CHAPTER 25

Most of the World's Languages Went Extinct

John H. McWhorter

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Since human language began, perhaps 100,000 to 150,000 years ago, new languages have formed and old languages have "died." Humans have migrated as part of our species' heritage, until we began to settle down following the Neolithic revolution—the invention/discovery of agriculture (at different times in different parts of the world). Some experts believe that sedentism has been accompanied by increasing language loss. Migrants may learn the language of groups they encounter, or the two languages may form a hybrid (a creole). People may add more languages to those they already know, or they may delete old ones as they learn new ones. When small groups speak an isolated language, its fate is intertwined with their biological and cultural fate; if they die off, the language dies with them.

Experts speculate that prior to the advent of agriculture, humans spoke a vastly greater number of different languages, perhaps as many as 100,000! Now that number is down to about 6,000, but many of them are spoken only by very small numbers of people.

Of course, "language death" is a metaphor, but it is the one commonly used to discuss this phenomenon. Language death begins with multilingualism, followed by "language shift," when people begin to move to another language for many of their communicative needs.

Using the analogy of biological evolution, in this chapter John McWhorter discusses the tragedy of linguistic extinction. He adds that linguistic extinction is even more complete than biological extinction because languages have left no trace at all, while organisms have had the chance to remain as fossils or as genetic constructs from offspring DNA.

McWhorter begins with a discussion of the reasons one language may give way to another over a brief period of time. He details many cases of languages known to have died both in the remote past and in very recent time. Moreover, even cases when languages have not completely disappeared cannot compensate for the fact that the vast majority of the people in the world—96 percent—speak just twenty powerful languages (maybe along with an indigenous language). McWhorter further argues that with the growth of cities and of national cultures, it is unrealistic to expect anything like the 6,000 currently spoken languages to endure, sad though that prospect is.

McWhorter pleads the case that what is lost when a language dies is not so much the cultural knowledge associated with that language but rather the specifics of the language, the details of its structure, the delicate, elaborate rules. So he urges linguists and others who love language at the very least to record dying languages so that in the future we can know what they were.

Reading Questions

- What is the general pattern of language death?
- What evidence do we have of earlier languages that have died?

John H. McWhorter, Most of the World's Languages Went Extinct. From *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. New York: Times Books, 2001, pp. 253–86.

- What causes languages to die? How can this be resisted, if it can? What cases have been successful?
- How have the specifics of industrialization and urbanization contributed to language death? What is the future likely to hold in terms of linguistic diversity?

[This discussion is part of a larger work] dedicated to an analogy between biological evolution and human language. Like animals and plants, languages change, split into subvarieties, hybridize, revivify, evolve functionless features, and can even be genetically altered. The analogy continues in that languages, like animals and plants, can go extinct.

As animals and plants drive one another to extinction by nosing one another out of ecological niches in competition for sustenance, in the past languages have usually gone extinct when one group conquers another or when a group opts for a language that it perceives as affording it greater access to resources it perceives as necessary to survival. Typically, a generation of speakers of a language becomes bilingual in one spoken by a group that is politically dominant or endowed with valuable goods or access to same. This bilingual situation can persist across several generations, but as often as not, the inevitable tendency for languages to be **indexed** to social evaluations takes its toll. Usually, through time new generations come to associate the outside language with status and upward mobility and the indigenous one with "backwardness." This is especially the case when the dominant language is a First World "tall building" language associated with money, technology, and enshrinement in the media while the indigenous one is an obscure tongue spoken only in villages.

A point arrives when one generation speaks the outside language better than the indigenous language, largely using the latter to speak with older relatives and in ritual functions. As such, these people do not speak the indigenous language much better than many Americans might speak French or Spanish after a few years of lessons in high school. One is unlikely to speak to one's child in a language one is not fully comfortable in and does not consider an expression of oneself. It is here that a language dies, because a language can only be passed on intact as a mother tongue to children. Once it is spoken only by adults and is no longer being passed on to children, even though it will be "spoken" in the strict sense for another several decades, it will die with its last fluent speakers.

Our natural sense is to suppose that, as long as the language has been written down or codified in a grammar, then it need not be dead forever. However, grammar writing is a relatively recent practice, and in the absence of a grammar, a dead language's full apparatus is only evident when there is a considerable volume of writings. This is in turn only the case for a small number of "big actors" such as Latin. Because writing itself is a relatively recent invention—as it has been put, if humans had existed for just one day, then writing would have been invented about 11:00 P.M.—obviously even these potential paths of rescue have been unavailable to human language for most of its existence. Until 11:00 P.M., once a language went extinct, it was gone forever.

An extinct language before the advent of writing is even more unrecoverable than an extinct life form. Life forms may leave their impressions as fossils, and technology gets ever closer to allowing us to someday at least partially resurrect ancient life forms through remains of their DNA. However, a language could not leave an "imprint" before writing existed, because an individual language is not encoded in a person's genes. If the ability to speak is genetically encoded, we can be quite sure that this inheritance is a generalized one allowing someone to speak any language on earth. The particular word shapes, grammatical configurations, and various irregularities that characterize any one language are the result of largely random accretions through the millennia, no more reproducible from basic human materials than the form of an individual snowflake is from the water droplets that it began as.

And even when a language is preserved in writing, there is a long trip indeed between the tales, recipes, battle accounts, and poetry preserved on the page and the language being used daily by living, breathing human beings as an expression of their souls. Many of us can attest to this from our exposure to Latin—no matter how good you may have gotten at those declensions, conjugations, and ablative absolutes, even this was a long way from speaking the language fluently, and what life conditions can we even imagine, outside of the clergy, where fluent Latin would be natural or necessary? Languages die when others take their place—we don't *need* Latin or any dead language, because we've got languages of our own. As often as not, a revived language hovers in the realm of the "undead"—part of the revivification effort entails gamely making space for the language in lives already quite full without it and sometimes even vaguely discomfited by its return.

World History: A Treadmill to Linguistic Oblivion?

It Was Ever Thus—To an Extent

Like biological extinctions, **language death** has been a regular and unsung occurrence throughout human history. We have records of Indo-European languages now no longer spoken, such as Hittite from present-day Turkey and Syria, and Tocharian, spoken by Europeans who penetrated as far east as present-day China. There was once a Romance language spoken on the Adriatic shores called Dalmatian, a kind of transition between Italian and Romanian, whose last speaker died in 1898.[1] The Romance languages in general spread in a continuous patch from Portugal eastward until a

break after Italy, turning up again only in Romania, with the exception of some dots of odd Romanian dialects spoken in the interim. As was Dalmatian, these dots are remnants of what once were many other Romance languages filling in today's gap—languages that died in the face of encroaching Slavic varieties now spoken in the former Yugoslavia. A Slavic language called Sorbian (or Wendish) is spoken within German borders and, predictably, has lost in the competition with German and is now only spoken by a few elderly people. King Arthur represented the Celtic peoples who once inhabited all of the British Isles and significant swaths of Iberia and present-day France. The onslaught of the Romans and then the Vikings pushed the languages they spoke to the margins. Gaelic hangs on tenuously in Ireland, as does an offshoot variety in Scotland; Welsh does so in Wales; and Breton is fighting for life in northwestern France. But the Gaulish that the *Asterix* characters are supposed to be speaking has not been heard from since about A.D. 500, the last full speaker of Cornish of Cornwall died in 1777, and Manx of the Isle of Man died in 1974.

In other cases, language deaths in the past are only reconstructable by inference. In Africa, where languages often change from one small region to another, the Maa language is relatively unusual in being spoken across a belt of territory incorporating two countries, stretching from the top of Kenya to the middle of Tanzania. Peculiarities among various groups of its speakers attest to Maa having "killed" local languages in its spread, the Maa being a traditionally successful pastoral people who migrated widely in the past in search of grazing lands.

