

## **Why should we care if a language goes extinct? Discuss with relevance to under-studied and/or minority languages.**

The capacity for language is often cited as the main dividing factor that distinguishes humans from other animals. However, in today's world the threat of extinction to many of the world's biological species can be paralleled with that facing thousands of languages across the globe. Language extinction is a hotly debated topic, with linguists predicting that anywhere from 50% to 90%<sup>1</sup> of the approximate 6000 languages currently in existence will be extinct – that is, have no speakers<sup>2</sup> - by 2100. Whilst some deem this 'catastrophic destruction'<sup>3</sup>, others dub the attempt to preserve these endangered minority languages 'ridiculous'<sup>4</sup>. However, in order to determine whether or not these figures are worthy of concern, the global and local impacts of language extinction must be considered, as well as questioning why these languages are disappearing to begin with.

Perhaps most compelling from an academic perspective is the potential for the loss of vast volumes of linguistic data upon the extinction of a language. Whilst linguists work all over the globe to document critically endangered languages in an effort to record and thereby preserve, among other things, the phonemes, lexicon and grammar of a particular language, given the current rate of language loss it is inevitable that many endangered languages will become extinct before they can be documented. Loss of linguistic diversity is immeasurably detrimental to the understanding of language as a whole, given that minority languages can and do exhibit features that contradict commonly accepted universal properties of language (including the extent of human phonetic capabilities) which have been extrapolated from the study of majority languages. For example, the Amazonian language of Urarina uses a highly unusual sentence structure, which consists of placing the object first, followed by the verb and finally the subject. This word order can only be found in a few other minority languages also spoken by small speech communities in the Amazon<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, if, as with many other endangered and minority languages, Urarina had gone extinct before linguists were able to study it, it is highly probable that this Object-Subject-Verb structure would still be considered impossible, thus perpetuating a fundamental misunderstanding of the processing capabilities of the human brain. Whilst such academic speculation may at first appear to have little relevance or appeal to the interests of non-linguists, the role of language in researching and understanding human cognition lends these issues a wider applicability. By discovering what is possible, and perhaps more importantly what is impossible in human language, and thereby establishing a set of shared characteristics of all languages, it may be possible to attain a greater understanding of the way in which language is acquired, perceived, understood and produced, and thus how the human brain processes information.

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<sup>1</sup> Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia (2011). "Introduction". In Austin, Peter K; Sallabank, Julia (eds.). *Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages*. Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-88215-6.

<sup>2</sup> Austin, P. and Sallabank, J., n.d. *The Cambridge Handbook Of Endangered Languages*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ladefoged, P., 1992. Another View of Endangered Languages. *Language*, 68(4), p.809.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News. 2020. *Are Dying Languages Worth Saving?*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-11304255>> [Accessed 16 July 2020].

<sup>5</sup> Harrison, K., 2007. *When Languages Die - The Extinction Of The World's Languages And The Erosion Of Human Knowledge*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Conversely, one must perhaps be wary of only considering the academic consequences of language extinction without addressing the impact for those to whom the language belongs. Whilst the argument for the preservation of linguistic diversity is undoubtedly strong, it is perhaps reductive to view language simply as ‘an experiment in the laboratory of human language evolution’<sup>6</sup>. Language does not only find value when represented as data in a study and neither can it be viewed as an entirely objective and scientific entity, given that it is inextricably linked with the culture and identity of those who speak it. The simultaneous development of language and culture in many small and minority speech communities, as well as the fact that culture is often realised through language, lends them an interdependent relationship. Therefore, the attempt to isolate language from culture can be seen as an oversight at best, and at worst an effort to sterilise language in order to claim it as academic property. As put by Angela Johnson, language is ‘our identity and culture, totems, countries and skin names’<sup>7</sup>, thus encapsulating the idea that upon the extinction of a language an individual loses an irrecoverable link to their heritage and sense of self.

To understand how loss of language can be considered synonymous with loss of culture and identity, it is first necessary to consider the way in which language acts as a reflection of culture itself. One can find both implicit and explicit evidence of culture embedded within language, which provide intimate insights into the history, values and experiences of its speech community. For example, noism is a commonly found feature in Korean, meaning that an individual will often refer to themselves using a collective pronoun such as ‘our’, compared to the singular ‘my’ that is used in a language such as English. A feature as subtle as this is able to convey the more collectivist mindset of the Korean culture compared to the more individualistic outlook in English or American culture<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, perhaps one of the most culturally informative aspects of a language is its lexicon, given that the act of naming itself is indicative of something having value and relevance within a community, and therefore it is also possible to infer that the richer a semantic domain, the larger the role or importance of this domain within a particular culture. For example, the Todzhu people of Siberia have an extremely extensive vocabulary for the naming of reindeers, in which one single word is able to convey a meaning that would require a much longer expression in Russian, the official language of Siberia. For example, a ‘döngür’ is the name given to a ‘male domesticated reindeer from second fall to third fall; first mating season; may be castrated or not, but even if not, will probably not be allowed to mate’<sup>9</sup>. Such specific vocabulary is indicative of the Todzhu’s long history of reindeer herding, and in turn helps to sustain these traditional practises in that a speaker is able to divine a relatively large quantity of information about the way in which reindeer are classified, utilised and domesticated through only one word. Through the many thousands of examples such as these, one is able to gain an understanding of the way in which language exists almost as a documentation of a way of life, including the history, geography, values and practises of those to whom it belongs. Thus the question of language extinction is also a question of cultural and historical extinction, and as a result the disappearance of a language signifies the death of a part of

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<sup>6</sup> Hanks, William F. *Language* 86, no. 2 (2010): 438-41. [Accessed July 18, 2020]. [www.jstor.org/stable/40666329](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40666329).

