

This man is worth £100,000 a year

For the first time, linguists have put a price on language. To save a language from extinction isn't cheap – but more and more people are arguing that the alternative is the death of communities

WORDS / David Crystal

A LANGUAGE dies only when the last person who speaks it dies. Or more likely it dies when the second-last person who speaks it dies. For then there is no one left to talk to.

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. But what is happening today is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It is language extinction on a massive scale. According to the best estimates, there are some 6,000 languages in the world. Of these, about half are going to die out in the course of the next century: that's 3,000 languages in 1,200 months. 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 been gathering comparative data. If they find a language with just a few speakers left, and nobody is bothering to pass the language on to the children, they conclude that language is bound to die out soon. And we have to draw the same conclusion if a

language has less than 100 speakers. It is not likely to last very long. A 1999 survey shows that 96 per cent of the world's languages are spoken by just four per cent of the people.

An updated table in *Ethnologue* (February 1999), compiled by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, recognises 6,784 languages, with data available for 6,060. There were 51 languages with just one speaker left – 28 of them in Australia alone. Adding up the totals in the table shows that there were nearly 500 languages in the world with less than 100 speakers; 1,500 with less than 1,000; and a staggering 5,000 languages with less than 100,000.

Number of speakers	Number of languages	%
More than 100 million	9	0.15
10-99.9 million	72	1.2
1-9.9 million	239	3.9
100,000-999,999	795	13.1
10,000-99,999	1,605	26.5
1,000-9,999	1,782	29.4
100-999	1,075	17.7
10-99	302	5.0
1-9	181	3.0

The reasons so many languages are dying range from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods and other cataclysms can easily wipe out small communities in isolated areas. A habitat may become unlivable through unfavourable climatic and economic conditions – famine and drought especially. Communities can die through imported disease. Cultural assimilation is an even bigger threat. Much of the present crisis stems from the major cultural movements which began 500 years ago, as colonialism spread a small number of dominant languages, such as English, Spanish, Portuguese and French, around the world.

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. It is called revitalisation.

Once a community realises that its language is in danger, it can get its act ▶

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▷ together, and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalise. The community itself must want to save its language. The culture of which it is a part must need to have a respect for minority languages. There needs to be funding, to support courses, materials, and teachers. And 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 – recorded, analysed, written down. People must be able to read and write if they and their language are to have a future in an increasingly computer-literate civilisation.

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. 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: when we discover new medical treatments from the folk medicine practices of an indigenous people. Sometimes it is intellectual – an increase in our awareness of the history of our world, when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. Very 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 quickly. 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.

But can we save a few thousand languages, just like that? Yes, if the will and funding were available. It is not cheap, getting linguists into the field, training local analysts, supporting the community with language resources and teachers, compiling grammars and dictionaries, writing materials for use in schools. It takes time, lots of it, to revitalise an endangered language. Conditions vary so much that it is difficult to generalise, but a figure of \$100,000 a year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount of effort over three years for each of 3,000 languages, we would be talking about some \$900 million.

THERE are some famous cases which illustrate what can be done. Probably the best known is modern Hebrew, resuscitated to serve as the official language of modern Israel. Then we have the case of Welsh, alone among the Celtic languages in not only stopping its steady decline towards extinction but (in the 1991 census) showing signs of real growth. Two Language Acts protect the status of Welsh now, and its

presence is increasingly in evidence wherever you travel in Wales.

On the other side of the world, Maori in New Zealand has been maintained by a system of so-called 'language nests', first introduced in 1982. These are organisations which provide children under five with a domestic setting in which they are intensively exposed to the language. The staff are all Maori speakers from the local community. The hope is that the children will keep their Maori skills alive after leaving the nests, and that as they grow older they will in turn become role models to new generations of young children.

There are cases like this all over the world. A similar language immersion programme has been used in Hawaii, with promising results for Hawaiian. The same applies to Tahitian (in Tahiti) and Yukagir (in Siberia). In North America, Navajo, Seneca, and Mohawk are among several Indian languages which have begun to benefit from a 'bottom-up' reawakening of interest by local communities, along with 'top-down' political support, in the form of measures guaranteeing language rights. And when the reviving language is associated with a degree of political autonomy, the growth can be especially striking, as shown by Faroese, spoken in the Faroe Islands, after the islanders received a measure of autonomy from Denmark. ▷



Left: Ainu community in Japan

▷ In Switzerland, Romansch was facing a difficult situation, spoken in five very different dialects, with small and diminishing numbers, as young people left their community for work in the German-speaking cities. The solution here was the creation in the 1980s of a unified written language for all these dialects. Romansch Grischun, as it is now called, has official status in parts of Switzerland, and is being increasingly used in spoken form on radio and television.

A language can be brought back from the very brink of extinction. The Ainu language of Japan, after many years of neglect and repression, had reached a stage where there were only eight fluent speakers left, all elderly. However, new government policies brought fresh attitudes and a positive interest in survival. Several 'semi-speakers' – people who had become unwilling to speak Ainu because of the negative attitudes by Japanese speakers – were prompted to become active speakers again. There is fresh interest now in working with children, and the language is more publicly available than it has been for years.

Several seriously endangered Aboriginal languages of Australia have been maintained and revived, thanks to community efforts, work by Australian linguists, and the help of local linguistic and cultural organisations. And if good descriptions and materials are available, even extinct languages can be resurrected. Kaurna, from South Australia, is an example. This language had been extinct for about a century, but had been quite well documented. So, when a strong movement grew for its revival, it was possible

to reconstruct it. The revised language is not the same as the original, of course. It lacks the range that the original had, and much of the old vocabulary. But it can nonetheless act as a badge of present-day identity for its people. And as long as people continue to value it as a true marker of their identity, and are prepared to keep using it, it will develop new functions and new vocabulary, as any other living language would do.

It is too soon to predict the future of these revived languages, but in some parts of the world they are attracting precisely the range of positive attitudes and grass roots support which are the preconditions for language survival. The interest can be seen in Britain, in the form of enthusiastic revival movements supporting Cornish and Manx, whose last mother-tongue speakers died out many decades ago. In such unexpected but heart-warming ways might we see the grand total of languages in the world minimally increased.

SAVING languages is expensive, time-consuming and energetic work. But it is immensely worthwhile. It is difficult to convey the sense of joy and pride that people feel when they realise that their language will live on. And conversely, it is difficult to express the sense of loss, when you have not experienced it. Australian author David Malouf puts it this way, in his short story *The Only Speaker of His Tongue* (1985): "When I think of my tongue being no longer alive in the mouths of men, a chill goes over me that is deeper than my own death, since it is the gathered death of all my kind."

Language death is like no other form of disappearance. 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. When a language dies, which has never been written down, it is as if it has never been. **High Life**

Saving tongues

Several organisations have been formed to address the plight of the world's endangered languages. They include:

In the UK: Foundation for Endangered Languages, c/o Batheaston Villa, 172 Bailbrook Lane, Bath BA1 7AA.

In the USA: The Endangered Language Fund Inc, c/o Department of Linguistics, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut 06520.

In Australia: Network on Endangered Languages, c/o Computer Centre, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, Canberra.

In Japan: International Clearing House for Endangered Languages, c/o Department of Asian and Pacific Linguistics, University of Tokyo, Hongo 7-3-1, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 113.