

MILLENNIUM BRIEFING: THE DEATH OF LANGUAGE

Half of the world's languages are likely to die in the next century. Unless we do something to reverse this trend, we will lose the cultural and linguistic diversity which is so essential to human development

by David Crystal

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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, Bruce Connell, was doing some field work in the Mambila region of Cameroon. He found a language called Kasabe, which no westerner had studied before. It had just one speaker left, a man called Bogon. Connell had no time on 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 5th November, taking Kasabe with him.

On 4th November, Kasabe existed as one of the world's languages; on 6th 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—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 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, as we move into a new millennium, is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It is language extinction on a massive scale.

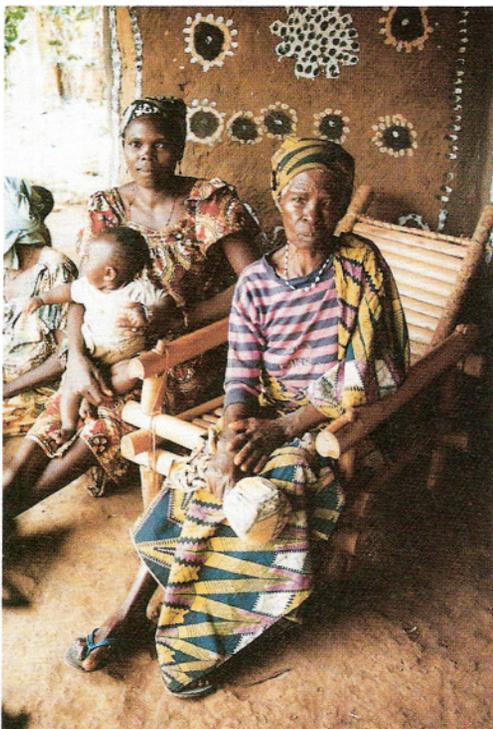
The figures speak for themselves. Not all the languages in the world have been properly identified and studied, but, according to the best estimates, there are about 6,000 languages in the world at the moment. Of these, about half—some say more, some say less—are going to die out in the course of the next century. The relevant deduction is sobering: 3,000 lan-

guages in 1,200 months. This means that, on average, there is a language dying out somewhere in the world every two weeks or so.

HOW MANY LANGUAGES ARE THREATENED?

In the course of the past two or three decades, linguists all over the world have spent a lot of time gathering comparative data. In surveying a language, linguists do not only record its grammar and vocabulary, and how it is pronounced; they also look at the number of people who speak it, and how old they are. A survey published in February 1999 by the US Summer Institute of Linguistics established 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 4 per cent of its people. No wonder so many are in danger.

But surely a language with 100,000 speakers is safe? Not necessarily. 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 couple of generations. It depends on the pressures being 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—do they care if it lives or dies? Breton, in northeast France, is a classic example of a language reducing dramatically in numbers. At the beginning of the 20th cen-



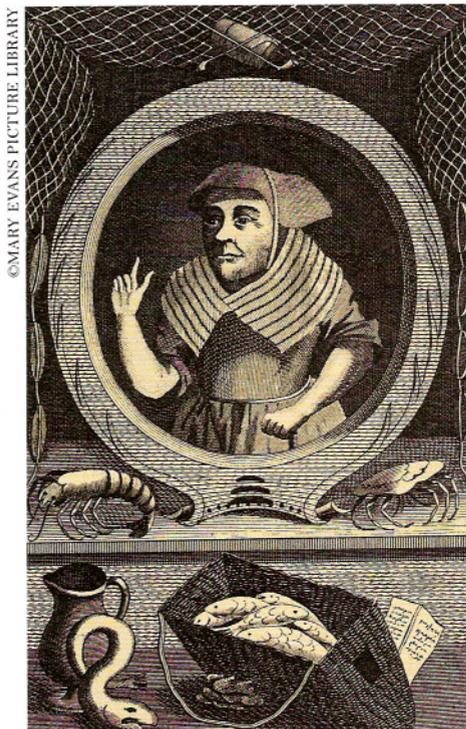
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tury it was spoken by 1m people, but it is now down to less than a quarter of that total. Breton can be saved if enough effort is made—the kind of effort that has already helped Welsh to recover from a dramatic decline (as recently as 1880 three-quarters of Welsh people spoke Welsh as a first language). If not, Breton could be gone in 50 years. In recent times, this has already happened to two other Celtic languages in northern Europe: Cornish, formerly spoken in Cornwall; and Manx, in the Isle of Man. Both are currently attracting support, but once a language has lost its last native speaker, resurrecting it—although not impossible, as we have seen with some of the Aboriginal languages of Australia—is difficult.

WHY ARE SO MANY LANGUAGES DYING?

The reasons for language death range from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be wiped out by earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and other cataclysms. On 17th July 1998, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake off the coast of East Saundau Province, Papua New Guinea, killed more than 2,200 people and displaced a further 10,000 people: 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 identified as being 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 1,700 in 1981; and Warapu 1,602 in 1983. The totals for Arop and Warapu will have diminished by at least 500 speakers. Moreover, as the survivors moved away to care centres and other locations, will these communities (and thus their languages) survive the trauma of displacement?

