

ENDANGERED NATIVE AMERICAN LANGUAGES:
WHAT IS TO BE DONE, AND WHY?

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Abstract

Language loss, a global phenomenon, is accelerating among indigenous groups in the United States. A large majority of Native American vernaculars are spoken only by elders and the remainder are fast approaching that status, as growing numbers of children speak only English. Inevitably comparisons are drawn between the threat to language diversity and the (better-publicized) threat to biological diversity. Yet biomorphic metaphor—e.g. "language murder," "language suicide"—can be simplistic and misleading. They tend to distort answers to critical questions in formulating a policy response: What causes language loss? How can it be reversed? Why should we care?

The threat to linguistic resources is now recognized as a worldwide crisis. According to Krauss (1992a), as many as half of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken on earth are "moribund"; that is, they are spoken only by adults who no longer teach them to the next generation. An additional 40 percent soon may be threatened because the number of children learning them is declining measurably. In other words, 90 percent of existing languages today are likely to die or become seriously embattled within the next century. That leaves only about 600 languages, 10 percent of the world's total, that remain relatively secure—for now. This

assessment is confirmed, with and without detailed estimates, by linguists reporting the decline of languages on a global scale, but especially in the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Southeast Asia (Brenzinger, 1992; Robins & Uhlenbeck, 1991; Schmidt, 1990). In formulating a response to this crisis, there are three questions that need to be explored: (1) What causes language decline and extinction? (2) Can the process be reversed? And (3) why should we concern ourselves with this problem? Before attempting to provide answers, it would be helpful to look in detail at the situation of Native American languages in the United States.

The Crisis

The phenomenon of language loss is especially acute in North America. No doubt scores, perhaps hundreds, of tongues indigenous to this continent have vanished since 1492. Some perished without a trace. Others survived long enough for 20th century linguists to track down their last speakers and partially describe their grammars—for example, Mohican in Wisconsin, Catawba in South Carolina, Yahi in California, Natchez in Louisiana, and Mashpi in Massachusetts (Swadesh, 1948).

While Krauss (1992b) estimates that 155 indigenous languages are still spoken in the United States, he classifies 135 of these—87 percent of the total—as moribund. Increasingly, young Native Americans grow up speaking only English, learning at best a few words of their ancestral tongues. Out of 20 native languages still spoken in Alaska, only Central Yupik and St. Lawrence Island Yupik are being transmitted to the next generation. Similarly, in Oklahoma only 2 of 23 are being learned by children. All of California's 31 Indian languages are moribund; of these, 22 are spoken only by small groups of elders. Among the 16 indigenous tongues still spoken in Washington State, few if any have fluent speakers under the age of 60. At today's rates of language shift, 45 of today's American Indian and Alaska Native languages are likely to be extinct by the year 2000; 105 by 2025; 135 by 2050. Many

of the 20 remaining tongues, while still viable, will soon be fighting to survive (Krauss, 1992b).

According to the 1990 Census, more than one-third of American Indian and Alaska Native languages now have fewer than 100 speakers (Census Bureau, 1993). "Native North American languages" comprised 136 different groupings; of these, 47 were spoken in the home by fewer than 100 persons; an additional 22 were spoken by fewer than 200. And this is probably a conservative estimate of linguistic erosion, because the Census has no way of knowing how well or how often these people actually use the language.

Respondents to a written questionnaire are simply asked the ambiguous question: "Does this person speak a language *other than English* at home?" (emphasis added). Without an interviewer to explain the purpose of the home-language question, it has elicited responses from those with limited proficiency in a language other than English, sometimes including those who have merely studied it in school. (e.g., many persons of non-Hispanic background have reported speaking Spanish in the home; Veltman 1988). The question understates the extent of language shift because of such possible interpretations as: "Can this person speak, at any level of proficiency, a language other than English?" and "Does this person ever speak another language at home?" Moreover, self-reports have been shown to be unreliable when compared with objective measures of language proficiency (see, e.g., Hakuta & D'Andrea 1992), often contaminated by ethnic feelings, such as pride in the native language. Ambiguous questions provide even more room for subjective assessments.

