What can be done to preserve endangered languages?

A community that wants to preserve or revive its language has a number of options. Perhaps the most dramatic story is that of Modern Hebrew, which was revived as a mother tongue after centuries of being learned and studied only in its ancient written form. Irish has had considerable institutional and political support as the national language of Ireland, despite major inroads by English. In New Zealand, Maori communities established nursery schools staffed by elders and conducted entirely in Maori, called *kohanga reo*, 'language nests'. There, and in Alaska, Hawaii, and elsewhere, this model is being extended to primary and in some cases secondary school. And in California, younger adults have become language apprentices to older adult speakers in communities where only a few older speakers are still living.
A growing number of conferences, workshops, and publications now offer support for individuals, schools, and communities trying to preserve languages.

Because so many languages are in danger of disappearing, linguists are trying to learn as much about them as possible, so that even if the language disappears, all knowledge of the language won't disappear at the same time. Researchers make videotapes, audiotapes, and written records of language use in both formal and informal settings, along with translations.

In addition, they analyze the vocabulary and rules of the language and write dictionaries and grammars.

Linguists also work with communities around the world that want to preserve their languages, offering both technical and practical help with language teaching, maintenance, and revival. This help is based in part on the dictionaries and grammars that they write. But linguists can help in other ways, too, using their experience in teaching and studying a wide variety of languages. They can use what they've learned about other endangered languages to help a community preserve its own language, and they can take advantage of the latest technology for recording and studying languages.

Are new languages being born to replace the languages that die?

Yes. Many signed languages, including American Sign Language, have been born within the last few centuries. Tok Pisin, the national language of Papua New Guinea, developed from an English-based pidgin (a blend of two or more languages). And over many centuries, different dialects of a single language can grow to be distinct languages in their own right, just as dialects of Latin developed into French, Italian, and so on.

But these new languages do not compare to the linguistic heritage that is being lost. The thousands of languages spoken in the world today have evolved over the entire course of human history. Every group of related languages is separated from every other group by at least 5000 years of development, usually more. If English were to become the sole language of every person on earth, it would take tens of thousands of years to produce anything like the diversity that is our heritage—assuming we could somehow reproduce the conditions under which this diversity grew. For all practical purposes, the diversity we have now is absolutely irreplaceable.

For further information

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The Linguistic Society of America was founded in 1924 for the advancement of the scientific study of language. The Society serves its nearly 7,000 personal and institutional members through scholarly meetings, publications, and special activities designed to advance the discipline.

The Society holds its Annual Meeting in early January each year and publishes a quarterly journal, LANGUAGE and the LSA Bulletin. Among its special education activities are the Linguistic Institutes held every other summer in odd-numbered years and co-sponsored by a host university.

The web site for the Society (http://www.lsadc.org) includes a Directory of Programs in Linguistics in the United States and Canada, The Field of Linguistics (brief, nontechnical essays describing the discipline and its subfields), and statements and resolutions issued by the Society on matters such as language rights, the English-only/English-plus debate, bilingual education, and ebonics.

What is an endangered language?

Written by Anthony C. Woodbury

Edited by Betty Birner

Linguistic Society of America

1325 18th St, NW, Suite 211
Washington, DC 20036-6501
(202) 835-1714
lsa@lsadc.org
http://www.lsadc.org

What does it mean to say a language is endangered?

An endangered language is one that is likely to become extinct in the near future. Many languages are falling out of use and being replaced by others that are more widely used in the region or nation, such as English in the U.S. or Spanish in Mexico. Unless current trends are reversed, these endangered languages will become extinct within the next century. Many other languages are no longer being learned by new generations of children or by new adult speakers; these languages will become extinct when their last speaker dies. In fact, dozens of languages today have only one native speaker still living, and that person's death will mean the extinction of the language: It will no longer be spoken, or known, by anyone.

Is that what happened to dead languages like Ancient Greek and Latin?

No. These languages are considered dead because they are no longer spoken in the form in which we find them in ancient writings. But they weren't abruptly replaced by other languages; instead, Ancient Greek slowly evolved into modern Greek, and Latin slowly evolved into modern Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian, and other languages. In the same way, the Old English of Chaucer's day is no longer spoken, but it has evolved into Modern English.

How do languages become extinct?

Outright genocide is one cause of language extinction. For example, when European invaders exterminated the Tasmanians in the early 19th century, an unknown number of languages died as well. Far more often, however, languages become extinct when a community finds itself under pressure to integrate with a larger or more powerful group. Sometimes the people learn the outsiders' language in addition to their own; this has happened in Greenland, a territory of Denmark, where Kalaallisut is learned alongside Danish. But often the community is pressured to give up its language and even its ethnic and cultural identity. This has been the case for the ethnic Kurds in Turkey, who are forbidden by law to print or formally teach their language. It has also been the case for younger speakers of Native American languages, who, as recently as the 1960s, were punished for speaking their native languages at boarding schools.

