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What is language death?

The phrase 'language death' sounds as stark and final as any other in which that word makes its unwelcome appearance. And it has similar implications and resonances. To say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead. It could be no other way – for languages have no existence without people.

A language dies when nobody speaks it any more. For native speakers of the language in which this book is written, or any other thriving language, it is difficult to envision such a possibility. But the reality is easy to illustrate. Take this instance, reported by Bruce Connell in the pages of the newsletter of the UK Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL), under the heading 'Obituaries':[1]

During fieldwork in the Mambila region of Cameroon's Adamawa province in 1994–95, I came across a number of moribund languages . . . For one of these languages, Kasabe (called Luo by speakers of neighbouring languages and in my earlier reports), only one remaining speaker, Bogon, was found. (He himself knew of no others.) In November 1996 I returned to the Mambila region, with part of my agenda being to collect

[1] Connell (1977: 27). The newsletters of this organization changed their name in early issues. The name was *Iatiku* for Numbers 2–4, and *Ogmios* for No. 6 on. Issues 1 and 5 had no distinctive name, and in this book these are referred to as *FEL Newsletter*.

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further data on Kasabe. Bogon, however, died on 5th Nov. 1995, taking Kasabe with him. He is survived by a sister, who reportedly could understand Kasabe but not speak it, and several children and grandchildren, none of whom know the language.

There we have it, simply reported, as we might find in any obituary column. And the reality is unequivocal. On 4 November 1995, Kasabe existed; on 5 November, it did not.

Here is another story, reported at the Second FEL Conference in Edinburgh in 1998 by Ole Stig Andersen.[2] This time, 8 October 1992 is the critical day:

The West Caucasian language Ubuh ... died at daybreak, October 8th 1992, when the Last Speaker, Tevfik Esenç, passed away. I happened to arrive in his village that very same day, without appointment, to interview this famous Last Speaker, only to learn that he had died just a couple of hours earlier. He was buried later the same day.

In actual fact, Kasabe and Ubykh (a widely used alternative spelling) had effectively died long before Bogon and Tevfik Esenç passed away. If you are the last speaker of a language, your language – viewed as a tool of communication – is already dead. For a language is really alive only as long as there is someone to speak it to. When you are the only one left, your knowledge of your language is like a repository, or archive, of your people's spoken linguistic past. If the language has never been written down, or recorded on tape – and there are still many which have not – it is all there is. But, unlike the normal idea of an archive, which continues to exist long

[2] Andersen (1998: 3).

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after the archivist is dead, the moment the last speaker of an unwritten or unrecorded language dies, the archive disappears for ever. When a language dies which has never been recorded in some way, it is as if it has never been.[3]

The language pool

How many languages are at the point of death? How many are endangered? Before we can arrive at an estimate of the scale of the problem, we need to develop a sense of perspective. Widely quoted figures about the percentage of languages dying only begin to make sense if they can be related to a reliable figure about the total number of languages alive in the world today. So how many languages are there? Most reference books published since the 1980s give a figure of between 6,000 and 7,000, but estimates have varied in recent decades between 3,000 and 10,000. It is important to understand the reasons for such enormous variation.

The most obvious reason is an empirical one. Until the second half of the twentieth century, there had been few

[3] There is, of course, always the possibility that other speakers of the same dialect will be found. In the Ubykh case, for instance, there were at the time rumours of two or three other speakers in other villages. Such rumours are sometimes found to be valid; often they are false, with the speakers being found to use a different dialect or language. But even if true, the existence of a further speaker or two usually only postpones the real obituary by a short time. For some Aboriginal Australian examples, see Wurm (1998: 193). Evans (forthcoming) provides an excellent account of the social and linguistic issues which arise when working with last speakers, and especially of the problem of deciding who actually counts as being a 'last speaker'.

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surveys of any breadth, and the estimates which were around previously were based largely on guesswork, and were usually far too low. William Dwight Whitney, plucking a figure out of the air for a lecture in 1874, suggested 1,000.[4] One language popularizer, Frederick Bodmer, proposed 1,500; another, Mario Pei, opted for 2,796.[5] Most early twentieth-century linguists avoided putting any figure at all on it. One of the exceptions, Joshua Whatmough, writing in 1956, thought there were 3,000.[6] As a result, without professional guidance, figures in popular estimation see-sawed wildly, from several hundred to tens of thousands. It took some time for systematic surveys to be established. *Ethnologue*, the largest present-day survey, first attempted a world-wide review only in 1974, an edition containing 5,687 languages.[7] The Voegelins' survey, published in 1977, included around 4,500 living languages.[8] Since the 1980s, the situation has changed dramatically, with the improvement of information-gathering techniques. The thirteenth edition of *Ethnologue* (1996) contains 6,703 language headings, and about 6,300 living languages are classified in the *International encyclopedia of linguistics* (1992).[9] There

