

REVITALIZING LANGUAGES

David Crystal discusses language life, death, and resurrection

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. Hittite, for example, died out when its civilization disappeared in Old Testament times. But what is happening today is extraordinary, judged by the standards of the past. It is language extinction on a massive scale.

The Size of the Problem

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.

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. And we have to draw the same conclusion if a language has less than 100 speakers. It is not likely to last very long. A 1999 survey has shown 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?

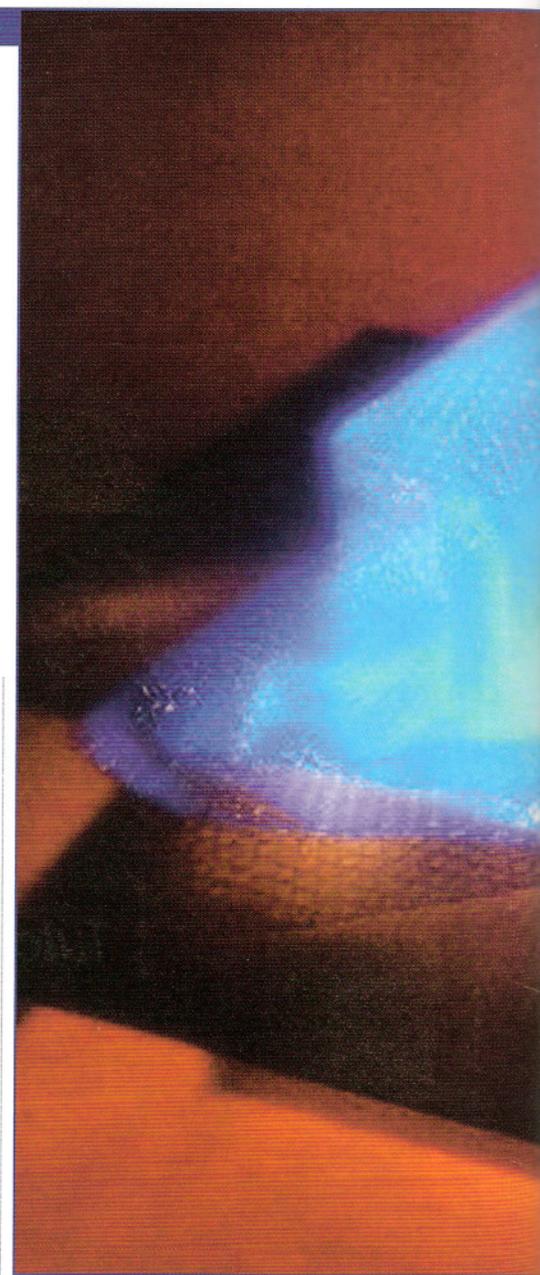
The reasons range from natural disasters, through different forms of cultural assimilation, to genocide. Small communities in isolated areas can easily be decimated or wiped

out by earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other cataclysms. A habitat may become unsurvivable through unfavorable climatic and economic conditions—famine and drought especially. Communities can die through imported disease. 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, such as English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French, around the world. 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. The term is revitalization.

Why Should We Care?

Once a community realizes that its language is in danger, it can get its act together, and introduce measures, which can genuinely revitalize. Everything has to be right, of course, for there to be a likelihood of success. The community itself must want to save its language. The culture of which it is a part must need to have a respect for minority languages. There needs to be funding, to support courses, materials, and teachers. And there need to be linguists, to get on with the basic task of putting the language down on paper.

That's the bottom line: getting the language documented—recorded, analyzed, written down. The obvious reason for this is educational—the need for literacy. People must be able to read and write, if they or their language is to have a future in an increasingly computer-literate civilization.



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 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.

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 is intellectual—an increase in our awareness of the history of our world, as when the links between languages tell us



year. Or a fraction of the profits of the major computer organizations. I often fantasize: wouldn't it be fine if the companies which have most fostered the linguicidal consequences of globalization in the last century should be the ones to save the world's languages and cultures from extinction in this one? It could be done.