On the other hand, the Census has acknowledged a significant undercount of minority groups, including Native Americans. Those living in remote areas are even less likely to be counted; for example, in the past large numbers of census forms have piled up, unclaimed, at reservation trading posts. Since these Indians are less likely to speak only English in the home, the undercount tends to overstate the number of English speakers (D. Waggoner, personal

communication, March 9, 1994). Another possible distortion, especially for small populations, is that language estimates are based on a 12 percent sample.

On balance, however, the last two decennial censuses probably overstate the extent of proficiency in (and usage of) languages other than English. Fortunately, the questions were asked consistently in 1980 and 1990. So at least the trends of language shift may be reliably plotted on the basis of comparable data. Unfortunately, no home language question was asked before 1980.

Rapid shift to English is evident even among speakers of the healthiest indigenous languages such as Navajo, who were historically among the slowest to become bilingual. As late as 1930, 71 percent of Navajos spoke no English, as compared with only 17 percent of all American Indians at the time (Census Bureau, 1937). The number who speak Navajo in the home remains substantial—148,530 in 1990, or 45 percent of all Native American language speakers (Census Bureau, 1993).

But the percentage of Navajos who speak only English is growing, predictably among those who have migrated from their tribal homeland, but also among those who have remained. For Navajos living on the reservation, age 5 and older, the proportion of English-only speakers rose from 7.2 percent in 1980 to 15.0 percent in 1990. For those aged 5-17, the increase was even more dramatic: from 11.8 percent to 28.4 percent (see Table 1). Among school-age children living on the reservation, the number of monolingual English speakers more than doubled, from 5,103 to 12,207.

The figures shown in the following table indicate the ominous future viability of the Navajo language. And, as I indicated above, it is likely that the 1990 Census data understate the rate of language shift for all linguistic minorities in the United States.

Table 1. Tribal Population and Home Language Speakers, Age 5+, Navajo Reservation and Trust Lands (AZ, NM, & UT), 1980-1990

1980	Age 5-17	%	Age 18+	%	Total	%
Population	42,121	100.0	65,933	100.0	109,054	100.0
<i>Speak only English</i>	<i>5,103</i>	<i>11.8</i>	<i>2,713</i>	<i>4.1</i>	<i>7,816</i>	<i>7.2</i>
Speak other language	38,557	89.4	63,220	95.9	101,777	92.8
1990						
Population	42,994	100.0	81,301	100.0	124,295	100.0
<i>Speak only English</i>	<i>12,207</i>	<i>28.4</i>	<i>6,439</i>	<i>7.9</i>	<i>18,646</i>	<i>15.0</i>
Speak other language	30,787	71.6	74,862	92.1	105,649	85.0

(Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1989, 1994).

The crisis of Native American languages can be summarized as follows: unless current trends are reversed, and soon, the number of extinctions seems certain to increase. Numerous tongues—perhaps one-third of the total—are on the verge of disappearing along with their last elderly speakers. Many others are not far behind. And even among the most vigorous 10 percent, their hold upon the young is rapidly weakening. In short, Native American languages are becoming endangered species.

What Causes Language Death?

Obvious parallels have been drawn between the extinction of languages and the extinction of plants and animals. In all probability, like the majority of creatures in natural history, the majority of languages in human history have passed from the scene: they have fallen victim to predators, changing environments, or more successful competitors. Moreover, the pace of extinction is clearly accelerating both for languages and for biological species.

In the past, despite a few exceptional periods (e.g., the late Mesozoic era, when the dinosaurs died out), the process has proceeded discretely and locally. Today, by contrast, it is proceeding generically and globally. We appear to have entered a period of mass extinction—a threat to diversity both in our natural ecology and in what one might call our cultural ecology.

Wilson (1992) has estimated that before industrialism began to affect tropical rain forests, roughly one in a million plants and animals there became extinct each year; today the rate is between one in a thousand and one in a hundred. Instead of individual species facing difficulties in their particular habitats, suddenly we're seeing a generalized threat to many species, such as the well-publicized extinction of frogs in diverse environments.

