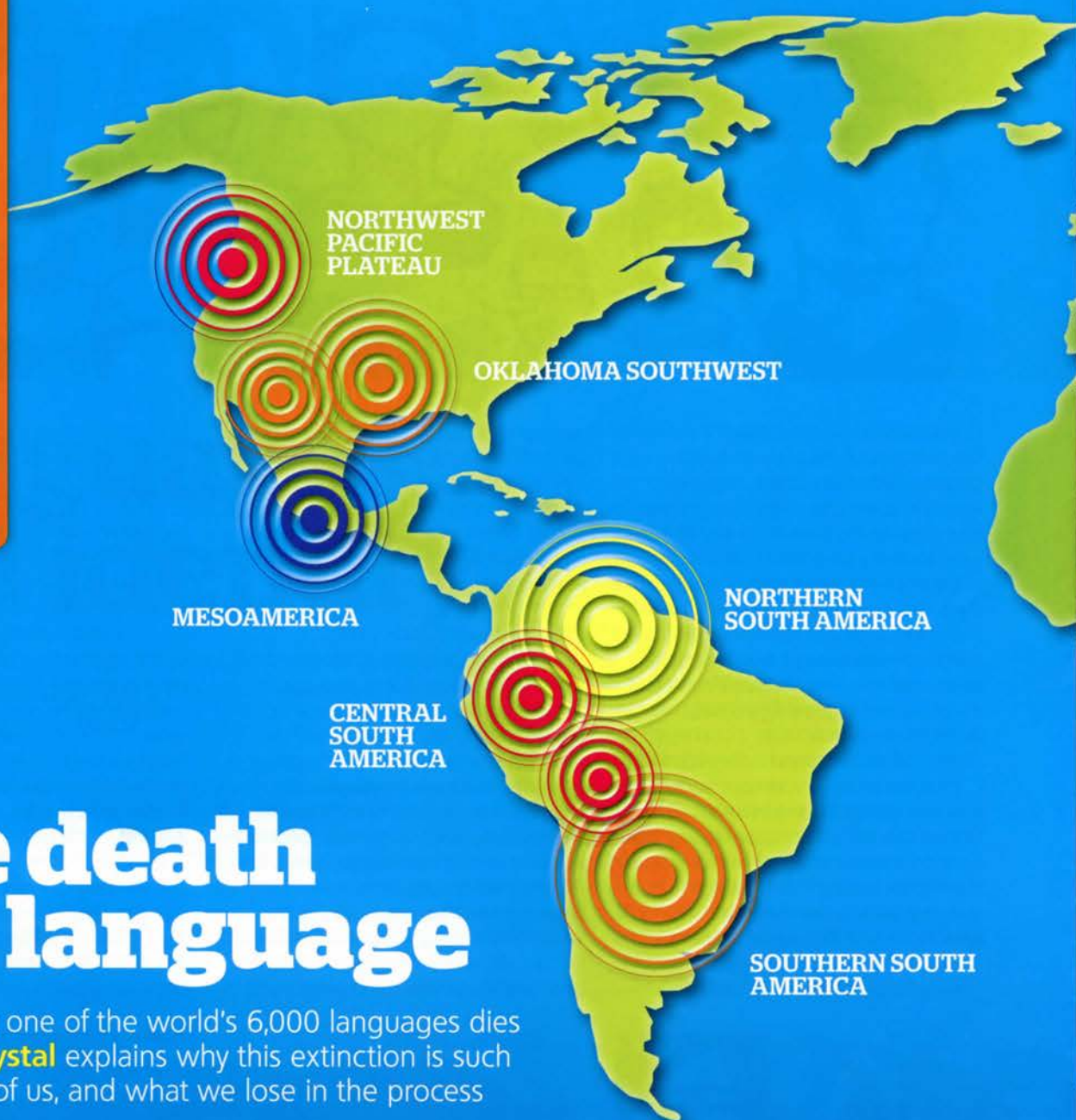


Focus on: Disappearing languages

Biography

David Crystal

David Crystal is a writer, editor, lecturer and broadcaster, and one of the country's leading linguists. He has written extensively in the fields of language and linguistics. His writings can be found at <http://tiny.cc/DCbooksandarticles>. David is patron of the Association for Language Learning and a frequent speaker at our annual conference, Language World.