There are very few success stories so far, because the money and political will have not been there, and in many cases it is too soon to say whether long-term survival is certain. 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 the case of Welsh, alone among the Celtic languages in not only stopping its steady decline towards extinction but (in the 1991 census) showing signs of real growth. The status of Welsh is protected by two Language Acts now, and its presence is increasingly in evidence wherever you travel in Wales.

On the other side of the world, Maori in New Zealand has been maintained by a system of so-called "language nests", first introduced in 1982. These are organizations, which provide children under five with a domestic setting in which they are intensively exposed to the language. The staff are all Maori speakers from the local community. The hope is that the children will keep their Maori skills alive after leaving the nests, and that as they grow older they will in turn

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something about the movements of early civilizations. And of course, very often we learn something new about language itself—the behavior that makes us truly human. That is 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 there are only about 6000 sources in all.

Can It Be Done?

Can we save a few thousand languages, just like that? Of course, if the will and funding were available. So how much would it cost? It is not cheap, when you think of what has to be done—getting linguists into the field,

training local analysts, supporting the community with language resources and teachers, compiling grammars and dictionaries, writing materials for use in schools—and all over a period of several years, because it takes time, lots of it, to revitalize an endangered language. Conditions vary so much that it is difficult to generalize, but a figure of \$100 thousand a year per language cannot 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.

Shall we be neat, and say a billion dollars? It sounds like a lot. But we must put it in perspective. It is equivalent to just over one day's OPEC oil revenues, in an average

become role models to new generations of young children.

There are cases like this all over the world. A similar language immersion program has been used in Hawaii, with promising results for Hawaiian. The same applies to Tahitian (in Tahiti) and Yukagir (in Siberia). In North America, Navajo, Seneca, and Mohawk are among several Indian languages, which have begun to benefit from a "bottom-up" reawakening of interest by local communities, along with "top-down" political support, in the form of measures guaranteeing language rights. And when the reviving language is associated with a degree of political autonomy, the growth can be especially striking, as shown by Faroese,

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spoken in the Faroe Islands, after the islanders received a measure of autonomy from Denmark.

Several seriously endangered Aboriginal languages of Australia have been maintained and revived, thanks to community efforts, work by Australian linguists, and the help of local linguistic and cultural organizations. And if good descriptions and materials are available, even extinct languages can be resurrected. Kurna, from South Australia, is an example. This language had been extinct for about a century, but had been quite well documented. So, when a strong movement grew for its revival, it was possible to reconstruct it. The revised language is not the same as the original, of course. It lacks the range that the original had, and much of the old vocabulary. But it can nonetheless act as a badge of present-day identity for its people. And as long as people continue to value it as a true marker of their identity, and are prepared to keep using it, it will develop new functions and new vocabulary, as any other living language would do.

It is too soon to predict the future of these revived languages, but in some parts of the world they are attracting precisely the range of positive attitudes and grass roots support, which are the preconditions for language survival. The interest can be seen in Britain, in the form of enthusiastic revival movements supporting Cornish and Manx, whose last mother-tongue speakers died out many decades ago. In such unexpected but



heart-warming ways might we see the grand total of languages in the world minimally increased.

An Eternal Loss

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 realize that their language will live on. And conversely, it is difficult to express the sense of loss, when you have not experienced it. Australian author David Malouf puts it this way, in his short story *The Only Speaker of His Tongue* (1985): "When I think of my tongue being no longer alive in the mouths of men, a chill goes over me that

is deeper than my own death, since it is the gathered death of all my kind."

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 artifacts—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. ■

Professor David Crystal is one of the world's foremost experts on the subject of language. After a long and distinguished academic career, David now travels extensively lecturing on language to audience throughout the world. His recent books include *Language Death* and *Shakespeare's Words*.



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