Naturally, we do not have similar estimates for the rate of language extinction. Because languages leave no fossil record, we cannot calculate the rate at which they died out in the past. But the phenomenon of language death is strikingly similar—and causally linked—to the death of biological species. Krauss speculates that 10,000 years ago, there may have been as many as 15,000 languages worldwide—2.5 times as many as today (Schwartz 1994). Modern cultures, abetted by new technologies, are encroaching on once—isolated peoples with drastic effects on their way of life and on the environments they inhabit. Destruction of lands and livelihoods; the spread of consumerism, individualism, and other Western values; pressures for assimilation into dominant cultures; and conscious policies of repression directed at indigenous groups—these are among the factors threatening the world's biodiversity as well as its cultural and linguistic diversity.

How does a language die? One obvious way is that its speakers can perish through disease or genocide. This was the fate, for example, of most languages spoken by the Arawak peoples of the Caribbean, who disappeared within a generation of their first contact with Christopher Columbus. But such cases are relatively rare. More often language death is the culmination of language shift, resulting from a complex of internal and external pressures

that induce a speech community to adopt a language spoken by others. These may include changes in values, rituals, or economic and political life resulting from trade, migration, intermarriage, religious conversion, or military conquest. Some describe these as "changes in the ecology of languages" (Wurm, 1991)—continuing the comparison with natural species—a Darwinian model suggesting that languages must adapt or perish.

Here the analogy begins to become misleading. Unlike natural species, languages have no genes and thus carry no mechanism for natural selection. Their prospects for survival are determined not by any intrinsic traits, or capacity for adaptation, but by social forces alone. As a practical matter, in discussing language shift it is probably impossible to avoid biomorphic metaphors like *ecology*, *survival*, *death*, *extinction*, and *genocide* (certainly if one judges from this paper thus far). But unless we remain vigilant, such metaphors can lead us into semantic traps, and these traps have political consequences.

Conceiving language loss as a Darwinian process implies that some languages are fitter than others, that the "developed" will survive and the "primitive" will go the way of the dinosaurs. While I know of no linguist who makes such an argument, there are plenty of laypersons who do. (And such voices are heeded by legislators, as testified by the advance of the English Only movement in the 1980s.) Some scholars of "language death" have helped to perpetuate this misunderstanding by ignoring its social and historical causes. By focusing exclusively on "structural-linguistic" factors, they imply "that a language can 'kill itself' by becoming so impoverished that its function as an adequate means of communication is called into question" (Sasse, 1992, pp. 10-11). The research literature demonstrates precisely the opposite: such structural changes are the result, not the cause, of language decline.

In a related vein, several writers have raised the question: "Language murder or language suicide?" (Edwards, 1985, pp. 51-53), as if it were possible to separate external and internal factors

in language loss and thereby assess blame. According to the "suicide" model, a language community (e.g., the Irish) opts to abandon its native tongue out of self-interest (to enjoy the superior opportunities open to English speakers) rather than in response to coercion. As Denison (1977) asserts, a speech community

sometimes "decides," for reasons of functional economy, to suppress a part of itself. ... [T]here comes a point when multilingual parents no longer consider it necessary or worthwhile for the future of their children to communicate with them in a low-prestige language variety, and when children are no longer motivated to acquire active competence in a language which is lacking in positive connotations such as youth, modernity, technical skills, material success, education. The languages at the lower end of the prestige scale retreat from ever increasing areas of their earlier functional domains, displaced by higher prestige languages, until *there is nothing left for them* to be appropriately used about. In this sense they may be said to "commit suicide." (p. 21; emphasis in original.)

Naturally, language choices are made, in the final analysis, by speakers themselves. But this "explanation" of language death explains little about the social forces underlying such choices. Whether deliberate or not, the notion of language suicide fosters a victim-blaming strategy. It reinforces the ethnocentric prejudice, all too common among dominant groups, that certain languages deserve to die. At best, it encourages the prevalent worldwide response to threatened cultures: malign neglect.

Yet "murder" too has been overrated as a cause of language extinction. This is due in part to the popular notion that conquerors "naturally" force their languages on others. But scholars also have favored the murder hypothesis in explaining the spread of Indo-European languages. The traditional account is that, over a relatively brief period—roughly the 4th millennium B.C.—bands of warriors armed with superior technology (and in some versions,

with superior "racial" traits) charged out of the Russian steppes (or Asia Minor or Northern Europe) to defeat indigenous peoples from India to Ireland and impose their own Proto-Indo-European vernacular(s).

