

Exploring the Death of a Language

Languages are like people in many ways. They grow and change. They get sick, and sometimes they even die. Languages are alive. The main goal of my research was to explore what determines the lifespan of a language. Why do some languages die while other languages flourish? How can a language be strong and powerful for hundreds of years and today no one speaks it? Obviously this does not happen overnight, but it does happen. It has happened over and over again to many languages for hundreds and thousands of years. In fact, linguists estimate that a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks (Time 1997). This is an astonishing figure.

Languages, like all living things, depend on their environment to survive. When they die out, it is for many of the same reasons that plants and animals die out. According to Time magazine, languages can be "consumed by predator tongues, deprived of their natural habitats or displaced by more successful competitors" (1997). It is survival of the fittest for languages. Survival is not only determined by intrinsic merits and adaptability of the language alone, however. The economic power, military strength and cultural prestige of the country in which a language is spoken play a huge role as well (Time 1997). These are some of the many factors that affect the growth or eventual decline of a language, and I will explore them further in the following pages.

One reason that languages become extinct is political opposition to a minority language in a certain area (Riverdeep 2001). The majority power often tries to suppress the identity and culture of a minority group. The majority wants to stay in power, so they try to hold minority groups down in any way they can. Language and culture are a way for a group of people to retain a sense of unity. Majority groups don't want the minorities to be unified, so they try to take these things away.

This has happened over and over again throughout history. The European exploration of the 16th and 17th centuries marked the beginning of the end for thousands of languages in North and South America. As the continents were colonized by the European powers, the original inhabitants were either killed or suppressed. Their indigenous languages vanished with them. In Brazil, for example, an estimated 75% of all the languages once spoken in the country have died since the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500 (Time 1997).

It has happened here in the United States as well. When the Europeans came to settle here in America, they tried to suppress the Native American people. The federal government actually forced Native American children to attend English-only schools. Our government didn't want the Indian children to learn their native tongues. They were forced to learn English. An 1868 federal report regarding American Indian affairs suggested that "schools should be established, which children should be required to attend; their barbarous dialects should be blotted out and the English language substituted." (Riverdeep 2001) Obviously, the American government had extremely strong feelings regarding the Native Americans and their culture and language. The way they treated these people is horrendous, but this is not the only case of this sort of behavior.

These situations occur throughout the world whenever one group of people conquers another. For centuries, the dominating invaders have attempted to eliminate the languages of the conquered people, along with their culture and overall identity. In Australia, there was a movement to stop Aboriginal tongues from being spoken. It was just another way to attempt to suppress the Aboriginal culture and people. When white settlers first arrived in Australia in 1788, the continent supported almost 250 Aboriginal tongues (Time 1997). Today, there are only twenty in existence. It is a sad phenomenon, but it seems to be the way of the world. The strong push on the weak.

Our own English language was almost lost in a similar fashion. The Norman

Conquest occurred in 1066 (Pyles). The Normans brought with them their native language of French. It quickly became the language of prestige in England. The aristocracy were forced to learn and speak French. French replaced English in the law courts and the royal courts. English lost its power for almost two hundred years. Events eventually favored the English language's return to power, but if history had happened in a different way, we might not speak English today. Perhaps we would all speak French here in America and English would be a thing of the past.

Another related factor is that of minorities trying to fit in with the culture of the majority. Parents want their children to fit into society, so they push them to adopt the language of the majority. Sometimes, this results in children becoming bilingual, but in other circumstances, their native language is lost all together. This seems extremely evident in this country where so many different people are all mixed together, and expected to speak nothing but English. In some cases, parents are simply not teaching their children the native language. These parents believe that their children will benefit more from learning the dominant language of the region they are living in. They don't want their children to struggle in the world as they did. We can see this happening throughout the United States. As more and more people immigrate here from foreign countries, they are forced to learn English and make English their dominant language. It only makes sense that they would want to teach their children English to make it easier for them to grow and flourish in the American culture. These children will most likely do better in school, and eventually the workplace, if they speak fluent English.

There is certainly something sad about this. So much culture, custom, and heritage are lost in this process of assimilation. It seems as though these immigrants are being forced to conform to the American way of life. In a perfect world, it would be amazing to see everyone's culture and customs existing peacefully together.

I remember a story my aunt told me years ago about a trip she took to Chicago, and how she had passed many billboards along the road that were all in Spanish. These billboards made her furious because she couldn't understand why 'those' people couldn't just learn our English language. It is attitudes like this that force many immigrants to abandon their own ways in favor of a more American way of life. Of course, Spanish is nowhere close to being an endangered language, but situations like this exist all over the world. Instead of celebrating differences, we are, in many cases, forcing those around us to become more like us.

I have certainly been guilty of these thoughts from time to time myself. There have been situations when I have been ordering food or dropping off my dry cleaning, and I have been unable to understand the person behind the counter. My first thought is always in regards to how they can possibly get by in this country with such poor English. I hope that I can show more compassion in the future, however, and consider how much courage it must take to leave one's homeland and start over again somewhere completely new and totally foreign.

