Part III: Disappearing Languages (articile)

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# Too Late to Say 'Extinct' In Ubykh, Eyak or Ona; Thousands of Languages Are Endangered

**By PAUL LEWIS**

As the legend goes, when the Turkish sultan first heard of Ubykh, the bizarre-sounding language spoken by Muslims who had emigrated from the northwestern Caucasus in the mid-19th century, he dispatched a servant to learn more.

When the servant returned, he described what a language with 83 consonants and one vowel sounded like by taking out a bag of pebbles and pouring them on the sultan's marble floor. ''Listen to these sounds,'' he said. ''Foreigners can gain no greater understanding of Ubykh speech.''

Today, if people are curious about Ubykh, they can listen to a recording instead of a handful of tumbling stones, but they can't hear it spoken in person. The last Ubykh speaker, Tevfik Esenc, died in Turkey at the age of 88 in 1992.

Ubykh is one of hundreds of languages that are either dead or dying; thousands more are expected to disappear over the next century. For linguists, the growing number of vanishing languages is a looming disaster that threatens to diminish the world's cultural diversity and erase a monumental human achievement. ''Languages are more than grammar,'' Ken Hale, a linguist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said. ''They are cultures, ways of thinking about ourselves and our surroundings. When we lose one it's like losing the Louvre.''

The disappearances are no less alarming, they argue, than the threat the earth's biological diversity faces from industrial pollution and population growth. ''Surely we linguists know and the general public can sense that any language is a supreme achievement of a uniquely human collective genius, as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism,'' Michael Krauss, a linguist at the University of Alaska, has written. ''Should we mourn the loss of Eyak,'' an Alaskan language, ''or Ubykh less than the loss of the panda or the California condor?''

According to the latest and most authoritative survey of the world's tongues -- Ethnologue, published in 1996 by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas -- 336 languages are ''nearly extinct,'' meaning that parents no longer teach them to their children. Among the recent disappearances, say linguists, are Northern Pomo, a Californian Indian language; Sirenik Eskimo; Quinault, spoken by Indians in Washington State; Kasabe, spoken in the Adamawa province of Cameroon, and Ona, spoken in Tierra del Fuego in southern Argentina. Eyak is down to one speaker.

Mr. Krauss brought attention to the erosion of the world's language diversity in 1992, when he predicted that at least half the world's roughly 6,500 languages would become extinct over the next century.

Many languages have already died out, including those of major civilizations, like Sumerian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Latin. But in today's more technologically connected world, that process is hastening. English and a handful of other major languages that increasingly dominate the world are widely seen as passports to education and a brighter economic future.

Roughly half the world speaks one of 10 mega-languages as a primary, or mother, tongue. Mandarin Chinese is spoken by 16 percent of the world's population, followed by English and Spanish at 5 percent each; varieties of Arabic, 4 percent; Hindi, Portuguese, Bengali and Russian, 3 percent each, and French and Japanese, 2 percent each, Ethnologue reports.

Meanwhile, 60 percent of existing languages have 10,000 speakers or fewer, said David Harmon, who analyzed the 'Ethnologue survey and is a member of Terralingua, a society dedicated to language preservation. Languages with so few speakers are highly vulnerable to disruption.

Nancy C. Dorian, a Gaelic languages expert at Bryn Mawr College, said that ''when small linguistic communities become economically unviable, for instance, they break up and the language dies out.''

For example, after Russia drove the roughly 50,000 Ubykh speakers from their homes on the Black Sea into Turkey in the 1860's, the refugees eventually decided that the dominant Turkish, Abkhaz or Circassian languages would be more useful. Over time they stopped teaching their children their own ferociously difficult tongue.

''From what we know it was simply a decision by the Ubykh elders not to teach Ubykh to the next generation,'' said George Hewitt, a professor of Caucasian languages at London University. ''It seemed more sensible to concentrate on languages they would need. But it was a tragedy all the same because when a language dies, a culture dies with it.''

Bert Vaux, an expert on Turkish languages at Harvard University, agreed. ''Every language offers a unique insight into the nature of speech and thought,'' he said. Ubykh, along with other northwestern Caucasian languages, for example, has a unique system of agreement between subject, verb, object and indirect object, Mr. Vaux said. ''It shows that humans have a greater cognitive capacity than we thought,'' he said, ''because the average person would never think it possible to keep track of so many agreements within a single sentence.''