In northern Kenya, there are Maa speakers who stand out in being hunter-gatherers instead of pastoralists. These Dorobo peoples assist the Maa of the area in their herding, and the Maa's oral tradition mentions having met hunter-gatherers in the past. Presumably before the meeting, the Dorobo spoke their own language, this made even more likely by the cultural distinctiveness they retain today. Southward there are other Maa speakers whose cultural distinctiveness tips us off to language death in days of yore. The Camus people on Lake Baringo of Kenya farm and fish, traits alien to and even looked down on by traditional Maa peoples; the Arusa of Tanzania also remain farmers, though speaking Maa. In other cases, the death of languages in the face of Maa is concretely visible as speakers remain who speak a shredded version of the original language: the Elmolo, Yaaku, and Omotik languages are now only spoken by the very old, their communities having opted for Maa in connection with the benefits of the pastoral life style.

It was ever thus, then. No more ammonites, *Pteranodon*, or eighteen-foot-tall rhinoceroses;[2] no more Hittite, Dalmatian, or Elmolo. There is a sense in which we cannot help but regret the demise of any of the endlessly marvelous permutations of life or language, and surely the demise of each creature or language is in the strict sense a tale of marginalization and erasure. Animals and plants have vanished as often in catastrophic grand extinctions as through gradual outnumbering by more successful competitors, and languages have often died as the result of violent conquest, enslavement, and oppression. However, under ordinary conditions, we could perhaps congratulate ourselves that naked conquest of this sort is no longer officially sanctioned by the world community (even if, sadly, conditions too often leave such events to be allowed passively to proceed, especially when the people in question are not perceived as commercially important) and that our enlightened awareness of the value of diversity combined with the availability of writing will further help ensure that languages will no longer disappear at nearly the rate that they used to.

This, however, is an understandable but mistaken view. Our parallel with animals and plants unfortunately extends to the fact that, today, languages are in fact disappearing at a rate as alarmingly rapid as that of flora and fauna. The same geopolitical forces that are raping the global environment are also vaporizing not just the occasional obscure tongue spoken in remote regions, but most of the world's six thousand languages. Today, a subset of the "top twenty" languages (Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German, French, Punjabi, Javanese, Bihari, Italian, Korean, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, and Vietnamese)[3] are imposed as languages of education and wider commerce throughout the world. The result is that ninety-six percent of the world's population speaks one or more of these top twenty; that is, these people speak one of these languages in addition to an indigenous one, and there is a threat that succeeding generations will learn only the dominant one and let the indigenous one die. This means that only *four percent* of the world's population is living and dying speaking *only* an indigenous language.

This imbalance of power leads to some rather gruesome predictions. By one reasonable estimate, ninety percent of the world's languages will be dead by 2100—that is, about fifty-five hundred full, living languages will no longer be spoken about 1,125 months from when you are reading this. As David Crystal puts it, this means that a language is dying roughly every two weeks.

Many of the languages we are most exposed to are among the top twenty or will be among the five-hundred-odd "medium" languages that will likely survive the impending mass extinction (Catalan, Finnish, Wolof, Thai, Tagalog, etc.), and all of these languages have been so richly documented in writing and in recordings that, even if they lost all of their native speakers, their revival, or at least maintenance on life support, would be at least technically feasible. Thus it can be difficult to appreciate the massive loss that more widespread language death will entail.

The Native American situation is illustrative. Before the arrival of Europeans, there were about three hundred separate languages spoken by Native Americans in what is today the continental United States. Today, a third of those languages are no longer spoken, whereas all but a handful of the rest are spoken only by the very old and will surely be extinct within a decade or so. The current situation is as in Europe, Albanian, Frisian, Romanian, Basque, Catalan, Occitan, Welsh, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Irish and Scottish

Gaelic were no longer spoken, and meanwhile only English, German, and Russian were still being passed on to children, with Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic, Dutch, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Serbo-Croatian, Macedonian, Polish, Bulgarian, Finnish, Estonian, and Hungarian only spoken by very old people, viewed as "quaint" and backward by young people jetting around in sports cars.

Each of these Native American languages was an astoundingly complex and remarkably beautiful conglomeration, presenting the glorious kinds of baroquenesses we [might see] in Cree. Europe is covered mostly by languages of one family such that all are based on a common general "game plan," but the Native American languages spoken north of Mexico constituted at the very least two dozen families, with a range of variation across the continent as broad as that on the entire Eurasian landmass, taking in Indo-European, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and others.

The First Crack in the Dam: The Neolithic Revolution

The trend toward a decrease in the number of the world's languages is, in large view, not an isolated phenomenon but one symptom of general trends in human development in the past several millennia. Until just about eleven thousand years ago, humanity worldwide consisted of relatively small groups of hunter-gatherers. This life style was not one inherently geared toward population increase and spread, and thus the world was feasibly shareable by large numbers of such groups, with minimum occasion for one group to exterminate another one along with its language. We can be sure such things happened but generally on a very local scale, counterbalanced by the birth of new languages as groups that reached a certain size spawned offshoot groups who moved away from the original group, their speech eventually developing into a new language. It has been estimated that this world could have harbored as many as one hundred thousand languages, and the scenario has been termed *linguistic equilibrium*.

Large-scale language death began with the development of agriculture in many societies, starting in about 9000 B.C. Agriculture required large expanses of land, and its greater yield of food led to hitherto unknown population growth. Cultivation allows the amassing of food surpluses, which, freeing certain classes of people from hand-to-mouth subsistence, is the basis of the development of hierarchies of specialization that breed technological advances. Armed with these, and in constant need of extra space as their populations burgeoned, agricultural societies quickly began overrunning hunter-gatherer groups worldwide.

Even the way in which the world's language families are distributed today makes it clear that language death has been a regular part of human existence for several millennia. In India, roughly speaking, the languages spoken in the top half are Indo-European languages such as Hindi, Bengali, and Marathi, whereas in the bottom half, languages of another family called Dravidian are spoken, including Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, and Malayalam. However, the subdivision of space is not perfect: there is the occasional Dravidian language spoken way up in northern India or even as far northwest as present-day Pakistan. What are those people doing way up there? From our present-day perspective, it looks as if certain Dravidian speakers decided at some point to pack up and move thousands of miles away from their homelands. Much more likely, and supported archaeologically, is that Indo-European speakers slowly moved southward, with formerly spoken Dravidian languages dying along the way as their speakers were incorporated into the invaders' societies for generations and gave up their original languages. Life is never tidy, and naturally some pockets remain that the invaders never happened to get to. Thus the Dravidian "outliers" are remnants of a once greater variety of Dravidian languages spoken in southern Asia.

A similar case is the Dahalo language of Kenya, unusual in having the **clicks** otherwise found only way down in the south of Africa, among a small group of languages called Khoi-San and a few Bantu languages spoken near them such as Xhosa and Zulu. It is easy to see why the Bantu languages have the clicks—language contact long ago with Khoi-San speakers. However, what are clicks doing way up in Kenya? Clicks are so extremely rare cross-linguistically—otherwise found only in one Australian language, and even there, only in a special "secret" variety of that language—that it is unlikely that the clicks developed in Kenya merely by chance. Most likely, Khoi-San "click" languages were once spoken more widely in Africa, and Dahalo is one of the only remnants of that situation. What this means is that untold numbers of click languages must have died as Bantu and other peoples spread into what began as click-language territory. Again, archaeological evidence supports this scenario: skulls of people of the ethnicity who today speak Khoi-San languages have been found as far north as Zambia, and the Bantu takeover apparently occurred within a mere few centuries' time after 1000 B.C.

In the New World and Australia, Europeans similarly overwhelmed Native American and Aboriginal languages, assisted by the germs that living among livestock had immunized them to but that quite often decimated indigenous hunter-gatherer populations on impact.

