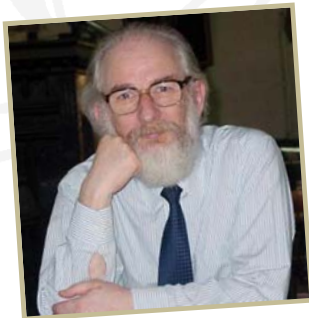


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Language Death: a Problem for All

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The facts are easy to state: half the languages of the world are dying. The implications take longer to assimilate.

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

Here's an example of it happening. A linguist, Bruce Connell, was doing some field work in the Mambila region of Cameroon, West Africa, in late 1995. He found a language called Kasabe, which nobody had studied before. It had just one speaker left, a man called Bogon. Connell didn't have time on that visit to find out very much about the language, so he decided to return to Cameroon a year later to collect some more material. He arrived in mid November, only to learn that Bogon had died on November 5th, taking Kasabe with him.

So there we have it: on November 4th, Kasabe existed, as one of the world's languages; on November 6th, it didn't. The event would perhaps have caused a stir in Bogon's village. If you're the last speaker of a language, you're often rather special, in the eyes of your community, because of what you know, of what you stand for. You're 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 less language in the world on that November day. And, if you had known, would you have cared?

I think we should all of us care, and I mean all of us - which is why this is a good subject for a conference on 'breaking down barriers'. But first, we need to appreciate the size of the problem. There's 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. That's understandable. But what's happening today is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It's language extinction on a massive scale.

The figures speak for themselves, even though the totals are a bit vague. Not by any means all the languages in the world have been properly identified and studied. That's part of the problem. But, according to the best estimates, there are some 6,000 languages in the world at the moment. And 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 languages, in 1200 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 some major surveys, and some large language atlases have been published. And when people survey a language, they don't just make notes about its grammar and vocabulary, and how it's pronounced; they look at the number of people who speak it, and how old they are.

Obviously, if they find a language with just a few speakers left, and nobody's bothering to pass the language on to the children, 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's not likely to last very long.

In a recent online survey, produced by Ethnologue, there were 51 languages with just one speaker left – 28 of them in Australia alone.

Table 1: Languages of the World

Number of speakers	Number of languages	%	Cumulative downwards %	Cumulative upwards %
more than 100 million	9	0.15		99.9
10--99.9 million	72	1.2	1.3	99.8
1--9.9 million	239	3.9	5.2	98.6
100,000--999,999	795	13.1	18.3	94.7
10,000--99,999	1,605	26.5	44.8	81.6
1,000--9,999	1,782	29.4	74.2	55.1
100--999	1,075	17.7	91.9	25.7
10--99	302	5.0	96.9	8.0
1--9	181	3.0	99.9	

There were nearly 500 languages in the world with less than 100 speakers; 1500 with less than 1000; over 3000 with less than 10,000 speakers; and a staggering 5,000 languages with less than 100,000 speakers. It turns out that 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the people. It's perhaps no wonder that so many are in danger.

That figure of 100,000 sometimes takes people by surprise. Surely a language with so many speakers is safe? Not necessarily. Such a language is not going to die next week or next year; but there's no guarantee that it will be surviving in a couple of generations. It all depends on the pressures being imposed upon it – in particular, whether it's 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 NE France, is a classic case. At the beginning of the 20th century it was spoken by as many as a million people, but it is now down to perhaps a quarter of that total. Breton could be safe if enough effort is made – the kind of effort that's already helped Welsh to recover its growth.

If not, the downward trend will just continue, and it could be gone in 50 years. I'm not being dramatic. This scenario has already happened, in recent times, to two other Celtic languages in NE Europe - Cornish, formerly spoken in Cornwall, and Manx, in the Isle of Man. Both are currently attracting support, in an effort to restore what has been lost; but once a language has lost its last native speaker, the task of resurrecting it – though not impossible – is hugely difficult.

It doesn't take a language long to disappear, once the spirit to continue with it leaves its community. In fact, the speed of the decline has been one of the main findings of recent linguistic research.

An example is Aleut, the language of the Aleutian Islands west of Alaska, surviving mainly in just one village, Atka. In 1990 there were 60 speakers left; by 1994 there were just 44, the youngest in their 20s. If that rate of decline continues, Aleut will be gone very soon. It will probably live on for a couple of decades, spoken sporadically, until eventually the last few speakers, isolated from each other and lacking the opportunities to renew the language through daily interaction, find they have no-one to talk to.

Why are so many languages dying? There are several reasons, ranging from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Consider the first factor. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be decimated or wiped out by earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, floods, volcanic eruptions, and other cataclysms. A habitat may remain but become unsurvivable, through a combination of unfavourable

climatic and economic conditions. Famine and drought are the two chief factors. And the historical effect of imported disease on indigenous peoples is now well-established, though the extraordinary scale of the effects, in the early colonial period, is still not widely appreciated.

