

Have you ever seen a film or television programme about the death of animal and plant species?

Dozens, I expect. But a film about the death of languages? Nor have I.

Language death is the crisis message of the new millennium. According to the best estimates, there are some 6,000 languages in the world. And of these, about half are going to die out in the course of the next century: 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.

A language dies only when the last person who speaks it dies. Or perhaps 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. But what is happening today is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It is language extinction on a massive scale.

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, obviously that language is bound to die out soon. A 1999 survey showed that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the people. No wonder so many are in danger.

Why are so many dying? The reasons range from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be decimated or wiped out by earthquakes, floods, and other cataclysms. Communities can die through imported disease. 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.

Why we should care about dying languages? 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.

Can anything be done? Plainly 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. Once a community realises that its language is in danger, it can get its act together, and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalise.

There are very few success stories so far, but there are some famous cases of what can be done when both will and means are present. Probably the best known is modern Hebrew, resuscitated to serve as the official language of modern Israel. Then we have Welsh, chief among the Celtic languages

in not only stopping its steady decline towards extinction but showing signs of real growth. In terms of the number of speakers, Welsh is in the top 15% of the world's languages now. Not many people know that. But it shows what can be done.

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. 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.

That is why I am going to the Celtic Film and Television Festival this year. We urgently need to gather together the resources of the arts and media world, to help combat the language death scenario, and to look after the future of all the Celtic languages. If there were more novels, poems, and plays written about the problem, it would come to the attention of a much wider audience, and who knows what then might happen? The imagination is needed, as well as the intellect - the heart as well as the head.

I spend most of my time as a writer, these days, working from my home in Holyhead. I have tried to do my bit, by writing a play on the subject, called *Living On*, and an academic book on the subject, *Language Death*. I don't know which might have the greater impact, in the long run. All I do know is that we need to harness all available means to fight this one. And the Festival provides a real opportunity. There is first-hand experience of language endangerment within every participant, and a wealth of expertise in using the medium of film to convey messages with real dramatic impact. I hope some of them will take the job on.