DAVID CRYSTAL

Language Death

The rapid endangerment and death of many minority languages across the world is a matter of widespread concern among all concerned with issues of cultural identity in an increasingly globalized culture. By some counts, only 600 of the 6,000 or so languages in the world are 'safe' from the threat of extinction. A leading commentator and popular writer on language issues, David Crystal asks the fundamental question, 'Why is language death so important?', reviews the reasons for the current crisis, and investigates what is being done to reduce its impact.

'... this work is directed at anyone with an interest in humanities and a concern about our future as mankind. Its wealth of information, observation and analysis enlightens the mind and invigorates the spirit of community and identity.'

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Canto

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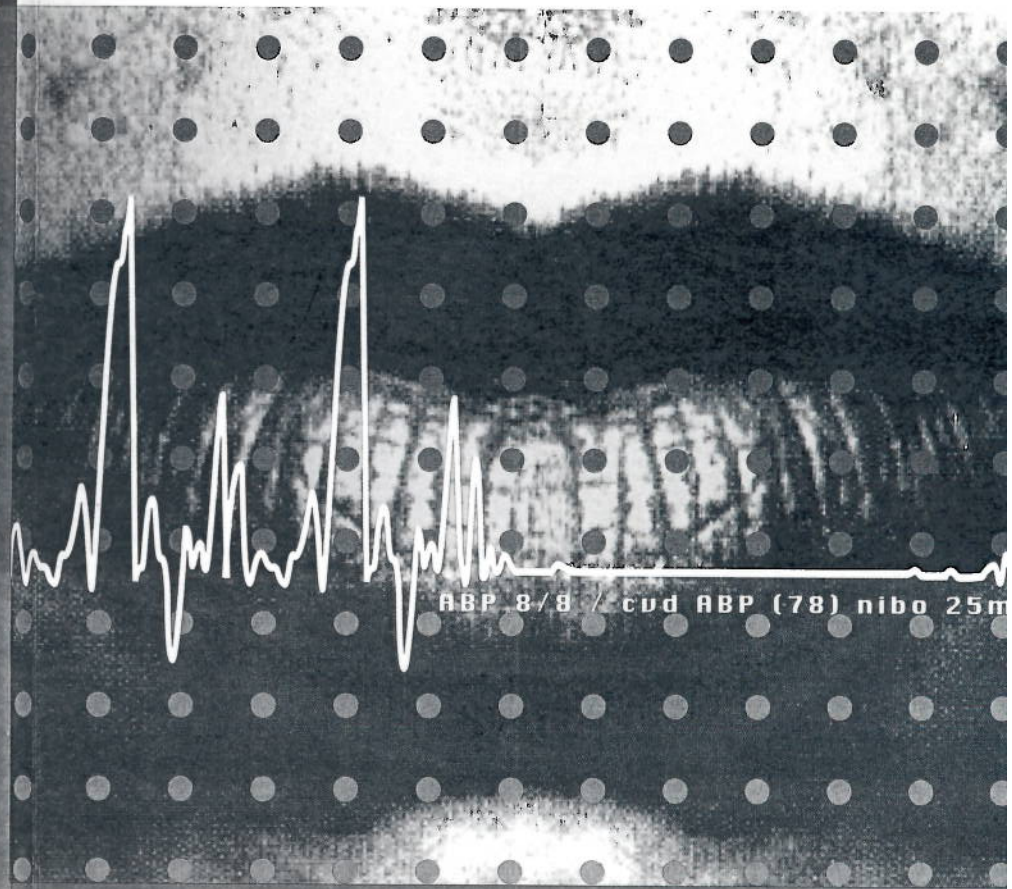

Canto

conscience) is to be raised sufficiently to enable something fruitful to be done. It is already too late for hundreds of languages. For the rest, the time is now.

It will be obvious, from the frequency of quotations and references in this book, that I have been hugely dependent on the small army of fieldworkers who are actively involved in the task of language preservation around the world. Enough material has now been published to provide the array of examples and illustrations which are needed to put flesh on a general exposition. I have also had the opportunity, in recent travels, to discuss these matters with several of the researchers who are routinely 'out there'. And I have immensely benefited from the comments on a draft of this book provided by Peter Trudgill, Carl James, and Jean Aitchison. Without all these supports, I could not have contemplated writing an overview of this kind; and that is why I have made copious use of the footnote convention, to give due acknowledgement to the crucial role of those who are doing the real work. I hope I have done them no disservice. Although I have never personally spent more than a few hours at a time with endangered language communities abroad, I have used up a good deal of my life working for the maintenance of Welsh at home, and would like to think that I have developed, both intellectually and emotionally, a real sense of the issues.

One of these issues is the question of exploitation: all too often (as we shall see in chapter 5) questions are raised by members of indigenous speech communities about the extent to which outside researchers are profiting financially from their plight. This issue, it seems to me, must exercise not only those working on endangered language projects, but equally authors of general books which deal specifically with the topic. This is such a book. All royalties from its sale will therefore be transferred to the Foundation for Endangered Languages (see Appendix), in the hope that the task of writing it will thereby have a practical as well as an intellectual outcome.

David Crystal
Holyhead

1 *What is language death?*

The phrase 'language death' sounds as stark and final as any other in which that word makes its unwelcome appearance. And it has similar implications and resonances. To say that a language is dead is like saying that a person is dead. It could be no other way – for languages have no existence without people.

A language dies when nobody speaks it any more. For native speakers of the language in which this book is written, or any other thriving language, it is difficult to envision such a possibility. But the reality is easy to illustrate. Take this instance, reported by Bruce Connell in the pages of the newsletter of the UK Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL), under the heading 'Obituaries':[1]

> During fieldwork in the Mambila region of Cameroon's Adamawa province in 1994–95, I came across a number of moribund languages . . . For one of these languages, Kasabe (called Luo by speakers of neighbouring languages and in my earlier reports), only one remaining speaker, Bogon, was found. (He himself knew of no others.) In November 1996 I returned to the Mambila region, with part of my agenda being to collect further data on Kasabe. Bogon, however, died on 5th Nov. 1995, taking Kasabe with him. He is survived by a sister, who reportedly could understand Kasabe but not speak it, and several children and grandchildren, none of whom know the language.

There we have it, simply reported, as we might find in any obituary column. And the reality is unequivocal. On 4 November 1995, Kasabe existed; on 5 November, it did not.

Here is another story, reported at the Second FEL Conference in

[1] Connell (1977: 27). The newsletters of this organization changed their name in early issues. The name was *Iatiku* for Numbers 2–4, and *Ogmios* for No. 6 on. Issues 1 and 5 had no distinctive name, and in this book these are referred to as *FEL Newsletter*.

Edinburgh in 1998 by Ole Stig Andersen.[2] This time, 8 October 1992 is the critical day:

> The West Caucasian language Ubuh . . . died at daybreak, October 8th 1992, when the Last Speaker, Tevfik Esenç, passed away. I happened to arrive in his village that very same day, without appointment, to interview this famous Last Speaker, only to learn that he had died just a couple of hours earlier. He was buried later the same day.

In actual fact, Kasabe and Ubykh (a widely used alternative spelling) had effectively died long before Bogon and Tevfik Esenç passed away. If you are the last speaker of a language, your language – viewed as a tool of communication – is already dead. For a language is really alive only as long as there is someone to speak it to. When you are the only one left, your knowledge of your language is like a repository, or archive, of your people's spoken linguistic past. If the language has never been written down, or recorded on tape – and there are still many which have not – it is all there is. But, unlike the normal idea of an archive, which continues to exist long after the archivist is dead, the moment the last speaker of an unwritten or unrecorded language dies, the archive disappears for ever. When a language dies which has never been recorded in some way, it is as if it has never been.[3]

The language pool

How many languages are at the point of death? How many are endangered? Before we can arrive at an estimate of the scale of the problem, we need to develop a sense of perspective. Widely quoted

[2] Andersen (1998: 3).

[3] There is, of course, always the possibility that other speakers of the same dialect will be found. In the Ubykh case, for instance, there were at the time rumours of two or three other speakers in other villages. Such rumours are sometimes found to be valid; often they are false, with the speakers being found to use a different dialect or language. But even if true, the existence of a further speaker or two usually only postpones the real obituary by a short time. For some Aboriginal Australian examples, see Wurm (1998: 193). Evans (forthcoming) provides an excellent account of the social and linguistic issues which arise when working with last speakers, and especially of the problem of deciding who actually counts as being a 'last speaker'.

figures about the percentage of languages dying only begin to make sense if they can be related to a reliable figure about the total number of languages alive in the world today. So how many languages are there? Most reference books published since the 1980s give a figure of between 6,000 and 7,000, but estimates have varied in recent decades between 3,000 and 10,000. It is important to understand the reasons for such enormous variation.

The most obvious reason is an empirical one. Until the second half of the twentieth century, there had been few surveys of any breadth, and the estimates which were around previously were based largely on guesswork, and were usually far too low. William Dwight Whitney, plucking a figure out of the air for a lecture in 1874, suggested 1,000.[4] One language popularizer, Frederick Bodmer, proposed 1,500; another, Mario Pei, opted for 2,796.[5] Most early twentieth-century linguists avoided putting any figure at all on it. One of the exceptions, Joshua Whatmough, writing in 1956, thought there were 3,000.[6] As a result, without professional guidance, figures in popular estimation see-sawed wildly, from several hundred to tens of thousands. It took some time for systematic surveys to be established. *Ethnologue*, the largest present-day survey, first attempted a world-wide review only in 1974, an edition containing 5,687 languages.[7] The Voegelins' survey, published in 1977, included around 4,500 living languages.[8] Since the 1980s, the situation has changed dramatically, with the improvement of information-gathering techniques. The thirteenth edition of *Ethnologue* (1996) contains 6,703 language headings, and about 6,300 living languages are classified in the *International encyclopedia of linguistics* (1992).[9] There are 6,796 names listed in the index

[4] See Silverstein (1971: 113).

[5] Bodmer (1944: 405). Pei (1952: 285); in a later book (1954: 127), this total decreased by 1.

[6] Whatmough (1956: 51).

[7] See now the 13th edition, Grimes (1996); also www.sil.org/ethnologue. The first edition in fact dates from 1951, when Richard S. Pittman produced a mimeographed issue of ten pages, based on interviews with people attending the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

[8] Voegelin and Voegelin (1977). I used their total in the first (1987) edition of my *Cambridge encyclopedia of language* (Crystal 1997a).

[9] Bright (1992); the files of *Ethnologue* (then in its 11th edition) were made available for this project, hence the similarity between the totals.

to the *Atlas of the world's languages.*[10] The off-the-cuff figure most often heard these days is 6,000, with the variance sometimes going below, sometimes above.[11] An exceptionally high estimate is referred to below.

A second reason for the uncertainty is that commentators know that these surveys are incomplete, and compensate for the lack of hard facts – sometimes by overestimating, sometimes by underestimating. The issue of language loss is itself a source of confusion. People may be aware that languages are dying, but have no idea at what rate. Depending on how they estimate that rate, so their current global guess will be affected: some take a conservative view about the matter; some are radical. (The point is considered further below.) Then there is the opposite situation – the fact that not all languages on earth have yet been 'discovered', thus allowing an element of growth into the situation. The ongoing exploration of a country's interior is not likely to produce many fresh encounters, of course, given the rate at which interiors have already been opened up by developers in recent years; but in such regions as the islands of Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, or the South American or Central African rainforests, reports do come in from time to time of a previously unknown community and language.[12] For example, in June 1998 two such nomadic tribes (the Vahudate and the Aukedate, comprising 20 and 33 families, respectively) were found living near the Mamberamo River area, 2,400 miles east of Jakarta in Irian Jaya. This is a part of the world where the high mountains and deep valleys can easily hide a community, and

[10] This is my count of Mosely and Asher (1994).

[11] Dixon (1997: 143) cites 5,000–6,000, as do Grenoble and Whaley (1998a), in their preface; Wardhaugh (1987: 1) cites 4,000–8,000, and settles on 5,000; Ruhlen (1987) goes for 5,000; Wurm (1991: 1) says 'well over 5,000'; Krauss consulted a number of linguists in writing his article on 'The world's languages in crisis' (1992: 5), and found widespread agreement that 6,000 was a reasonable estimate; Crystal (1997a: 287) also cites 6,000. Other major surveys are in progress: a 'World Languages Report', supported by UNESCO and Linguapax, and financed by the Basque Country, is scheduled for publication in 2001; see also the Global Language Register below.

[12] The world's languages have a highly uneven distribution: *c.* 4% are in Europe; *c.* 15% in the Americas; *c.* 31% in Africa; *c.* 50% in Asia and the Pacific. The countries mentioned have the highest distributions: Papua New Guinea and Indonesia alone have 25% (1,529 languages) between them (according to the 1996 edition of *Ethnologue*).

it is likely that their speech will be sufficiently different from that of other groups to count as a new language. The social affairs office in the region in fact reports that its field officers encounter new groups almost every year.[13]

Even in parts of the world which have been explored, however, a proper linguistic survey may not have been carried out. As many as half the languages of the world are in this position. Of the 6,703 languages listed in the thirteenth edition of *Ethnologue*, 3,074 have the appended comment – 'survey needed'. And what a survey chiefly does is determine whether the speakers found in a given region do indeed all use the same language, or whether there are differences between them. If the latter, it then tries to decide whether these differences amount only to dialect variations, or whether they are sufficiently great to justify assigning the speakers to different languages. Sometimes, a brief preliminary visit assigns everybody to a single language, and an in-depth follow-up survey shows that this was wrong, with several languages spoken. Sometimes, the opposite happens: the initial visit focuses on differences between speakers which turn out not to be so important. In the first case, the number of languages goes up; in the second case, it goes down. When decisions of this kind are being made all over the world, the effect on language counts can be quite marked.

To put some flesh on these statistics, let us take just one of those languages where it is said a survey is needed: Tapshin, according to *Ethnologue* also called Tapshinawa, Suru, and Myet, a language spoken by 'a few' in the Kadun district of Plateau State, Nigeria. It is said to be unclassified within the Benue-Congo broad grouping of languages. Roger Blench, of the Overseas Development Institute in London, visited the community in March 1998, and sent in a short report to the Foundation for Endangered Languages.[14] He stressed the difficulty of reaching the settlement: Tapshin village is a widely dispersed settlement about 25 km north of the

[13] The report is reproduced in *Ogmios* 9. 6. For similar discoveries in South America, see Adelaar (1998: 12); Kaufman (1994: 47) reports that about 40 languages have been discovered in South America during the past century.