Situation Critical: The Downsides of the Global Economy

Thus even today's six thousand languages constitute a vast decrease in the number of languages that existed before the Neolithic revolution. Today, however, a second revolution, which some leftist political commentators term the imperialist one, is having an even starker effect on how many languages are spoken in the world.

During the Neolithic revolution, when a language spread across an area, it generally did so relatively slowly such that, by the time the spread was complete, the language had already developed into several new ones, which continued to spawn new ones in turn. For example, by the time

Latin was disseminated throughout the Roman Empire, its progenitor Proto-Indo-European had elsewhere in Europe already split into several branches such as Germanic, Slavic, Celtic, Hellenic (Greek). Then Latin itself developed into more than a dozen new languages, the Romance languages, while at the same time Proto-Slavic developed into several new tongues. Thus, though Europe was once covered by languages now lost forever, this original diversity was replaced at least partly by new diversity. Furthermore, until recently, Europeans were unable to physically take over tropical and subtropical regions, where farming methods developed for temperate climates were ineffective and diseases Europeans had no immunity to tended to kill them, just as their own diseases tended to kill Native Americans and Australian Aborigines.

However, in the past few hundred years, the development of capitalism and the Industrial Revolution, and its resultant technological advances and encouragement of strongly centralized nationalist governments, have led a certain handful of languages to begin gradually elbowing not just many but *most* of the world's remaining languages out of existence. The urgencies of capitalism require governments to exact as much work and allegiance from their populations as possible, and the imposition of a single language has traditionally been seen as critical to this goal, especially within the nationalist models that have ruled since the 1700s. [Relevent is] the active hostility of the French government to the Occitan dialects and other "patois" of France, in favor of a scenario under which everyone in France spoke French.

In our era, climatological boundaries present few barriers to the onslaught. Today, language death is often caused less by physical conquest than by gradually yoking indigenous peoples into a centralized cash economy. This is often done by transforming their traditional life styles on site according to what their local topography can bear, with the aid of advances in agricultural technology. In other cases, the dominant power renders much of the population migrant laborers, spending half of their lives working in cities, this facilitated by modern transportation technology (assembling part-time work forces drawn from afar was more difficult before the invention of trains, for example). In the past few centuries, a great many human societies have been drawn from independent subsistence on the land into dependent relationships with capitalist superstructures, with traditional ways of life often actively discouraged in favor of new practices geared toward supplying the central government with salable resources.

A Skeleton of Its Former Self: A Language Withers Away

What happens to a language as it dies? Generally, the last generation of fluent speakers has learned it only partly, never truly living in the language, using it only in the corners of their lives. As a result, the language is slightly **pidginized**. However, whereas in many cases a **pidgin** has been a temporary "setback" on the way to its expansion into a new language, the moribund variety of a dying language is a step along the way to permanent demise.

"I Wish I Had the Words": Atrophied Vocabulary

Just as pidgins such as early Tok Pisin had restricted vocabularies, dying languages' vocabularies are constricted, with many single words pinch-hitting for concepts that were expressed by several more specific ones in the living language. Cayuga is a Native American language originally spoken in New York State. Under the Jackson Administration in the 1830s, as *you was* popped up in letters written by white clerks in New York City, many Native Americans were relocated to Oklahoma, intended as a delineated Indian Territory, and Cayugas were among them. By 1980, only a few elderly people spoke any Cayuga but had been thoroughly English-dominant all of their lives, and their Cayuga was seriously frayed around the edges as a result. The Oklahoma Cayuga had a word for *leg* but none for *thigh*, a word for *foot* but none for *ankle* or *toe*, words for *face* and *eye* but none for *cheek* or *eyebrow*. Where full Cayuga had a word specifically meaning *enter*, these old people substituted the more general word *go*, such that *Come into the house* was rendered as *Go into the house*. The nuance of where the speaker was in relation to the house—determining whether one would say from the porch ***Come** in* or say from a hill up yonder *Go in*—was left to context.

The Genericization of a Language: The Demise of the "Hard Stuff"

Just as pidgins strip away aspects of language not necessary to basic communication, dying languages are marked by a tendency to let drop many of the accreted "frills" languages drift into developing through time. In a language that one uses little, the first thing to start wearing away in the grammar is, predictably, the "hard stuff" that takes lifelong daily practice to learn and retain.

The Death of Inflections One "frill" in a language is the inflectional **prefix** or **suffix**, which quite a few languages do without. **Inflections** arise accidentally through time from what begin usually as separate words, which as inflections become one of the challenging aspects of language to learn, entailing lists of arbitrarily shaped bits of stuff signaling concepts such as gender, person, and number that are in any case either clear from context or unnecessary to communication. People who use an inflected language day in and day out learn the inflections with ease and have no trouble retaining them throughout their lives; they become as ingrained as walking. But in dying languages speakers have often never mastered the inflections fully or have lost control of them in time, and thus to them the inflections become "hard," just as they would be to a foreigner learner.

Thus speakers of a dying inflected language often avoid using inflections in favor of more immediately transparent constructions, just as an English speaker feels as if he has

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...ntext a kind of break when finding out that, in Spanish, ...stead of *hablaré* "I will speak" he can also say *Voy a hablar*, ...hich allows him to get around calling up the ending in favor ...using a form of the verb *go* that he has already learned. In ...ditional forms of Pipil, spoken in Guatemala and El Salva- ...ere were future inflections, such that *I will pass* was:

Ni-panu-s
1- pass- will

...day we mostly see this in old texts; elderly living speak- ...might cough it up for money, but in the Pipil they speak, ...stepped down in comparison with the living language of ...the future is expressed with a "going to" construction. ...going to do it* is:

Ni-yu ni-k-chiwa
1- go 1- it-do

...Pipil has moved in the direction of pidginhood, par- ...the tendency in pidgins to express the future with ...going' expressions (although many old languages happen ...express the future this way as well).

The Soul of Celtic Melts Away In Welsh, . . . the first con- ...sonant of a noun often changes, depending on which pos- ...sessive word comes before. The word for *cat* is *cath*, but the ...word takes on a different form as used with the word for ...*my*:

ein cath "their cat"
fy nghath "my cat"

...*his* and *her* case is particularly interesting because the ...same word is used for both: only the change in the conso- ...nant shows whether *his* or *her* is intended in the meaning:

ei gath "his cat"
ei chath "her cat"

...Welsh's relative Gaelic—namely, the Scottish variety ...spoken in Sutherland County—speakers in their forties ...were the last generation of fluent speakers left in the early ...70s. Gaelic has the same kinds of consonant changes ...as Welsh does, and one sign of the decay of the Suther- ...land speakers' Gaelic was the gradual breakdown of these ...rules. To say *She was kept in* in living Scottish Gaelic, laid ...out Celtic languages are on a basic foundation quite dif- ...ferent from English's, one says literally "Was she on her ...keeping in":

Bha i air a cùmail.
was she on her keeping-in

...This is a little challenging to wrap our heads around, but for ...our purposes concentrate on the last two words:

Bha i air a **cùmail.**
was she on **her keeping-in**

...to say *He was kept in*—that is, "Was he on his keeping in"— ...uses the same word as for *her*, but the consonant in the ...following verb changes:

Bha e air a **chùmail.**
was he on his keeping-in

And to say *They were kept in*, there is a different consonant change:

Bha iad air an **gùmail.**
was they on their keeping-in

In the moribund Scottish Gaelic of Sutherland County, however, as often as not, in all three cases the form *chùmail*, properly used with *his*, was used for all three:

Bha i air a **chùmail.** "She was kept in."
Bha e air a **chùmail.** "He was kept in."
Bha iad air an **chùmail.** "They were kept in."