I always thought that it was so great that English was such a dominant language around the world. Many people are learning it and adopting it as their own. It is a powerful feeling to think of English so widely spoken, but on second glance, I do see that something is being lost in the process. A piece of history is being eliminated. English is the language of popular culture as well. Mass tourism, telecommunication technology and the Internet are bringing this culture of movies, television and music to the rest of the world. This only furthers the dominance of English (Time 1997).

Of course, some languages become extinct without any direct human interference. Natural disasters and disease are also major factors. When the Europeans first attempted to colonize what would become the United States, they brought with them diseases that the natives had no immunity to. These diseases

wiped out hundreds and thousands of people, and their languages were lost with them. The Europeans did not even realize what they were doing. The people of that time did not have the medical knowledge and technology that we have today. So many people died without any real knowledge of what was happening to them. Another more recent example would be that of the tsunami that hit Asia last December. A hundred thousand people were lost in the horrifying disaster, and there was probably some nuance of their language lost with them. And these types of things have been happening for centuries. Humans have endured plagues, famines, earthquakes, volcano eruptions, and droughts. All of these things have had an effect on the progression of language throughout history (Baugh 2002).

According to a website on extinct languages, humans once spoke almost 15,000 languages around the world (Riverdeep 2001). Today the estimate is approximately 6,500. This is a huge decline. It is a sad to think of all that was lost with those languages. Certainly, some culture and heritage is gone forever. Michael Krauss, an expert on endangered languages at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks says, "Any language is as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism. Should we mourn the loss of [a language] any less than the loss of the panda or the California condor?" (Time 1997). It is helpful to think of endangered languages in terms of endangered plants and animals. Languages are no less important.

Endangered languages are those languages that are nearly extinct, but not quite there yet. Of the roughly 6,500 languages spoken around the world today, almost half of them are endangered or on the brink of extinction (Time 1997). Typically, these languages have only a few elderly speakers left, and the language is no longer being passed down from one generation to the next. The main distinguishing characteristic is that children are not learning these languages.

Sometimes languages become endangered simply because the population of native speakers is dying out. The last few speakers may not even know the language very well. They may simplify the grammar, forget certain vocabulary, or change the language to better reflect their second language (Grimes 2001). These populations become smaller and smaller until there is no one to pass the language on to. In this case, there is not much that can be done to save the language. The most important thing in this situation would be to preserve the language so that the uniqueness of the language and the people who speak it is not lost forever. Luckily, there are people who do this for a living (Grimes) Their jobs are to learn as much about an endangered language as they possibly can and document this information for future reference. Through their work, they help preserve the history of these forgotten people.

The debate regarding what to do for an endangered language can also be a controversial one. There are some people who believe that nothing should be done. I suppose this would be along the lines of the survival of the fittest idea. Languages, people, and cultures have died and been replaced for thousands of years, some people believe that we have no right to interfere with these workings of the world. Nature has selected them to die out, just as plants, animals, and people are selected.

Of course, not everyone thinks this way. Organizations have been created for the sole purpose of documenting endangered languages, and, in some cases, trying to save these languages from extinction. There are arguments in favor of these actions. Mainly, these actions allow for the preservation of lingual and cultural diversity. They also add to the base knowledge of language in general (Grimes 2001). This goes hand in hand with the idea that knowledge in and of itself is valuable and powerful. In the end, however, as the internet article states, "the only people who can stop a language from shrinking or dying are the speakers of the language" (Grimes 2001). The native speakers must have a passion to continue on with the language. Sometimes this can be sparked by literacy programs, general education, literature production, and translation

efforts. In Australia, there are currently programs in place that help Aborigines to regain some of their cultural heritage. Some schools allow Aboriginal children to spend two days a week on cultural excursions into surrounding areas with local tribe leaders (Time 1997). The children learn about their heritage and native tongues.

Programs also exist in New Zealand, where the Maori language was endangered for many years. Here they create what are called "language nests" (Time 1997). These nests are a nationwide network of elementary schools that introduce and teach Maori children their native tongue. The language centers have actually halted and reversed the once imminent death of the Maori language. These are important programs that exist throughout the world to save languages.

Linguist specialists are also finding new uses for the Aboriginal languages that they never realized existed before (Time 1997). These languages are helping to create new advances in science. Botanists are discovering new species of plants by researching the different names the Aborigines gave to these plants. Plants they previously thought were identical can now be seen to contain differences. These languages are also helping researchers to determine the migration patterns of early humans and the origins of some cultural innovations. Language is such an important piece in the history of the world. This is just another reason why it is so essential to try and preserve it.

Saving a language can be thought of in terms of trying to save an endangered plant or animal. Not everyone agrees about the value of such endeavors, but some people are extremely passionate about them. I find myself being persuaded in that direction. Language seems so much a part of who we are. What we say and how we say it makes us unique as people. Language is the way that we express our thoughts, emotions, and feelings. It seems sad to me that some people will lose, and have lost, that part of themselves forever. I always find it fascinating to think back hundreds or even thousands of years ago to consider the way people lived and how different their lives were from ours today. I wish I could watch a video of a day in the life of someone from Ancient Egypt or Ancient Greece. It is simply not possible, however. We must construct their histories from what they have left behind. We are extremely lucky in this day and age because we have the technology to preserve so many aspects of our lives. It does seem important to make a record of the languages and peoples of the world, to try and preserve their culture and uniqueness for future generations.