The death of a language

Every fortnight one of the world's 6,000 languages dies out. **David Crystal** explains why this extinction is such a threat to all of us, and what we lose in the process

LANGUAGE DEATH. The phrase has the same kind of resonance as it has when we talk about the death of a person. And that's how it should be. A language dies when the last person who speaks it dies. One day it's there; the next, it's gone.

We need to appreciate the scale of the problem. There's nothing unusual about a single language dying. Communities have come and gone throughout history, and with them their language. But what's happening today is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It's language extinction on a massive scale, the result of a combination of natural disasters, cultural assimilation, and even genocide.

The figures speak for themselves. According to the best estimates, there are some 6,000 languages in the world; and about half are going to die out in the course of this century. That's 3,000 languages in 1,200 months – which means there's a language dying out somewhere in the world every two weeks or so.

In a recent Ethnologue survey, there were 51 languages with just one speaker left. Nearly 500 languages had less than 100 speakers; 1,500 with less than 1,000; over 3,000 with less than 10,000 speakers; and a staggering 5,000 languages with less than 100,000 speakers. It turns out that 96% of languages are spoken by just 4% of the people. No wonder so many are in danger.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE? We should care about language death for the same reason that we care when an animal or plant species dies. The arguments which support the need for biological diversity also apply to language. Diversity has a central place in evolutionary thought, where it's seen as the result of species genetically adapting in order to survive in different environments: our success in colonising the planet has been due to our ability to develop diverse cultures which suit all kinds of environments.

So, if diversity is a prerequisite for successful humanity, then the preservation of linguistic diversity is essential, for language lies at the heart of what it