These speakers have a general sense that there is some consonant change after possessive words but have not mastered the particular changes that each possessive pronoun requires or does not require. Thus just as we might do in trying to learn to speak Scottish Gaelic, these speakers simply generalized one kind of change to all persons.

There's Speaking and There's Speaking The last generation to speak a language is often incapable of being *articulate* in it as well, a crucial indication that the language is no longer capable of expressing full humanity.

There are scattered examples in English of concepts that are expressed as a single word incorporating both the object and the verb together: *He sat the baby for her* is more often rendered as *He babysat for her*. In many Native American languages, however, this process is central to basic expression, usable for just about any commonly occurring verb–object combination. In Cayuga, to say *She has a big house*, one might say "It house-bigs her," in the sense of "Things have it that she has a big house." Moreover, all of this is one word: *Konǫhsowá:neh*. When to use expressions like this and when not to are central to manipulating language artfully in these cultures, in the same vein as word choice and relative clauses are for us.

Of course, as we in particular know, a language can do just fine without this sort of thing, which evolves accidentally in certain languages through time—[elsewhere I show] it having done so just in the past century with "camp-sat" in Ngan'gityemerri in Australia. It's an extra and, as such, one of the first things to start wearing away as a language containing it dies. In living Cayuga, to render *She has a big onion* within a narrative, one would likely say "It onion-bigs her." In dying Cayuga, however, speakers are more likely to just say something like *The onion is big* or *Her onion is big*.

When a language is dying, then, its last speakers typically render it in the very way that we or another foreigner might, taking the easy ways out, avoiding the kinky stuff, reducing complexities to one-size-fits-all. The moribund version of a language is like one of those 1920s 78 rpm records of a symphony orchestra playing, recorded acoustically rather than electrically. You get the basics, but no matter how carefully

we enhance the recording with modern techniques, it's nothing like having been at the performance.

All of this is to say that, when a language dies, one of the thousands of offshoots of the first language simply grinds to a halt, after having thrived and morphed and mixed with abandon for 150,000 years.

How Do You Solve a Problem Like Revival?

Language Revival Meets the Realities of Language in Time and Space

In response to all of this, there are attempts proceeding worldwide to halt the death of minority languages, with a particularly concerted effort by many linguists in the past ten years to call worldwide attention to the problem. The effort serving as a primary inspiration is the example of Hebrew, which by the late 1800s had essentially been used only in writing and for liturgical purposes for more than two thousand years—Hebrew was an archaic-looking language encountered in weighty books, not something you had dinner in. The movement to make it the official language of Israel was so successful that today it is spoken natively by a nation of six million people. There are movements to similarly resuscitate threatened languages such as Irish Gaelic, which in many areas is taught, and taught in, in schools, with radio and television time set aside for broadcasts in the language and various activities in the language encouraged for young people. There are similar movements for Breton, Occitan, Maori, Hawaiian, and other languages. Yet these efforts, laudable as they are, face many imposing obstacles, posed in large part by the realities of how languages live in the world as we know it.

> For one, . . . most "languages" are actually clusters of dialects. The form of a dying language taught in school is often a single, standardized variety, which can be quite different from the various dialects that constitute the "language" as it actually exists. If there is still a healthy population of people speaking the language natively and well, this "school" variety that children learn may sound rather sanitized and even imposed from without. This is a special problem in communities where the impending death of the language is a symptom of historical oppression by a surrounding power, as has been the case in Brittany with Breton. France's former policy was to discourage the use of Breton in favor of French, treating Breton as a primitive "patois" only suitable for talking to livestock. The Breton nationalist movement in response has occasionally been a violent one, and to its partisans, the alien air of "school" Breton often suffers by association with the martinet French educational tradition that has been so hostile to the language rights of Breton peoples.
>
> [It is also important to see] how languages mix, often when speakers are shifting from one language to another one through time. Typically, speakers leave footprints from their old language in their version of the new one (the peculiarities of Irish English come largely from Gaelic) while at the same time, during the twilight of their old language, they speak it with heavy influence from the new one. This means that, in many cases, the dying language we encounter is no longer its true self, having been tinted by the one its speakers are now dominant in.
>
> Gros Ventre was a Native American language of Montana. When its last speakers were interviewed in the 1960s, their Gros Ventre showed evidence of remodeling on an English template. In the living language, there was no way to express the word for a body part in isolation. One could not simply say *eye*; one had to say *my eye, your eye, his eye*. The closest you could come to just *eye* was "someone's eye." Thus, to express the root *síitheh* "eye" alone would be pidgin Gros Ventre; one would have to at least say ***bi***-*síitheh* "someone's eye." In true Gros Ventre, *my eye* was ***ne***-*síitheh*. In dying Gros Ventre, however, it was ***ne-bi***-*síitheh*, where the speaker tacked the prefix for *my* onto the word meaning "someone's eye." To this speaker, more comfortable with English, in which we can say just *eye*, ***bi***-*síitheh* had come to mean simply *eye* rather than "someone's eye," such that it felt natural to him to render *my eye* as ***ne***-*bi*-*síitheh*, although to a tribal elder this would have meant the nonsensical "my someone's eye."[4]
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> Because it is harder for adults to learn new languages well than it is for children, when adults are forced to learn a new language quickly, the result is often various degrees of pidginization, utilizing just the bare bones of a language. This becomes a problem in revival efforts because, even when adults of a given nationality desire strongly to have their ethnic language restored to them, the mundane realities of a busy life can make it difficult to get beyond a pidgin-level competence in the language.
>
> This is especially crucial in the **language-revival** case, because the languages in most immediate danger of death tend to be those spoken by previously isolated groups—for example, the peoples who were isolated enough by geography that Europeans could not transform their lands into plantation colonies in the middle of the past millennium. As we have seen, languages spoken by such groups, having had millennia to complexify without intermediation by large numbers of second-language speakers to keep the overgrowth in check, tend to be more imposingly complex than the "big dude" languages.
>
> To the English speaker, Spanish presents its challenges with its gender marking, conjugations, and occasional quirks like *Me gusta el libro* instead of the "Yo gusto el libro" that would feel "normal" to us. But in general, one senses oneself as "still in Kansas"—there are plenty of similar word shapes, and how thoughts are put together is generally akin to how we do so in English. Go to languages beyond familiar ones like this and things get rockier. Someone I know who emigrated from Romania at fourteen speaks English perfectly (with a lovely hint of accent), and learning French was no problem for her. But during a stay in the Czech Republic, she ultimately decided that it was hopeless trying to pick up any Czech because, as she put it, there was simply nothing

familiar: word shapes are usually unlike anything we are used to in Germanic or Romance (remember Romanian is a Romance, not Slavic, language); there is a sound or two that one essentially has to be born hearing to render properly; the nouns are declined as fiercely as the verbs are conjugated; and then there are the notorious Slavic verb pairs, where each verb takes arbitrarily different prefixes or suffixes or even changes its root according to whether actions are continuous or abrupt.

And my Romanian friend was still within Indo-European. With Native American languages, for example, one is confronted not simply with learning extremely unfamiliar word shapes, but with ways of putting words together to render even the most basic of thoughts that an English speaker might barely believe humans could spontaneously resort to in running speech. *She has a big house* in Spanish translates almost word for word: *Ella tiene una casa grande*. In Czech, it is similar; typically of Slavic languages, no word for *a*, but that's not hard to get used to: *Ona má velký dům*. In general Czech "puts" things in ways that make intuitive sense to an English speaker. But then recall Cayuga's "It house-bigs her"—that's just off the scale, and remember that this is not just one wrinkle but a general way of phrasing things throughout the grammar. "Someone's eye" instead of just "eye"; having to specify just how you broke something—these are the sorts of things that confront the now English-dominant Native Americans seeking to reacquire the language of their ancestors. Here is Mohawk for *Suddenly, she heard someone give a yell from across the street:*

Tha'kié:ro'k iá:ken' ísi' na'oháhati iakothón:te' ónhka'k khe tontahohén:rehte'.

