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

Introduction

Today, 7.8 billion people speak just six thousand languages. Most of these languages are spoken in small, marginalised communities in danger of being swallowed by major language communitiesⁱ. Today, the rate of extinction is critical: one language every two weeksⁱⁱ. Yet, lack of interest in and understanding of the value of these languages renders this crisis silent. In this essay, I will argue that language loss compounds the suffering of minority communities, permits their persecution by authoritarian or nationalistic regimes, and detracts from our understanding of global history and sociocultural cognition.

The loss to knowledge

The study of the widest possible variety of languages is critical to uncovering the extent of the human linguistic capacityⁱⁱⁱ and moving away from a purely Indo-European perspective. Whilst the existence of common elements and a limited set of forms and structures is well argued by many linguists, the nativist concept of a universal grammar is unfounded. Indeed, it led to the misconception that indigenous languages were primitive because they could not be reconciled with Latin grammar^{iv}. In fact, complexity varies chiefly within grammatical subsections^v: one language may use many tenses but lack prepositions, while another may have fewer tenses but more phonemes. By studying these variations, linguists can establish the boundaries of human communicative ability. For instance, the 'bilabial trills' of the near-extinct Vanuatuan language Naati were previously considered impossible for humans to make^{vi}. !Xoo, spoken by roughly 4000 people in Botswana and Namibia, is made up of between 84 and 159 consonant phonemes, whilst English has just 40-45; before the discovery of !Xoo, Ubykh's 82 was considered the upper limit^{vii}. Evidently, the study of minority languages is essential to understanding the limits of human capabilities.

Language variety reflects and impacts human cognition, since the loss of minority languages will not only result in a loss of information for linguists, but in our diversity of worldviews. As Ezra Pound stated, "no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension^{viii}." For decades, linguists were baffled by the apparently colour-blind writings of Homer; even modern indigenous communities were thought to be incapable of differentiating green from blue or blue from black. Yet, the boundaries of the colour spectrum is one example of a cognitive/cultural convention which varies between societies; if a wide range of synthetic dyes are not used or wildflowers not cultivated in your community, you are unlikely to devise names for such rare shades as pink or purple or differentiate blue from green^{ix}. Every community is particularly sensitive to some part of the human experience. The greatest variation from Western norms is found in isolated aboriginal communities. The Amazonian Matsigenka tribe use elaborate verb distinctions based on 'evidentiality': when speaking, one must state whether the information reported is based on one's first-hand knowledge, on inference, conjecture, or hearsay. Thus, as Guy Deutscher puts it, "The Matsigenka...have to be master epistemologists^x." In Guugu Yimithirr, an endangered Australian aboriginal language, an instinctual knowledge of cardinal directions as opposed to egocentric coordinates is necessary for communication^{xi}. Thus, language pushes speakers to attend to certain features of experiences instead of others; this idea is very relevant to the modern debate on gendered pronouns. If English learned from one of any number of minority languages which possess a non-gendered third person singular pronoun, would we be less inclined to define a person by his or her gender?

Consequently, we may propose that the greater the number of languages known by an individual, the wider their worldview. Indeed, a study into ability to grasp the differences between English and Korean prepositions (which respectively distinguish between placing something 'in' or 'on' an object, and the tightness of its fit) showed that, whilst monolingual English adults found it impossible to use the Korean format, bilingual children could maintain both perceptions of the interrelationships of objects^{xii}. Thus, arguably, monolinguals are at a disadvantage in terms of the scope of their cognitive ability.

In addition, language extinction constitutes the loss of the accumulated knowledge of a community. As indigenous language speakers are "active stewards of some of the most biologically and ecologically rich regions of the world^{xiii}," a breadth of ecological knowledge is contained within their languages. Indeed, ethnobiologist Fiona Archer's study of Khoisan languages has revealed the names of 120 plant species used by traditional healers, all disclosing their properties^{xiv}, potentially invaluable to western medicine.

The loss to history

"Everything forgets. But not a language^{xv}." When George Steiner made this statement, he was pointing to a key role of linguistics: its power to support the discipline of history by providing an insight into our cultural and migratory past. According to Crystal, each one of the 250 living languages listed in the etymological files of the Oxford English Dictionary acts as a point of contact with our social history^{xvi}. Thus, when any language disappears, the potential of historical and prehistorical research diminishes.