[4] See Silverstein (1971: 113).
[5] Bodmer (1944:405). Pei (1952: 285); in a later book (1954: 127), this total decreased by 1.
[6] Whatmough (1956: 51).
[7] See now the 13th edition, Grimes (1996); also www.sil.org/ethnologue. The first edition in fact dates from 1951, when Richard S. Pittman produced a mimeographed issue of ten pages, based on interviews with people attending the Summer Institute of Linguistics.
[8] Voegelin and Voegelin (1977). I used their total in the first (1987) edition of my *Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (Crystal 1997a).
[9] Bright (1992); the files of *Ethnologue* (then in its 11th edition) were made available for this project, hence the similarity between the totals.

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are 6,796 names listed in the index to the *Atlas of the world's languages*.[10] The off-the-cuff figure most often heard these days is 6,000, with the variance sometimes going below, sometimes above.[11] An exceptionally high estimate is referred to below.

A second reason for the uncertainty is that commentators know that these surveys are incomplete, and compensate for the lack of hard facts – sometimes by overestimating, sometimes by underestimating. The issue of language loss is itself a source of confusion. People may be aware that languages are dying, but have no idea at what rate. Depending on how they estimate that rate, so their current global guess will be affected: some take a conservative view about the matter; some are radical. (The point is considered further below.) Then there is the opposite situation – the fact that not all languages on earth have yet been 'discovered', thus allowing an element of growth into the situation. The ongoing exploration of a country's interior is not likely to produce many fresh encounters, of course, given the rate at which interiors have already been opened up by developers in recent years; but in such regions as the islands of Indonesia and

[10] This is my count of Mosely and Asher (1994).

[11] Dixon (1997: 143) cites 5,000–6,000, as do Grenoble and Whaley (1998a), in their preface; Wardhaugh (1987: 1) cites 4,000–8,000, and settles on 5,000; Ruhlen (1987) goes for 5,000; Wurm (1991: 1) says 'well over 5,000'; Krauss consulted a number of linguists in writing his article on 'The world's languages in crisis' (1992: 5), and found widespread agreement that 6,000 was a reasonable estimate; Crystal (1997a: 287) also cites 6,000. Other major surveys are in progress: a 'World Languages Report', supported by UNESCO and Linguapax, and financed by the Basque Country, is scheduled for publication in 2001; see also the Global Language Register below.

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Papua New Guinea, or the South American or Central African rainforests, reports do come in from time to time of a previously unknown community and language.[12] For example, in June 1998 two such nomadic tribes (the Vahudate and the Aukedate, comprising 20 and 33 families, respectively) were found living near the Mamberamo River area, 2,400 miles east of Jakarta in Irian Jaya. This is a part of the world where the high mountains and deep valleys can easily hide a community, and it is likely that their speech will be sufficiently different from that of other groups to count as a new language. The social affairs office in the region in fact reports that its field officers encounter new groups almost every year.[13]

Even in parts of the world which have been explored, however, a proper linguistic survey may not have been carried out. As many as half the languages of the world are in this position. Of the 6,703 languages listed in the thirteenth edition of *Ethnologue*, 3,074 have the appended comment – 'survey needed'. And what a survey chiefly does is determine whether the speakers found in a given region do indeed all use the same language, or whether there are differences between them. If the latter, it then tries to decide whether these differences amount only to dialect variations, or whether they are sufficiently great to

[12] The world's languages have a highly uneven distribution: c. 4% are in Europe; c. 15% in the Americas; c. 31% in Africa; c. 50% in Asia and the Pacific. The countries mentioned have the highest distributions: Papua New Guinea and Indonesia alone have 25% (1,529 languages) between them (according to the 1996 edition of *Ethnologue*).

[13] The report is reproduced in *Ogmios* 9. 6. For similar discoveries in South America, see Adelaar (1998: 12); Kaufman (1994: 47) reports that about 40 languages have been discovered in South America during the past century.

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justify assigning the speakers to different languages. Sometimes, a brief preliminary visit assigns everybody to a single language, and an in-depth follow-up survey shows that this was wrong, with several languages spoken. Sometimes, the opposite happens: the initial visit focuses on differences between speakers which turn out not to be so important. In the first case, the number of languages goes up; in the second case, it goes down. When decisions of this kind are being made all over the world, the effect on language counts can be quite marked.

