Language death

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Language death. The death of a language. The word has the same kind of reluctant resonance as it has when we talk about the death of a person. And indeed, that is 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 is there; the next, it is gone.

Here is 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 are the last speaker of a language, you are often rather special, in the eyes of your community, because of what you know, of what you stand for. 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 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 care passionately, and later I’ll tell you why. But first, we need to appreciate the size of the problem. 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. That is understandable. 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, 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 is 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 do not just make notes about its grammar and vocabulary, and how it is 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 is 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 is not likely to last very long.
In a survey which was published in February 1999 (www.sil.org/ethnologue), there were 51 languages with just one speaker left – 28 of them in Australia alone. 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. It turns out that 96% of the world’s languages are spoken by just 4% of the people. It is perhaps no wonder that so many are in danger.

The figure of 100,000, in an article on endangered languages, sometimes takes people by surprise. Surely a language with 100,000 speakers is safe? The evidence is to the contrary. Such a language is not going to die next week or next year; but there is 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 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 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 has already helped Welsh to recover its growth. If not, the downward trend will just continue, and it could be gone in 50 years. I am 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 – although not impossible, as has been seen with some of the Aboriginal languages of Australia – is hugely difficult.

It does not 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 by 2010. It will probably live on until the middle of the century, 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 so many 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 is 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. You’ve seen it happen in Australia with several aboriginal languages. And it’s happening in other countries too. 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 putting the language down on paper.

That’s the bottom line, isn’t it, getting the language documented – recorded, analysed, written down. There are two reasons for this. The obvious one is educational – the need for literacy. But there’s a second reason, and this is all to do with why we should care about dying languages at all. 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. We’re 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.

We can learn so much from the visions of others. Sometimes the learning is eminently practical, such as when we discover new medical treatments from the folk medicine practices of an indigenous people. Sometimes it’s intellectual – an increase in our awareness of the history of our world, such as when the links between languages tell us something about the movements of early civilisations. And of course, very often we learn something new about language itself – the behaviour that makes us truly human, and without which there would be no radio, no Melbourne Writers’ Festival, no talk at all. That’s why it is so important to document 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 don’t forget, there are only about 6000 sources in all.

So, there are good ecological, social, and linguistic reasons why we should care about language death. But nonetheless, not everyone believes we should. There are some pretty deep-rooted myths about. Here’s the main one. Some people think that the multiplicity of the world’s languages is a curse rather than a blessing. Indeed, you’ll have heard the phrase ‘the curse of Babel’, referring to the time when God supposedly punished humanity for its pride by making people speak different languages. Ah, you can hear people say, if only we had just one language in the world, whether English, Esperanto, or whatever, we’d all be better off. There’d be no misunderstanding. It would be a new reign of world peace.

That argument sounds very attractive. If only it were so easy. But the fact of the matter is that a monolingual world would not bring peace any more than it comes to monolingual countries today. Quite the contrary. Look at all the really big trouble spots of the world in recent decades – Cambodia, a monolingual country; Vietnam, a monolingual country; Rwanda and Burundi, almost alone in Africa for being monolingual countries. All monolingual countries have had their civil wars. If people want to fight each other, it takes more than a common language to stop them.

It’s the other way round. If you want to have a peaceful world, one of the first things you have to do is pay attention to people’s rights within society, and to their identities as
communities – and the chief emblem, or badge of a community is its language. A sensitive policy of multilingualism, and a concern for minority languages – these are much more likely to lay the foundation for peaceful and mutually beneficial coexistence.

Could we save a few thousand languages, just like that? Of course, if the will and funding were available. So how much would it cost, you must be thinking? Well it’s not cheap, when you think of what has to be done – getting linguists into the field, supporting the community with language resources and teachers, getting grammars and dictionaries of the language out, writing materials for use in schools – and all over a period of several years, because it takes time, lots of it, to revitalise an endangered language. Conditions vary so much that it’s difficult to generalize, but a figure of 100 thousand dollars a year per language can’t 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 dollars. That sounds like a lot. But let’s put it in perspective. It’s equivalent to just over one day’s OPEC oil revenues, in an average year. One day.

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. It’s worth remembering: when a language dies, which has never been written down, it is as if it has never been.