The effect of imported disease on indigenous peoples is well-established, although the scale of its effects 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 population was killed by diseases brought in by both animals and humans. To take just one area: in 1518, when the Spanish arrived, the central Mexico population is believed to have numbered more than 25m, but by 1620 it had dropped to 1.6m. Before European contact the population of the New World may have been as high as 100m. Within 200 years it had dropped to fewer than 1m. The scale of this disaster far exceeds the 25m thought to have died from the Black Death in 14th-century Europe; it also exceeds the combined total of deaths in the two world wars (40m-50m).



Left: Bogon's cousin, the last speaker of Luo
Above: Dorothy Jeffrey, the last speaker of Cornish

The people may live, and even continue to inhabit their traditional territory, but their language may still die as a result of cultural assimilation: when one culture is influenced by a more dominant culture, it begins to lose its character as its members adopt new mores. The language of the original culture goes into decline and eventually disappears, to be replaced by the language of the dominant culture. Much of the present crisis stems from the big cultural movements which 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 Aboriginal languages. In South America, Spanish

and Portuguese became the dominant languages. In northern Asia, it was Russian. Nor has European colonialism been the only cause of the crisis. Arabic has suppressed many languages in northern Africa.

The factors which foster cultural assimilation are well known. Urbanisation produces cities which act as magnets to rural communities, and developments in transport and communications make it easier for country people to reach these cities. The learning of the dominant language—Spanish or Portuguese in South America, Swahili in much of east Africa, Quechua and Aymara in the Andean countries, and English almost everywhere—is a necessary condition of economic advancement. Even if people stay in their rural setting, there is no escape (except for the most isolated communities) because the same transport systems which carry country people into the cities are used to convey consumer products and the associated advertising back to their communities. The language of the dominant culture infiltrates everywhere, reinforced by the daily pressure of the media, and especially of television.

When one culture assimilates to another, the sequence of events affecting the endangered language is usually characterised by three broad stages. The first is immense pressure on the people to speak the dominant language—pressure which can come from political, social or economic forces. It might be “top-down,” 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 competence in their old. 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 the parents as well as their children. Those families which 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 within a family can slip into a self-conscious semilingualism, and thence into monolingualism.

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. But many other languages are not in such a serious crisis. Often, where languages are endangered, things can be done to revitalise them. There are successful examples in Australia, North America and Europe. The conditions have to be right for there to be a likelihood 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; there needs to be funding for courses, materials and teachers.

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. So long as a few hundred or even a couple of thousand languages survive, that is sufficient. No, 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. In the case of language, we are talking about intellectual and cultural diversity, not biological diversity, but the issues are the same. As a result of decades of environmental publicity and activism, most people have come to 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 eco-systems are those which are most diverse. It has often been said that our success in colonising the planet can be accounted for by our ability to develop diverse cultures which suit different

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The Tower of Babel by Pieter Breugel

environments. The need to maintain linguistic diversity stands on the shoulders of such arguments. If the development of multiple cultures is a prerequisite for successful human development, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, because cultures are chiefly transmitted through

spoken and written languages. Encapsulated within a language is most of a community's history and a large part of its cultural identity. "Every language is a temple," said Oliver Wendell Holmes, "in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined."

Sometimes what we might learn from a language is eminently practical, as 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—as when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. 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 radio, no *Prospect*, no talk at all. Ezra Pound summed up the core 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." 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 total.

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

This is nonsense. Let us leave aside the question of whether there ever was a single language pre-Babel. (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. All the big trouble spots of the world in recent decades have been monolingual countries—Cambodia, Vietnam, Rwanda, Burundi, Yugo-

slavia, 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 a peaceful coexistence. We need to accept the costs and benefits of bilingualism—a principle which the leading nations, largely monolingual by historical temperament, are still coming to terms with. We need to reflect on Emerson's words: "As many languages as he has, as many friends, as many arts and trades, so many times is he a man." Or the Slovakian proverb: "With each newly learned language you acquire a new soul."

Physical wellbeing is a higher priority than language preservation. 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. Then language preservation seems like a luxury. But if the development programmes fostered by international organisations are successful, the hope 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.

It may be too late. "If only my grandpar-

ents' generation had..." This kind of reaction is common 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, with battles over land-claims and civil rights behind them, 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 their language has gone, unrecorded and unremembered, there is no way they can get 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, provided 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, write materials for use in schools—and all over a period of several years. Conditions vary so much (for example, between written and unwritten languages) that it is difficult to generalise, but a figure of £40,000 a year per language cannot be far from the truth. If we devoted that amount over three years for each of the 3,000 endangered languages, we would need about £360m to have a real impact. It sounds like a lot. But it is equivalent to just over one day's Opec oil revenues in an average year.

During the 1990s, several organisations were established to try to raise funds. In Britain, the Foundation for Endangered Languages (Fel) was started in 1995 (information from nostler@chibcha.demon.co.uk), and there are similar organisations 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 give out. Of the 30 applications it received, it was able to support only four.

The concept of an endangered language should be an attractive subject to those who live by language—poets, novelists, dramatists—but there has so far been little, by way of creative output. I know of Margaret Atwood's poem, *Marsh languages* and Harold Pinter's play, *Mountain Language*. I have put in my own sixpennyworth in the form of a play, *Living On*. But we need more, if the concern is to enter the consciousness, if not the conscience, of the majority.

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The conquest of the New World destroyed indigenous populations and languages

● This is the second in a series of Prospect millennium briefings. Others in the series will include: human behaviour, consciousness, climate and human history