Of course, this idea predates the advent of linguistic archaeology. In 1492, Antonio de Nebrija completed a Castilian (Spanish) grammar book, the first ever completed of a European language. When he presented it to Queen Isabella and she asked, "What is it for?" the Bishop of Avila answered for him: "Your majesty, language is the perfect instrument of empire." Thus began a 300-year attempt by Spanish monarchs to wipe out indigenous languages in the New World. Yet despite repeated edicts from Madrid, the policy was frequently ignored by Spanish priests and civil officials who found it easier to pursue their work through indigenous lingua francas like Nahuatl and Quechua (Heath 1972). A U.S. Commissioner of Indian Affairs similarly invoked the conqueror's prerogative to justify linguistic repression in North America:

All are familiar with the recent prohibitory order of the German Empire forbidding the teaching of the French language in either public or private schools in Alsace and Lorraine. Although the population is almost universally opposed to German rule, they are firmly held to German political allegiance by the military hand of the Iron Chancellor. If the Indians were in Germany or France or any other civilized country, they should be instructed in the language there used. As they are in an English-speaking country they must be taught the language which they must use in transacting business with the people of this country. No unity or community of feeling can be established among different peoples unless they are brought to speak the same language, and thus become imbued with like ideas of duty. (Atkins, 1887).

Renfrew (1987) has recently cast strong doubts on the "murder" hypothesis. Invoking archaeological as well as linguistic evidence, he argues that Proto-Indo-European advanced more gradually through the expansion of agriculture, beginning as early as 6500 B.C. Farming supports considerably larger populations than hunting and gathering, but also requires constant migration in search of arable land. Thus, instead of spreading their language(s) primarily by conquest, it is more likely that Indo-Europeans overwhelmed other language communities with superior numbers. Europe's original inhabitants (with exceptions, e.g., the Basques) either adopted the newcomers' way of life, including their speech, or perished trying to compete with it. In this scenario demographic, cultural, and economic changes rather than military factors played the key roles in language extinction. While the debate over Indo-European origins continues, Renfrew's hypothesis is more consistent with sociolinguistic evidence about language shift.

In sum, the murder vs. suicide dichotomy is simplistic in the extreme. And it lends support to those who would either justify the colonizer's prerogative to coerce assimilation or blame the victims for acquiescing. Languages die from both internal and external causes, operating simultaneously. On the one hand, the process always reflects forces beyond its speakers' control: repression, discrimination, or exploitation at the hand of others, and in many situations all three. On the other hand, except in the case of physical genocide, languages never succumb to outside pressures alone. There must be complicity on the part of the speech community itself, changes in attitudes and values that discourage teaching its vernacular to children and encourage loyalty to the dominant tongue.

Take the example of Native American languages, which were targeted by the U.S. government in a campaign of linguistic genocide. In 1868, a federal commission on making peace with the Plains Indians concluded: "In the difference of language to-day lies two-thirds of our trouble ... Schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects

should be blotted out and the English language substituted" (quoted in Atkins, 1887).

By the 1880s this policy was institutionalized in the boarding school system established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Under strict English Only rules, students were punished and humiliated for speaking their native language as part of a general campaign to wipe out every vestige of their Indian-ness. A BIA teacher in the early 1900s explained that the schools "went on the assumption that any Indian custom was, per se, objectionable, whereas the customs of whites were the ways of civilization. ... [Children] were taught to despise every custom of their forefathers, including religion, language, songs, dress, ideas, methods of living" (Albert H. Kneale, quoted in Reyhner, 1992, p. 45). John Collier, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs during the New Deal, condemned and prohibited these ethnocentric practices. Nevertheless, English Only rules and punishments persisted unofficially for another generation, as many former students can attest.

In the short term, the coercive assimilation policy met with limited success in eradicating Indian languages. Brutality of this kind naturally breeds resistance and determination to defend the culture under attack. Moreover, the isolation and exclusion of most Indians from the dominant society made assimilation seem like a poor bargain indeed. Even when students excelled in BIA schools and embraced the dominant culture, on graduation they were usually shunned by white society.