[14] Blench (1998).

Pankshin–Amper road, reached by a track which can be traversed only by a four-wheel drive, and which is often closed during the rainy season. The Tapshin people call themselves Ns'r, and from this derives Blench's name for them, Nsur, and presumably also the name Suru in *Ethnologue*; but they are called Dishili by the Ngas people (referred to as the Angas in *Ethnologue*). The name Myet derives from a settlement, Met, some distance west of Tapshin. The Tapshin people claim that the Met people speak 'the same' language as they do, but Blench is cautious about taking this information at face value (for such judgements may be no more than a reflection of some kind of social or historical relationship between the communities). No data seems previously to have been recorded on Nsur. From his initial wordlists, he concludes that there has been substantial mutual influence with the Ngas language. He estimates that there are some 3–4,000 speakers, though that total depends on whether Met is included along with Nsur or not.

This small example illustrates something of the problem facing the linguistic analyst. There is a confusion of names which must be sorted out, in addition to the observable similarities and differences between the speakers.[15] The Nsur situation seems fairly manageable, with just a few alternatives to be considered. Often, the problem of names is much greater. Another Plateau State language, listed as *Berom* in *Ethnologue*, has 12 alternative names: *Birom, Berum, Gbang, Kibo, Kibbo, Kibbun, Kibyen, Aboro, Boro-Aboro, Afango, Chenberom,* and *Shosho*. The task then is to establish whether these are alternative names for the same entity, or whether they refer to different entities – the name of the people, the name of an individual speaker, or the name of the language as known by its speakers (a European analogy would be *Irish, Irishman/woman,* and *Gaelic/Irish/Erse,* respectively). Then there is the question of what the language is called by outsiders. There could of course be several 'outsider' names (*exonyms*), depending on how many other groups the language is in contact with (cf.

[15] For a discussion of the problem of naming, with particular reference to China, see Bradley (1998: 56 ff.).

deutsch being equivalent to *allemand, German, Tedesco,* etc.), and these might range from friendly names through neutral names to offensive names (cf. 'He speaks French' vs 'He speaks Frog'). Shosho, in the above list, is apparently an offensive name. But all this has to be discovered by the investigator. There is no way of knowing in advance how many or what kind of answers will be given to the question 'What is the name of your language?', or whether a list of names such as the above represents 1, 2, 6, or 12 languages. And the scale of this problem must be appreciated: the 6,703 language headings in the *Ethnologue* index generate as many as 39,304 different names.

Many of these names, of course, will refer to the dialects of a language. But this distinction raises a different type of difficulty: does a name refer to the whole of a language or to a dialect? The question of whether two speech systems should be considered as separate languages or as dialects of the same language has been a focus of discussion within linguistics for over a century. It is crucial to have criteria for deciding the question, as the decisions made can have major repercussions, when it comes to language counting. Take, for example, the Global Language Register (GLR), in the process of compilation by the Observatoire Linguistique:[16] in a 1997 formulation by David Dalby, this project proposed a threefold nomenclature – of *tongue* (or *outer language*), *language* (or *inner language* – or *idiom,* in a further proposal), and *dialect* – to avoid what it considered to be the oversimplified dichotomy of *language* and *dialect*. Early reports related to this project suggested that, using these criteria, an order of magnitude of 10,000 languages was to be expected – a surprisingly large total, when compared with the totals suggested above. The explanation is all to do with methodology. The GLR total is derived from the *tongues* and *idioms* of their system, and includes as languages many varieties which other approaches would consider to be dialects. One

[16] The following details are taken from a Logosphere Workshop held at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, September 1997, specifically from Dalby (1997), and his follow-up paper subsequently circulated.

example will illustrate the 'inflationary' effect of this approach. The orthodox approach to modern Welsh is to consider it as a single language, with the notable differences between (in particular) north and south Welsh referred to as dialects. On grounds of mutual intelligibility and sociolinguistic identity (of Wales as a nation-principality), this approach seems plausible. The GLR analysis, however, treats the differences between north and south Welsh as justifying the recognition of different languages (each with their own dialects), and makes further distinctions between Old Welsh, Book Welsh, Bible Welsh, Literary Welsh, Modern Standard Welsh, and Learners' Normalized Welsh (a pedagogical model of the 1960s known as 'Cymraeg Byw'). Excluding Old Welsh, in their terms a total of six 'inner languages' can be recognized within the 'outer language' known as modern Welsh. One can see immediately how, when similar cases are taken into account around the world, an overall figure of 10,000 could be achieved.

The language/dialect issue has been addressed so many times, in the linguistics literature, that it would be gratuitous to treat it in any detail here.[17] In brief, on purely linguistic grounds, two speech systems are considered to be dialects of the same language if they are (predominantly) mutually intelligible. This makes *Cockney* and *Scouse* dialects of English, and *Quechua* a cover-name for over a dozen languages. On the other hand, purely linguistic considerations can be 'outranked' by sociopolitical criteria, so that we often encounter speech systems which are mutually intelligible, but which have nonetheless been designated as separate languages. A well-recognized example is the status of Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, which are counted as separate languages despite the fact that the members of these communities can understand each other to an appreciable extent. A more recent example is *Serbo-Croatian*, formerly widely used as a language name to encompass a set of varieties used within former Yugoslavia, but following the

[17] Standard accounts are to be found in Chambers and Trudgill (1980: ch. 1) and Crystal (1997a: ch. 47).

civil wars of the 1990s now largely replaced by the names *Serbian*, *Croatian*, and *Bosnian*. In 1990 there was a single language spoken in these countries; now there are three. The linguistic features involved have changed hardly at all; but the sociopolitical situation has changed irreversibly.

It is of course likely that the linguistic differences between these languages will increase, as their respective communities strive to maximize them as symbols of local identity. This process is already happening. If it continues, then one day it is conceivable that Serbian and Croatian could become mutually unintelligible – a further example of something that has happened repeatedly and normally in linguistic evolution. Indeed, it is possible that a significant increase in the world's languages may one day emerge as an evolutionary consequence of the contemporary trend to recognize ethnic identities. Even global languages could be affected in this way. The point has been noted most often in relation to English, where new varieties have begun to appear around the world, as a consequence of that language's emerging status as a world lingua franca. Although at present Singaporean, Ghanaian, Caribbean, and other 'New Englishes' continue to be seen as 'varieties of English', it is certainly possible for local sociopolitical movements to emerge which would 'upgrade' them to language status in due course. Books and articles are already appearing which (in their nomenclature, at least) anticipate such outcomes.[18] After all, if a community wished its way of speaking to be considered a 'language', and if they had the political power to support their decision, who would be able to stop them doing so? The present-day ethos is to allow communities to deal with their own internal policies themselves, as long as these are not perceived as being a threat to others. The scenario for the future of English is so complex and unpredictable, with many pidgins, creoles, and mixed varieties emerging and gradually acquiring prestige, that it is perfectly possible that in a few generations time the degree of local distinctiveness in a speech

[18] McArthur (1998), Rosen (1994), and the journal *World Englishes*. See also Crystal (1998).

system, and the extent of its mutual unintelligibility with other historically related systems, will have developed to the extent that it will be given a name other than 'English' (as has happened already – though not yet with much success – in the case of Ebonics). At such a time, a real evolutionary increase in the number of 'English languages' would have taken place. A similar development could affect any language that has an international presence, and where situations of contact with other languages are fostering increased structural diversity. The number of new pidgins and creoles is likely to be relatively small, compared with the rate of language loss, but they must not be discounted, as they provide evidence of fresh linguistic life.

Estimates about the number of languages in the world, therefore, must be treated with caution. There is unlikely to be any single, universally agreed total. As a result, it is always problematic translating observations about percentages of endangered languages into absolute figures, or vice versa. If you believe that 'half the languages in the world are dying', and you take one of the middle-of-the-road totals above, your estimate will be some 3,000 languages. But if you then take this figure out of the air (as I have seen some newspaper reporters do), and relate it to one of the higher estimates (such as the Global Language Register's 10,000), you would conclude that less than a third of the world's languages are dying – and, as a consequence, that the situation is not as serious as has been suggested. The fact that this reasoning is illegitimate – the criteria underlying the first total being very different from those underlying the second – is disregarded. And, as I read the popular press, I see all kinds of claims and counter-claims being made, with the statistics used to hold a weight of argument they cannot bear.

At the same time, despite the difficulties, we cannot ignore the need for global measures. As so much of the situation to be described below is bound up with matters of national and international policy and planning, we have to arrive at the best estimates we can, in order to persuade governments and funding bodies about the urgency of the need. Accordingly, I will opt for the range

of 5,000–7,000 as my lower and upper bounds, for the year 2000 – 6±1K – and will relate any further talk of percentages to this.[19]

The size of the problem

A language is said to be dead when no one speaks it any more. It may continue to have existence in a recorded form, of course – traditionally in writing, more recently as part of a sound or video archive (and it does in a sense 'live on' in this way) – but unless it has fluent speakers one would not talk of it as a 'living language'. And as speakers cannot demonstrate their fluency if they have no one to talk to, a language is effectively dead when there is only one speaker left, with no member of the younger generation interested in learning it. But what do we say if there are two speakers left, or 20, or 200? How many speakers guarantee life for a language?

It is surprisingly difficult to answer this question. One thing is plain: an absolute population total makes no sense. The analysis of individual cultural situations has shown that population figures without context are useless. In some circumstances, such as an isolated rural setting, 500 speakers could permit a reasonably optimistic prediction; in others, such as a minority community scattered about the fringes of a rapidly growing city, the chances of 500 people keeping their ethnic language alive are minimal. In many Pacific island territories, a community of 500 would be considered

[19] As an endnote to this section, it is worth remembering that the languages we have today are only a fraction of all the languages there have ever been. There are too many unknowns for estimates to be other than highly speculative, but we can make some guesses using two criteria. First, we have some evidence from the known span of recorded Western history about the number of languages (and civilizations) that have died; and from historical linguistics we know something about the rate at which languages change – for example, the rise of the Romance languages from Vulgar Latin. We also have a vague idea about the age of the language faculty in humans, which probably arose between 100,000 and 20,000 years ago. Combining these variables is a daring task, but some people have attempted it. Pagel (1995: 6) concludes that there may have been as many as 600,000 languages spoken on earth, or as few as 31,000; his 'middle of the road' estimate is 140,000. Even if we take his lowest estimate, it is plain that far more languages have died, in the history of humankind, than now remain. For the question of whether the rate of decline has increased in recent times, see below; for the issue of what we may have lost, see chapter 2.

quite large and stable; in most parts of Europe, 500 would be minuscule. Speaker figures should never be seen in isolation, but always viewed in relation to the community to which they relate. Thus, in one survey, by Akira Yamamoto,[20] languages which had between 300 and 500 speakers included the Santa Ana dialect of Keresan (USA), Ulwa (Nicaragua), and Sahaptin (USA); but the first of these localities had a community population of only 600, the second had about 2,000, and the third had about 12,000. Plainly, the figure 500 tells a different story in each case, when it comes to evaluating the level of endangerment. Yamamoto concludes his survey with the comment that population size alone is not an accurate indicator of a language situation. He gives an example of a language which at the time of the survey had just 185 speakers of all ages – Karitiana (Brazil). Though this seems small, he points out that the total size of the community was only 191 – in other words, we have to say that over 96% of the people speak the language. And as the children are apparently continuing to learn Karitiana as their first language (with Portuguese coming later, as a second language), Yamamoto asks pertinently, is this really an endangered language?

The presumption is that any language which has a very small number of speakers is bound to be in trouble, and common sense tells us that this should usually be the case.[21] Perhaps only in places where the circumstances are especially favourable could such a language survive (see, further, chapter 3). So, notwithstanding the exceptions, most people would accept that a language spoken by less than 100 is in a very dangerous situation. They would then probably think in terms of a 'sliding scale' whereby languages with less than 500 would be somewhat less endangered, those with 1,000 even less so, and so on. What is unclear is the level at which we would stop automatically thinking in terms of danger. The figures

[20] Yamamoto (1997: 12).

[21] Many articles on endangered languages reflect this point: for example, Norris (1998: 3) says: 'There are a number of factors which contribute to a language's ability to survive. First and foremost is the size of the population with an Aboriginal mother tongue or home language. Since a large base of speakers is essential to ensure long-term viability, the more speakers a language has, the better its chances of survival.' See, further, chapter 4.

suggested for this level are higher than we might expect. A total of 10,000 suggests safety in the short term, but not in the medium term.[22] In the savannah zone in Africa, for example, some linguists consider a language to be endangered if it has less than 20,000 speakers.[23] And in parts of West Africa, where English and French creoles in particular are attracting huge numbers of new speakers, many local languages are felt to be endangered – even though they are currently spoken by several hundred thousand. This is what surprises people – that languages with such large numbers of speakers can nonetheless be in danger. Yet, within the twentieth century, we have seen many languages fall from very large numbers: for example, in 1905 one estimate of Breton gave 1.4 million speakers; today, depending on the kind of fluency criteria used, the figure may be as low as 250,000.[24] And when we consider the causes of language death (chapter 3), it is evident that the factors involved are so massive in their effect that even a language with millions of speakers may not be safe. Even Yoruba, with 20 million speakers, has been called 'deprived' because of the way it has come to be dominated by English in higher education.[25] And during a visit to Southern Africa in 1998, speakers of several of the newly recognized official languages of South Africa expressed to me their anxiety for their long-term future, in the face of English – including several Afrikaners (whose language, Afrikaans, is spoken by around 6 million). The same reaction was observed in Zimbabwe, where not only speakers of Ndebele (1.1 million) but even of Shona (7 million) professed the same anxiety. One experience illustrates the trend that these people find so worrying: engaging a Johannesburg driver in conversation, it transpired that he was conversant with all 11 of his country's official languages – an ability which he did not think at all unusual. However, his main ambition was to earn enough to enable all his children to learn English. None of the other languages ranked highly in his esteem.