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, L., 2020. *What Is Language Extinction And Why Should We Care?*. [online] NITV. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/my-grandmothers-lingo/article/2016/10/06/what-language-extinction-and-why-should-we-care> [Accessed 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020].

<sup>8</sup> Bhana, Y., 2020. *How Language Provides Insights Into Culture - Translatemedia*. [online] TranslateMedia. Available at: <https://www.translatemedia.com/translation-blog/language-provides-insights-culture/> [Accessed 26 July 2020].

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, K., 2007. *When Languages Die - The Extinction Of The World’S Languages And The Erosion Of Human Knowledge*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

identity. Far from being an abstract concept, having a strong sense of one's identity has been shown to have significant effects on the mental and physical well-being of individuals. For example, studies of indigenous Australian populations have shown strong correlations between connectedness to native culture and language and well-being, with reports of significantly lower suicide rates<sup>10</sup> and levels of drug and alcohol abuse among aboriginal youths where natives were able to speak their traditional indigenous language at a conversational level<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, when a language goes extinct, it also sparks larger issues of 'personal and societal wellness'<sup>12</sup>.

However, this largely localist rhetoric<sup>13</sup> is arguably difficult to engage with, as it can be hard to mourn the loss of a culture that one has never experienced and an identity which is not one's own. Therefore, it may also be useful to remember that the loss of language not only gives rise to a loss of cultural identity, but a loss of cultural products which can have universal value. Many minority languages do not have scripts (or at least do not have prevalent written traditions), and therefore the majority of local literature and knowledge is expressed and preserved entirely in oral tradition. For example, poems such as the Iliad and the Odyssey, which are now considered canonical, originally existed as part of Ancient Greek oral tradition passed down from generation to generation<sup>14</sup>. Oral literature such as this, which is both culturally informative as well as being artistically valuable in its own right, may well be lost forever, thereby intellectually, culturally and artistically diminishing humanity as a whole each time a language dies. Indeed, perhaps even more concerning is the disappearance of local knowledge of the natural world signified by language extinction. Scientists estimate that approximately 86% of the world's plant and animal species have not been discovered or described by modern science to this day<sup>15</sup>, however it is thought that there are extensive repositories of widely unknown and unexplored ethnoscientific knowledge held by small speech communities across the globe. Such knowledge may prove (and has proved) vital to the survival and development of humanity, not only from a medicinal perspective, but equally due to the fact that indigenous communities have unique methods of cultivating and utilising natural resources unknown to outside groups. For example, the Seri have discovered the nutritional value of Eelgrass, which is 'the only known grain from the sea used as a human food source', and is potentially invaluable due to the relative ease with which it can be cultivated<sup>16</sup>. Just as language is essential to

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<sup>10</sup> Walsh, M., 2017. Indigenous Languages Are Good For Your Health: Health And Wellbeing Implications Of Regaining Or Retaining Australian Languages.

<sup>11</sup> 2012. *Our Land Our Languages*. 1st ed. [ebook] Canberra: The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, pp.7-44. Available at: [https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/house\\_of\\_representatives\\_committees?url=/atsia/languages2/report.htm](https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=/atsia/languages2/report.htm) [Accessed 26 July 2020].

<sup>12</sup> Rogers, Chris, and Lyle Campbell. "Endangered Languages." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. 3 Dec. 2015; Accessed 21 July 2020. <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-21>.

<sup>13</sup> Errington, J., 2003. Getting Language Rights: The Rhetorics of Language Endangerment and Loss. *American Anthropologist*, 105(4), pp.723-732.

<sup>14</sup> Foley, J., 2007. "Reading" Homer through Oral Tradition. *College Literature*, 34(2), pp.1-28.

<sup>15</sup> Watson, T., 2020. *86 Percent Of Earth's Species Still Unknown?*. [online] National Geographic. Available at: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/8/110824-earths-species-8-7-million-biology-planet-animals-science/> [Accessed 20 July 2020].

<sup>16</sup> Rogers, Chris, and Lyle Campbell. "Endangered Languages." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics*. 3 Dec. 2015; Accessed 18 July 2020. <https://oxfordre.com/linguistics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-21>.

the preservation of traditional cultural practises, so too is it important in the safeguarding of local knowledge. If the protection of the world's languages is neglected, the breadth of the humanity's knowledge is diminished, and humankind as a whole is done a disservice.