Over time, however, the English Only policy did take a toll on the pride and identity of many Indians, alienating them from their cultural roots and from their tribes, and giving them little or nothing in return. Being punished for speaking their ancestral language often devalued it in their own minds, and some accepted the dominant society's judgments. This has left a legacy of opposition to bilingual education among Indians who vividly remember the pain they suffered in school and who hope to shield

their children and grandchildren from the same experience (Crawford, 1991, ch. 9).

Yet while the English Only boarding schools did damage to the status of Indian languages within their own communities, other factors may have exerted a stronger influence. The advent of a cash economy, government services, and in some cases industrial employment, along with the penetration of once-remote reservations by English-language media (especially television and VCRs), have created new pressures and enticements for Native Americans to enter the wider society or at least to abandon their former way of life.

Returning again to the example of the Navajo, we can see that language shift began to accelerate long after the BIA abandoned its English Only school policies. That is, linguistic assimilation seems to be proceeding more efficiently on a laissez-faire basis than it did through coercion. Pragmatic parents see advantages to raising their children mostly or entirely in English, the language of social and economic mobility. Every step toward modernization puts the indigenous tongue at a greater disadvantage. Gradually its sphere of usage contracts to "sentimental functions" (Ruiz, this issue)—home and hearth, religious rituals, and traditional ceremonies. In theory, stable bilingualism (diglossia) offers a possible antidote to language loss, but the odds for maintaining it decline to the extent that traditional cultures decline, thereby shrinking the domains of the ancestral tongue.

How should we conceptualize the causes of language shift? Rather than rely on Darwinian metaphors, Fishman (1991, pp. 55-67) offers criteria with fewer semantic pitfalls. In place of changing "ecology," he cites "dislocations"—physical and demographic, social, and cultural-affecting a language community. These include a group's dispersal from its historic homeland, subordination to a socioeconomic system in which its tongue commands limited power and prestige, and the weakening of traditional bonds through contact with modern, atomized democracies that elevate individual freedom over communal values. While a comprehensive theory of

language loss remains to be developed, Fishman's categories provide a useful framework for investigation.

Is There a Cure?

What, if anything, can be done to cope with this crisis? Is it possible to rescue languages now on the brink of extinction, or perhaps even to resuscitate some that are no longer spoken? This latter idea is not so far-fetched when you consider the example of Hebrew—a "dead" language for nearly 2,000 years when it was brought back to life in Israel 40 years ago; it now has several million speakers. Some Native American groups have expressed interest in doing the same thing. For example, the Coquille tribe of Oregon has sought funding for a project to revive the Miluk language, using tape recordings from the 1930s of its last living speakers (Farley, 1992).

Of course, it would be hard to find a community whose language is threatened today that has access to the level of resources the State of Israel devoted to the cause of reviving Hebrew. So the question of whether this kind of effort can succeed is very relevant. If there is little hope of preventing the extinction of a language, renewal projects may be ill-advised; scarce resources might be better devoted to other social and educational programs. On the other hand, if endangered languages can be saved, there is little time for delay in the name of "budgetary constraints."

In the 1980s several tribes recognized the urgency of this task. The Navajo, Tohono O'odham, Pasqua Yaqui, Northern Ute, Arapaho, and Red Lake Band of Chippewa adopted policies designed to promote the use of their ancestral tongues in reservation schools and government functions. Ironically, in most cases the English Only movement sounded the alarm bells that energized tribal officials (Crawford, 1992b, pp. 245-48). While these tribal language policies are an important first step, their implementation has been uneven. To succeed, language renewal projects require not only good intentions but enormous

practical efforts. Some tribes still need expert help to complete orthographies, grammar books, and dictionaries. Virtually all need assistance in developing and publishing curriculum materials. Bilingual education programs, for example, at community-run schools like Rough Rock on the Navajo reservation, are a major (if underutilized) tool for promoting native-language literacy (see articles on Rough Rock, this issue). Another key task is teacher-training, complicated by the fact that Indian language speakers often lack academic credentials, while outsiders lack essential cultural and linguistic knowledge. As a result, these projects must draw on cultural resources available on reservations and especially on elders, the true experts in these languages.