Although concerns have been expressed about some languages

[22] For example, Dixon (1991: 231).

[23] Footnote to a field report on Kagoro (Mali) by Vydrine (1998: 3).

[24] Total given for 1991 in the Breton entry in Price (1998: 38).

[25] Brenzinger (1998: 93).

with relatively large populations, it is the ones with the smallest totals which have inevitably captured the most attention. Yamamoto also recognizes this (see fn. 20 above): 'the number of speakers is an immediate index for its endangered situation'. It is difficult to see how a community can maintain its identity when its population falls beneath a certain level. Hence there is some force behind the statistics of language use which scholars have been compiling in recent years – though these surveys have not been taking place long enough for one to see long-term trends (e.g. whether there is an increase in the rate at which languages are being lost). An updated table in *Ethnologue* (February 1999) recognizes 6,784 languages, with data available for 6,059. Using this latter figure – and inevitably disregarding the question-marks which accompany several of the estimates – we can obtain the totals in Table 1, all for first language speakers.

There are many observations which can be made from a scrutiny of a summary table of this kind, and of the fuller table which underlies it. Beginning with the largest totals: it is evident that a very small number of languages account for a vast proportion of the world's population (thought to have passed 6 billion in mid 1999). The 8 languages over 100 million (Mandarin, Spanish, English, Bengali, Hindi, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese) have nearly 2.4 billion speakers between them; and if we extend this count to include just the top 20 languages, we find a total of 3.2 billion – over half the world's population. If we continued the analysis downwards, we would eventually find that just 4% of the world's languages are spoken by 96% of the population.

Turning this statistic on its head: 96% of the world's languages are spoken by just 4% of the population. That is the perspective within which any discussion of language death must be seen. And, at the bottom end of the table, there are some sobering deductions. From the rightmost column, we can see that a quarter of the world's languages are spoken by less than 1,000 people; and well over half by less than 10,000. The median number of speakers for all languages in the list is 6,000. If the figure of 20,000 (referred to above as a danger-level in some parts of the world) were taken as a universal datum, this would correspond to exactly two-thirds of

Table 1

	N	%	Cumulative downwards %	Cumulative upwards %
more than 100 million	8	0.13		99.9
10–99.9 million	72	1.2	1.3	99.8
1–9.9 million	239	3.9	5.2	98.6
100,000–999,999	795	13.1	18.3	94.7
10,000–99,999	1,605	26.5	44.8	81.6
1,000–9,999	1,782	29.4	74.2	55.1
100–999	1,075	17.7	91.9	25.7
10–99	302	5.0	96.9	8.0
1–9	181	3.0	99.9	

the world's languages. Then, using the leftmost column, we can see that nearly 500 languages have less than 100 speakers; around 1,500 have less than 1,000; and 3,340 have less than 10,000. If a population of 20,000 is again taken as a danger-level datum, we are talking about 4,000 languages. Most of these will be found in those parts of the world where languages are most numerous – notably in the equatorial regions everywhere (see fn. 12 above). The underlying table also lists 51 languages with just a single speaker – 28 in Australia, 8 in the USA, 3 in South America, 3 in Africa, 6 in Asia, 3 in the Pacific islands.

As we have already seen, conditions vary so much around the world that it is impossible to generalize from population alone about the rate at which languages die out. That is why there is so much variation in the claims that are currently being made, that 'x% of the world's languages are going to die out in the next 100 years' – x here has been anything from 25% (a conservative estimate which correlates with the 'less than 100' criterion) to 80% or more (a radical estimate which correlates with the 'less than 100,000' criterion). It is impossible, in our present state of knowledge, to say more about these deductions other than that they are well-informed guesswork. Most available demographic data (on death-rate, fertility-rate, etc.) is country-based, and not language-related. On the other hand, there have been enough micro-studies

of specific locations carried out over a period of time to indicate the rate at which a downward trend operates. One report, on Dyirbal (Australia), found some 100 speakers in 1963, with everyone over about 35 speaking it as a first language; by 1993, there were just 6 speakers, all over about 65, with comprehension by some younger people.[26] Another report showed that in 1990 there were 60 fluent speakers of Aleut in Atka (USA), the main village where it survives; but by 1994 this number was down to 44, with the youngest speakers in their twenties.[27] At that rate of attrition, the language could stop being used by 2010.[28] (The factors which can influence the rate of decline are reviewed in chapter 3.)

Here is a more detailed example of the nature of a downwards trend. A Canadian census-based study[29] showed that between 1981 and 1996 most of Canada's 50 Aboriginal languages suffered a steady erosion; indeed, by the latter date only 3 of the languages were felt to have large enough populations to be secure from the threat of long-term extinction (Inuktitut, Cree, Ojibway). A superficial look at the census data might suggest the contrary, for in this 15-year period the number of people reporting an indigenous mother-tongue actually increased by 24% (chiefly the result of high fertility rates among the population). However, a closer look at the statistics shows a very different picture. There are four critical points (to each of which I add a general observation).

- The number of people who spoke an indigenous language at home grew by only 6%. In real terms, for every 100 people with an indigenous mother-tongue, the number whose home

[26] Dixon (1997: 105).

[27] Bergsland (1998: 38). Another example of a language which has gone from vital to moribund within a generation is Cup'ik in Chevak, Alaska: see Woodbury (1998: 239). The suddenness of the change in the languages of the Great Plains is emphasized in Furbee, Stanley, and Arkeketa (1998: 75).

[28] Another example of extrapolation is given for Tlingit and Haida in Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 72): on the basis of current trends, if the youngest speaker of Tlingit is 45, and lives to be 100, the language will be dead in 2050. It should be noted that a pattern of decline is not always a smooth descending curve. There is evidence of a cyclical process in some places, as a period of loss is followed by one of maintenance. In parts of India, for example, there is evidence of people letting their indigenous language fall into disuse in early childhood, or after moving to a city to find work; but if they join new social networks after marriage, or return to their village with a newfound political awareness, they may then become actively involved in its resuscitation (Annamalai 1998: 25).

[29] Norris (1998).

language was most often an indigenous language declined from 76 to 65. (The importance of using the language at home is critical, in parts of the world where a population lives in relative isolation, and where it is unlikely that numbers will be enhanced through immigration. In the present survey, the viability of a language is directly reflected in its proportion of home language use: in the more viable languages, an average of 70 out of every 100 used their indigenous language at home; in the less viable ones, this had fallen to 30 or fewer.)[30]

- The age trend shows a steady decline: 60% of those aged 85+ used an indigenous mother-tongue, compared with 30% of those aged 40–44, and 20% of children under 5. The average age of speakers of all indigenous languages rose from 28 to 31. (Age is another critical factor, as it shows the extent to which language transmission between generations has been successful. The lower the average language population age, the more successful the parents have been in getting young people to speak it. A rise in average speaker age is a strong predictor of a language's progress towards extinction.)
- The points at which language loss chiefly take place can also be identified: in 1981, 91 out of 100 children under 5 spoke their mother-tongue at home; in 1996, these children had reached their late teens, and only 76 out of 100 now did so. (The ages at which there is a shift in language use are highly significant.[31] The dependence of very young children on their family means that few have an opportunity to shift from their

[30] Some demographers use an *index of continuity*, derived by dividing the number of people who speak an indigenous language at home by the number of those who speak it as a mother-tongue. A figure of less than 100 indicates a decline in the viability of the language. Another measure is an *index of ability*, derived by dividing the number of mother-tongue users by the number of people who have reasonable conversational ability in it. A figure of more than 100 indicates the presence of second-language speakers, and thus the possibility of revival. See Harrison (1997).

[31] *Language shift* is the conventional term for the gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another (either by an individual or by a group). Other terms frequently encountered in the endangered languages literature include: *language loss*, for a situation where a person or group is no longer able to use a language previously spoken; *language maintenance*, where people continue to use a language, often through adopting specific measures; and *language loyalty*, which expresses the concern to preserve a language when a threat is perceived.

home language. By contrast, the teenage years, characterized by pressure both from peer-group trends and from the demands of the job-market, are a particularly sensitive index of where a language is going.)

- The preceding point takes on fresh significance when people leave the family home. The data show that language loss is most pronounced during the early years of entering the job-market and after marriage (especially among women): between ages 20 and 24, 74 out of 100 women were using an indigenous language; but in the corresponding group 15 years later, this average had fallen to 45. (Such a shift is particularly serious, as these are the years in which women are likely to be bringing up their children. Fewer children are thus going to be exposed to the indigenous language at home.)

There are also several positive signs in the Canadian situation; but the picture of overall decline is very clear, and has its parallels in other census studies, notably in the USA. These studies, however, provide only a very partial picture of the world situation: most countries do not record census data on language use at all, or (when they do) the questions they ask do not throw light on the issue of language endangerment.

It is certainly possible, after immersing yourself in data of this kind, to 'take a view' (as lawyers say) about the global situation, and several writers have done so. One of the most widely quoted statistics is that of Michael Krauss, who concludes, after a statistical review:[32]

> I consider it a plausible calculation that – at the rate things are going – the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind's languages.

That means only about 600 are 'safe'. As I have already indicated in my Preface, the groups which have been established to monitor the situation are in total agreement about the seriousness of the situation, though usually avoiding a hard statistic. For example,

[32] Krauss (1992: 7).

here are two judgements from the Foundation for Endangered Languages:[33]

> The majority of the world's languages are vulnerable not just to decline but to extinction.
>
> Over half the world's languages are moribund, i.e. not effectively being passed on to the next generation [see further below].

A middle position would assert 50% loss in the next 100 years. This is the view independently arrived at by three linguists reported by Krauss in 1992.[34] 50% is 3,000 languages. 100 years is 1,200 months. To meet that time frame, at least one language must die, on average, every two weeks or so. This cannot be very far from the truth.

Levels of danger

Comparing levels of endangerment is very difficult, in view of the diversity of language situations around the world, and the lack of theoretical models which would allow us to interpret combinations of relevant variables. How should we approach the kind of question raised earlier: which is the more endangered – a language where 400 people out of a community of 500 speak it, or one which has 800 speakers out of 1,000? Plainly, in such cases, the only answer is 'It all depends' – on such factors as the rate of acquisition by the children, the attitude of the whole community to it, and the level of impact of other languages which may be threatening it. At the same time, it is important for people to be able to take such factors into account (intuitively, at least, if surveys have not been made) and arrive at a judgement about just how endangered a language is. Some sort of classification of endangerment needs to be made. Without it, it would be impossible to 'take a view' about the urgency of the need, and thus to allocate scarce resources, in cases where something might be done (chapter 5).

[33] The first is from the preamble to the proposal to establish the Foundation for Endangered Languages, June 1995; the second is from *Iatiku* 2. 3. [34] Krauss (1992: 6).

A common-sense classification recognizes three levels: languages are **safe**, **endangered**, or **extinct**. To this, Michael Krauss adds a notion which has been widely taken up: languages which are no longer being learned as a mother tongue by children are said to be **moribund** (a term originating in the field of medicine).[35] This captures the notion of a language well beyond the stage of 'mere' endangerment, because it lacks intergenerational transmission; the analogy is with a species unable to reproduce itself. The distinction is illustrated by Krauss with reference to North America, where he identifies a total of 187 indigenous languages. All are, in principle (given the dominant English-language environment), endangered; but major efforts are taking place in some communities to reverse the decline (see chapter 5). The more important statistic is to identify those which are moribund – which Krauss calculates to be 149, or 80%. In Alaska, the percentage is higher: there, only 2 out of the 20 indigenous languages were, in 1992, still being learned by children. A similar percentage is found in Australia. On the other hand, applying his criterion in South America produces a lower figure (27%) and in Central America an even lower one (17%).

Some classifications go a stage further, distinguishing 'safe' and 'not so safe', as in this five-level system:[36]

viable languages: have population bases that are sufficiently large and thriving to mean that no threat to long-term survival is likely;

viable but small languages: have more than *c.* 1,000 speakers, and are spoken in communities that are isolated or with a strong internal organization, and aware of the way their language is a marker of identity;

endangered languages: are spoken by enough people to make survival a possibility, but only in favourable circumstances and with a growth in community support;

nearly extinct languages: are thought to be beyond the possibility of survival, usually because they are spoken by just a few elderly people;

[35] Krauss (1992: 4). [36] Kincade (1991: 160–3).

extinct languages: are those where the last fluent speaker has died, and there is no sign of any revival.

And here is a five-level classification used by Stephen Wurm, focusing on the weaker languages (and giving *moribund* a somewhat different emphasis):[37]

potentially endangered languages: are socially and economically disadvantaged, under heavy pressure from a larger language, and beginning to lose child speakers;

endangered languages: have few or no children learning the language, and the youngest good speakers are young adults;

seriously endangered languages: have the youngest good speakers age 50 or older;

moribund languages: have only a handful of good speakers left, mostly very old;

extinct languages: have no speakers left.

Another way of trying to introduce some order into endangerment is through the use of linguistic criteria, reflecting the range of functions for which languages are used and the types of structural change which they display. Endangered languages come to be used progressively less and less throughout the community, with some of the functions they originally performed either dying out or gradually being supplanted by other languages. There are many cases in Africa, for example, where an indigenous language has come to be less used in educational, political, and other public situations, because its roles have been taken over by English, Swahili, or some other lingua franca. In one formulation, such languages have been called 'deprived'.[38] Some languages suffer discourse attrition so much that they end up surviving in just one domain – for example, Ge'ez (Ethiopia) as a language of liturgy. Even modern European languages can feel the threat, as the following comment illustrates. Johan Van Hoorde is senior project manager

[37] Wurm (1998: 192). Five-level models of status are typical: another is Bauman (1980), who recognizes *flourishing, enduring, declining, obsolescent,* and *extinct.*

[38] Bamgbose (1997: 22).

at the Nederlandse Taalunie, an organization set up by the Dutch and Belgian governments to promote Dutch (currently spoken by *c.* 21 million):[39]

> Dutch may not be threatened with extinction in the short or medium term, but it is in danger of losing domains. It could eventually become just a colloquial language, a language you use at home to speak with your family – the language you can best express your emotions in – but not the one you use for the serious things in life: work, money, science, technology.