Within 200 years of the arrival of the first Europeans in the Americas, it's thought that over 90% of the indigenous population was killed by the diseases which accompanied them, brought in by both animals and humans. Some estimates suggest that the population of the New World may have been as high as 100 million before European contact. Within 200 years this had dropped to less than 1 million.

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 around the world. The point hardly needs to be stressed in the Celtic countries, where English has displaced so many languages – but what's sometimes forgotten is that English is by no means the only language which has dominated in this way. 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'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 a hoot 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. The term is *revitalisation*. A community, once it realises that its language is in danger, can get its act together, and introduce measures which can genuinely revitalise. It's happened in

Australia with several aboriginal languages. It's happened in Wales.

And it's happening in other countries too, such as with Galician in Spain. Everything has to be right, of course, for there to be a likelihood of success. The community itself must want to save its language, that's the absolute first step. The culture of which it's a part must need to have a respect for minority languages. There needs to be funding, to enable courses, materials, and teachers to be introduced. And, in a huge number of cases, there need to be linguists, to get on with the basic task of giving the language a permanent record.

That's the bottom line, getting the language documented – recorded, analysed, written down. There are two reasons for this. The obvious one is preservation. Languages are like people, in one way, as I said at the beginning – but in another way they're not like people at all. 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.

The other reason is all to do with why we should care about dying languages at all. It's a challenge to everyone, because language death affects everyone, and it's especially relevant in a conference with the theme of 'breaking down barriers'. Which intellectual domains are most involved? Here's my 'top ten' .

First, biology. We should care about language death for the very 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 colonizing the planet has been due to our ability to develop diverse cultures which suit all kinds of environments. 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 means to be human. If the development of multiple cultures is so important, 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.

Second, epistemology. The world is a mosaic of visions expressed through language. We can learn so much from the visions of others, and this learning can be eminently practical. Encounters with indigenous peoples have frequently brought to light a profound awareness of fauna and flora, rocks and soils, climatic cycles and their impact on the land, the interpretation of landscape, and the whole question of the balance of natural forces. It is language that unifies everything, linking environmental practice with cultural knowledge, and transmitting everything synchronically among the members of a community, as well as diachronically between generations. Animal management, agriculture, botany, and medicine are just some of the areas where language has directed and interpreted observation in ways which have proved to be far more efficient and fruitful than through traditional methods of empirical observation.

For example, in the botanical domain, the bark of different trees can be medically valuable. It's possible for Western observers to look at two plants and see no obvious difference between them; reference to the local language, however, shows that the plants have been given different names, thus suggesting a difference in species or ecological function. Or an example from zoology: a python species from the *Morelia* genus - *oenpelliensis* was given a Western name only in the 1960s. It had long been recognized by

the name *nawaran* in the Australian aboriginal language Gunwinygu.

Third, sociology and anthropology. If we turn the concept of diversity over, we find identity. Identity is a summation of the characteristics which make a community what it is and not something else – of ‘us’ vs. ‘them’. These characteristics may be to do with physical appearance, but just as often (especially in these increasingly heterogeneous days, when it can be difficult to tell what community people belong to just by looking at their faces) 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. Here, understanding the issues requires a collaboration between linguists and anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists.

Fourth, history. A language encapsulates its speakers' history. It expresses, through the grammar and lexicon of its texts, the events which form its past. Even the most casual glance at the reference section of any library conveys the extent to which people are reliant on written language for a full sense of their origins and development, as a nation. The literature section makes the point just as 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, the name scribbled on the back of a photograph, the entries in parish registers and gravestone inscriptions – 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.

Fifth, archaeology. Languages relate to history in a broader sense, in that they can provide a partial window into prehistory. For example, there's an ongoing research project supported by the British Academy exploring early Central Andean civilization. By examining the many indigenous languages and dialects of the region, in particular Quechua and Aymara, it proves possible to infer significant historical detail in the patterns of their origins, especially in relation to the spread of the Inca empire, and to suggest movements that may have taken place long before the historical record. Similar joint comparative studies have been illuminating in helping to formulate hypotheses about the prehistoric journeys of peoples in many parts of the world. Language death reduces the pool of relevant evidence.

Sixth, cognitive science. There's a long-standing debate in philosophy, psychology, and linguistics about the relationship between language, thought and culture, stimulated largely by the claim made by Benjamin Lee Whorf in the 1940s: 'We dissect nature (he said) along lines laid down by our native languages'. That there is a significant relationship between language and culture is repeatedly affirmed - not least by the United Nations at the beginning of the International Year of Languages in 2008: 'linguistic diversity (it said) is an important element in cultural diversity'. The problem with such statements is that they're intrinsically vague. It is easy to refer to the uniqueness, individual richness, special expressiveness, and so on of languages. What we need are more systematic comparisons of languages to determine just how much is shared and how much is unique? We all have a sense of the uniqueness of a language, of the individual vision of the world that the language expresses. But how do we quantify that? As soon as we begin to ask these questions, we realize that the extent to which language, thought, and culture interact remains one of the great cognitive unknowns in our subject.