By contrast, it is possible to argue that the connection between language and culture is hyperbolised for emotional impact, rather than appealing to logic and rationality. The ability to separate culture from language is perhaps exemplified through the existence of the 200,000 indigenous Australians in Northern Australia who speak the English-based creole, Kriol. In these communities, not only do traditional culture and practises continue, but cultural aspects of the original language can even be seen reflected in Kriol. For example, the word 'sori' in Kriol has a dual meaning of 'sorry' and 'to give', just as it did in the original language of Dalabon, thereby showing how culturally specific features can shift between languages and are not always lost in translation<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, it would be foolish to claim that language is the only reflection of culture and history, given that there are many other vessels through which culture can be expressed such as dance, art, music and even body language or gestures that have recognised meaning within a community. Once it is acknowledged that language is not necessarily synonymous with culture, it becomes evident that the glorification of language as a part of culture and identity is inherently problematic. The argument that culture dies with language is not only false, but ultimately serves to invalidate the sense of cultural and personal identity of many post-colonial indigenous communities and migrant populations that continue to thrive without speaking their ancestral or native languages. This is both offensive and potentially harmful, as by denying the viability of the cultural identity of indigenous communities it becomes easier for those in power to overlook the rights of these comparatively powerless and marginalised groups, for example by refusing them legal rights to their traditional lands<sup>18</sup>. Equally as detrimental is the trope of the 'erosion of human knowledge'<sup>19</sup>, which suggests a universal claim to knowledge. Whilst some speech communities may welcome linguistic or anthropological interest, others believe that their language and traditional knowledge holds spiritual significance and therefore reject interference by outsiders. The idea that the wisdom of a speech community is the rightful property of humanity as a whole is perhaps no less condemnable than claiming the language itself as the academic property of linguists, as both come dangerously close to a neo-colonialist mindset which sees material and immaterial wealth as open to be taken and exploited by others in the interests of self-advancement.

It is possible to claim that, regardless of the cultural importance it may or may not carry, language is first and foremost a means of communication. Therefore, if people are no longer choosing to speak a language it becomes redundant and so, logically, it goes extinct. However, it is perhaps more pertinent to question why these languages going extinct to begin with. Historically, forced suppression of languages may have been responsible for their disappearance, such as that seen in Canada during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Indigenous children were sent to boarding schools

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<sup>17</sup> Ponsonnet, M., 2020. *Indigenous Languages Matter – But All Is Not Lost When They Change Or Even Disappear*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/indigenous-languages-matter-but-all-is-not-lost-when-they-change-or-even-disappear-127519>> [Accessed 28 July 2020].

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, K., 2007. *When Languages Die - The Extinction Of The World'S Languages And The Erosion Of Human Knowledge*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

where they were forbidden to speak their languages<sup>20</sup>. Although outright suppression and persecution continues to be a culprit of language extinction, today one of the biggest threats comes from globalisation. As certain countries grow more politically and economically powerful, so do their languages, which spread and stifle smaller and minority languages. Often this occurs because the dominant language becomes a pre-requisite for achieving a certain quality of life; for example, access to education, employment and healthcare may only be obtainable through a particular language<sup>21</sup>. As a result, one must perhaps be cautious when claiming that speakers 'choose' to abandon their minority languages. Whilst they may not be legally obliged to do so, the so-called autonomy that these individuals retain is largely superficial, given that they are heavily coerced into abandoning their language by external forces. Furthermore, as the dominant language gains political, economic, and social favour, other languages are viewed as 'backwards' as a result of being associated with a lack of education or poor socio-economic background. This leads to a stigmatisation of minority languages, which further discourages the passing down of languages from parent to child, thereby severely endangering the future of the language. Once again, this subjugation of one language to another can perhaps be seen as a form of modern-day colonialism, in which one group is seen as 'inferior' to another, partially due to the fact that they are in a less powerful position.

Here, it is important to consider what is meant by 'we', as it is not the place of a linguist, or even a native speaker of a majority language, to judge or dramatise the forsaking of a minority language. Indeed, it is perhaps ignorant and self-indulgent to suggest that individuals should prioritise the preservation of their native language over the economic and social stability of their lives. Ultimately we should care about language extinction, not because the act of giving up a language is morally condemnable, nor even due to the academic and cultural value of language, but because language extinction is in itself a reflection of a larger human rights issue. Far too often, the death of a language is the direct result of the marginalisation of one community to another and the violation of an individual's right to true freedom and autonomy. Regardless of whether one has a specific interest in language loss, we all have a moral and ethical obligation to fight for the rights of jeopardised communities, in which opposing language extinction plays a fundamental role.

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<sup>20</sup> Riehl, A., 2019. *Why Are Languages Worth Preserving?*. [online] SAPIENS - Anthropology / Everything Human. Available at: <<https://www.sapiens.org/language/endangered-languages/>> [Accessed 14 July 2020].

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, M., 2018. *Why Languages Become Endangered, And How We Can Keep Them Alive*. [online] Smithsonian Insider. Available at: <<https://insider.si.edu/2018/04/why-languages-become-endangered-and-how-we-can-keep-them-alive/>> [Accessed 16 July 2020].