From a structural point of view, different aspects of the language may show rapid change, amongst those people most influenced by it. There is usually a dramatic increase in the amount of code-switching, with the threatened language incorporating features from the contact language(s). Grammatical features may be affected, such as an increase in the use of inflections and function words from the dominant language. Knowledge of vocabulary declines, with younger people familiar with only a proportion of the traditional vocabulary known by older people, and older people being unfamiliar with or antipathetic to the borrowed vocabulary that is replacing it. One study of Welsh looked at lexical erosion across three generations: three groups (N=20) of 60–80-year-olds, 40–59-year-olds, and 20–39-year-olds.[40] Everyone was asked to provide the Welsh word for 150 items belonging to domestic (weather, animals, parts of the body, clothing, etc.) and agricultural vocabulary. There was a steady decline in awareness between the generations: 65% of the senior group knew over 90% of the vocabulary, compared with 40% of the middle-aged group – and none of the youngest group achieved the 90% level. The drop in the percentage of known items was greater in some semantic fields than others, being most noticeable in the vocabulary relating to parts of the body. In some languages, only one area of vocabulary may be left: an example is Yaku (Ethiopia), which is reported to survive in its plant names only.[41]

[39] Van Hoorde (1998: 6). [40] Jones (1985).

[41] Report by Matthias Brenzinger to a seminar held at Dartmouth College, Hanover (New Hampshire, USA) in 1995 (reported in *Newsletter FEL* 1, p.5).

Assessing the level of functional or structural change in a language is an important process; but it must always be carried out with caution. After all, change is a normal and necessary part of all languages. Healthy languages are always borrowing from each other, and vocabulary is always changing between old and young generations. The formal characterization of what has been called language *obsolescence* is still in its early stages, as a research field, but its importance is evident. We need to know which features of change (if any) might be unambiguously associated with it.[42] When is the emergence or loss of a form, or the advent of a greater degree of language mixing, an instance of a 'change' introduced through the normal processes of language contact, and when is it an instance of 'decline'? Normally, linguists fall over backwards to counter the purist view that linguistic change is deterioration; and this stance needs to be used with endangered languages too. But the kinds of change which take place during the decline of endangered languages are likely to be different from those which characterize healthy languages. There are likely to be differences in extent, range, rate, and quality: in a declining language, far more features should be affected simultaneously; they should belong to more areas of the language (e.g. different aspects of grammar, different lexical fields); they should change more rapidly; and they should change in the same direction (displaying the influence of the languages which are replacing them). Sometimes, the speed of change can be dramatic indeed, resulting in a rapid and abrupt shift with very little linguistic interference – what has been called 'catastrophic' or 'radical' shift – a phenomenon which has been noted, for example, in some African situations where ethnicity is particularly weak while the external pressure to shift is high.[43]

When is change normal + when is it a sign of decline?

[42] The point is recognized by commentators in Dorian (1989): see especially the paper by Hoenigswald. The situation is not clear-cut. Romaine (1989) finds no factors functioning as exclusive predictors of language death. Also, considerable creativity is still possible, even in languages close to death. Endangered languages need to attract the same kind of theoretical investigation that has characterized the study of child language acquisition and pathological linguistic decline in individuals; see also Menn (1989).

[43] Examples are given in Tosco (1997). See also this assessment for Quechua in Grinevald (1998: 139). The term *radical language shift* is from Woodbury (1998: 235). Other terms have also been used, such as *language tip*, in Dorian (1981: 51).

Conclusion

We frequently encounter dramatic and emotional reactions, when the topic turns to language death – and that is hardly surprising, in view of the nature of the issues, and the cultural realities which have led to so many languages dying (see chapter 3). There are now several parts of the world where there are no indigenous languages left – for example, all the Arawakan and Cariban languages originally spoken in the islands of the Caribbean are now extinct. The drama has doubtless been unconsciously heightened by its coincidence with the millennium; but it is difficult to disagree with those who see the present time as a particularly critical moment in linguistic history:[44]

> We, then, and our children, appear to live at the catastrophic inflexion point, where all together, for most languages in the world, the decline in speaker numbers reaches the zero point.

To support the use of such apocalyptic language, we need to let other voices be heard – insofar as this is possible, for those who are experiencing or have experienced language loss find it difficult to express their emotional state. What is it like to be without your rightful mother tongue? Hendrik Stuurman, talking about his Khoikhoi background in north-western South Africa, puts it this way:[45]

> I feel that I have drunk the milk of a strange woman, that I grew up alongside another person. I feel like this because I do not speak my mother's language.

George Rizkalla, an Aramaic speaker from Malula, Syria, talks about the way in which Aramaic (currently spoken by *c.* 6,000 in three villages near Damascus) is gradually being displaced by Arabic:[46]

[44] Preamble to the proposal to establish a Foundation for Endangered Languages in the UK (Nicholas Ostler, June 1995). See also the quotations in my Preface.
[45] Report in the Braamfontein *Mail & Guardian* (Koch and Maslamoney 1997: 28).
[46] Report in the *Los Angeles Times* (Daniszewski 1997: A1).

> Fifty years ago, all the students in Malula spoke Aramaic, and some of them could speak Arabic with difficulty. Now all speak Arabic, and some struggle with the Aramaic . . . [*Then, talking about his children, who work in Damascus*] There they cannot see goats, or trees or peasants working in the field. So all the words for these things are forgotten because they hear such words maybe once a year. In this way the language gets poorer and poorer.

How can we sum up such an enormous concept as language death? Mari Rhydwen provides a relevant perspective:[47]

> Loss of language is not the loss of a concept, an abstraction, but rather it is what happens when people change their behaviour and stop transmitting their language intergenerationally. It is intimately connected with people and it cannot be treated simply as an intellectual puzzle to be solved.

That is why so much of the contemporary emphasis, as we shall see in later chapters, is ecological in character, focusing on the relationships between people, their environment, and their thoughts and feelings.

For a modern literary comment, I call Scottish author James Kelman and Australian author David Malouf:[48]

> My culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that.
>
> When I think of my tongue being no longer alive in the mouths of men a chill goes over me that is deeper than my own death, since it is the gathered deaths of all my kind.

And for a classical literary comment, I call Samuel Johnson:[49]

> My zeal for languages may seem, perhaps, rather overheated, even to those by whom I desire to be well esteemed. To those who have nothing in their thoughts but trade or policy, present power or present money, I should not think it necessary to defend my

[47] Rhydwen (1998).
[48] Kalman, in a speech at the Booker Prize ceremony, 11 October 1994; Malouf (1985).
[49] Samuel Johnson, 13 August 1766, letter to William Drummond, in Boswell (1791: ch. 18).

> opinions; but with men of letters I would not unwillingly compound, by wishing the continuance of every language, however narrow in its extent, or however incommodious for common purposes, till it is reposited in some version of a known book, that it may be always hereafter examined and compared with other languages.

But why should these people, from the humble to the famous, think like this? Why is the issue of language death so important to them? Why should it be important to us? Why, in a phrase, should we care?[50]

[50] Two important books, which appeared at virtually the same time as the first edition of *Language Death*, are Nettle and Romaine (2001) and Hagège (2001), the former containing much more of an anthropological frame of reference, the latter much more of a philosophical perspective. Their near-simultaneous appearance testifies to the growing sense of urgency among professionals about the matter, and their mutually reinforcing message has significantly increased public awareness and debate about the issue.

2 *Why should we care?*

Many people think we shouldn't. There is a widely held and popular – but nonetheless misconceived – belief that any reduction in the number of languages is a benefit for mankind, and not a tragedy at all. Several strands of thought feed this belief. One reflects the ancient tradition, expressed in several mythologies but most famously in the Biblical story of Babel, that the proliferation of languages in the world was a penalty imposed on humanity, the reversal of which would restore some of its original perfectibility.[1] In an ideal world, according to this view, there would be just one language, which would guarantee mutual understanding, enlightenment, and peace. Any circumstances which reduce the number of languages in the world, thereby enabling us to move closer to this goal, must therefore be welcomed.

There are two intractable difficulties with this view. The first is the naivety of the conception that sharing a single language is a guarantor of mutual understanding and peace, a world of new alliances and global solidarity. The examples to the contrary are so numerous that it would be impracticable to list them. Suffice it to say that all the major monolingual countries of the world have had their civil wars, and that as one reflects on the war-zones of the world in the last decades of the twentieth century, it is striking just how many of them are in countries which are predominantly monolingual – Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, and Burundi (the latter two standing out in Africa in their lack of multilingualism). It is, in short, a total myth that the sharing of a single language

[1] See Eco (1995); for the comparative dimension, see Borst (1957–63).

judiciously selected. Curiously, it is one of the hardest jobs on earth to convince a language extremist of that. A purism on behalf of an endangered language is no less stultifying than a purism on behalf of a dominant language.

It is easy to let intellectual awareness of the controversies, and political cynicism over the outcomes, eat away at any enthusiastic response to the question with which I began this chapter, 'Where do we begin?' If the task is to rebuild a community's self-confidence, often after several hundred years of cultural domination, anything other than a gloomy prospect seems remote. Within the community, the size of the task can be enough to put people off. They know they don't know enough. They know they haven't the resources. They therefore delay making decisions, or pick at the problem, instead of approaching it systematically. They look for quick returns, and then, when they find these do not work, they are put off once again. They underestimate the amount of preliminary work which needs to be in place before significant progress can be made. Faced, then, with a community mood which lies somewhere along the range from black to very black, it is important to draw attention to the cases where problems have been overcome, and significant progress has been made, for these have been many. It is perhaps too soon, in most instances, to talk about 'success stories', for not enough research has been done to establish the long-term impact of a few years or decades of language shift reversal. At the same time, if long life is not yet guaranteed for these cases, there is now plenty of evidence to show that death has been postponed.

5 *What can be done?*

The preceding two chapters have raised a number of general considerations which are involved in the early stages of working with an endangered language. Chapter 3 drew attention to the range of factors which cause a language to decline; chapter 4 emphasized the effect of this process on people's attitudes. Both perspectives are needed before we are in a position to make informed decisions about when and how to intervene, in order to reverse language shift – or indeed about whether intervention is practicable or desirable.[1]

Our decisions may be informed, but they are not always based on principles that are fully understood. There is still so much that we do not know. What motivates the members of a community to work for their language? Why do some communities become so involved and others do not? Sometimes the reasons are very clear: for example, a powerful combination of political and religious factors explain the rebirth and ongoing maintenance of Hebrew in modern Israel.[2] But most endangered situations do not permit easy analysis. Nor is the range of factors and how they interact completely understood. We know a great deal about why languages become endangered and die, and why people shift from one language to another (see chapter 3), but we still know very little about why they are maintained, and why people stay loyal to them.

[1] The question of desirability raises a host of issues which have been little discussed. Some writers are well aware of a medical analogy, and have asked (though not answered) the same kinds of difficult question which are encountered in medical ethics. 'Should we keep languages alive on respirators and breathing tubes?', asks Matisoff (1991: 221), and he raises the spectre of 'linguistic euthanasia' in cases where the community expresses its wish for its language to be allowed to die, or rejects outside help entirely. I do not think the subject is yet ready to provide principled answers to such questions.

[2] However, Modern Hebrew is a very special case. Although very different from Classical Hebrew in its many European influences, there has been significant continuity in writing between classical and modern times, and also in speech through several European vernacular varieties.

Surprising cases of language maintenance, even in the most adverse of circumstances, are encountered. The Tewa of Arizona are an example: they have long been a small group within the dominant Hopi community, and yet their language has been strongly maintained. In trying to explain this, linguists have noted the Tewa's real concern over stylistic consistency in the use of ceremonial and religious speech, even to the extent of physically punishing anyone who might make use of non-Tewa expressions; also, a spirit of linguistic tolerance is strongly present among the Hopi.[3] But it is difficult to find ways of quantifying such notions as 'real concern over consistency' and 'strong presence of tolerance', and much of the commentary in the research literature still remains impressionistic.

In most settings, clusters of factors interact in subtle ways. A report on the Ugong of Thailand tries to explain why this language has died out in some places and not in others. The researcher, David Bradley, concludes that the language has survived in geographical areas which are relatively isolated, the communities there being more likely to be economically self-sufficient and to have had little contact with outside groups (and thus few or no marriages to outsiders). In such places, the headman retained some measure of political control and social prestige, and there was no access to Thai-based education in schools.[4] In the case of the Maori of New Zealand, a different cluster of factors seems to have been operative, involving a strong ethnic community involvement since the 1970s, a long-established (over 150 years) literacy presence among the Maori, a government educational policy which has brought Maori courses into schools and other centres, such as the *kohanga reo* ('language nests'), and a steadily growing sympathy from the English-speaking majority. Also to be noted is the fact that Maori is the only indigenous language of the country, so that it has been able to claim the exclusive attention of those concerned with lan-

[3] Kroskrity (1993). Another case of survival in an unfavourable setting is the Barbareno Chumash of California, who were taken into a Franciscan mission in the late eighteenth century, and made to learn Spanish, yet its last speaker did not die until 1965: see Mithun (1998: 183). [4] Bradley (1989: 33–40).

guage rights.[5] In the case of Welsh, the critical factors included the rise of a strong community movement in the 1970s, the presence of a visionary leader (prepared in this case to fast to death: see p. 87), the establishment of a Welsh-medium television channel, and the passing of protective legislation (notably, the Welsh Language Acts of 1967 and 1993).[6] In the case of one project on Irish in Northern Ireland, the critical factor was a remarkable level of personal commitment, leading to the emergence of a socially dynamic community: eleven families from West Belfast undertook to learn Irish, buying houses in the same neighbourhood (Shaw's Road) and raising their children as bilinguals. The project enhanced the prestige of the language, and inspired other enterprises of this kind in the region.[7] In the case of Rama, in Nicaragua, the chief factors were reported to be the involvement of a visionary language rescuer who managed to motivate the local community, the constitutional commitment to linguistic and cultural rights which followed the Sandinista revolution, and the presence of a team of professional linguists.[8]

These are just a few of the many cases on record where individual languages have been seen to make progress in recent years.[9] In none of these cases would we yet be able to guarantee the safety of the languages in the long term. Indeed, in some instances, an objective assessment of numbers of speakers might actually show a downturn, despite a period of intense language support. This is often because of the lateness of the intervention: it can take a long time before the number of new speakers manages to exceed the death of older speakers. Also, the initial enthusiasm of some language learners might wane, as they encounter the time-consuming

[5] For historical background, see Benton (1996). For an analysis in terms of factors, see Grenoble and Whaley (1998b: 49ff.).
[6] See the papers in Ball (1988) and Bellin (1984). [7] Maguire (1991). [8] Craig (1992).
[9] Several other examples are given by Dorian (1998); see also the papers by Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, England, Jacobs, and Grinevald in Grenoble and Whaley (1998a). Wurm (1998: 203ff.) reports on progress with Ainu (Japan), Djabugay (Australia), Faeroese, Tahitian, Yukagir (Siberia), and several other cases. Other reports of progress appear in the bulletins of the Foundation for Endangered Languages; illustrative are the reports on Hawaiian (*Newsletter* 1. 3), Livonian (*Iatiku* 3. 3), Cayuga and Mohawk (*Iatiku* 3. 12), Inupiak (*Newsletter* 5. 19), Salish (*Ogmios* 6. 18), and Chimila (*Ogmios* 9. 9).

realities of their task. And, all the time, there is the constant pressure towards language loss coming from the dominant culture in the ways outlined in chapter 3. Yet, as we read the reports from field linguists and community workers, we cannot fail to note a mood of optimism and confidence which was not present a decade ago. Trond Trosterud tells a nice story which illustrates this in relation to the Sámi (earlier called Lapp) people of northern Norway:[10]

> Attending a meeting of Sámi and Norwegian officials, one of the Sámi participants was asked: do you need an interpreter? No, she answered, I don't. But I will give my talk in Sámi, so it might be that you will need one.

