages, but that is by no means the only dominator. In South America, it was Spanish and Portuguese; in northern Asia, it was Russian. Nor was European colonialism the only cause. Arabic has suppressed many languages in northern Africa; and in sub-Saharan Africa, local tribal conflict has always been a critical factor.

Can anything be done? Obviously 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 to care about their



LEFT TO RIGHT: CHINESE MANDARIN SHOP SIGNS; AN ABORIGINAL WOMAN, SOUTH AUSTRALIA; SPANISH SPEAKING MAN IN VENEZUELA



DBURNE/ALAMY



SUSANNA BENNETT/ALAMY



JACQUES JARGOUZ/ALAMY

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. A community, once it realises that its language is in danger, can get its act together, and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalise. It has happened in Australia, New Zealand, Wales and several other countries. Everything has to be right, of course, for there to be a likelihood of success. The community itself must want to save its language. The culture of which it is a part needs to have a respect for minority languages. There needs to be funding, to enable courses, materials and teachers to be introduced. And, in most cases, there need to be linguists, to get on with the basic task of putting the language down on paper.

That is the bottom line: getting the language documented – recorded, analysed, written down. There are two reasons for this. The obvious one is educational – the need for literacy. But there is 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 are talking about the intellectual and cultural diversity of the planet now, of course, not its biological diversity. But the issues are the same. Enshrined in a language is the whole of a community's history and 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, as when we discover new medical

treatments from the folk medicine practices of indigenous people. Sometimes it is intellectual – an increased awareness of the history of our world, as when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. And of course, every so often we learn something new about language itself – the behaviour that makes us truly human. That is 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 6,500 sources in all.

The language surveys have shown that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the people. No wonder so many are in danger. But what of the healthiest languages? That 4% makes an interesting list. If we look just at mother-tongue speakers, the leader is Mandarin Chinese, with 725+ million, then English (425+ m.), followed by Spanish (250+ m.), Hindi/Urdu (220+ m.), and Arabic (180+ m.). If we include second-language speakers, then English far exceeds the rest, with around two billion speakers. All of these languages are important for business purposes and any of them could threaten the dominance of English in due course. But predicting the future of a language is difficult, for it is to predict the political and economic future of the planet. The only safe policy is: be prepared – which means valuing and fostering a multilingual ethos. The more languages we know, the more powerful we will be on the world stage. And the more languages we use, the more we are likely to achieve that elusive goal with customers – the competitive edge. ■

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