



Languages are not just tools with which we communicate; they also reflect our view of the world and our values.

One urban legend has it that the Eskimo languages have hundreds of words for snow, whereas English has just one. Living closer to nature and in a snowy climate, you could reason that an Inuit would distinguish between various types and states of snow and develop words that communicate this. In creating these words, the culture is signifying snow's importance to it.

This idea is the argument at the heart of language preservation: when languages disappear, so does an important way of understanding the culture and heritage of a particular people. It is impossible to say how many words Inuits have for snow, as there are many Eskimo languages – but that number is undoubtedly in decline.

Vanishing voices

Languages all over the world are threatened with extinction and, as they disappear, so too does an insight into the values and views of a particular culture.

Although 6,000 languages are still in use, experts estimate that more than 50 per cent of these are endangered, with one disappearing every two weeks. As English, Mandarin, Spanish and French exert their global dominance, 96 per cent of the world's languages are now spoken by just ►

LOST

LANGUAGES

Laura Fountain finds that half of the world's languages are now in danger of disappearing forever



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► four per cent of the world’s population. In Nepal, for example, efforts are underway to prolong the life of Soma Devi Dura, who is the last surviving speaker of the Dura language.

Should this 82-year-old woman die before linguists have recorded the knowledge she holds, it will mean the end of hundreds of years of songs and folklore that have been handed down through the generations. In Nepal alone there are more than 100 tongues, many with fewer than 100 speakers each.

This situation is by no means unique: linguists in Alaska know only too well Nepal’s predicament. Experts at the Alaska Native Language Center worked with Marie Smith

“Languages are absolutely vital to the identity of groups and individuals”

Jones, the last native speaker of the Eyak language, until her death earlier this year. Jones believed in preserving her language and wanted a written record kept for future generations. When she died, it caused the first of Alaska’s native languages to become extinct.

Languages become endangered when users cease to pass them on. This can be as a result of external forces such as military, economic or cultural subjugation, or internal forces such as a community’s attitude towards its own language. Jones did not pass Eyak on to her children as it was considered ‘wrong’ to speak anything but English when they were growing up.

Concern about vanishing languages is not confined to small communities, however.

The United Nations, for one, has recognised their importance by proclaiming 2008 to be the International Year of Languages.

Defending the mother tongue

Also, in April 2006, UNESCO introduced a convention to protect ‘intangible cultural heritage’. Among its many elements, the convention protects oral traditions and expressions, including language.

UNESCO’s Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, says: “Languages are absolutely vital to the identity of groups and individuals, and their peaceful coexistence. They are a strategic factor in advances towards sustainable development and the harmonious coordination of the global and the local.”

UNESCO also sees native languages as important to ensuring a good education. “Languages do indeed matter in attaining the six Education for All goals and the Millennium Development Goals, which the United Nations agreed in 2000,” adds Matsuura.

“They matter when we want to promote cultural diversity and fight illiteracy, and they matter for quality education, including teaching in the mother language in the first

years of schooling. They matter in the fight for greater social inclusion, for creativity, economic development and safeguarding indigenous knowledge.”

UNESCO’s Endangered Languages Programme aims to safeguard linguistic diversity by aiding language data collection through the production and digital storage of the material collected; and the production of books of stories and cultural information.

Hope for lost languages

Despite the depressing figures facing linguists, it is possible to revive a disappearing language, as the increasing use of Welsh shows.

In the 1500s, Wales became part of England and English became its official language. At the start of the 20th century, Welsh was spoken by half the population; the 1911 Census shows that there were nearly a million Welsh speakers. Even so, Welsh was not reinstated as the official language of Wales until 1942.

By 1991, the number of Welsh speakers was still more than half a million, but this represented just 18.7 per cent of the population. In 1993, the Welsh Language Board was established and the 2001 Census shows that the proportion of Welsh speakers had increased to 20.8 per cent.

The teaching of Welsh in schools has been seen as a vital part of the revival. The Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs, John Osmond, says: “There seems little doubt that Welsh-medium education has been largely responsible for reversing nearly a century of decline.”

Hopes of reviving any language lie in teaching it to new generations of speakers. But unless we begin safeguarding languages today, we may indeed end up with no Inuit word for snow. ■

Lost languages

- More than 50 per cent of the world’s 6,000 languages are endangered
- 96 per cent of languages are spoken by four per cent of the world’s people
- 90 per cent of the world’s languages are not represented on the Internet
- One language disappears every two weeks
- There is no correct way to spell words in 80 per cent of African languages