Literally translated, with an attempt to make this sound the *least* needlessly "exotified," what this comes out as is "Suddenly, by what you could hear, there, it's beyond the street, the ear went to who just then made-shouted back toward her."

It's not impossible to learn a Native American language after childhood, and one can gradually wrap one's head around such ways of putting things. The language makes its own sense once one masters various general principles distinguishing such languages from ours. There are success stories of young Native Americans acquiring competence in their tribe's language from tutelage by elders, as in a long-term project directed by Leanne Hinton at the linguistics department of the University of California, Berkeley, pairing Native Americans with elders in an attempt to save as many Californian indigenous languages as possible. But learning one of these languages or an Australian Aboriginal language is hard work for someone raised in English or a related language, much harder work than picking up Spanish, and quite a job to expect of whole communities of people.

This difficulty relates to the fact that living languages are developed far beyond the strict necessities of communication and that incomplete learning guarantees that some of these baubles will be stripped away. Children learning an indigenous language in school but more comfortable in a dominant one such as English typically speak a rather simplified variety, just as do American students who learn French or Spanish in school. There is a perhaps universal tendency for elders to view youngsters as insufficiently mindful of tradition, which is heightened when the youngsters in question are assimilating to a dominant culture. This area of tension extends into children's version of a threatened language, when older fluent speakers often disparage the new version as "not real X," sometimes putting a damper on enthusiasm for the revival itself.

One of the notorious "Dammits" in Polynesian languages such as Maori and Hawaiian, for example, is the often arbitrary classification of nouns as taking either an *o* or an *a* possessive marker, and young speakers are often unsure which class a given noun belongs to. To a fluent Maori or Hawaiian speaker, this sounds like "bad" speech, just as saying *speaked* or *squoze* sounds to an English speaker. One can only imagine what schoolchildren's version of an immensely elaborated language such as Fula would sound like. The truth is that a revived language, if it "takes" and is passed on to children, will almost certainly be a considerably simplified version of the language as it was once spoken.

Finally, just as writing tends to give a language an air of "legitimacy," the converse also is true—a language that has not been traditionally written is often considered "less of a language" even by its speakers if they have been reared in a written, standardized "top twenty" language. Whereas to the scholar or social services worker, the indigenous language appears, quite properly, an exotic treasure to be cherished, to a person for whom the language is a mundane aspect of daily life, sociological realities intrude and often stamp the language as a lowly vehicle, associated with the elderly, parochialism, and a world many consider—for better or worse—a lesser option than the world of tall buildings.

Scholars have not always been immune to shades of this view. Before cultural pluralism was as overtly valued in mainstream educated discourse in America, even a linguist might describe Occitan in this fashion, this passage being from a generally masterful 1944 book on the world's languages (or the pipe-smoking Western professor of the period's conception thereof, with a Eurocentric bias focusing on standardized languages): "This *Provençal* has a flourishing culture of romantic poetry greatly influenced by Moorish culture. Its modern relatives are hayseed dialects."

If this was the best even some scholars could do until recently, then certainly lay speakers traditionally tend toward the same equation of "written" with "real." The very sound of the indigenous language immediately conveys a social context considered orthogonal to prestige, just as, no matter how Politically Correct we are and no matter what race we happen to be, we would be hard pressed to see the Declaration of Independence written in inner-city Black English as a document equal in gravity to the one Thomas Jefferson wrote. Such judgments are thoroughly arbitrary but noisomely deeply ingrained, and many communities resist efforts to revive their dying languages out of a sense

that the languages are incompatible with the upward mobility they seek.

Language Versus Prosperity

And this brings us to a very important matter regarding language death: why people give up their languages.

To be sure, indigenous languages have often been actively discouraged, by school policies calling for corporal punishment on any Native American student heard conversing in his home language, a practice especially common in the United States until the middle of the twentieth century, and by governmental positions declaring minority languages antithetical to national unity (witness France in the 1700s). My first office at Berkeley looked out on a courtyard called Ishi Court, named after a man who found himself the last living speaker of his native language, Yahi, after all of the other Yahis had been massacred. Many Native Americans died after similar massacres carried out by presidential administrations in the nineteenth century and depicted so placidly in the history books. Dozens of these languages expired under the watch of the Millard Fillmores and Chester Alan Arthurs by extermination or when groups were forced to live among others or to scatter, thus making it impossible to pass their languages on to enough children to keep them alive.

It is not difficult to make a case that people must not have their languages forcibly taken from them or beaten out of them. But in reality, just as often the reason groups abandon their traditional languages is ultimately a desire for resources that their native communities do not offer. Sometimes this occurs "naturally," as with the groups who now speak Maa in Kenya and Tanzania, a by no means unusual case that Western linguists would be unlikely to decry as an injustice. But more often today, it happens as a result of the pervasive effects of First World imperialism: the language of the dominant power—written, spoken by the wealthy, and broadcast constantly on radio and television—quite often comes to be associated with legitimacy, the cosmopolitan, and success. Almost inevitably, the home language is recast as, basically, *not* that—and thus antithetical to survival under the best possible conditions. This judgment is ultimately as unrelated to the stuff of the language itself as our evaluation of nonstandard dialects as "backward" is. But that's something only linguists know, for the most part, and in the meantime, many languages of Papua New Guinea, for instance, are gradually being replaced by Tok Pisin within their own largely self-subsisting villages, not through active outside imposition but because the villagers themselves have come to see this language and the access to the outside world that it offers as "cool."

Urbanization: Linguistic Slurry The trend toward urban migration that this cultural co-optation encourages is particularly lethal for language diversity. There is a short step from spending half of one's life working in a city to relocating there permanently in search of larger opportunities, especially when the degradation by large-scale logging, mining, monoculture, and other resource extractions destroys the environment a group formerly inhabited. For better or for worse, the modern geopolitical trend is toward genuine population intermixture in multiethnic polities. This could be termed "diversity," and indeed one potential aim might be that peoples speaking different languages will coexist within large cities, maintaining their native languages at home while using the dominant top twenty languages as utilitarian **lingua francas** in the realms of education, politics, and the workplace. This is the goal stated by many language revivalists, who certainly do not wish to bar indigenous peoples from the world economy.

This vision seems unobjectionable enough on its face but in reality simply could not support six thousand distinct languages. Certainly there are cities and countries where two or more languages coexist, such as English and French in Canada, Spanish and Catalan in the Catalonian region of Spain, or even more than a dozen in India. However, it is impossible, by the dictates of sheer logic, that *six thousand* languages, or anything even close, could thrive and be passed on generation after generation within the world's cities.

This is because if a city is to contain ethnic groups in a state of harmony—and presumably this is the ideal—then a phenomenon inherent to harmony is intermarriage. Love knows no boundaries, and world history eloquently demonstrates that intermarriage can only be prevented under conditions of virulent enmity between groups or, at the very least, stringent caste relations such as those in India designating certain groups as unsuitable for intimate contact with others. The problem is that, if a couple speaking different native languages but both fluent in the dominant lingua franca marry and have children, then the children almost inevitably become more competent and comfortable in the lingua franca than in the language spoken by either parent. This is partly because the parents are more likely to speak the lingua franca to each other. Furthermore, even if the parents dutifully make sure to speak to the children only in their respective native languages, once the children are exposed to the lingua franca in school and in the world outside of the home, social evaluations kick in. Young children are exquisitely sensitive to such metrics, and quite commonly, as the child gets older, he or she begins to reject the parents' home languages in favor of the "cool" language, the one spoken by playmates, heard incessantly on television, and in general the marker of success and acceptance in the only society they have ever known. Many are the people we know who say that they spoke their parents' native language or languages when they were young but have since forgotten most of it—even when they still live with the parents and hear the language constantly. Social evaluations play a crucial role in a child's receptivity to linguistic input and orientation toward it.

