The death of language?

By Tom Colls
17 October 2009

An estimated 7,000 languages are being spoken around the world. But that number is expected to shrink rapidly in the coming decades. What is lost when a language dies?

In 1992 a prominent US linguist stunned the academic world by predicting that by the year 2100, 90% of the world's languages would have ceased to exist.

Far from inspiring the world to act, the issue is still on the margins, according to prominent French linguist Claude Hagege.

"Most people are not at all interested in the death of languages," he says. "If we are not cautious about the way English is progressing it may eventually kill most other languages."

According to Ethnologue, a US organization that compiles a global database of languages, 473 languages are currently classified as endangered.

Among the ranks are the two known speakers of Lipan Apache alive in the US, four speakers of Totoro in Colombia and the single Bikya speaker in Cameroon.

"It is difficult to provide an accurate count," says Ethnologue editor Paul Lewis. "But we are at a tipping point. From here on we are going to increasingly see the number of languages going down."

Every 14 days a language dies.

Why Is It Important?

When a language disappears, it takes with it a wealth of knowledge about history, culture, the natural environment, and the human brain.

Language defines a culture, through the people who speak it and what it allows speakers to say. Words that describe a particular cultural practice or idea may not translate precisely into another language. Many endangered languages have rich oral cultures with stories, songs, and histories passed on to younger generations, but no written forms. With the extinction of a language, an entire culture is lost.

Much of what humans know about nature is encoded only in oral languages. Indigenous
groups that have interacted closely with the natural world for thousands of years often have profound insights into local lands, plants, animals, and ecosystems—many still undocumented by science. Studying indigenous languages therefore benefits environmental understanding and conservation efforts.

Studying various languages also increases our understanding of how humans communicate and store knowledge. Every time a language dies, we lose part of the picture of what our brains can do.

"What we lose is essentially an enormous cultural heritage, the way of expressing the relationship with nature, with the world, between themselves in the framework of their families, their kin people," says Mr Hagege.

"It's also the way they express their humor, their love, their life. It is a testimony of human communities which is extremely precious, because it expresses what other communities than ours in the modern industrialized world are able to express."

For linguists like Claude Hagege, languages are not simply a collection of words. They are living, breathing organisms holding the connections and associations that define a culture. When a language becomes extinct, the culture in which it lived is lost too.

**Why Do Languages Die Out?**

Throughout human history, the languages of powerful groups have spread while the languages of smaller cultures have become extinct. This occurs through official language policies or through the allure that the high prestige of speaking an imperial language can bring. These trends explain, for instance, why more language diversity exists in Bolivia than on the entire European continent, which has a long history of large states and imperial powers.

As globalization sweeps around the world, it is perhaps natural that small communities come out of their isolation and seek interaction with the wider world.

As big languages spread, children whose parents speak a small language often grow up learning the dominant language. Depending on attitudes toward the ancestral language, those children or their children may never learn the smaller language, or they may forget it as it falls out of use. This has occurred throughout human history, but the rate of language disappearance has accelerated dramatically in recent years.

**Cross words**

The value of language as a cultural artifact is difficult to dispute, but is it actually realistic to ask small communities to retain their culture?
One linguist, Professor Salikoko Mufwene, of the University of Chicago, has argued that the social and economic conditions among some groups of speakers "have changed to points of no return".

As cultures evolve, he argues, groups often naturally shift their language use. Asking them to hold onto languages they no longer want is more for the linguists’ sake than for the communities themselves.

Ethnologue editor Paul Lewis, however, argues that the stakes are much higher. Because of the close links between language and identity, if people begin to think of their language as useless, they see their identity as such as well.

This leads to social disruption, depression, suicide and drug use, he says. And as parents no longer transmit language to their children, the connection between children and grandparents is broken and traditional values are lost.

"There is a social and cultural ache that remains, where people for generations realize they have lost something," he says.