So, if there is now a significant body of data on language maintenance projects which have achieved some success, are there any factors which turn up so frequently that they could be recognized as postulates for a theory of language revitalization – that is, prerequisites for progress towards the goal of language being used in the home and neighbourhood as a tool of inter-generational communication?[11] I attach primary significance to six such factors.

1 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their prestige within the dominant community.

Prestige comes when people start to notice you. An endangered community therefore needs to make its presence felt within the wider community. It needs to raise its visibility, or profile. Obtaining access to the media (traditionally, the province of the dominant culture) is critical – to begin with, a regular column in a daily newspaper, perhaps, or an occasional programme exposing the language on radio or television, such as a cultural celebration or a religious festival. But the media will only report what they perceive to be significant community activity, hence the first step is to enhance that activity in community settings, such as churches,

[10] Trosterud (1997: 24).
[11] For a profound appreciation of the whole issue, see Fishman (1991).

social centres, and town halls. People have to get into the habit of using a language, and this requires that they have regular access to it. Sporadic language activities need to be replaced by activities in which the language has a predictable presence, thus enabling a process of consolidation to take place. Decisions need to be made about which social activities to concentrate on: after all, people cannot revitalize everything at once. Certain functions may need to be selected for special effort, such as story-telling or religious ritual. Traditional religious links and practices are especially important in the way they provide motivation for language revival, as are the arts.

The longer-term aim is to increase visibility in more and more sectors of the public domain. The worlds of business, law, and public administration are particularly important targets. A token presence is often all that can initially be obtained, through letterheadings, company symbols, and the like; but if the political circumstances are auspicious, this can steadily grow, until it becomes (as in present-day Wales) co-equal with the dominant language in such areas as advertising, public-service leaflets, and minute-taking. There is an associated growth in translation and interpreting services. With political support, also, a high level of visibility can come from the use of the indigenous language in place names, on road signs, and on public signs in general. These usually provide a real indication of the acceptability of a language's presence in the wider community, and are thus often a focus of activism.[12] The defaced road signs in many countries, in which names in the dominant language have been painted over by their Welsh, Basque, Gaelic (etc.) equivalents, provide a contemporary illustration. They demonstrate the presence of a community dynamism which has gone further than the law permits in order to express corporate linguistic identity. But dynamism at grass-roots level there must be. One contributor to an e-mail discussion put it this way:[13]

[12] *Ogmios* 6 (1997: 12ff.) carried a report of a trial of four members of a Macedonian minority party in Greece for the use of their mother tongue on a public sign.
[13] Golla (1998: 20).

> Languages are not 'objects' to be 'saved', but processes of social interaction that define particular groups. If no significant social boundaries set a group off from the ambient society, no amount of effort by linguists and educators is going to preserve a language, except as a documented artifact. But the reverse is also true. Once a social group achieves sufficient cohesion and independence . . . there is no stopping language being used for identity purposes.

2 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their wealth relative to the dominant community

I have already quoted an observation by Grenoble and Whaley that economics 'may be the single strongest force influencing the fate of endangered languages' (see p. 125), but the point is so salient that it deserves to be repeated. I am inclined to agree, if for no other reason than that it costs money to raise the social and political profile of a language, and that money will only be forthcoming in a prosperous environment. But a change in economic fortunes has a more fundamental and positive impact on the self-esteem of a community, as long as the increase in prosperity is gradual, and is well managed. (There are cases, such as the oil booms in some parts of the world, where the arrival of sudden wealth has proved to be destructive of an indigenous community.) The strengthened economy of Catalonia, for example, has been a major factor in encouraging the use of Catalan there, and this has enhanced the prestige of the language in other Catalan-speaking areas. Service industries and light manufacturing industries tend to be the domains in which endangered languages can most benefit from economic growth. (By contrast, as we have seen in chapter 3, the so-called 'primary' industries of the world, and especially the extractive industries, such as mining and quarrying, have had an overall harmful effect on indigenous languages, because of the way they attract exploitation by outside organizations.)

Tourism is a good example of a service industry which can bring considerable benefits to an endangered language, as has been seen

in parts of Switzerland and northern Italy. Dolomitic Ladin, for example, spoken in a few small locations in the South Tyrol, has benefited in this way, as has the use of Romansh, since 1938 one of the four national languages of Switzerland, spoken in the canton of Graubünden (Grisons) in south-east Switzerland, and also in the valleys of the upper Rhine and Inn rivers.[14] Other minority languages and dialects in the region have also developed a higher profile as a result of the tourist presence, such as Franco-Provençale in the Vallée d'Aoste, the German-related Walser in the Vallée de Gressoney, and Friulian in the extreme north-east of Italy. A significant attribute of tourists, of course, is that they come and go, at different times of the year, and represent a wide range of linguistic backgrounds. There is thus less likelihood of the emergence of an alien threatening presence in the indigenous community.

3 An endangered language will progress if its speakers increase their legitimate power in the eyes of the dominant community

The closing decades of the twentieth century saw indigenous languages in many parts of the world benefiting from a trend in public opinion displaying increased sympathy towards cultural and linguistic rights. The mood was particularly strong in Europe, where a series of statements emerged from within the leading political organizations; and while these were inevitably focused on the position of the lesser-used languages of Europe, they sent a strong message to those concerned with language rights in other parts of the world. In 1981, a milestone was passed when the European Parliament adopted a resolution, prepared by Gaetano Arfé (an Italian member of a parliamentary committee), proposing a Community charter to deal with regional languages and cultures and the rights of ethnic minorities. In 1992 another milestone was reached when the Council of Europe adopted the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages in the form of a

[14] Markey (1988). For the other languages of the region, see the various entries in Price (1998).

European laws protecting / promoting minority lgs.

convention; this came into force on 1 March 1998. As a convention, it is legally binding on the ratifying countries, and offers significant levels of protection for minority languages in crucial walks of life.[15] Other bodies, notably the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, have contributed important statements which have helped to encourage the current climate, and the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages, with its aim of conserving and promoting the regional, autochthonous languages and cultures of the European Union, has been a significant facilitating force.[16]

It is perhaps not surprising to see European support these days for multilingualism, given that the European Union has affirmed the national-language principle in its affairs, despite the costs involved: if a country is proud of its right to have its national language used in Brussels, Luxembourg, and Strasbourg, it becomes much more difficult for that country to deny the same right to its own constituent ethnic communities. But several other parts of the world have also seen positive political developments. The USA passed two Native American Languages Acts, in 1990 and 1992, the first 'to preserve, protect, and promote the rights of freedom of Native Americans to use, practice and develop Native American languages', the second 'to assist Native Americans in assuring the survival and continuing vitality of their languages'.[17] The 1991 Law on Languages of the Russian Federation gave all languages the status of a national property under the protection of the state. The 1991 Colombian Constitution gave indigenous languages official status in their own territories, and supported a bilingual education

[15] Seven countries ratified the Charter at the outset: Croatia, Finland, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland. A further eleven countries signed it (an initial step in the process towards ratification): Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Germany, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Ukraine. The UK, after several years of prevarication, finally agreed to sign later in 1998. Measures of protection are given to education (Article 8), judicial authorities (9), administrative authorities and public services (10), media (11), cultural activities and facilities (12), economic and social life (13), and transfrontier exchanges (14).

[16] Not least because of its role in fostering the spread of information about political decision-making through its bulletins and booklets: see, for example, European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (1994).

[17] US Public Law 101–477; US Public Law 102–524.

policy. On the wider world stage, UNESCO and the UN have produced various statements, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, adopted in 1992. Language, however, has tended to be just one of several cultural issues covered by these statements, hence the potential significance of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights produced at Barcelona in 1996, with its primary focus on language (see Appendix). Statements, declarations, and resolutions are of course relatively easy to make; they are much harder to interpret in real social settings and to put into practice. The various formulations have all received their share of critical comment about the comprehensiveness of their coverage or the practicability of their recommendations.[18] But they are certainly more specific and focused than earlier expressions of support for human rights, which have often not mentioned language at all, or done so in the vaguest of terms.

The need to maintain pressure on governments, at international, national, and local levels, to make sure that something is actually done, is therefore as critical as ever. Notwithstanding the above developments, there are probably still more countries in the world currently violating or ignoring language rights than supporting them. So there is no room for complacency. At the same time, the progress made in certain countries has to be acknowledged, as they provide illustrations of what can be done. Probably the most heart-warming case is in Paraguay, where Guaraní has come to be the chief sign of national identity, with official status (since 1992), enjoying widespread prestige, attracting great loyalty, and spoken by over 90% of the population. Paraguay was formerly considered to be a Spanish-speaking country in which Guaraní had a presence; today, some commentators reverse the description, talking about a Guaraní-speaking country in which Spanish has its place.[19] There has also been progress in Greenland, where Home Rule in 1979 led to a real increase in the numbers of bilingual Greenlanders appointed to senior positions.[20] And in Eritrea, as

[18] For some critical perspective, see the comments by Skutnabb-Kangas (1996: 8).

[19] For example, Rubin (1985).

[20] Langgaard (1992).

already noted, it is government policy to have no official language – an unusually liberal policy (especially in Africa: see p. 82) which was strongly affirmed by President Afewerki in 1995:[21]

> Our policy is clear and we cannot enter into bargaining. Everyone is free to learn in the language he or she prefers, and no one is going to be coerced into using this or that 'official' language.

4 An endangered language will progress if its speakers have a strong presence in the educational system

To promote a presence in the home is the priority, with any endangered language. As we have seen, it is no solution to develop a mindset which sees all the responsibility transferred to the school system.[22] But if there is no presence in the school system at all, at primary and secondary levels, the future is likewise bleak. The role of a school in developing a child's use of its mother-tongue is now well understood, following several decades of research and debate in educational linguistics,[23] and while most of this work has been devoted to helping children improve their skills in unendangered languages, there is an immediate and obvious application to less fortunate linguistic situations. The school setting provides an increasingly widening range of opportunities for children to listen and speak, as they learn to cope with the demands of the curriculum and come to use the language in school-mediated social occasions (such as religious or cultural gatherings). It gives them the opportunity to engage with literacy (see further below), which will open the doors to new worlds. If their only experience of speech and writing in school is through the medium of the dominant language, it will not be surprising to find that the indigenous language fails to thrive (an example of this happening was noted by Bradley in the case of the Ugong, above). Conversely, if careful planning has managed to give the indigenous language a formal place alongside the dominant language, the result can be a huge increase in the pupils' self-confidence.

[21] Quoted by Brenzinger (1998: 94). [22] See above, p. 110. See also Fishman (1991).
[23] A useful synthesis of thinking, in relation to the UK's National Curriculum, is Brumfit (1995). See also Cantoni and Reyhner (1998) and Reyhner (1997).

Education is to some extent a mixed blessing, in endangered language situations. It introduces the pupils to the very foreign influences and values which have made their language endangered in the first place. At the same time, the knowledge and awareness which comes from the process of education can generate a confidence which stands the children in good stead, as they find themselves coping with the difficulties of language maintenance. Knowing something about a language's history, folklore, and literature can be a great source of reassurance. The school is not the only source of this knowledge, of course. A great deal of language awareness, as well as social solidarity, results from the various forms of extra-curricular activity which a community can arrange as part of its language maintenance programme – for example, language playgroups, summer immersion camps, master–apprentice programmes, or bilingual holidays. And the same point applies in educational settings when older members of the community are involved. If 'educational system' is interpreted in its broadest sense, it will include all kinds of adult education courses in local halls and centres, community-based programmes, informal apprenticeships, in-service courses, and a great deal of activity that goes under the heading of 'awareness-raising'.[24]

But no teaching programme can succeed without good materials, and good materials are of no value unless there are teachers trained to use them. Teacher-training is thus a critical need in most endangered situations. Ideally, these teachers would come from the population of fluent speakers left within the indigenous community, and their training would prepare them to cope with the non-speakers who will form the bulk of the next generation. The training required is complex, because the language-learning situation is so mixed. A great deal of the work is remedial, in the sense that many learners have varying levels of proficiency in the indigenous language, ranging from reasonable fluency to semilingualism. Many of the students will be members of the 'in-between' generation, who have learned the dominant language as a first

[24] For a useful distinction between 'language awareness' (working *on* what one knows) and 'consciousness-raising' (working *at* what one does not know), see James (1999).

language in order to assimilate, and who now have no alternative but to learn the ancestral language as if it were a foreign language. The teachers also have to cope with enormous variations in student temperament, ability, and motivation; a sociopolitical situation which may not always be sympathetic to their work; and an economic situation in which typically there is a shortage of materials and resources. The job, in short, is not easy, and demands proper status and pay – with indigenous teachers being paid comparably to visiting teachers who may have been imported to assist with the problem. Unfortunately, low salaries and discrepant levels are all too common, in endangered situations.