Nor is cultural diversity the only loss. Luisa Maffi of Terralingua said indigenous languages could play a role in environmental preservation because they often reflect valuable ecological knowledge that enable speakers to preserve their habitats.

Today, Spanish is killing Indian tongues in Latin America while French wipes out languages in its former colonies in Africa. In southeastern Alaska, parents have stopped teaching native languages to children, Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer write in ''Endangered Languages: Language Loss and Community Response'' (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

English, it turns out, is the biggest language slayer. It was the language of the Industrial Revolution and remains the language of the world's biggest economy and remaining superpower. ''It was always in the right place at the right time,'' said David Crystal, a retired linguistics professor from Reading University in Britain and author of ''English as a Global Language'' (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Mr. Crystal estimated that 343 million people speak English as a mother tongue; another 235 million to 350 million speak it well as a second language because they learned it in a country like India, where it has official status. Estimates of those who are learning English as a foreign language vary wildly, from 100 million to one billion. Nonetheless, Mr. Crystal figures that the number of ''fluent to reasonably competent'' English speakers is 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion, compared with 1.1 billion Chinese speakers.

English seems set to spread even further because it is the most-taught foreign language in more than 100 countries, including Russia, China, Germany, Spain, Egypt and Brazil, sometimes displacing the study of other languages in the process, Mr. Crystal said. In 1996, for example, Algeria replaced French with English as the chief foreign language in its schools.

''It may be,'' he concluded, ''that English, in some form or another, will find itself in the service of the world forever.''

As concern grows over the loss of languages, efforts to record and revitalize endangered tongues are intensifying. Before he died, Mr. Esenc, the last Ubykh speaker, allowed linguists to take X-rays of his speech organs while he demonstrated the vocal gymnastics necessary to produce those 83 distinct consonant sounds. He also helped scholars compile an Ubykh dictionary and grammar guide.

In the United States, Congress passed legislation in 1990 and 1992 encouraging the preservation of American Indian languages. And a privately financed Endangered Languages Fund, which awards grants for the preservation and recording of threatened tongues, has been set up at Yale University.

Abroad, Tokyo University has created an International Clearinghouse for Endangered Languages and Unesco is cataloguing languages around the world. British linguists have established a Foundation for Endangered Languages that also provides grants for preservation and documentation.

In Britain and Ireland, minor revivals are under way in such endangered tongues as Breton, Provencal and Welsh, Irish and Scottish Gaelic. Bilingual inhabitants of the Isle of Skye off the western coast of Scotland, for example, are writing English subtitles for Gaelic television programs. In Belfast a group is trying to found an Irish-speaking community by buying houses in the same street. And over 200 people are now fluent in Cornish although the last mother-tongue speaker died at the end of the 18th century.

Ms. Dorian pointed out that the collapse of the Yugoslav federation had strengthened the position of Slovenian by making it the official language of an independent nation, while Croats and Bosnian Muslims are trying to create separate languages for themselves out of the Serbo-Croatian they speak along with Serbs.

In some cases ''new'' languages are gaining popularity. In Papua New Guinea, Tok Pisin, originally a form of pidgin English, is becoming a language in its own right. Yet as it does, it is replacing some of the country's other 800 languages.

Organizations interested in preserving indigenous languages, including Terralingua and International PEN, which represents writers and translators, want to add a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights -- creating a right to be educated in one's native tongue -- to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that the United Nations adopted in 1948.

But many argue that the disappearance of languages is inevitable. Peter Ladefoged of the University of California at Los Angeles has argued that linguists should record languages before they disappear but not necessarily try to save them. Preserving languages, he said, can impose political and economic costs by weakening unity and encouraging tribalism. It can also absorb scarce resources that might otherwise be used for development. Tanzania, he pointed out, promotes Swahili at the expense of tribal languages in the hope of creating a sense of nationhood in an ethnically diverse country.

The loss of indigenous language and culture can be the price of entering the modern world, Mr. Ladefoged said. He remembered a speaker of Dahalo, an almost extinct Cushitic language in rural Kenya, who smilingly revealed that his sons spoke only Swahili. ''He was proud his sons had been to school and knew things he did not. Who am I to say he was wrong?''

**Article Questions (Answer in complete sentences.)**

1. What is causing so many languages to become extinct?
2. Why do many consider this a tragedy?
3. Why should or shouldn’t “the world” try to preserve the world’s diversity of languages?