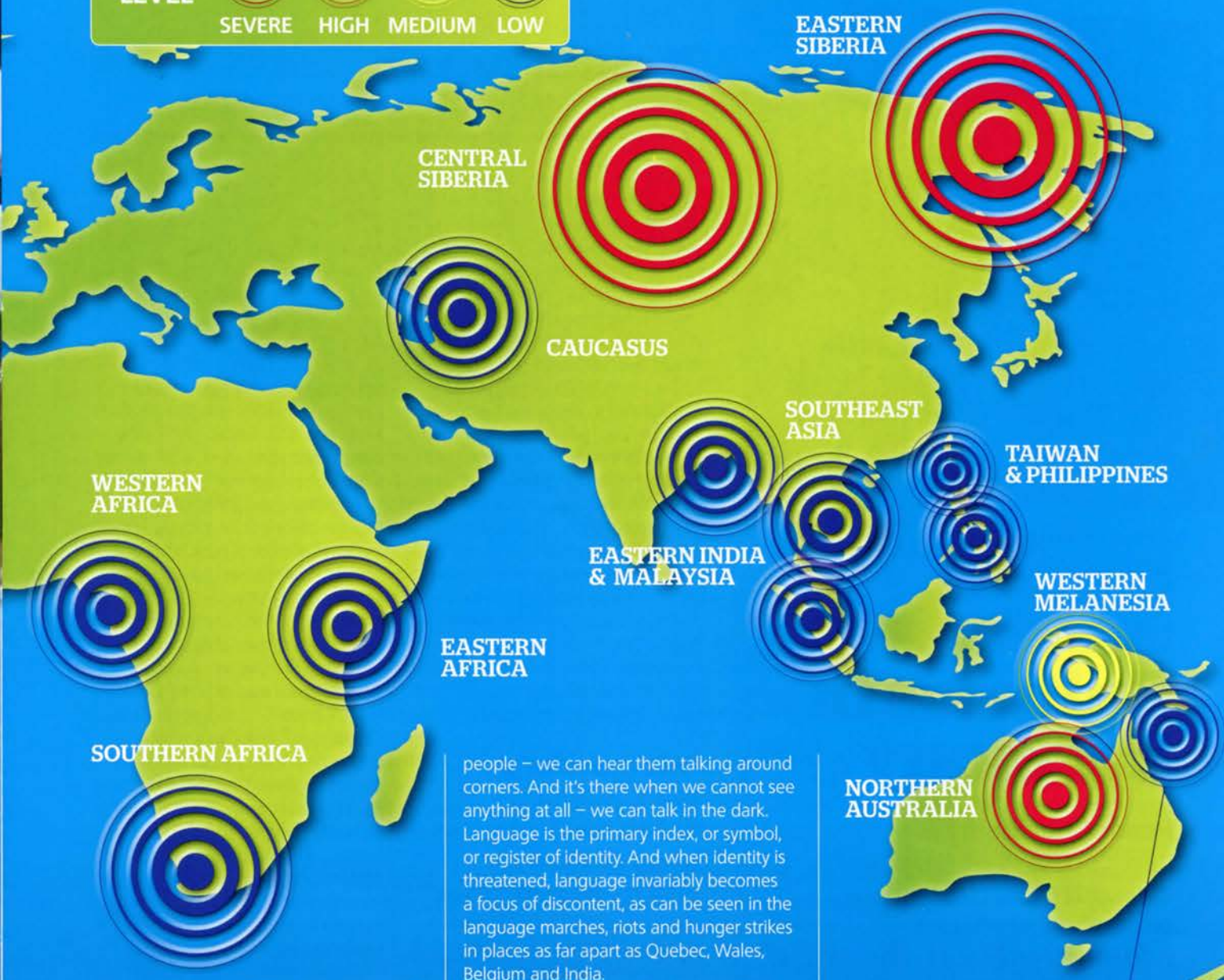
HOTSPOTS AROUND THE WORLD WHERE MANY LANGUAGES ARE CLOSE TO EXTINCTION

THREAT LEVEL



SEVERE HIGH MEDIUM LOW

Features



means to be human. If the development of multiple cultures is so vital, then the role of languages becomes critical, for cultures are chiefly transmitted through spoken and written language. Accordingly, when language transmission breaks down, through language death, there's a serious loss of inherited knowledge.

IF WE TURN THE CONCEPT OF DIVERSITY OVER, WE FIND IDENTITY. Identity is a summation of the characteristics that make a community what it is and not something else – of 'us' versus 'them'. These characteristics may be to do with physical appearance, but just as often they relate to local customs (such as dress), beliefs, rituals and the whole panoply of personal behaviours. And of all behaviours, language is the most ubiquitous. It's available even when we cannot see other

people – we can hear them talking around corners. And it's there when we cannot see anything at all – we can talk in the dark. Language is the primary index, or symbol, or register of identity. And when identity is threatened, language invariably becomes a focus of discontent, as can be seen in the language marches, riots and hunger strikes in places as far apart as Quebec, Wales, Belgium and India.

A language encapsulates its speakers' history. It expresses, through the grammar and lexicon of its texts, the events that form its past. Even the most casual glance in a library conveys the extent to which people are reliant on written language for a full sense of their origins and development. The literature section makes the point especially strongly. And, as individuals, we value highly those linguistic scraps of personal documentation which have come down to us from our ancestors – a grandparent's diary, an entry in a parish register – all of which provide evidence of our pedigree. The desire to know about our ancestry is a universal inclination – but it takes a language to satisfy it. And, once a language is lost, the links with our past are gone. That's why people can get very emotional when they reflect on the implications of language death.

NORTHERN AUSTRALIA

Useful links

- ALL webpage on language and identity: <http://tiny.cc/LanguageandIdentity>
- UNESCO website on endangered languages: <http://tiny.cc/UNESCOEndangeredLangs>
- National Geographic - Vanishing Voices: <http://tiny.cc/VanishingVoices>
- David Crystal on Minority Languages: <http://tiny.cc/MinorityLanguages>
- Ethnologue Survey: <http://tiny.cc/EthnologueSurvey>
- Foundation for Endangered Languages: <http://tiny.cc/EndangeredLangsFoundation>

Source: Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages www.livingtongues.org