Comparing closely related languages, such as French and Spanish, will not get us very far. We need as diverse a sample of languages as it is possible to obtain, and this is where endangered languages come in, for many of them belong to very small families or are even isolates - unique representatives, with no known connection with other languages, and thus of critical relevance to this debate.

Seventh, literature. Whatever the relationship between language and thought, literature is widely held to provide the fullest expression of the way an individual or a community thinks. It's perhaps the best way of countering the argument of those who maintain that a single language would be a global blessing. For what is lost when a language is lost? A moment's reflection shows that, for English, there would have been no Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Dickens - to name but three. If there had been no French? Or Russian? Anyone familiar with the literature of these languages would be able to answer the questions. What we need to remember is that the literatures of endangered languages, whether written or oral, are just as powerful in their aesthetic and perceptive expressiveness as are any of the world's recognized literatures. When a language dies, it is perhaps comparative literature which suffers most.

Eighth, linguistics. It's an axiom of linguistics that each language is unique. Accordingly, the loss of a language that has never been recorded is the loss of information about the nature of the human language faculty. In some cases, the loss could be quite dramatic. Imagine what we would not have known if all the Khoisan click languages of southern Africa had died out before linguists had had a chance to study them. Who would ever have thought that click sounds, such as 'tut tut', would function as consonants, and in such numbers, in so many different ways. Fortunately, we now have a full understanding of how this phonetic mechanism operates. But what other surprises lie in store for the linguist, in the 2000 or so languages of the world that have not yet been described? We will never know, without the opportunity to

document them. That's why it's so important to record 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 we mustn't forget that there are only about 6000 sources in all.

Ninth, the arts, in the broadest sense of this term. The arts have a significant role in relation to language death, as part of the process of revitalization. Documenting and revitalizing languages costs money. Linguists have to be imported or trained, schoolteachers provided, community centres established, pedagogical texts published. Websites, TV stations, and other media opportunities need to be explored to ensure a pervasive public presence. Fund-raising, whether carried out at international, national, regional, or local levels, is plainly a priority. But funds do not come unless politicians, business people, philanthropists and others are aware of the urgency of a need and convinced of its desirability. Fostering a climate of opinion thus has to be carried on in parallel with the above activities. Endangered languages have to be given a higher public profile, which means devising appropriate campaigns. And this is where the arts come into play. People do not change their minds, or develop positive attitudes about endangered languages, just by being given information; the arguments need to capture their emotions, and this is what the arts can do. But there are still far too few poems, plays, novels, and other genres in which the notion of language endangerment and death is the theme. And when we consider other art genres, such as music, painting, and dance, language death, despite its obvious dramatic potential, is conspicuous by its absence.

Tenth, and finally, information technology. Many parts of the world where languages are most seriously endangered have not yet come to benefit from electronic technology – or, for that matter, electricity. But in principle, IT offers endangered languages a fresh set of opportunities whose potential has hardly begun to be explored. To begin with, these languages need a public profile -

which is traditionally an expensive business: newspaper space, or radio and television time, does not come cheaply. Only the 'better-off' languages can afford to make routine use of these media. But with the Internet, once electronic technology is available, everyone is equal. The cost of a Web page is the same, whether the contributor is writing in English, Spanish, Welsh, or Navajo. It's perfectly possible for a minority language culture to make its presence felt on the Internet, and over a thousand minority languages have some form of Internet presence now. Of particular significance, of course, is the fact that the Net provides an identity no longer linked to a geographical location. People can maintain a linguistic relationship with their relatives, friends, and colleagues, wherever they may be. Whereas traditionally the geographical scattering of a community through migration has been an important factor in the dissolution of its language, in future this may no longer be the case. The Internet is altering our scenarios of endangerment.

So, ten intellectual domains, at least - I'm sure listeners can add others - brought together by the phenomenon of language death, and each contributing its unique perspective. It is an ideal topic for a conference on 'breaking down barriers'. But in some ways it is perhaps different to other topics, because as soon as one is persuaded about the dangers of language extinction, the question immediately comes to mind: What can be done? or even, What can I do? There is, in fact, plenty individuals can do. An easy step is to add yourself to the membership of national groups working in this area, such as the Foundation for Endangered Languages in the UK. If there isn't already such an organization in your country, why not start one? If you speak an endangered language yourself, or live in an area where one is spoken, then you can use your experience to help increase public awareness of the linguistic crisis facing the planet as a whole.

The huge range of activities associated with the International Year of Languages show what can be done. And if you are an artist, or

are friends with one, why not help the world build a canon of artworks on the theme of language death and survival? At least, that way, future generations will know we cared.