What no-one disputes is that the demise of languages is not always the fault of worldwide languages like our own.

An increasing number of communities are giving up their language by their own choice, says Claude Hagege. Many believe that their languages have no future and that their children will not acquire a professional qualification if they teach them tribal languages.

"We can do nothing when the abandonment of a language corresponds to the will of a population," he says.

**Babbling away**

Perhaps all is not lost for those who want the smaller languages to survive. As the revival of Welsh in the UK and Maori in New Zealand suggest, a language can be brought back from the brink.

Hebrew, says Claude Hagege, was a dead language at the beginning of the 19th century. It existed as a scholarly written language, but there was no way to say "I love you" and "pass the salt" - the French linguists’ criteria for detecting life.

But with the "strong will" of Israeli Jews, he says, the language was brought back into everyday use. Now it is undeniably a living breathing language once more.

Closer to home, Cornish intellectuals, inspired by the reintroduction of Hebrew, succeeded in bringing the seemingly dead Cornish language back into use in the 20th Century. In 2002 the government recognized it as a living minority language.
But for many dwindling languages on the periphery of global culture, supported by little but a few campaigning linguists, the size of the challenge can seem insurmountable.

"You've got smallest, weakest, least resourced communities trying to address the problem. And the larger communities are largely unaware of it," says Ethnologue editor Paul Lewis.

"We would spend an awful lot of money to preserve a very old building, because it is part of our heritage. These languages and cultures are equally part of our heritage and merit preservation."

Rosetta Stone, the popular language learning software, has actually undertaken a project to go to some of the people of the world who are some of the last speakers of their language to record them so their language never dies.

Some other elements of the "modern world", especially digital technology, are pushing back against the tide, as well.

North American tribes use social media to re-engage their young, for example.

Tuvan, an indigenous tongue spoken by nomadic peoples in Siberia and Mongolia, even has an iPhone app to teach the pronunciation of words to new students.

"Small languages are using social media, YouTube, text messaging and various technologies to expand their voice and expand their presence," said K David Harrison, an associate professor of linguistics at Swarthmore College.

"It's what I like to call the flipside of globalization. We hear a lot about how globalization exerts negative pressures on small cultures to assimilate. But a positive effect of globalization is that you can have a language that is spoken by only five or 50 people in one remote location, and now through digital technology that language can achieve a global voice and a global audience."

With National Geographic, Harrison has just helped produce eight talking dictionaries.

These dictionaries contain more than 32,000 word entries in eight endangered languages. All the audio recordings have been made by native speakers, some of whom are among the last fluent individuals in their native tongues.

Endangered Languages:

Ter Sami

Spoken by only two elderly people in the Kola peninsula in the north-west of Russia. Had about 450 speakers at the end of the 19th century until it was prohibited in schools in the 1930s.

Kayardild

Kayardild is spoken fluently by four people – all elderly Aboriginals – on Bentinck and Mornington Islands in Queensland, Australia.

Lengilu

Language from the north-eastern area of Kalimantan, Indonesia. Lengilu was at one stage spoken by 10 people. Today, there are only four.

Mabire

Three people reportedly speak Mabire in the Oulek village of Chad. The chief of the Mabire is the only Mabire speaker in his village so people doubt whether he is still fluent.

Tehuelche

Originally the language of nomadic hunters in Chile. The last four speakers live in Patagonia, Argentina.

Ayapaneco

There are just two people left who can speak it fluently in the village of Ayapa in the tropical lowlands of the southern state of Tabasco in Mexico.

Its demise was sealed by the advent of education in Spanish in the mid 20th century, which for several decades included the explicit prohibition on indigenous children speaking anything else. Urbanization and migration from the 1970s then ensured the break-up of the core group of speakers concentrated in the village.
Assignment:

1) Why are so many languages endangered?

2) Why is language an important part of a people’s culture?

2) Do you think the world's languages should be preserved? Why? Explain.