Is language extinction sudden or gradual?

Both. The fate of a language can be changed in a single generation if it is no longer being learned by children. This has been true for some Yupik Eskimo communities in Alaska, where just 20 years ago all of the children spoke Yupik; today the youngest speakers of Yupik in some of these communities are in their 20s, and the children speak only English.

Likewise, Scots Gaelic was spoken on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, until the 1940s, but by the 1970s the language was no longer being learned by children. In other cases, languages have declined much more slowly.

Iroquoian languages like Onondaga and Mohawk, spoken in upstate New York and adjacent parts of Canada, have been declining for over two centuries; yet they are still spoken today by older adults and, in the case of Mohawk, some younger people as well.

How many languages are endangered?

According to one count, 6,703 separate languages were spoken in the world in 1996. Of these, 1000 were spoken in the Americas, 2011 in Africa, 225 in Europe, 2165 in Asia, and 1320 in the Pacific, including Australia. These numbers should be taken with a grain of salt, because our information about many languages is scant or outdated, and it is hard to draw the line between languages and dialects. But most linguists agree that there are well over 5,000 languages in the world.

A century from now, however, many of these languages may be extinct. Some linguists believe the number may decrease by half; some say the total could fall to mere hundreds as the majority of the world's languages—most spoken by a few thousand people or less—give way to languages like English, Spanish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Indonesian, Arabic, Swahili, and Hindi. By some estimates, 90% of the world's languages may vanish within the next century.

Whose languages are endangered?

Although the endangered languages are spoken by minority communities, these communities account for most of the world's languages. They include the tribes of Papua New Guinea, who alone speak as any as 900 languages; Aboriginal peoples of Australia, over 90% of whose native languages will die with the current generation; the native peoples of the Americas, who still retain 900 or so of their languages; the national and tribal minorities of Africa, Asia, and Oceania, speaking several thousand more languages; and marginalized European peoples such as the Irish, the Frisians, the Provençal, and the Basques.

How many North American native languages are endangered?

According to a recent survey, out of hundreds of languages that were once spoken in North America, only 194 remain. Of these, 33 are spoken by both adults and children; another 34 are spoken by adults, but by few children; 73 are spoken almost entirely by adults over 50; 49 are spoken only by a few people, mostly over 70; and 5 may have already become extinct.

The languages that are not being transmitted to children, or that are being learned by few children, are endangered and likely to become extinct. In fact, only the 33 languages in the first group seem 'safe.' But most of these are threatened as well because their speakers live near other communities where the children speak English. And all native North American groups are under pressure to give up their native languages and use English instead. The younger generation feels the pressure especially strongly; television and movies often send a message that discourages the maintenance of community values, inviting young viewers to join a more glamorous and more commercialized world that has no apparent connection to their native community and its elders and traditions.

Nonetheless, although a great deal of linguistic heritage is clearly in danger, the fact that so many Native American languages have survived into the 21st century is evidence of the strength of these communities and of the fundamental value of language to human beings.

What does language extinction mean for a community—and for the rest of us?

When a community loses its language, it often loses a great deal of its cultural identity at the same time. Although language loss may be voluntary or involuntary, it always involves pressure of some kind, and it is often felt as a loss of social identity or as a symbol of defeat. That doesn't mean that a group's social identity is always lost when its language is lost; for example, both the Chumash in California and the Manx on the Isle of Man have lost their native languages, but not their identity as Chumash or Manx. But language is a powerful symbol of a group's identity. Much of the cultural, spiritual, and intellectual life of a people is experienced through language. This ranges from prayers, myths, ceremonies, poetry, oratory, and technical vocabulary to everyday greetings, leave-takings, conversational styles, humor, ways of speaking to children, and terms for habits, behaviors, and emotions. When a language is lost, all of this must be refashioned in the new language—with different words, sounds, and grammar— if it is to be kept at all. Frequently traditions are abruptly lost in the process and replaced by the cultural habits of the more powerful group. For these reasons, among others, it is often very important to the community itself that its language survive.

Much is lost from a scientific point of view as well when a language disappears. A people's history is passed down through its language, so when the language disappears, it may take with it important information about the early history of the community. The loss of human languages also severely limits what linguists can learn about human cognition. By studying what all of the world's languages have in common, we can find out what is and isn't possible in a human language. This in turn tells us important things about the human mind and how it is that children are able to learn a complex system like language so quickly and easily. The fewer languages there are to study, the less we will be able to learn about the human mind.

But wouldn't it be easier if everyone just spoke the same language?

Although for many people it's important to know a major national or international language, that doesn't mean they must abandon their mother tongue. Children who grow up speaking two or more languages learn those languages just as well as children who grow up speaking only one language.