Finally, even in rare cases when parents are diligent enough to maintain their child's fluency in the home language or languages, when that child himself marries, the

chances of his marrying someone who speaks the same language (or certainly languages) are slim, and hence the chances that *their* children will speak a language they hear only occasionally from one parent and otherwise only when grandparents visit is nil.

The Grass Is Always Greener: The Mundane Realities of the "Exotic" What this means is that a world where all six thousand of today's languages thrived would be, properly speaking, one where a great many peoples remained rooted in isolated hunter-gatherer, pastoral, or small-scale cultivational existences, untouched by the First World. There is perhaps a certain romance in that idea: we are trained to emphasize the downsides of our First World existences, which are certainly many, such that a picture of a globe peopled by smallish groups living on the land may seem "the way things should be." Yet for all of the pernicious injustices and psychological dislocation inherent to Western life, there is perhaps a danger in romanticizing Third World cultures as well. The rain forest–dwelling Amazonians whose cultures and languages are dying at an alarming rate are, after all, also societies where life expectancy is often brief, diseases easily cured in the West are often rampant and lethal, there is a high infant mortality rate, and the treatment of women would be unthinkable to anyone reared in a "modern" society, especially since the 1970s. It is not accidental that it is often women in rural and indigenous societies who are in the vanguard of opting out of the native language in favor of the linguistic key to success in the surrounding culture, where women have more freedom of choice about child rearing and more control over their relationships with men.

In the conclusion of a much-discussed article in academic linguistics' signature journal *Language*, the eminent linguist Peter Ladefoged described a Dahalo-speaking father who was proud that his son now spoke only Swahili, because this was an index of his having moved beyond the confines of village life into material success beyond. "Who am I to say that he was wrong?" writes Ladefoged. Certainly we cannot prefer that the son opt for poverty; he was most likely moving away from a context in which few Western-born, language revivalists or not, could even conceive of living if other options were available. This last point is crucial: even if the Dahalo speaker was seduced by attractions of city life and the cash economy that in our eyes are of superficial value, we put ourselves in a tenuous position when we argue that the son should resist the very life style that none of us, downsides fully acknowledged, would even consider giving up.

The possible objection that it would be preferable for his son to move to a city but be bilingual in Dahalo and Swahili would most likely be a stopgap solution: dozens of languages are spoken in Tanzania, and the chances that the son will marry a fellow Dahalo speaker in the city are slim. As response, Nancy Dorian, who spearheaded the study of language death with seminal work on the demise of Scottish Gaelic, answered Ladefoged by noting that the generations raised by the one that let its language go often come to resent their parents for not passing on such a precious inheritance. But the sad question is whether their having tried to pass the language on would have been effective in a context where those very children would have been lapping up the dominant language as eagerly as all children do—and if they had, would the children have been able to pass the language on to *their* children?

Practical Solutions

Cognizant of these problems and paradoxes, Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine argue in *Vanishing Voices*, the most deeply thought of the various book-length treatments of the language-death matter, that any realistic worldwide language-revival effort must take place within a general initiative allowing indigenous groups to continue living on their lands within their own cultures. Nettle and Romaine view language death as a symptom of the larger process of the rape of the world's landscapes and the destruction of the cultures that once thrived within them, driven by the insatiable capitalist thirst for natural resources and the often brutally centralized control necessary to ensure its continual slaking. By no means so utopian as to require that native groups not acquire top twenty languages in order to participate to some extent in the world economy, Nettle and Romaine propose that such groups be ushered into a **diglossic** use of dominant languages and their native ones. Their point is that only if such groups are encouraged and allowed to stay in their traditional settings will such **diglossia** not be a mere stopgap along the way to the abandonment of the "low" language forever in favor of the "high."

Nettle and Romaine's message is as depressing as it is sensible, because at its heart is the belief that the preservation of any significant number of the world's languages will require a significant transformation in the global economy, which is driven largely by governments for whom such notions as cultural diversity have been anathema at worst and of low priority at best. The sad fact is that Western scholars' earnest musings on the value of linguistic diversity are ultimately a luxury of the prosperity created by the very destructive policies at the heart of the extinctions in question. It is not accidental, for example, that to date almost all of the seminal books and anthologies on language death have been published by Cambridge University Press, an entity representing and founded on an institution made possible only through the wealth generated by what was once one of the world's most nakedly imperialist, exploitative powers.

Developing countries, constrained by limited budgets, pressing poverty, and poor educational systems, and too frequently run by despotic dictatorships as little concerned with minority rights as the monarchies that created today's First World countries, generally only pay lip service to European calls that they preserve their lands and indigenous cultures. After all, the very European countries urging "multiculturalism" on, say, an Indonesia only developed their own broad-horizoned intelligentsia on the basis of resources derived from deforesting and polluting their own

countries, as well as others, and often exterminating other cultures in the process.

This is not to say that we coddled Western intellectuals are wrong in our exhortations. It is clear to many that cultural relativism has its limits, and I believe that we can assert that the preservation of environments and indigenous cultures is a desirable pathway for humankind without censuring ourselves for imposing "ethnocentric" conceptions. I for one can quite confidently reject the notion that the erasure of the entire Amazonian rain forest be treated as a legitimate expression of a "different culture." I would love to see Nettle and Romaine's articulate exhortation and its general frame of reference serve as the foundation of increased efforts to prevent most of the world's peoples from being subsumed into a slurry of multiethnic urban misery and exploitation voiced in just a couple of dozen big fat languages.

What Will Happen to the First Language's Children?

Yet it is clear in view of modern realities that a great many languages now technically alive will not be saved. A sober yet progressive assessment of the situation might be that today's endangered languages constitute three main sets having potential viability.

Many Will Either Survive or Become Thriving "Taught" Languages

In the relatively successful language revivals of Irish, Breton, Maori, Welsh, and Hawaiian, large numbers of children are learning the languages in school, the media have joined the effort, and there are increasing amounts of printed materials available in the languages. However, it is also true that these languages remain very much the second languages of most of the learners, not much spoken at home or in casual situations. Whether these languages will survive as natively spoken ones is at this writing essentially a question mark.

Hebrew was indeed revived from the page at the founding of Israel—but the fact that today this case remains the only one commonly referred to as a success story signifies that it was unusual. The revival of Hebrew was favored by its occurrence within a new country where the language was explicitly designated as the intended official one, with the government expressly committed to the effort rather than setting aside occasional funds for the use of Hebrew "alongside" another language. Furthermore, the original immigrants to Israel spoke various languages and thus there was a motivation for a new language to express the new national identity, in contrast with Welsh, Irish, Hawaiian, or Maori people who, for better or for worse, can only adopt the indigenous language as an "add-on," English having long been their primary language. Finally, the adoption of Hebrew was assisted by its link to a religious tradition, virtually a covenant: even though Hebrew was declared the official language of Israel from on high, the success of the movement was determined by a powerful sentiment within the families themselves that the use of this language was critical to the establishment of a Jewish state. It has been said that the revival would not have succeeded without this crucial element—a sense of learning Hebrew as an imperative of, again, one's very soul, not just as a kind of party trick or "local custom."

Conditions in Ireland, Wales, New Zealand, or Hawaii only approximate the spiritual ones that reanimated Hebrew. The indigenous languages are not connected to religions still alive and deeply felt by most, nor are the revival efforts taking place among a people committed so starkly and universally to cultural sovereignty as to relocate to a brand-new nation or be allowed by sociohistorical serendipity to found one. Yet many of the people learning these languages feel that they are not fully expressing their souls without speaking the indigenous language. This is a hopeful sign. In all of these places, increasing numbers of homes are passing the language on to their children as a first one.

