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**Endangered languages: Why so important?**

**Language loss** is not new—languages have fallen out of use since ancient times. However, languages are disappearing today at an alarming rate. Of the nearly 7,000 languages in the world today, some 3,000 (43%) are endangered; many others will make their way into this catalogue in the near future.

Experts have predictedthat in the worst-case scenario 90% of all languages will cease to be spoken within 100 years; in the best-case scenario, only 50% will survive, and just 10% are considered safe during the next century (see Krauss 1992). Languages not being learned by children are not just *endangered,* they are *doomed*. Of the Native American languages of the U.S., 90% are not being passed on to a new generation, while also 90% of Australian aboriginal languages and over 50% of minority languages of Russia are in a similar situation. There were 312 American Indian languages in use when Europeans first arrived in North America; of these, 123 (40%) are known to have lost all native speakers. Of the 280 languages known in what is now the U.S. from the time of first European contact, only 151 still have speakers (54%); however all are endangered. Only 20 of these (13%) are being learned by children, and by ever fewer children each year. Most of these languages will cease to be spoken in your lifetime, if language revitalization programs are not successful. California illustrates the crisis well. At the time of the Gold Rush (1848), California had about 100 Native American languages. Today only 50 of these survive with speakers, and none is being learned by children in the normal way – the youngest remaining native speakers are well into senior-citizenhood.

The disappearance of an individual language constitutes a monumental loss of scientific information and cultural knowledge, comparable in gravity to the loss of a species - for example the Bengal tiger or the white whale. However, the disappearance of whole families of languages is a tragedy comparable in magnitude to the loss of whole branches of the animal kingdom (classes, orders, families), such as the loss of all felines or all cetaceans. Just as it would be difficult to understand the animal kingdom with major branches missing, it is impossible to understand the history and classification of human languages with the loss of entire language families. Yet this is what confronts us: already all the languages belonging to more than 100 of the 420 independent language families (including isolates) of the world have ceased to be spoken—a  staggering 25% of the linguistic diversity of the world, gone. Worse, this number will change radically and rapidly. The *Catalogue of Endangered Languages* has just over 3,000 entries from among the approximately 7,000 living languages in the world—by this count, 43% of living languages are endangered! The *Catalogue* also lists 635 additional languages known or considered by some to have become dormant. If this trend continues, the number of dormant languages will soon swell dramatically.

**Why should you care?**  We should all be concerned over the crisis of language loss, for compelling reasons.

**(1)** **Human concerns**. Languages are treasure houses of information on literature, history, philosophy, and art. Their stories, ideas, and words help us make sense of our lives and the world around us. For example, the life-enriching value of literature is well-understood, and is true also of the oral literature of the indigenous peoples of the world – they, too, have grappled with the complexities of their world and the problems of life, and the insights and discoveries represented in their literature are of value to us all. When a language disappears without documentation, taking all its oral literature, oral tradition, and oral history with it into oblivion, we are all diminished. There are also great reservoirs of historical information to be recovered from the study of languages. The classification of related languages teaches us about the history of human groups and how they are related to one another, and through the comparison of related languages and the study of language change we gain understanding of contacts and migrations, location of the homelands where languages were originally spoken, and past cultures —all  irretrievably lost when a language disappears without adequate documentation.

**(2)** **Lost** **knowledge**. Specific knowledge is often held by the smaller speech communities of the world—knowledge of medicinal plants and cures, identification of plants and animals yet unknown scientifically, new crops, etc. When the language is not learned by the next generation, the knowledge of the natural and cultural world encoded in the language typically fails to be transmitted. Loss of such knowledge could have devastating consequences for humanity. For example, the Seri (of Mexico, only 700 speakers) use *xnois* ‘eelgrass seed’ (*Zostera marina L.)* as a food source. This is “the only known grain from the sea used as a human food source,” and “has considerable potential as a general food resource for mankind. Its cultivation would not require fresh water, pesticides, or artificial fertilizer” (Felger and Moser 1973). It is easy to imagine a future in which natural or human-caused catastrophes compromise land-based crops, leaving human survival in jeopardy if we lose knowledge such as this.