A community's language acts as a window onto its past; by depriving a people of their language, we strip them of their stories and fables, and thus their history. Moreover, the loss of a script means losing access to centuries of documentation and the knowledge therein. To place this in context, if Latin and Ancient Greek ever ceased to be learned, the original works of Plato, Herodotus, and Ovid, works which shaped and continue to influence the development of many cultures, would be lost. Even on a smaller scale, such as that of minority communities, the damage to individuals and to a community can be severe. The desire to understand one's heritage is instinctual: consider the current wave of interest in tracing one's family history and ethnic background, and the anger felt against Henry VIII for destroying England's parish records. Philologist Johan Van Hoorde makes this point well: "When you lose your language...you exclude yourself from your past^{xvii}."

On a wider scale, the loss of a language impairs our knowledge of global history and prehistory. Living languages are an essential supplement to archaeology, providing an insight into illiterate or undocumented cultures. Language reconstruction relies on the preservation of a diverse pool of living languages: for instance, Proto-Oceanic, an undocumented language, was reconstructed through the study of cognates in Hawaiian, Manam, Māori, and other (also endangered) modern Oceanic languages^{xviii}. Cognates between living languages can also identify ancient cultural practices. For instance, the cognate terms from two distinct cultures, *markuriija* in Kayardild and *malkuri* in Lardil (both moribund), to express the illness resulting from cooking land- and seafood together suggest descent from a common culture which held the Kayardild belief of the importance of keeping apart sea and land creatures, food, and smells^{xix}.

By linking reconstructed languages to archaeological and genetic evidence, it is possible not only to locate in time these proto languages, but to trace paths of human migration^{xx}. For instance, Bantu, from which most African languages descend, can be traced back from southern Africa to its homeland near Cameroon through a process (known as *Worter und Sachen*) of linking sets of reconstructed words to archaeological profiles. The reconstructed proto-Bantu terms included

words related to the agricultural practices of western Africa and it was possible to map its technological vocabulary onto the contents of Cameroonian archaeological sites^{xxi}. Evidently, if one supports the practice of history one must also value linguistic research, for which a wide pool of living languages is necessary.

The geopolitical consequences:

Arguments for political unification through a global language (facilitating communication and levelling the international playing field), though popular, are fundamentally flawed. The belief that a reduction in the number of global languages would facilitate peace is long-held: the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel presents the division of a global language as God's punishment of man for his hubris^{xxii}. Yet, as with any fable, the view expressed herein is simplistic: firstly, the idea of enlightenment and peace following monolingualism has been repeatedly disproven by civil wars; secondly, it dismisses the possibility of multilingualism. As Crystal puts it, "there are good grounds for conceiving the natural condition of the human being to be multilingual^{xxiii}": young children are capable of picking up on multiple languages^{xxiv} and bilingual children have been shown to understand each of their languages as completely as a monolingual child does her single language^{xxv}. Furthermore, language variation is natural and inevitable: consider the preponderance of accents and dialects within allegedly monolingual countries; would not human creativity and drive to form individual identities render a global language unsustainable? Additionally, creating a monolingual society requires the suppression of minority languages which is not conducive to peace. The suppression of Cantonese in Hong Kong, for instance, is partially responsible for a decrease in the number of people who identify as Chinese and the rise of the Hongkonger identity. Among young people, speaking Mandarin has become taboo^{xxvi}. The attempts of the Chinese government to enforce Mandarin have only served to deepen the rift between city and country. Through multilingualism, a lingua franca need not be irreconcilable with the preservation of minority languages.

Supporting the preservation of endangered languages is critical if we are to oppose authoritarian regimes and make reparations for our colonial pasts. Colonial oppression was facilitated by linguistic suppression of and prejudice against oral languages. Indigenous speakers of purely oral languages have been denied land rights and full citizenship of their own countries by colonists due to a lack of documentation^{xxvii}. The resulting poverty and disenfranchisement of these people is reflected in the

Authoritarian governments have long used linguistic suppression to monopolise national identity. For instance, following the Indian Removal Act of the 1830s, North American government policy from as late as the 1950s involved the forceful removal of Tsalagi (Cherokee) children from their families to supplant their native language with English. This practice was crucial to integrating the native communities into 'civilised' North American culture. It resulted in a 70% decrease in the number of Tsalagi children raised bilingually^{xxviii}. A modern example is the placement in concentration camps of Uighur Muslims in China, where they are forced to learn, and are punished for speaking any language other than, Mandarin Chinese^{xxix}. Evidently, the forced extinction of minority languages is a totalitarian tool. Thus, if we wish to oppose expansionism and political hegemonies, and the oppression of minority communities, we must promote the teaching, sustainment, and revival of endangered languages.