To put some flesh on these statistics, let us take just one of those languages where it is said a survey is needed: Tapshin, according to *Ethnologue* also called Tapshinawa, Suru, and Myet, a language spoken by 'a few' in the Kadun district of Plateau State, Nigeria. It is said to be unclassified within the Benue-Congo broad grouping of languages. Roger Blench, of the Overseas Development Institute in London, visited the community in March 1998, and sent in a short report to the Foundation for Endangered Languages.[14] He stressed the difficulty of reaching the settlement: Tapshin village is a widely dispersed settlement about 25 km north of the Pankshin-Amper road, reached by a track which can be traversed only by a four-wheel drive, and which is often closed during the rainy season. The Tapshin people call themselves Ns'r, and from this derives Blench's name for them, Nsur, and presumably also the name Suru in *Ethnologue*; but they are called Dishili by the Ngas people (referred to as the Angas in *Ethnologue*). The name Myet derives from a settlement, Met, some distance west of Tapshin.

[14] Blench (1998).

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The Tapshin people claim that the Met people speak 'the same' language as they do, but Blench is cautious about taking this information at face value (for such judgements may be no more than a reflection of some kind of social or historical relationship between the communities). No data seems previously to have been recorded on Nsur. From his initial wordlists, he concludes that there has been substantial mutual influence with the Ngas language. He estimates that there are some 3–4,000 speakers, though that total depends on whether Met is included along with Nsur or not.

This small example illustrates something of the problem facing the linguistic analyst. There is a confusion of names which must be sorted out, in addition to the observable similarities and differences between the speakers.[15] The Nsur situation seems fairly manageable, with just a few alternatives to be considered. Often, the problem of names is much greater. Another Plateau State language, listed as *Berom* in *Ethnologue*, has 12 alternative names: *Birom*, *Berum*, *Gbang*, *Kibo*, *Kibbo*, *Kibbun*, *Kibyen*, *Aboro*, *Boro-Aboro*, *Afango*, *Chenberom*, and *Shosho*. The task then is to establish whether these are alternative names for the same entity, or whether they refer to different entities – the name of the people, the name of an individual speaker, or the name of the language as known by its speakers (a European analogy would be *Irish*, *Irishman/woman*, and *Gaelic/Irish/Erse*, respectively). Then there is the question of what the language is called by outsiders. There could of course be several 'outsider'

[15] For a discussion of the problem of naming, with particular reference to China, see Bradley (1998: 56 ff.).

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names (*exonyms*), depending on how many other groups the language is in contact with (cf. *deutsch* being equivalent to *allemand*, *German*, *Tedesco*, etc.), and these might range from friendly names through neutral names to offensive names (cf. 'He speaks French' vs 'He speaks Frog'). Shosho, in the above list, is apparently an offensive name. But all this has to be discovered by the investigator. There is no way of knowing in advance how many or what kind of answers will be given to the question 'What is the name of your language?', or whether a list of names such as the above represents 1, 2, 6, or 12 languages. And the scale of this problem must be appreciated: the 6,703 language headings in the *Ethnologue* index generate as many as 39,304 different names.

Many of these names, of course, will refer to the dialects of a language. But this distinction raises a different type of difficulty: does a name refer to the whole of a language or to a dialect? The question of whether two speech systems should be considered as separate languages or as dialects of the same language has been a focus of discussion within linguistics for over a century. It is crucial to have criteria for deciding the question, as the decisions made can have major repercussions, when it comes to language counting. Take, for example, the Global Language Register (GLR), in the process of compilation by the Observatoire Linguistique:[16] in a 1997 formulation by David Dalby, this project proposed a threefold nomenclature – of *tongue*

[16] The following details are taken from a Logosphere Workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, September 1997, specifically from Dalby (1997), and his follow-up paper subsequently circulated.

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(or *outer language*), *language* (or *inner language* – or *idiom*, in a further proposal), and *dialect* – to avoid what it considered to be the oversimplified dichotomy of *language* and *dialect*. Early reports related to this project suggested that, using these criteria, an order of magnitude of 10,000 languages was to be expected – a surprisingly large total, when compared with the totals suggested above. The explanation is all to do with methodology. The GLR total is derived from the *tongues* and *idioms* of their system, and includes as languages many varieties which other approaches would consider to be dialects. One example will illustrate the 'inflationary' effect of this approach. The orthodox approach to modern Welsh is to consider it as a single language, with the notable differences between (in particular) north and south Welsh referred to as dialects. On grounds of mutual intelligibility and sociolinguistic identity (of Wales as a nation-principality), this approach seems plausible. The GLR analysis, however, treats the differences between north and south Welsh as justifying the recognition of different languages (each with their own dialects), and makes further distinctions between Old Welsh, Book Welsh, Bible Welsh, Literary Welsh, Modern Standard Welsh, and Learners' Normalized Welsh (a pedagogical model of the 1960s known as 'Cymraeg Byw'). Excluding Old Welsh, in their terms a total of six 'inner languages' can be recognized within the 'outer language' known as modern Welsh. One can see immediately how, when similar cases are taken into account around the world, an overall figure of 10,000 could be achieved.

The language/dialect issue has been addressed so many times, in the linguistics literature, that it would be

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