Medicines provide similar examples. Seventy-five percent of plant-derived pharmaceuticals were discovered by examining traditional medicines, and the languages of curers often played a key role. If these languages had ceased to be spoken and knowledge of the medicinal plants and associated cures had been lost in the process, all of humanity would have been impoverished and our survival as a species left more precarious. Paul Cox worked with Epenesa Mauigoa, a *taulasea*, traditional healer, on Upolu, Samoa, and they described 121 herbal remedies. Their work led to knowledge of the mamala plant (*Homalanthus nutans*) and the anti-viral drug prostratin, used to treat yellow fever. In trials at the National Cancer Institute, it also proved effective against HIV Type 1 (Cox 1993, 2001). Loss of this endangered traditional Samoan knowledge would have been a loss for all of humanity.

**(3) Scientific understanding of human language**. Linguists have the goal of understanding what is possible and impossible in human languages, and through the study of human language capacity, of advancing knowledge of how the human mind works. For these goals, language loss is a disaster. The discovery of previously unknown features and traits in undescribed languages contributes to this goal. For example, the discovery of languages with OVS [Object-Verb-Subject] and OSV [Object-Subject-Verb] basic word orders forced abandonment of previously postulated universals of language. Since languages with these basic word orders were not previously known, it was claimed that “the dominant order is almost always one in which the subject precedes the object” (Greenberg 1966:177), like English with SVO or Japanese with SOV. However, languages such as Hixkaryana (Brazil, 350 speakers) were discovered with OVS basic word order, as in:

toto yonoye     kamura

man ate     jaguar

‘The jaguar ate the man.’

Discovery of languages with these previously unattested basic word orders forced this claim to be abandoned. It is all too plausible, however, given the recent loss of many languages in Brazil where most of the OVS and OSV languages have been found, that the few languages with these word orders could have become lost before they were described, leaving us forever in error about what is possible in human language and how that reflects human cognition.

The discovery of a new speech sound is to linguists like the discovery of a new species to biologists. Recent discoveries of a new speech sound in threatened languages have led to testing scientific claims about sound systems and to refining our knowledge. Linguists document endangered languages to discover information of this sort, and to determine the full range of what is possible in human languages.

**(4) Human rights.** Language loss is often not voluntary; it frequently involves violations of human rights, with oppression or repression of speakers of minority languages. It is a matter of injustice when people are forced to give up their languages by repressive regimes or prejudiced dominant societies.

Related to this is the personal loss associated with the death of one’s heritage language. Language loss is often experienced as a crisis of social identity. Our psychological, social, and physical well-being is connected with our native language; it shapes our values, self-image, identity, relationships, and ultimately success in life. For many communities, work towards language revitalization is not about language alone, but is part of a “larger effort to restore personal and societal wellness” (Pfeiffer and Holm 1994, the of Navajo Nation’s Education Division). Many indigenous voices affirm the importance of language in cultural identity:

Linguistic diversity ... constitutes one of the great treasures of humanity, an enormous storehouse of expressive power and profound understanding of the universe. The loss of hundreds of languages that have already passed into history is an intellectual catastrophe in every way comparable in magnitude to the ecological catastrophe we face today as the earth’s tropical forests are swept by fire. Each language still spoken is fundamental to the personal, social and – a key term in the discourse of indigenous peoples – spiritual identity of its speakers. (Zepeda [Tohono O’odham nation] and Hill 1991.)

But why save our languages ... we should save our languages because it is the spiritual relevance that is deeply embedded in our own languages that is important. (Richard Littlebear [Northern Cheyenne, President of Chief Dull Knife College, Lame Deer]. 1999:1.)

I canʼt stress enough the importance of retaining our tribal languages, when it comes to the core relevance or existence of our people … You could argue that when a tribe loses its language, it loses a piece of its inner-most being, a part of its soul or spirit … When it comes to native languages, the situation is simple: Use it or lose it. (Sonny Skyhawk [Sicangu Lakota, Hollywood actor] 2012.)

**Language loss does not promote peace**. It is often claimed that there would be more harmony if there were just one or only a few languages in the world. Some see language loss as promoting greater understanding and fostering world peace. This is wrong. Having only one language is no guarantee of “understanding.” We need look no further than the conflicts in monolingual Northern Ireland, the former Yugoslavia (where Serbians and Croatians have a common language), or the 1994 Rwanda genocide (involving Hutu and Tutsi, both speakers of Kinyarwanda), not to mention the U.S. Civil War. National unity is not fostered by monolingualism; rather, recognition of minority languages’ rights may be a better way of bringing about peace, understanding, and ultimately national unity, as in relatively peaceful multilingual Belgium, Finland, or Switzerland.

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