5 *An endangered language will progress if its speakers can write their language down*

The teaching of literacy is, of course, a major educational function; but literacy raises so many special issues that it requires a section to itself. It has a unique role in the maintenance of a language, as Samuel Johnson asserted, reflecting on the differences between a written and an unwritten language:[25]

> Books are faithful repositories, which may be a while neglected or forgotten; but when they are opened again, will again impart their instruction: memory, once interrupted, is not to be recalled. Written learning is a fixed luminary, which, after the cloud that had hidden it has past away, is again bright in its proper station. Tradition is but a meteor, which, if once it falls, cannot be rekindled.

Just because a language is written down does not automatically mean it will survive, of course, as is evident from the many extinct languages of classical times which we know about only through their written records. But equally, once a language passes the stage where it can be transmitted between generations as the first language of the home, its future is vastly more assured if it can be written down. The reason is not simply to safeguard a corpus of

[25] 'Ostig in Sky', in *A journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, p. 113 of the Penguin edition (Johnson 1990/1773).

data for posterity: if this were all that were required, these days it would be enough to make large numbers of audio or video recordings. The writing down of a language is a different kind of activity, as it involves an intellectual step – an analysis of the way the sound system of the language works, so that the most efficient form of spelling system can be devised, and the preparation of materials to aid learning, in the form of dictionaries, grammars, and other manuals. It is a step that linguists should be trained to do, in ways which will be reviewed below. It can also be a controversial step, so this postulate for progress needs to be viewed with caution.

For people whose culture has a history of several centuries of literacy, it can come as a surprise to realize that literacy has its down side, in relation to endangered languages. But there are several ways in which this can be so. To begin with, there may be resistance from the people themselves. If literacy has never been part of your culture, it is easy to see how its adoption could be perceived as a loss rather than a gain – a surrendering of that culture to a possibly hostile outside world, or a loss of ownership (see further below). Some people think of their language as being destroyed, once it is written down. And certainly, there is bound to be an effect on the way the language is represented: the stories of oral tradition are typically dynamic in character, varying between retellings, relying greatly on a lively interaction between speaker and listeners, and using an array of communicative effects of a non-verbal kind. When written down, they become static, reduced in form, and lacking a dialogic element; moreover, the alphabetical system is incapable of coping with the melodies, rhythms, tones of voice, gestures, and facial expressions that give the stories so much of their life. All recordings privilege one version above others; and in a tradition where the whole point is to allow for narrative variation, a great deal is lost as a consequence of the selection.

The decision to introduce literacy involves a second problem of selection. Which variety of the language shall be written down? Many endangered languages exist in a variety of dialects, some of which are very different from each other in sounds, grammar, and vocabulary. It is rarely possible, for reasons of practicality, to write

them all down; so one dialect must be selected. What, then, happens to the others? Ironically, the very process of selection can be a factor leading to the loss of the diversity it was designed to safeguard.[26] A literacy programme tends to burn money, and resources which might otherwise have been used in support of a range of dialects suddenly turn out to be available no longer. Moreover, when a particular dialect is chosen for literacy, it inevitably acquires a higher status, and this can result in community divisiveness, which again might hasten the process of language loss. The problem is especially difficult in places where two different alphabetical systems are in competition, perhaps associated with different cultural or religious traditions – such as the Roman (Christian) and Arabic (Islamic). The decision to write down any of the unwritten endangered languages within the Arabic- or Hindi-speaking countries can lead to confrontations of this kind. It is easy to see why 'standardization is the single most technical issue in language reinforcement'[27] – needed before the production of written materials can make much progress.

It is important not to overstate the problems. Indeed, sometimes the risk is the opposite one – people become so positive about literacy that they develop a false sense of security, believing, for example, that once a language is written down it is thereby saved, and nothing more needs to be done. Literacy programmes have been successfully implemented in hundreds of endangered language situations, and is a priority in most revitalization projects.[28] Sometimes, two writing systems can be involved. In Yup'ik, for example, intergenerational transmission was at risk because the schoolchildren were having difficulty understanding the language of the elders. A book of elders' narratives was therefore compiled; and it was decided to print this in two orthographies. This was because the region was in a transition period between older missionary-developed orthographies which the elders would be used

[26] For more on this viewpoint, see Mühlhäusler (1995: 234; 1990).
[27] England (1998: 113).
[28] It is unclear just how many languages in the world have been written down. One estimate, using *Ethnologue* data, suggests 2,040 (about a third): see Trosterud (1999: 16).

to, and the newer phonetic orthography which was being used in the schools. (This project had other interesting features. For instance, the compilers decided to keep the older, more difficult words in the text undefined, to encourage the children to ask their teachers, parents, and elders about them. This strategy shifted the emphasis away from the text and into the community, resulting in a more dynamic linguistic interaction.)[29]

Even the question of competing dialects can be handled, with careful planning. An example is Quechua, where several local dialects were each given official status, all written in one alphabet.[30] Another is Romansh, where five dialects had each developed an individual literary norm. In 1978, a non-Romansh linguist, Heinrich Schmid, was given the task of devising a unified system which would treat each dialect impartially. The resulting 'Rumantsch Grischun' reflected the frequencies with which words and forms were used in the different dialects, choosing (when items were in competition) those which were most widespread. Although controversially received, as an artificial standard, it has since come to be increasingly used as a practical administrative tool, in official situations where the five dialects need a lingua franca. All dialects seem to have benefited from the newfound prestige, as a result.[31]

6 An endangered language will progress if its speakers can make use of electronic technology

To some extent, this is a hypothetical postulate, as many parts of the world where languages are most seriously endangered have not

[29] Wyman (1996: 20).
[30] Grinevald (1998: 130). However, the question of which way to represent standardized Quechua has proved contentious, as reported by Hornberger and King (1997: 19). One group supports an alphabet which has symbols for five vowels, showing Spanish colonial influence; another supports a system showing three vowels, which is more in line with the actual phonological structure of the language. The dispute has slowed the production of written materials, because publishers are naturally reluctant to invest in either system in case it is eventually rejected. Strongly held positions of this kind, though historically explicable, are a real hindrance to revitalization efforts, because they dissipate the energies of those who should be fighting on the same side.
[31] Haiman and Benincà (1992).

yet come to benefit from electronic technology – or, for that matter, electricity. But in principle, information technology (IT) – and the Internet in particular – offers endangered languages which have been written down a fresh set of opportunities whose potential has hardly begun to be explored. The chief task presented by my first postulate above involved the need to give an endangered language a public profile. Traditionally, it is an expensive business: newspaper space, or radio and television time, does not come cheaply. Only the 'better-off' languages could afford to make routine use of these media. But with the Internet, everyone is equal. The cost of a Web page is the same, whether the contributor is writing in English, Spanish, Welsh, or Navajo. It is perfectly possible for a minority language culture to make its presence felt on the Internet, and this has begun to happen – notwithstanding the attempted repression of some languages by the occasional service-provider.[32] There are probably over 500 languages with an Internet presence now. What is significant, of course, is that the Net provides an identity which is no longer linked to a geographical location. People can maintain a linguistic identity with their relatives, friends, and colleagues, wherever they may be in the world. Whereas, traditionally, the geographical scattering of a community through migration has been an important factor in the dissolution of its language, in future this may no longer be the case. The Internet, along with the growth of faster and cheaper means of travel between locations, is altering our scenarios of endangerment.

There is a great deal to be done before these scenarios become compelling. Software developers need to become more multilingual. More comprehensive coding conventions for non-Roman alphabets need to be implemented. And for many endangered communities, the basic possibility of an Internet connection is a long way off, given the lack of equipment – or even electricity. But there are already several signs of progress. A number of language maintenance projects have recruited language technologies to

[32] Recent reports include the closure of message boards in Irish by AOL (America OnLine) UK, reported in *Ogmios* 10. 23.

facilitate their task. For example, spelling-checkers have been used to help implement normalized spelling conventions in a newly written language – particularly useful where there is interference from some other language in the region. Computers have begun to handle bodies of specialized knowledge, such as lists of place names, genealogies, or plants. There has been a steady growth in computer-assisted self-study materials. One of the most promising signs is in the knowledge-management side of IT, where the importance of the notion of *localization* has steadily grown, to the extent that it must now be regarded as an industry in itself, with its own association, LISA (the Localization Industry Standards Association). In this context, *localization* refers to the adaptation of a product to suit a target language and culture, and is distinguished from both *globalization* (the adaptation of marketing strategies to regional requirements of all kinds) and *internationalization* (the engineering of a product, such as software, to enable efficient adaptation of the product to local requirements).[33] It is a healthy sign to see this swing back from the global to the local, within such a short time, and it may be that endangered languages will be one of the domains which will benefit from this change of focus. At any rate, I am sufficiently convinced of the potential power of electronic technology to make it one of my six postulates for progress in language maintenance, notwithstanding the limited role it has been able to play in this domain hitherto.

My six postulates cut the cake in a certain way, and there are of course many other ways. Yet, despite differences of terminology and emphasis, similar themes recur. For example, Akira Yamamoto distinguishes nine factors 'that help maintain and promote the small languages':[34]

- the existence of a dominant culture in favour of linguistic diversity;

[33] These definitions are from a report in *Language International* 10:4 (1998), 19. The report makes it clear that there is a great deal of variant usage over matters of definition throughout the industry. [34] Yamamoto (1998b: 114).

- a strong sense of ethnic identity within the endangered community;
- the promotion of educational programmes about the endangered language and culture;
- the creation of bilingual/bicultural school programmes;
- the training of native speakers as teachers;
- the involvement of the speech community as a whole;
- the creation of language materials that are easy to use;
- the development of written literature, both traditional and new;
- the creation and strengthening of the environments in which the language must be used.

And Lynn Landweer provides eight 'indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality' for an endangered language:[35]

- the extent to which it can resist influence by a dominant urban culture;
- the number of domains in which it is used;
- the frequency and type of code switching;
- the existence of a critical mass of fluent speakers;
- the distribution of speakers across social networks;
- the internal and external recognition of the group as a unique community;
- its relative prestige, compared with surrounding languages;
- its access to a stable economic base.

These lists have a great deal in common.

The role of the linguist

Linguists have been lurking in the background, in relation to each of these postulates, as indeed throughout earlier chapters, and it is time now to bring their role into the foreground. Or rather, roles – for there are several tasks of a specialized kind which have to be

[35] Landweer (1998).

carried out in order to secure the future of a language. Adapting a metalanguage which has been well tried in clinical linguistics,[36] these tasks can be grouped into three broad types: those to do with diagnosis and assessment; those to with description and analysis; and those to do with intervention and re-assessment.

The clinical analogy is particularly appropriate, as it enables us to take a stand about an issue which is raised from time to time: the linguist's motivation in working with endangered languages. My view is unequivocal: in exactly the same way as doctors only intervene with the primary aim of preserving the physiological health of patients, so linguists should only intervene with the primary aim of preserving the linguistic health of those who speak endangered languages. The concept of linguists working on such languages with no interest in the people who speak them – other than to see them as a source of data for a thesis or publication – is, or should be, as unacceptable a notion as it would be if doctors collected medical data without caring what happened subsequently to the patients. This point would not be worth making if it had not often happened. Indeed, it was once part of the research ethos. During the formative stages of linguistics, anthropology, and ethnography, data collection was routinely viewed as an end in itself. Once a corpus of data had been collected, it was treated as an autonomous entity, a contribution to a growing body of knowledge about human behaviour. In the case of linguistics, the aim was to increase the generality of descriptive statement and the power of theoretical explanation. It became so easy to forget about the people, while concentrating on the language. And the popular impression that scholars are preoccupied with their data while ignoring the problems of the real world surfaces regularly in relation to linguistics as it does elsewhere. Indeed, only a month before I wrote this paragraph I was involved in a radio discussion where one of the participants commented that dying languages 'must keep linguists very happy'. The point was made in a jocular tone, but its reiteration was uncomfortable, for it is a distraction from what the real issues

[36] See the discussion in Crystal (1981/1989). The medical analogy is also drawn by Valiquette (1998: 110).

are. The joke would not have been made about doctors. But then, linguists have never affirmed the equivalent of a Hippocratic oath. Perhaps they should.

None of this disallows linguists collecting data, analysing it, generalizing from it, speculating about it, and doing all the other things which do indeed keep them happy. That is what linguists are for – and we have to respect the interest which led them to become linguists in the first place. After all, there would be no linguists if we disregarded the needs of their own professional development, which chiefly involve the production of research publications and reference works. But in the field of endangered languages – as in the clinical field – this must not be the only motivation. Once linguists have decided to specialize in this area, they have to adopt a broader perspective, in which the aspirations of the indigenous community itself hold a central place. There has been much discussion about what this perspective should be. My own view is that linguists should see their broader role as helping an indigenous community understand what is unique about its linguistic heritage and what the forces are which threaten it. This means that one of their first tasks, under the general heading of diagnosis, is to grasp as much of the sociopolitical realities of endangered situations as they can. They need to appreciate the risks involved in stepping into a complex social setting, where to intervene in relation to one element may have unforeseen consequences elsewhere.[37] Language, it should be recalled from chapter 2, is just one element within an ecological system, and it is all too easy for linguists, even with the best of intentions, to harm the environment it was their hope to preserve. Even the initial selection of a language to study has political implications. There are always people around who will ask: why has one language been supported and not another? Once a language is chosen, there may be arguments about the support location: why work in town A and not in town B? The selection of consultants within the speech community (and their rates of pay)

[37] Thomas (1980: 90). See also chapter 3, fn. 9.

can also be contentious: why choose him and not her? It is easy for linguists, without realizing it, to find themselves apparently taking sides in a family feud, being aligned with a hidden political agenda, or being expected to fulfil a set of demanding social obligations. As Donna Gerdts has put it:[38]

> Linguistic expertise is not sufficient for successful participation in a language program. The linguist must develop social and political skills to be an effective member of a language revitalization program.