Tribal initiative and control are essential to the success of renewal efforts because language choices are a matter of consensus among speakers. They are very difficult to impose from without. Citing his experiences at the Alaska Native Language Center in Fairbanks, Krauss (1992b) maintains that, "all-important is the peoples' will to restore their native languages. You cannot from the outside inculcate into people the will to revive or maintain their languages. That has to come from them, from themselves." If endangered languages are to be saved, it is crucial for native speakers to see the value of doing so and get actively involved in the process (see Ruiz, this issue).

At the same time language renewal faces a perennial barrier to social progress on Indian reservations: scarce resources. Such projects must compete with other, usually more pressing priorities like health care, housing, schooling, and economic development. Most tribes, lacking a local tax base, have historically relied on federal funding for these needs. But since 1930 the federal government has cut back substantially on its support of Indian programs generally (a trend that continues in the Clinton Administration's 1995 budget proposals).

Greatly aided by the efforts of the American Indian Language Development Institute and Native American Language Issues Institute, Congress passed the Native American Languages Acts of

1990 and 1992. These laws articulate a government policy of protecting indigenous languages and authorize a grant program for that purpose (for a further discussion see Crawford, 1992a, pp. 155-57). While some federal help was already available through the National Science Foundation and the U.S. Department of Education, for the first time the 1992 Act made tribes eligible for funding to carry out language conservation and renewal. Yet Congress has been slow to appropriate any resources to carry out the new laws. Finally, under an agreement between Sen. Daniel Inouye and the Clinton Administration, \$1 million in grants were awarded in the fall of 1994—a meager amount but still a beginning. The Administration for Native Americans, a branch of the Department of Health and Human Services, issued regulations governing this grant program in the Federal Register on March 25, 1994.

Implementation of the 1990 Act also has been disappointing. Among other things it called upon all agencies of the federal government—including the Departments of Interior, Education, and Health and Human Service—to review their activities in consultation with tribes, traditional leaders, and educators to make sure they comply with the policy of conserving Native American languages. By the fall of 1991, the President was supposed to report back to Congress on what was being done and to recommend further changes in law and policy. But the Bush Administration simply ignored these requirements. There is no indication that any review or consultation has taken place. After some prodding by the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, the White House referred the matter to the BIA, whose only response has been to compile a list of bilingual education programs in its schools. So, while the federal government now has a strong policy statement on file, its real-world impact has thus far been limited.

To return to my question: Is there a realistic chance of reversing the erosion of Native American languages? In theory, this goal is certainly possible to achieve, as we know from the miraculous revival of other languages. Heroic efforts are now being made on

behalf of languages with only a few elderly speakers, for example, by the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (Feldman, 1993; Hinton, 1994). For other languages, especially those still being learned by children, taught in bilingual education programs, and receiving tribal support, there is considerable hope. In practice, however, limited progress is being made in retarding the pace of language shift overall. This bleak situation is unlikely to change without a stronger commitment at all levels and without a substantial infusion of new resources. To put it bluntly, the decisive factor in the survival of Native American languages will be politics—the final subject of this paper.

Why Should We Care?

Why concern ourselves with the problem of endangered Native American languages, to the extent of investing the considerable time, effort, and resources that would be needed to save even a handful of them? Posing the question in this way may seem callous, considering the shameful history of cultural genocide practiced against indigenous peoples in this country. But, for many non-Indians, who tend to view linguistic diversity as a liability rather than an asset, the value of these languages is not self-evident. Knowledge about Native American issues is limited. Meanwhile assimilationist biases remain strong; hence the symbolic opposition these days to any kind of public expenditure aimed at preserving "ethnic" cultures (Crawford, 1992b). Until such attitudes are changed—by effectively answering the question, "Why should we care about preserving Native American languages?"—there will be limited progress in conservation and renewal. Advocates have advanced a variety of answers. Let us consider them on their scientific merits and on their political appeal.