The humanitarian implications:

To preserve languages and instil in people a recognition of their importance is to fight against the lack of respect for and oppression of minorities worldwide.

Due to the devaluing of their native languages, many minority groups are socially and economically disadvantaged and thus may be driven to abandon their languages. The spread of a chiefly Latinate Internet, with only half a dozen other scripts available, excludes many minority communities from the technological revolution^{xxx}. Often, minority speakers must learn a major language or be denied access to social services, education, work, and the justice system. There are countless instances of children being punished or humiliated for using their native languages in school and being perceived as ignorant for not being fluent in a country's official language, such as in Bangladesh^{xxxii} and in 19th and 20th century Canada^{xxxiii}. Unable to understand their lessons, children from minority communities often lag behind their major language-speaking peers. This effect was illustrated by a study of Inuit children: those taught in their native language were able to solve complex mental problems by second grade, whilst their peers taught in French and English fell far behind^{xxxiii}. Similarly, founder of Our Golden Hour, Maung Nyeu noted in a Harvard interview that the 60% school dropout rate in Bangladesh was largely represented by indigenous children^{xxxiv}. His work educating children first in their native languages before introducing Bengali has led to a significant fall in the dropout rate^{xxxv}. Outside of education, for minority communities, never seeing one's language used in the corporate or political spheres can provoke a subconscious feeling of impotence or of one's culture being a hindrance to one's social and economic advancement. This is seen particularly in immigrant communities, where parents may opt not to raise their children bilingually for fear of limiting their access to education and professions. Thus, a crucial connection to their heritage is lost. Only through the wider world recognising the validity of minority languages can speakers gain social equality without losing their cultural identity.

Cultural and community identities are based in shared languages; according to Bloch and Trager, "language...is not only an element of culture itself; it is the basis for all cultural activities^{xxxvi}." With the loss of a language comes the loss of many terms related to cultural practices and beliefs. For example, language is key to expressing a community's social network. In English, familial ties and the boundaries of blood relations are not essential parts of our communities, so our kinship vocabulary is very limited, forcing us to resort to circumlocution to reference our 'grandfather on our mother's side' or 'older sister's wife.' In contrast, in many Amerindian and Australian Aboriginal languages, hundreds of highly specific words describe the gender, age, blood relations, social function, and generation of each relation. These vocabularies identify the social system of a community^{xxxvii}. Similarly at risk are the words used in rituals and prayer, without which a community may lose its bond to its native religion^{xxxviii}. Not only this, but the teaching of an indigenous language bridges generational divides and sharing a communal language is documented to enhance well-being^{xxxix}. For instance, in British Columbia, youth suicide rates are more than six times lower in indigenous communities where at least 50% of the population speaks the native language than in others^{xl}. Evidently, having a shared language is crucial both to maintaining the bonds within a community and to individuals' personal identities.

Conclusion:

The consequences of language extinction on our global society are severe: the loss of cross-cultural perspectives and valuable sources of research into psychology, history, anthropology, and medicine; the validation of authoritarianism; and the loss of the cultural identity of minority groups. Africa and Asia hold the largest numbers of endangered languages^{xli}. As the world's poorest continents, the adoption of Western technologies and integration with a US-centred economy is essential to their economic survival and the repercussions of colonial occupation are still being felt. It is these conditions which breed the most pernicious threat to language survival: speakers simply ceasing to teach and learn their language due to a need to integrate with a larger, more powerful, community.

Therefore, it is essential that the governments of developed countries recognise the global significance of minority languages and support communities in their languages' preservation- before they disappear.

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^v Deutscher, Guy. (2011). *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. 109-10. London: Arrow Books.

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^{xi} Deutscher, Guy. (2011). *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages*. 156-93. London: Arrow Books.

^{xii} Evans, Nicholas. (2010). *Dying Words: Endangered Languages and What They Have To Tell Us*. 176-9. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

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^{xvi} Crystal, David. (2000). *Language death*. 35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

^{xvii} As cited in: Crystal, David. (2000). *Language death*. 41. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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^{xxii} Genesis. 11:1-9 (New International Version).

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