Linguists who have worked a great deal with endangered languages – and here we have a further parallel with the clinical field – often remark on how emotionally stressful this sociopolitical context can be. Traditionally, there is nothing in a linguist's training which prepares for it. The concept of fieldwork commonly presented in courses is one where the methodological intricacies are well explained, but the psychological and social demands on the fieldworker are not. As experience grows, so this situation is slowly changing, especially in those academic departments where there is a strong commitment to applied studies, and where the links with anthropology remain strong. But, as Gerdts wryly comments:

> Young scholars should be warned . . . that, while endangered language research may seem like noble and interesting work, they will be faced with a hornet's nest of socio-political issues. The languages most in need of archiving are probably also the ones where the political situation is least hospitable. The good old days of popping in, doing some fieldwork, doing the analysis, going home, and publishing are gone forever.

There is still an enormous gap between the safe world of academic applied linguistics and the realities of endangered situations. The word 'safe' is not rhetoric: there are indeed physical dangers, given that many parts of the world are subject to crisis and conflict (see chapter 3), with irregular forces (terrorists or freedom fighters, depending on whose side you are on) and criminal operations

[38] Gerdts (1998: 13); the following quotation is from p. 21.

posing an ever-present threat.[39] Rather more commonly, linguists find themselves faced with social and political obligations, simply by becoming a member, albeit a temporary one, of the indigenous community. The closeness of the bond varies greatly, but in small communities it can often amount to an intense commitment, even a familial responsibility. If an indigenous consultant falls ill, for example, the linguist may be called upon to help get the person to hospital. Moreover, in the Third World, a sense of the poverty of a region is never far away. There is a humanitarian need always in the background, which inevitably affects linguists (as human beings), and extends them in directions which go well beyond the strict needs of a linguistic enquiry (cf. p. 104). Several commentators have talked about the way linguists, as with aid workers, can become so mentally and physically exhausted by the pressure of the human need around them that they are unable to function professionally.

It has been called burnout.[40] They may also begin to question the value of their role, and be unable to control the ever-present doubt about whether they are really helping or just making things worse. There may, in addition, be hostility shown towards them by local people suspicious of their motives (especially if they are members of the society that threatened the community in the first place). Economic exploitation is so common that it is only natural for a community to assume that a Western investigator is there to make money out of them. And in the West itself, the suspicion may be there for political reasons, as Jens-Eberhard Jahn discovered in his work in Istria, Croatia, involving Croats, Slovenians, Italians, and others. Although he met some positive attitudes, he adds: 'I have also been accused of adding fuel to the fire of intolerance and ethnic hate by asking people about ethnic and linguistic attitudes', and he comments:[41]

[39] It should not be forgotten, also, that there may be physical threat to the safety of the local consultants, as well as to the linguists. Not everyone in the indigenous community may be happy to see one of its members 'working with outsiders'.

[40] Rhydwen (1998: 104).

[41] Jahn (1998: 46, 47). For another example of linguistic research being seen as exploitation, see Yamamoto (1998a: 213).

> This suspiciousness is an important factor to be reckoned with in researches of this kind: people who saw five different flags on their houses in the course of this century do not easily trust anyone with a questionnaire asking about attitudes and language use, especially in the countryside and under ethnic minority conditions.

Not surprisingly, some fieldworkers give up.

Fortunately, the vast majority do not. To begin with, by no means all endangered languages belong to such demanding parts of the world. But even in those locations where the task is difficult, it is perfectly possible to develop the required strengths and sensitivities. There are many linguists who have completed fieldwork projects or collaborated in language maintenance programmes that have been highly praised by indigenous communities and local government bodies. Confident in their linguistic professionalism, and experienced in the delicacies of sociopolitical situations, they have provided the right kind of advice and support at the right time, helping the community decide when something can usefully be done, and providing the expertise or training to enable them to do it. So often, it comes down to the question of deciding about priorities. In some places linguists may advise documentation of the language as rapidly as possible, because they have been able to perceive the true seriousness of the endangered situation. This was what one recent conference, on the situation in Africa, concluded.[42] In other places, the advice might be to get on with revitalization work as rapidly as possible, because an assessment of a local situation might indicate that there is a population ready to benefit from it. Both types of work involve multiple considerations.

Documentation is a *sine qua non* of language maintenance. It is by no means the whole story, as we have seen – no language has ever been saved just by being documented – but an assessment of the documentation state of a language is an early priority in all

[42] In a round-table discussion at the conference, Endangered Languages in Africa, held at Leipzig in 1997: see *Ogmios* 6. 22.

investigations, and is a top priority in those cases where there is a real risk of impending language death. It is important to talk in terms of assessment, in all instances, because there are not enough opportunities and resources – or, for that matter, linguists – to waste effort on repeating what has been done already. We need to know what material may already exist within a community, or further afield, and what state it is in. Archive research is especially important in locations where early colonialists might have left materials – for example, there is an uncertain amount of material about South American languages in Spanish or Portuguese libraries, and there must be more in Italy, the Vatican, and elsewhere. If such material does exist, it needs to be preserved, and this may involve special technical measures, especially in cases where manuscripts are in a sensitive state. Devising secure repositories for material is in fact no small matter, especially in locations where rain, heat, and insects provide one kind of threat, theft provides another, collateral destruction by forces in a civil war provides a third, and the deliberate destruction of indigenous language materials by antagonistic governments provides a fourth.

What does documentation mean? We are not talking about the relatively straightforward task of gathering together a few words to act as symbols of heritage – such as we might see on souvenir mugs or in tourist magazines. Documentation is a major enterprise. Essentially we are talking about the permanent portrayal of a language using all available means. Face-to-face sessions with speakers, where utterances are systematically elicited and phonetically transcribed, are one method, enabling linguists to make immediate analytic decisions about sounds, patterns, and meanings which can then be checked directly with ethnic consultants. The language also has to be written down in a publicly usable alphabet. This can present a major technical problem (as well as the sociolinguistic problems referred to in the discussion of literacy above), especially in languages which have many sounds and tones; the Roman alphabet is inadequate, in most cases, and needs all kinds of letter combinations and diacritics to cope with the sometimes dozens of sounds not used in English. Much of the documentation effort, of

course, will be devoted to the traditional tasks of compiling dictionaries and grammars;[43] but these days, a great deal of attention is also paid to the recording of patterns of discourse, in such genres as story-telling, prayers, and speech-making. Long word-lists and sets of grammatical paradigms go only a short way towards capturing what is unique about a heritage; what is crucial is to show how the language is really used. Audio-recording facilities are especially important here, as they capture the dynamic aspects of the language (strategies of conversational interaction, for example) in ways that no other method can. Video facilities, if available, provide a record of the associated nonverbal communication, such as facial expression, gesture, and body posture and movement.

The *corpus* of a language comprises the set of (written, audio, video, multimedia) recordings which may have been made of it, along with all transcripts of speech, whether transcribed from tapes or from face-to-face interaction, and any other materials that are available, such as letters, place names, and historical documents. Only about 60% of the world's languages have had any kind of corpus compiled; and in many languages where some level of corpus work has been carried out, the material is often sporadic or biased (for example, related to the needs of Bible translation). Because in many cases it is this corpus which is going to be the only permanent record of a language, it is crucial that the quality and range of the data is as robust as possible. This means much more than ensuring that audio recordings are audible and clear (though that in itself can be difficult to guarantee). It means as far as possible obtaining material which is genuinely representative of the language and not a distortion of it (for example, not using

60% of lges have any corpus at all

[43] The need for different kinds of dictionaries should be borne in mind. It is not just a matter of listing the words of the endangered language with a gloss in the linguist's language. Also desirable are dictionaries of the mutual influence between the endangered language and the other languages in the region with which it is in contact, especially the dominant language. The issue may be contentious (cf. chapter 4), but borrowings from the dominant language into the endangered language ought not to be excluded. Likewise, there may be scope for a dictionary of borrowings in the other direction – words that have been borrowed by the dominant language (e.g. Maori vocabulary in New Zealand English) – as this can add considerably to the prestige of the endangered language. The question of standardized spelling of course needs to have been resolved in such cases.

someone with a speech defect). It means finding both male and female speakers, especially in languages where gender differences are systematically expressed in speech. It may also mean finding speakers of different ages, classes, professions, or kinship groups. People with specialized knowledge (for example, about animals, plants, or medicine) need to be paid special attention. Above all, in languages which are seriously endangered, it means finding people who are as fluent as possible, and who display as little as possible of the inconsistency and structural deterioration in the forms of the language which is so characteristic of obsolescence.[44] The level of competence of the consultants is obviously critical, given that the possibilities range from genuine fluency to a state in which there remain only fragmentary memories of a language. The possibility of fake data – invented forms presented by sharp informants who imagine the permanent presence of a linguist as a source of unending funds – also needs to be borne in mind.[45] But we have to be realistic: often, linguists have no options available to them. With last-speaker research, it is Hobson's choice.

Notwithstanding the need expressed above, to be sociopolitically aware, linguists must also respect the imperative (placed upon them in chapter 2, p. 54) to attend to the demands of their own subject, seen as a branch of human knowledge. They must respect the urgency of the intellectual need to document languages which, from a formal (as opposed to a sociolinguistic) point of view, are of especial importance to our understanding of the nature of language and its place in human history – particularly the way it can shed light on the nature of early civilization and the historical movement of peoples. Top priority in this context is the documentation of linguistic isolates – languages without a recognized affiliation – and of languages used in those parts of the world where linguistic relationships are uncertain. The north of Russia is one such area, where the languages are very diverse, and classification is controversial. South America is another important area because

[44] For the state of the art in language obsolescence, see chapter 1, fn. 42.
[45] Some examples from Central America are referred to in Kaufman (1994: 34). The risk is everywhere.

of its genetic diversity – it contains well over 100 families with about 70 of these being isolates – and here a great deal of basic documentation remains to be done. But every region has its isolates and its tentative proposals for family groupings; and even in those areas where work has begun, there is a great deal which needs to be done before these groupings reach the level of certainty found in Indo-European.

The size of the task is daunting, and requires a massive effort on the part of linguistics departments the world over.[46] It is an effort, moreover, which requires a fresh commitment, especially in those departments which have devoted the bulk of their intellectual and pedagogical energies to domains of linguistics which are at the opposite end of the scale from those required here. There is a growing concern, largely fuelled by the greater awareness of endangerment, that an important balance has been lost within linguistics – that the subject has become too 'theoretical' and insufficiently 'empirical'.[47] No one, I trust, is trying to set up the kind of false oppositions which were around half a century ago. The need for theoretical awareness on the empirical side is axiomatic. There have been excesses on that side too – notably the exclusive use of one analytical framework, tagmemics, in many parts of the world because of its favoured status as the approach used by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in its work in relation to Bible translation. But when we encounter training courses in linguistics which have given their students negligible amounts of phonetics exposure, or which omit courses on fieldwork and the associated anthropological/social perspectives required (to do with place names, personal names, genealogy, kinship, ethnobotany, etc.), it is plain – at least, to this writer – that we are a long way from having found the correct balance. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that a significant part of the encounter with endangered languages is in relation to intervention, and this puts the field of preventive

[46] The cuts that have been made in schools and departments of languages in various parts of the world in recent years make the situation worse.
[47] For example, the point is made by Paul Newman and others in the Leipzig conference on Endangered Languages in Africa: see *Ogmios* 6. 20.

linguistics (as I have been calling it) firmly within the domain of applied linguistics – another area which has been treated dismissively by some academic linguistics departments. Indeed, some of the recognized fields within applied linguistics are of considerable relevance to the work, such as foreign language teaching, language learning, error analysis, and lexicography. Nor is an outline perspective enough. When we are dealing with a situation where the only source of data for a language is one person's transcription, it is critical for that person to have the best possible phonetics training. When we are dealing with such sensitive sociopolitical situations as those described above, a thorough grounding in fieldwork principles and practice is obligatory. And the theoretical and methodological issues involved in preventive linguistics are certainly no less critical than those involved in such fields as clinical linguistics.

The revitalization team

Languages need communities in order to live. So, only a community can save an endangered language. This point is fundamental:[48]

> The community, and only the community, can preserve a living language. If the community surrenders its responsibility to outsiders, or even to a few persons within the community (such as school teachers), the language will die. Language preservation efforts must involve the total community, and not just a part of it.

The saving of a language demands commitment, a shared sense of responsibility, a clear sense of direction, and a wide range of special skills. 'Many languages need management to survive.'[49] That is why, in many parts of the world, we see the emergence of a team approach to language maintenance – recognition of the fact that the task is so great that it needs proper planning and management, and the involvement of selected people with individual skills, acting on behalf of the community as a whole. While situations

[48] Valiquette (1998: 107). [49] Wurm (1991: 3).

vary widely, there are a number of steps which have to be taken (though the following order is in no way obligatory):[50]

- community members and outside fieldworkers meet, get to know each other, and form a working team;
- the nature of the problem needs to be agreed – that the language is indeed endangered, that it is the responsibility of the community to do something about it, and that something can be done about it;
- the local situation is given a general assessment, taking into account the sociopolitical or religious sensitivities to be respected, and other issues to do with authenticity, standardization, ownership, and control;
- a survey of language use is carried out, to decide whether there are urgent short-term tasks to be carried out, and whether the long-term focus needs to be on first language learning, second language teaching, or both;
- the kind of preservation has to be decided, the possibilities ranging from the provision of a symbolic heritage presence within a dominant culture to a full-scale independent presence as a daily spoken and written medium;
- the nature and extent of the commitment by team members is explored, in relation to both long-term and short-term planning;
- immediate objectives are established, including the balance of activity to be devoted to recording, documentation, teaching, the writing of materials, and so on;
- procedures for data collection and storage are agreed;
- 'model' speakers of the language are identified and enlisted as consultants;
- data collection is carried out;
- analysis of the data is undertaken, with the aim of producing an account of the language's structure, in the form of a grammar and dictionary, etc.;

[50] The list is a synthesis and expansion of recommendations made by various people: see, in particular, Yamamoto (1998b: 118), Valiquette (1998: 109–10), England (1998: 106).

- a process of standardization is introduced, for both speech and writing, and a publicly usable alphabet devised;
- strategies are introduced for reinforcing the use of the language in homes and other domestic settings;
- strategies are introduced for expanding the use of the written language in the public domain;
- strategies are introduced for expanding the use of the spoken language in the public domain;
- strategies are introduced for giving the language a presence in schools, with the aim of making it a medium of instruction;
- curriculum materials are written and published, for both child and adult use;
- texts in the language, of general public interest (such as stories, poems, newspaper articles), are written and published;
- principles need to be established to get the language recognized as an official regional language.