1. Linguists, who are increasingly vocal on this issue, have warned that the death of any natural language represents an incalculable loss to their science. "Suppose English were the only language available as a basis for the study of general human

grammatical competence," writes Hale (1992, p. 35). While "we could learn a great deal ... we also know enough about linguistic diversity to know that we would miss an enormous amount." No doubt few who are acquainted with this problem would disagree: from a scientific standpoint, the destruction of data is always regrettable. The loss of a language represents the loss of a rare window on the human mind. But from the perspective of the public and policymakers, this argument smacks of professional self-interest; it is hardly a compelling justification for new spending in a time of fiscal austerity.

2. Others have argued that the loss of linguistic diversity means a loss of intellectual diversity. Each language is a unique tool for analyzing and synthesizing the world, incorporating the knowledge and values of a speech community. Linguistic "categories [including] number, gender, case, tense, mode, voice, 'aspect,' and a host of others ... are not so much discovered in experience as imposed upon it" (Sapir, 1931). Thus to lose such a tool is to "forget" a way of constructing reality, to blot out a perspective evolved over many generations. The less variety in language, the less variety in ideas. Again, a Darwinian analogy:

Evolutionary biologists recognize the great advantage held by species that maintain the greatest possible diversity. Disasters occur when only one strain of wheat or corn, a "monoculture" is planted everywhere. With no variation, there is no potential to meet changing conditions. In the development of new science concepts, a 'monolanguage' holds the same dangers as a monoculture. Because languages partition reality differently, they offer different models of how the world works. There is absolutely no reason why the metaphors provided in English are superior to those of other languages. (Schrock, 1986.)

Theoretically this sounds plausible; yet such effects are impossible to quantify. Who can say whether a concept that evolved in one language would never have evolved in another? The extreme

version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—that perception and cognition are determined by the structure of whatever language one happens to speak—has been demolished by Chomskyan linguistics (see, e.g., Pinker, 1994, pp. 59-63). Its more flexible version, "linguistic relativity," is another matter. Few would dispute that culture, influenced by language, influences thought. Yet the impact remains too elusive, too speculative, to rally public concern about language loss.

3. Then there is the cultural pluralist approach: language loss is "part of the more general loss being suffered by the world, the loss of diversity in all things" (Hale, 1992, p. 3). While this argument is politically potent—with lots of cosmopolitan appeal—it is scientifically dubious. For at least one linguist working to save endangered languages, such "statements ... are appeals to our emotions, not to our reason" (Ladefoged, 1992, p. 810). Again the biological analogy breaks down. From the loss of natural species scientists are continually documenting ripple effects that harm our global ecosystem. No such evidence is available for the loss of linguistic species, which are not physically interdependent and which "evolve" in very different ways. No doubt it would be interesting to know more about extinct languages like Sumerian, Hittite, Etruscan, and even Anglo-Saxon. But how can we regard their disappearance as a global "catastrophe"? As for the threat to human diversity in general, "the world is remarkably resilient ...; different cultures are always dying while new ones arise (Ladefoged, 1992, p. 810). Indeed, this resilience is the basis for linguistic diversity itself.

4. A final line of argument—and in my view the most effective one—appeals to the nation's broader interest in social justice. We should care about preventing the extinction of languages because of the human costs to those most directly affected. "The destruction of a language is the destruction of a rooted identity" (Fishman, 1991, p. 4) for both groups and individuals. Along with the accompanying loss of culture, language loss can destroy a sense of self-worth, limiting human potential and complicating efforts to

solve other problems, such as poverty, family breakdown, school failure, and substance abuse. After all, language death does not happen in privileged communities. It happens to the dispossessed and disempowered, peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive.

In this context, indigenous language renewal takes on an added significance. It becomes something of value not merely to academic researchers, but to native speakers themselves. This is true even in extreme cases where a language seems beyond repair. As one linguist sums up a project to revive Adnyamathanha, an Australian Aboriginal tongue that had declined to about 20 native speakers:

It was not the success in reviving the language—although in some small ways [the program] did that. It was success in reviving something far deeper than the language itself—that sense of worth in being Adnyamathanha, and in having something unique and infinitely worth hanging onto. (D. Tunbridge, quoted in Schmidt, 1990, p. 106.)

Editor's Note

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