Yet even if these success stories remain too scattered to revive the languages generally, their situation is not quite as hopeless as is claimed by various commentators who have declared the Irish revival movement a failure because of the unlikelihood that significant numbers of families will pass the language on to children as a mother tongue. It is a central tenet of the language-revival movement that a language is only truly alive when it is regularly passed on to children, but this is not necessarily true. More properly, throughout human history thus far, this has been the case. Yet it is conceivable that languages such as Irish, Welsh, Maori, and Hawaiian could be passed on as second languages, taught in school and spoken nonnatively but proficiently, *in perpetuo*. Under such conditions, the languages could persist as cultural indicators, the very learning of the language in school itself constituting a hallmark of cultural identity. As such, the population would surely speak the language with varying degrees of proficiency, some excellently, others only controlling the basics (as do many Americans in California who "speak Spanish" as the result of a few years of classes in school followed by constant exposure to the language from the large Latino population), and many people falling somewhere between these poles.

This is, after all, the case with many lingua francas in Third World countries, with more speakers having learned the languages as teenagers or later than having learned them natively; Swahili has long been an example. Many languages born as pidgins have been spoken as nonnative languages for centuries, learned mostly by men in work contexts and quickly expanding through constant use of this kind into **creoles,** suitable for precise and modulated expression. It is perhaps something of a Western conceit to suppose that a language is not "a language" unless it is spoken from the cradle. This requirement, after all, would imply that clergy speaking Latin or Sanskrit are not really "speaking the language," because they did not learn the language as infants, a claim that would ultimately seem to be rather arbitrary.

Similarly, Africans typically "speak" many languages that were not spoken to them until adolescence or later; even if a speaker's version of a language constitutes only, say, seventy-five percent of what a natively transmitted version consists of, it is unclear that this African "does not speak" the language.

For better or for worse, the cultural conditions are present to preserve, for example, Irish within what could be considered a domain for minority languages commensurate with new world conditions: a living *taught* language. The invention of writing, which has threatened minority languages in tending to anoint the dominant languages chosen to write in as "legitimate," can ironically be of assistance here, in allowing the transcription and dissemination of language-teaching materials.

Many Will Likely Survive Only as Living "Taught" Languages

Then there are the languages concentrated in tropical regions that are threatened by the encroachments of global capitalism—the Dahalos of the world, such as the Ugong language that Thai is edging away, and the more than eight hundred fabulously complex and variegated languages of Papua New Guinea. In these cases, the glass-half-full perspective suggests hope that national governments can be persuaded to assist in preserving the cultures speaking these languages, because only this will allow them to continue to be spoken natively. On the other hand, a constructive response to the glass-half-empty perspective, considering that brutal realities make it likely that such attempts will not be able to save anything approaching all of these languages, would be to adopt the "taught language" perspective, providing for a time when descendants of today's native speakers will at least be able to acquire some proficiency in their languages through schooling, to the extent that the descendants remain a coherent enough entity to ensure a suitable demand.

A Historically Unprecedented Number Will Die

On the other hand, almost all of the indigenous languages of North America and Australia would appear to be lost forever as living languages. All but a handful are spoken only by the very elderly, as foreign and imposing to many of their English-dominant children and grandchildren as they are to us. In most cases, surviving descendants of a given group are too few and too geographically scattered for there to be significant demand for revival of any kind in the future.

A Really Good Chinese Restaurant in San Francisco

In general it would appear that the linguistic landscape of the future will be a less diverse and somewhat blander one than has existed until now. Many of the languages that survive as natively spoken will be mostly geopolitically dominant ones, and such languages, by the very nature of having through the ages been learned by large numbers of adults and as often as not used as secondary rather than primary languages, are often somewhat "streamlined" in regard to grammatical elaborations. This means that a certain "vanilla" quotient will be overrepresented among the surviving languages—...Swahili is somewhat watered down in complexity as Bantu languages go; it has even been argued that the Romance languages, representing Latin learned as a second language by subjugated populations, are slightly "pidginized" in comparison with other Indo-European languages. Note also that Wolof, in becoming the lingua franca of Senegal, is probably on the way to seeing its array of noun class markers severely reduced as a "price" to pay for its new broadened sway—power corrupts! Meanwhile, a substantial number of minority languages will persist in use as "taught" languages—but then in this guise these languages will be somewhat less elaborated than they were when spoken natively.

One might analogize the linguistic landscape of the future to a world where the dazzling variety and subtlety of native Chinese cuisines, the product of thousands of years of accumulated skills, evolutions, branchings, and mixture, are represented only by Chinese food as available in the United States. Certainly, a great deal of excellent Chinese food is available here, but not in the protean richness available in China, and a great deal of what Americans are accustomed to eating as "Chinese" food is actually better described as Chinese ingredients adapted to a beef-stew palate. Yet just as this is surely better than nothing (there was no won ton soup, sushi, coconut milk soup, or even spaghetti and meatballs served on the *Titanic* in 1912), the admittedly blanched language palate that even our most dedicated language-revival efforts will most likely leave behind is certainly better than what would remain if we did nothing.

The Task Ahead and Why It Must Be Done

It is therefore urgent that we record as many languages as possible before they no longer exist so that, even if they are not actively spoken anymore, we have their essences preserved for posterity for the benefit of descendants of speakers who want to make contact with their heritage by learning some of the language; for research; and for sheer wonder.

It is here that linguists, the people most qualified to carry out this task, will be crucial, but only if there is a fundamental recasting of current attitudes in the discipline. People often suppose that linguists are either professional **polyglots** or arbiters of "proper grammar." Neither is the case; in fact, precisely what most linguists are engaged in would surprise many people by virtue of the extremely specific nature of the enterprise, focused on a particular issue barely perceptible at all to the layperson.

The linguistics discipline as it is today configured is centered on identifying through elegant induction the

cise structure of our innate neurological endowment for language, sparked by a paradigm founded by Noam Chomsky in the late 1950s. There are many other branches of linguistics and a great many linguists with no serious interest in the Chomskyan approach. However, the paradigm looms over the field with a sociological "capital" analogous to the domination of the music composition field decades ago by atonalists despite their never having been a numerical majority.

One's basic training focuses on the Chomskyan framework, and there is a tacit but powerful sense in the field that this subarea is not only the "sexiest," but also the most intellectually substantial. For example, there are some departments where students are trained in nothing but the Chomskyan paradigm, but none where students are grounded entirely in any other subfield—the other subfields are ultimately regarded as "other," the icing rather than the cake. Regardless of the caliber of his work in another subfield, the linguist who does not display at least token interest in the Chomskyan endeavor is not considered "a *linguist* linguist" in the back of the minds of a great many in the field, and the most general respect is accorded the linguist in an "icing" subfield who is invested in showing the implications of his work for the latest developments in the Chomsky bailiwick. For example, it is safe to say that to most modern linguists in America the phenomena I [cover in many of my books] are perhaps "interesting" in a passing way, but generally not considered "real linguistics."

To be sure, Chomskyan linguistics is a thoroughly fascinating investigation. Steven Pinker's book *The Language Instinct* should in my opinion, along with Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (a rare example of a book that tells us what we want to hear and is empirically correct in the bargain), be required reading for all thinking people. It is not for nothing that the Chomskyan paradigm took our field by storm to such an extent in the 1960s and has obsessed so many fine minds since. Properly, however, illuminating the possibility that we possess a neural mechanism calibrated to produce basic sentences is but one of dozens of ways that one might study the multifarious thing known as human language. In our moment, as linguist R. M. W. Dixon eloquently calls for in his book *The Rise and Fall of Languages*, linguists should be trained to go out and document at least one dying language before it disappears forever from the earth—I myself will be embarking on such work as soon as I finish this book. This is particularly appropriate given that the study of such a language inestimably enriches the study of the possibility of an innate language competence, often furnishing a career's worth of relevant data. (Notice my sense of obligation to say that, so powerful is the sense of "Chomsky—smart/other—also-ran" in modern academic linguistics in the United States.)

