

LANGUAGE DEATH

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By now, it is well documented that languages are vanishing at a rate that has never been seen before. Since 1500 AD, the world has lost about 15% of the languages we think were spoken then, and the pace is quickening dramatically. We can definitely state that at least half of the 6,800 contemporary living languages will disappear by 2050. There were cases when each week a language ‘died’ somewhere on the planet and this trend is considered normal. Now the figure is growing exponentially. Over the next century, about 6,200 languages, dialects and subdialects can disappear from circulation. And it’s not just the little languages that are dying. A hundred years ago, Breton had a million speakers, but is now struggling for survival. Thirty years ago, Navajo had over 100,000 speakers and now faces an uncertain future.

The most recent example is the Chulym language, which had been found in the half-dead state. Today this language is used by about 40 people in central Siberia, and all native speakers are at least 50 years old. The distinct features of the language are its grammar rules: for example, the construction of sentences containing negation, or forms of interrogative sentences. You see, every language has its own ecosystem, and we have no right to destroy these areas. For example, speakers of this newly-discovered Chulym language practice hunting, collecting, and fishing — all that our ancestors did thousands of years ago. They have their legends, folklore, are brilliantly versed in medical herbs. But in a few years, there will be no language, it will disappear forever.

Since merely saying that a language is "endangered" can be ambiguous, it is needful to define levels of endangerment. They are:

1. Potentially endangered – lack of prestige in the home country, economic deprivation, language not being passed on in the education system.
2. Endangered – youngest fluent speakers are young adults.
3. Seriously/severely endangered – youngest speakers are 50 years of age and older.
4. Moribund – a tiny portion, mostly the very age, remain as speakers of the language.
5. Extinct – no remaining speakers of the language.

We recognize easily the danger in losing biodiversity, but is the loss of language – and thus cultural – diversity really a problem? For all we know, one language and one culture might be just fine. Of the 6000 languages spoken today, fewer than 300 cover 5.5 billion speakers. All the rest of the languages, 95% of them, are spoken by just 300 million people.

Think of it: 5% of the people in the world speak 95% of the world's languages, which means that 95% of the cultural heterogeneity of the planet – 95% of the *differences* in ways of seeing the world – is vested in under 5% of the people, and the problem gets worse each year.

It’s not only the loss of a language, it is also the death of an ethnic group. This is very dangerous in terms of culture, because we lose the knowledge related to traditions, models of philosophy rooted in human consciousness. It is bad from the scholar’s point of view, since we cease to understand how the processes of perception of the world through language is organized.

The reasons for the disappearance of languages can be described as ethnic wars and genocide, natural disasters, the assimilation of small ethnic groups and their transition to the dominant languages, including English, French, Chinese, and Russian in their respective areas. Monster states are not interested in the development of minority languages.

According to UNESCO, a language may be transmitted from generation to generation, when the number of its speakers is no less than 100,000. Currently, the Eyak language of indigenous inhabitants of Alaska is used by only one inhabitant of the same state, the Udege dialect of Siberia is spoken by about 100 people, and only six Brazilian Indians language communicate in their tribe’s Arikapu language. You see, the statistics are sad. Interestingly, more than half of all the world’s languages are found in just eight countries: Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Nigeria, India, Mexico, Cameroon, Australia and Brazil.

But despite the languages’ deaths, the reverse process is also happening. So Hebrew was once revived and is now spoken by more than five million Israelis. Over 10,000 people in Hawaii speak their native language, almost forgotten just a decade ago; Mexicans want to restore lost languages of the Mayan tribes, and New Zealanders do it with the Maori language. But the proportion of the dead languages to the revived is catastrophic.

Linguists are recording texts by the last speakers of languages across the world. Linguists are also helping indigenous peoples to write dictionaries and grammar books so that school children who are participating in bilingual education programs will have basic tools for learning their languages. Speakers of Mayan and other indigenous languages are getting degrees in linguistics and joining the effort to document those languages.

There is one more thing that works. Most languages have no literary tradition. In today’s, world, no books means language death. This is the goal of CELIAC, the *Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, Asociación Civil* or the Center for Native Language Publishing, in Oaxaca, Mexico.

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