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Language death

The rapid endangerment and death of many minority languages across the world is a matter of widespread concern, not only among linguists and anthropologists but among all concerned with issues of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized culture. A leading commentator and popular writer on language issues, David Crystal asks the fundamental question, ‘Why is language death so important?’, reviews the reasons for the current crisis and investigates what is being done to reduce its impact.

By some counts, only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages in the world are ‘safe’ from the threat of extinction. On some reckonings, the world will, by the end of the twenty-first century, be dominated by a small number of major languages. *Language death* provides a stimulating and accessible account of this crisis, brimming with salutary and thought-provoking facts and figures about a phenomenon which – like the large-scale destruction of the environment – is both peculiarly modern and increasingly global. The book contains not only intelligent argument, but moving descriptions of the decline and demise of particular languages, and practical advice for anyone interested in pursuing the subject further.

DAVID CRYSTAL is one of the world’s foremost authorities on language. He is author of the hugely successful *Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (1987; second edition 1997), *Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language* (1995) and *English as a global language* (1997). An internationally renowned writer, journal editor, lecturer, and broadcaster, Professor Crystal received an OBE in 1995 for his services to the study and teaching of language. He is also editor of *The Cambridge encyclopedia* (1990; second edition 1994; third edition 1997; fourth edition 2000), *The Cambridge paperback encyclopedia* (1993; second edition 1995; third edition 1999), *The Cambridge biographical encyclopedia* (1994; second edition 1997), and *The Cambridge factfinder* (1994; second edition 1997; third edition 1998; fourth edition 2000).

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Preface

In 1992, linguists attending the International Linguistics Congress in Quebec agreed the following statement:

As the disappearance of any one language constitutes an irretrievable loss to mankind, it is for UNESCO a task of great urgency to respond to this situation by promoting and, if possible, sponsoring programs of linguistic organizations for the description in the form of grammars, dictionaries and texts, including the recording of oral literatures, of hitherto unstudied or inadequately documented endangered and dying languages.

UNESCO did respond. At a conference in November 1993, the General Assembly adopted the 'Endangered Languages Project' – including the 'Red Book of Endangered Languages' – and a few months later a progress report observed:

Although its exact scope is not yet known, it is certain that the extinction of languages is progressing rapidly in many parts of the world, and it is of the highest importance that the linguistic profession realize that it has to step up its descriptive efforts.

Several significant events quickly followed. In 1995 an International Clearing House for Endangered Languages was inaugurated at the University of Tokyo. The same year, an Endangered Language Fund was instituted in the USA. The opening statement by the Fund's committee pulled no punches:

Languages have died off throughout history, but never have we faced the massive extinction that is threatening the world right now. As language professionals, we are faced with a stark reality: Much of what we study will not be available to future generations. The cultural heritage of many peoples is crumbling while we look on. Are we willing to shoulder the blame for having stood by and done nothing?

Also in 1995, the Foundation for Endangered Languages was established in the UK. Its second newsletter, summarizing the likely prospects, provides an informal estimate of the scale of the problem:

There is agreement among linguists who have considered the situation that over half of the world's languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation. We and our children, then, are living at the point in human history where, within perhaps two generations, most languages in the world will die out.

Something truly significant is evidently taking place. There has never, in my recollection, been such a universal upsurge of professional linguistic concern. But although the facts, and the reasons behind the facts, are now tolerably clear, most members of the educated public – a public that is usually concerned and vociferous about language and ecology – is still unaware that the world is facing a linguistic crisis of unprecedented scale.

Some people can't or won't believe it. I recall, in early 1997, writing a piece for the *Guardian* about my (at the time) forthcoming book, *English as a global language*. It was a retrospective account of the factors which had promoted the growth of English around the world. At the end of the 2000-word piece, I added a sentence as a speculative teaser. Imagine, I said, what could happen if English continues to grow as it has. Maybe one day it will be the only language left to learn. If that happens, I concluded, it will be the greatest intellectual disaster that the planet has ever known.

The point was incidental, but for many readers it was as if I had never written the rest of the article. The paper's editor made it the keynote of his summary, and most of the published letters which followed focused on the issue of language death. It was good to see so many people being alert and concerned. But the main reaction, in the form of a follow-up article by a journalist the next week, was not so good. He dismissed out of hand the thought that languages could be in danger on a global scale. He had just returned from a visit to Africa, and was filled with pleasurable recollections of the multilingualism he had encountered there; so he concluded that

the languages of the world are safe, and that ‘a monoglot millennium will never come’.

It was at that point I decided it was essential to write this book – a complementary volume, in some ways, to *English as a global language*. The need for information about language loss is urgent. As the quotations from the various professional groups suggest, we are at a critical point in human linguistic history, and most people don’t know.

Language death is real. Does it matter? Should we care? This book argues that it does, and we should. It aims to establish the facts, insofar as they are known, and then to explain them: what is language death, exactly? which languages are dying? why do languages die? – and why apparently now, in particular? It addresses three difficult questions. Why is the death of a language so important? Can anything be done? Should anything be done? The last two questions are especially difficult to answer, and need careful and sensitive debate, but, in this author’s mind, the ultimate answers have to be a resounding YES and YES. The plight of the world’s endangered languages should be at the top of any environmental linguistic agenda. It is time to promote the new ecolinguistics – to echo an ancient saying, one which is full of colourful and wide-awake green ideas (see p. 32). It needs to be promoted urgently, furiously, because languages are dying as I write. Everyone should be concerned, because it is everyone’s loss. And this book has been written to help foster the awareness without which universal concern cannot grow.

The book would have been written in 1997, if I had not been sidetracked by a different but related project, which eventually achieved literary life in the form of a play, *Living on*, which tried to capture imaginatively some of the emotional issues, for both linguists and last speakers, surrounding the topic of language death. Whether a dramatic as opposed to a scholarly encounter with the topic is likely to have greater impact I cannot say. All I know is that the issue is now so challenging in its unprecedented enormity that we need all hands – scholars, journalists, politicians, fund-raisers, artists, actors, directors . . . – if public consciousness (let alone

conscience) is to be raised sufficiently to enable something fruitful to be done. It is already too late for hundreds of languages. For the rest, the time is now.

It will be obvious, from the frequency of quotations and references in this book, that I have been hugely dependent on the small army of fieldworkers who are actively involved in the task of language preservation around the world. Enough material has now been published to provide the array of examples and illustrations which are needed to put flesh on a general exposition. I have also had the opportunity, in recent travels, to discuss these matters with several of the researchers who are routinely 'out there'. And I have immensely benefited from the comments on a draft of this book provided by Peter Trudgill, Carl James, and Jean Aitchison. Without all these supports, I could not have contemplated writing an overview of this kind; and that is why I have made copious use of the footnote convention, to give due acknowledgement to the crucial role of those who are doing the real work. I hope I have done them no disservice. Although I have never personally spent more than a few hours at a time with endangered language communities abroad, I have used up a good deal of my life working for the maintenance of Welsh at home, and would like to think that I have developed, both intellectually and emotionally, a real sense of the issues.

One of these issues is the question of exploitation: all too often (as we shall see in chapter 5) questions are raised by members of indigenous speech communities about the extent to which outside researchers are profiting financially from their plight. This issue, it seems to me, must exercise not only those working on endangered language projects, but equally authors of general books which deal specifically with the topic. This is such a book. All royalties from its sale will therefore be transferred to the Foundation for Endangered Languages (see Appendix), in the hope that the task of writing it will thereby have a practical as well as an intellectual outcome.

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