It is often said that we must preserve the world's languages because each one reflects a particular culture. Although this is true in itself, I have always felt that to elevate this as a guiding motivation for preserving languages is based on an oversimplified conception of the relationship between language and culture. It is true that when a group loses its language millennia of accumulated knowledge regarding the medicinal properties of plants, the subtleties of managing crops, the life cycles of fishes, and other phenomena are lost. However, in the strict sense, the linkage of language revival with cultures seems to imply that once researchers recorded the cultural aspects of language for posterity, then it would no longer be important whether or not the language as a whole continued to be spoken.

And in any case, as I have noted previously, most of a given language has evolved less on the basis of culture than through the structured randomness of an evolution bounded only by human physiognomy and cognitive requirements. All but a few pages of any written grammar of a language is taken up with elaborate rules, lists, and exceptions that no more reveal anything specific to the culture that uses them than a pattern of spilled milk reveals anything specific about the bottle it came from.

Linguists are quite aware of this, and in fact most linguists' scholarship on languages has little to do with charting links between grammars and cultures. It is safe to say that most, although not all, linguists largely cherish languages because of the sheer marvel of their various architectures, elegantly combining structure and chaos in six thousand different ways. I surmise that the emphasis on culture among linguists. active in the language-revival movement stems from a sense that the purely linguistic wonder of human speech is less accessible to the general public than arguments founded on more easily perceived concepts such as culture.

Yet . . . I have hoped to usher the reader into the very awareness animating linguists that human speech is a truly wondrous thing in itself. In this vein, it pays to note that the Dahalo language that Peter Ladefoged referred to is the one with clicks spoken far from the territory where the other click languages are spoken—the language the farmer thinks of as a sign of backwardness is, with all due respect to his justifiable relationship to his immediate circumstances, a language with a wondrous sound system. A great many of the Native American languages dying before our eyes were so complex that children were not fully competent in them until they were ten years old. It is truly sad that world history cannot allow all of these languages to continue to be spoken, transform themselves into new ones, overgrow, and mix with one another. But at the very least we can make sure that as many of them as possible are written down as thoroughly as possible before their demise as living systems and that at least a healthy number of lucky ones can be passed along as secondary but essential languages across generations.

Let's take a look at one last descendant of the world's first language. Because prefixes and suffixes generally

evolve in a language from what begin as full, separate words. the first language can be assumed to have had no prefixes or suffixes at all (or tones or a great many other complications of a grammar that only arise through grad- ual reinterpretations of material). Yet 150,000 years later, global evolution produced a remarkable array of pre- fixes in the Central Pomo language of California. English speakers associate prefixes with relatively basic meanings such as repetition (*re-*) and opposition (*un-*, *in-*, *mis-*). But in Central Pomo, prefixes carry much more robust and specific meanings:

ho-	orally
s-	by sucking
ʔa-	with a handle
da-	by slicing
ʔa-	pertaining to vegetative growth
daʔa-	by pushing with the palm
ʔe-	by poking
ma-	with heat
qa-	by biting
ʔa-	by shaking
-	by fine hand action, such as using the fingers

The root *yól* means "to mix." Each of its combinations with these eleven prefixes yields a particularly useful word:

hoyól	to insert words suddenly while humming; that is, mix orally
syól	to wash down cookies or doughnuts with coffee; that is, to mix by sucking
ʔyól	to stir with a spoon; that is, to mix with a "handle"
dayól	to chop up several things together, such as celery and onions for stew
ʔeyól	to plant things close together
daʔyól	to fold in dry ingredients while baking
hmyól	to add salt or pepper (I guess they "poke" it in)
mayól	to throw various ingredients into a pot; that is, to mix by heating
qayól	to eat several things together, such as meat and potatoes; that is, to mix by biting
ʔayól	to sift dry ingredients
yól	to throw ingredients into a bowl with the fingers

Of course, the prefixes create new words with each verb; *'ól*, with a glottal stop as its first consonant, means "to summon," and here are some of its prefixed versions:

ho'ól	to call; that is, to summon orally
ʔa'ól	to set a fishing line; that is, to summon by manipulating a handle
ʔe'ól	to comb hair; that is, to summon vegetative growth (by analogy with the flowing motion of some vegetation)
daʔa'ól	to dig for; that is, to summon by pushing with the palm
h'ól	to probe for a creature with a stick; that is, to summon by poking

It is this kind of thing, then, that we are losing when languages die—the last known fluent speakers of Central Pomo have died since these data were collected. Just as we would be inestimably poorer to be denied the opportunity to see giraffes, roses, bombardier beetles, tulips, and little black house cats with white spots on their chests that sit on our laps as we write, we lose one of the true wonders of the world every time one of these glorious variations on a theme set by the first language slips away unrecorded for posterity. We will never encounter a stegosaur, but we can be thankful that fossils allow us to know what it was like. In the same way, if we cannot enjoy all six thousand of the world's lan- guages alive for much longer, let us at least make sure to afford them high-quality preservation.

In the Central Pomo case, certainly the loss of the lan- guage entailed the loss of a vehicle of cultural expression. But surely all of us value sucking, poking, and shaking as much as the Central Pomo speakers did: it's just that our languages chose not to index such things with prefixes. Most likely the reader's native language chose instead to genuflect to mark- ing each noun as definite or indefinite. Both the Central Pomo prefixes and the European languages' articles are fasci- nating in their own right as alternate methods of packaging information in order to talk about this thing called living, and both are only the tip of the iceberg in regard to the endless ways in which humans can express themselves in speech.

Each variant of the first language is festooned with gloriously random remnants of things caught in the cracks in the course of transformations long forgotten, and most of them exist in an array of subvariants on the theme related to one another rather like Barbara Cartland's hundreds of romance novelettes. All carry mementoes of past liaisons with other dialects of other languages; some of them once rose from the ashes; most of them developed as far beyond the call of duty as the Cathedral of Notre Dame. A select few even sit swathed in a Dorian Gray complex as a by- product of the invention of the printing press. The world's riffs on basic materials that emerged in East Africa around 148,000 B.C. represent six thousand ways of being human.

Notes

1. Unfortunately he died toothless, rendering the data elicited from him somewhat fuzzy around the edges—particularly awkward because he was the only source of the language ever recorded.

2. Yes, there *were!* Just imagine that.

3. Notice that India is so populous that languages many of us have never heard of are spoken by more people than almost any oth- ers in the world (Bihari, Telugu, Marathi).

4. Which in itself sounds like a song cut from *The Music Man* on the road to New York.

Critical Thinking and Application

- Do you agree that it is tragic to lose a language? Why? What is lost with it?
- Analogies help us think about unfamiliar things in more familiar terms, which provides advantages. At the same time, they may urge us to overlook differences. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using biological evolution as an analogy for human language.
- Poll the students in your class. How many generations back did their forebears speak languages other than English? How many languages were spoken? How many languages can your classmates speak and how well? Are any of their ancestors' languages endangered?
- What does it mean for a language to be genuinely spoken?
- Research an endangered language and the activities being done to combat its loss.

Vocabulary

click
creole
diglossia, diglossic
index
inflection
language death
language revival
linguistic equilibrium
lingua franca
pidgin, pidginized
polyglot
prefix
suffix

Suggested Further Reading

Abley, Mark. 2003. *Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages*. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Dorian, Nancy C. 1981. *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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McWhorter, John H. 2001. *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language*. New York: Times Books.

Nettle, Daniel, and Suzanne Romaine. 2000. *Vanishing Voices: The Extinction of the World's Languages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Walsh, Michael. 2005. Will Indigenous Languages Survive? *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34: 293–315.

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Vocabulary

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