It can be seen from this list that revitalization teams need several types of person to be most effective – ideally community administrators, elders, good general speakers and speakers with specialized knowledge, teachers, materials designers and writers, and linguists. In a truly ideal world, the community itself would have members who could fulfil all these roles; in practice, outside help is usually required for the linguistic side of the work, and often for the teaching and materials side too.

However, reports from fieldworkers in several places indicate that the concept of a 'team', with all the positive resonances we associate with that term, is often not an easy goal to achieve, partly because of the different agendas being followed by communities and linguists (as discussed earlier in this chapter), and partly because of a lack of mutual understanding about their different roles. As the initiative is generally coming from outside, the onus is on the linguist to understand what local communities want. According to Donna Gerdts, there are three main issues: they want their language and culture back; they want control of all aspects of

education and research; and they want autonomy – the opportunity to do the work themselves without foreign experts.[51] If this is so, then the primary aim of intervention on the part of the outside linguist must be to train local people in the linguistic skills required – insofar as there are possible candidates available. Not only must the work be '*on* a language, *for* its speakers and *with* its speakers',[52] it also needs to be '*by* its speakers'. There is no conflict here with the urgency of the linguistic need for documentation, as it is precisely by working through the processes involved in this task that training is carried out. One learns by doing – a well-established routine in other domains of applied linguistics.

Some of the issues in the above listing are highly complex, and require considerable discussion at an early stage. For example, the question of ownership, already introduced in chapter 3, raises many sensitive issues. In some cultures, to begin with, not everyone is entitled to recite a particular story, or sing a particular song. There is a recognized notion of ownership, often depending on kinship within a clan, or a person's age, or someone's status within ceremonial protocol.[53] Losing control of a particular use of language – for example, by tape-recording it or writing it down – is therefore viewed as a very serious matter. There may be a genuine fear that ethnic materials will be exploited by people who do not understand them – becoming the butt of jokes, or distorted through stereotypes in film and television, or desecrated by being retold in inappropriate settings. Writing the language down may be seen as a dilution of the 'real' language, which is spoken (cf. above). Some elders therefore do not want to tell their stories; and even if they do, their relatives or community groups may dispute their right to tell them, or refuse to allow other people to use them. The ancestral language may be viewed as sacred. Arguments can be

[51] Gerdts (1998: 17).

[52] Grinewald (1998: 156). The same point is made by Yamamoto (1998b: 118). See also Furbee, Stanley, and Arkeketa (1998: 79): 'It is the job of the outside consultant to help the tribe find such people [to become language scholars], train them, and step aside.' For examples of teacher-training programmes, see the American Indian Language Development Institutes in Arizona and Oklahoma described in Yamamoto (1998b: 115).

[53] This notion of ownership is explored in Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 91ff.).

bitter, and linguists have reported instances where people have stopped recording sessions taking place, and where tapes already recorded have been sabotaged. In the worst-case scenario, the issue has become so contentious, with members of a community taking different sides, that access to a body of recordings is denied to everyone. The tapes or transcripts are kept locked away.

Linguists obviously have great difficulty operating in such circumstances. All they can do is draw attention to the consequences of such actions – that there will come a time when no one will be left to interpret what is in the recordings (assuming the tapes have physically survived), and that the next generation will not be able to understand them. The core argument is that the concept of *ownership* of a language needs to be balanced with that of *stewardship*. Linguists can also suggest practical solutions – ways in which ownership can be made manifest for posterity. The name, picture, and biography of an oral performer, or an appropriate set of clan symbols and commentary, can become a formal part of the procedure. This kind of thing is often done with indigenous paintings and crafts; it can be a routine part of language 'products' too. When the options are pointed out, and if the issue is handled sensitively, people can be persuaded; indeed, they can take great pride in the language materials which they originated, as can the whole community. When this happens, the prognosis for the future of the language is improving.

There is another concept of ownership which needs to be considered – the issue of intellectual property rights. According to Donna Gerdts, this is the issue which most often delays or halts the progress of a project.[54] The local community may view the linguistic work as yet another attempt to 'steal' their language, or as an opportunity for outsiders to profit from it, and they therefore claim ownership of the data which linguists record or transcribe, and the analyses and materials they make. Linguists working alone in these situations, on the other hand, having put in so much time and expertise to produce these results, and without whom there

[54] Gerdts (1998: 19–21).

would *be* no results, also claim some rights in the matter. Conflicts over the rights to data and dissemination have evidently led to frequent major breakdowns in the collaborative process between local community and visiting linguist, amounting at times to litigation. Perhaps the worst of the 'horror stories' (Gerdts) are a consequence of the stage of development of preventive linguistics, which is still working out a concept of best practice. In principle, the issues are no different from those already encountered in literary or clinical work, where scrupulous attention must be devoted to issues of data gathering, permissions to reproduce data, and data dissemination, before linguistic analysis can proceed. Ultimately, copyright of the raw data must remain with the community, just as copyright of literary data remains with the author. However, the situation with indigenous languages is inevitably more complex, in that there is usually no tradition of understanding to rely upon (as in the concept of 'fair quotation' in publishing) and often no clear legal notion of copyright – a notion which is in any case of Western origin. Research agreements therefore have to be made at the outset of any project, and decisions made about the distribution of responsibilities, costs, and profits (e.g. royalties).

If a positive approach to teamwork can be quickly achieved, the study of endangered languages gains immensely, and everything seems achievable. The same effect has been noted in clinical and educational linguistics, where teamwork is also critical for success. Everything depends on a recognition of individual strengths and limitations. There are certain things which linguists cannot do, and where they are wholly dependent on other members of the team. For example, linguists are not the ones to instil a sense of enthusiasm within a community on behalf of a language; nor are they able to function as teachers of culture, nor – in most cases – as fluent teachers of the endangered language. Most linguists are not even able to be full time within a community, as they hold jobs elsewhere and are available only at certain times of the year. On the other hand, linguists have experience which other members of the team do not have. Apart from the more obvious skills in language transcription and analysis, or in writing up results for archiving or

publication, they usually have more awareness than other people of how funding can be obtained or maintained – for example, they will be more used to writing grant applications, or keeping records of project targets for funding organizations. They will be more used to speaking in public, and can thus act as mediators between the community and political or educational bodies – such as by presenting a case on behalf of the community in a government enquiry, or translating legal documents relating to civil or language rights. They may even find themselves in court, providing evidence in support of the community in a land claim or other issue of social justice. The study of place names, or tribal genealogies, for example, may be critical in deciding the boundaries of a treaty or the extent of its application. In such cases, though the role of the linguist is restricted in scope, it can be critical.

The success of a team approach depends very much on its members having an accurate and realistic awareness of the contribution which each can make to the project. Community members of the team need to be clear about what the abilities of linguists actually are. They must not expect linguists to be polyglots (the other sense of 'linguist') or to have native-speaker fluency in their language. Linguists have often found themselves being criticized for 'having an accent' or 'making errors' by local people who have not grasped the nature of the analytical role which linguists perform. The complexity of the task of phonetic transcription is also usually underestimated, as well as that of developing a new writing system. Moreover, the members of an indigenous community, once involved, are anxious for quick results, and can become impatient or disillusioned when these are not forthcoming. While linguists can do a lot, they are not magicians, and if the data sources are weak, or time is short, or conditions are poor, there is a limit to what can be done.

Linguists, correspondingly, need to develop their sense of what the community members of the team require, and respond positively when requests are put to them for help. They may end up performing all kinds of activities which they would not normally do, or which they would consider to be linguistically unimportant.

For example, they may be asked to produce simple lists of words and phrases in response to a particular local need (such as a tourist leaflet), or to provide captions or labels for a museum exhibition. Such tasks might have little or no linguistic significance, as far as the discovery of new facts about the language is concerned, but they can be of considerable social value, in the eyes of the community. Linguists may also find themselves being asked to spend precious time producing versions of their findings which are accessible to non-specialists – a point which becomes critical when dealing with the provision of teaching materials. They also need to appreciate that the community may want to be kept informed about what they are doing, even though they might not be happy about making public a set of findings which they consider to be preliminary and tentative. In the final analysis, as Donna Gerdts asserts, it is the community which is in charge:[55]

> A linguist working on an endangered language must submit to the authority of the community administrators. At every turn, the linguist will have to compromise long-range scholarly goals to meet the community's immediate needs.

But the gap between the two viewpoints is still very great. As Colette Grinevald puts it:[56]

> Bridging the gap between academic linguistics and community wants and efforts is surely one of the major challenges of the linguistic profession as it faces the situation of endangered languages at the turn of the new century.

None of this thinking is unique to working with endangered languages. Every point just made I have encountered before in relation to language pathology.

But there is one point of difference, when we compare clinical and preventive linguistics. Following the death of a language-disordered person, the story is over. But following the death of a language, the story may not be over, for people at some point may wish to resurrect it. Indeed, this possibility is very real in the minds

[55] Gerdts (1998: 21). [56] Grinevald (1998: 143).

of linguists, as they try to document dying languages: one day a community may wish to make contact with its interrupted linguistic heritage, and reintroduce the ancestral language into its community – insofar as it can be reconstructed from available resources. Can dead languages be revived in this way? And, if such efforts are made, might not a Frankenstein's monster of a language be the result?

In fact, limited success has been achieved in several instances, and with opportunities now to record dying languages using audio and video facilities, the situation can only improve. The classic case of language revival is, of course, Hebrew – though this is a contentious example, as we saw above (p. 127), because of the question of just how much continuity there has been in the use of the language in the Jewish diaspora since Classical times. Stephen Wurm reports an uncontentious instance: the case of Kaurna, an Aboriginal language of South Australia.[57] This language had been extinct for about a century, but had been quite well documented; so, when a strong movement grew for its revival, progress was possible. The revived language is not the same as the original language, of course; most obviously, it lacks the breadth of functions which it originally had, and large amounts of old vocabulary are missing. But, as it continues in present-day use, it will develop new functions and new vocabulary, just as any other living language would, and as long as people value it as a true marker of their identity, and are prepared to keep using it, there is no reason to think of it as anything other than a valid system of communication. This is not the only Australian case, according to Wurm; and several other instances have been noted elsewhere. Britain has seen the re-emergence of Cornish in Cornwall after an appreciable interval, and efforts are underway to make progress with Manx in the Isle of Man. It is too soon to predict the future of these revived languages, but they do exist, and are in some parts of the world attracting precisely the range of positive attitudes and grass-roots support which are the preconditions for language survival. In such unexpected

revived lge in Australia

[57] Wurm (1998: 193).

but heart-warming ways might we see the grand total of languages in the world minimally increased.

Conclusions

Language death is a terrible loss, to all who come into contact with it: 'Facing the loss of language or culture involves the same stages of grief that one experiences in the process of death and dying.'[58] We do not have to be members of an endangered community to sense this grief, or respond to it. Anyone who has worked with these communities, even over a short period, knows that it is a genuine insight, well justifying the dramatic nature of the analogy. And it is this keen, shared sense of loss which fuels the motivation and commitment of linguists, community groups, and support organizations in many parts of the world.

The growth in linguistic awareness about the problem, and the emergence of an associated activism, was one of the most exciting developments of the 1990s. Although awareness is still poor among the general public, the issues are now being much more widely discussed at professional levels, in a variety of international, national, regional, and local contexts. At one extreme, there are major campaigns such as those involved in promulgating the Barcelona Declaration of Linguistic Rights, or such initiatives as the 'Red Book on Endangered Languages' (part of the Tokyo Clearing House project: see Appendix). At the other extreme, there is lively debate taking place within many of the endangered communities themselves. Mechanisms and structures are now in place to channel energies. Short-, medium-, and long-term aims are now much clearer, as a result of the conferences and publications of the 1990s – many of which I have relied upon in this book. Preventive linguistics, as a subject, is still very largely at the stage of case studies, building up an empirical database to act as a testing ground for the hypotheses about the causes, processes, and conse-

[58] Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer (1998: 71).

quences of language death. But it is a subject which is showing signs of real growth.

How far it will grow is currently unclear. It depends, to some extent, on a maturation of attitude towards research into endangered languages from within the profession of linguistics itself. The harsh realities of working in endangered situations have often not been appreciated by linguists used to working only with healthy languages. Experienced fieldworkers have often emphasized that old speakers or last speakers can be hard to find and hard to work with. Moreover, such consultants are not all orators: sometimes they say very little, and what they do say may be full of inconsistencies. It may take a lot of time and money to obtain a small amount of data, whose range and quality may fall well short of what is usually found in academic studies, such as a thesis or journal publication. There may be no point of major theoretical import to be discovered. By all accounts, some of those with seniority in the linguistics profession, who accept students for research or who evaluate journal articles, are still some way from understanding this. I therefore applaud the clear stance taken by the Linguistic Society of America, in a 1994 policy statement, which recommended that linguistics departments should 'support the documentation and analysis of the full diversity of the languages which survive in the world today, with highest priority given to the many languages which are closest to becoming extinct, and also to those languages which represent the greatest diversity', recognizing that the collection and analysis of such data is 'a fundamental and permanent contribution to the foundation of linguistics', and urging that the value of the work should be recognized 'through the awarding of advanced degrees and through favorable hiring, promotion, and/or tenure decisions'.[59]

Growth also depends on imponderables, such as the emergence of fresh international trends. It is difficult to predict the consequences of new supranational political and economic entities, such as the European Union or the various Free Trade Associations. One

[59] Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (1994: 5).

likely effect is a stronger reassertion of local regional identities, and with this will come greater political support for minority groups, and the possibility of funding. For ultimately growth in this domain depends, fundamentally, on the availability of funding. There are several people willing to 'get out there', but the shortage of money means that only a tiny number of projects can be supported. This is the message, repeatedly, from the organizations which are trying to raise funds. For example, the Endangered Language Fund in its second year managed to support 10 projects – but out of a field of 70 applicants, and mostly at a lower level than was requested; there was a similar story from the Foundation for Endangered Languages, which in 1998 managed to contribute to 4 projects out of 30.[60]

Much of the focus, moreover, has so far been short-term. There is an urgent need for projects which devote their energies to long-term planning, in relation to intervention. After all, we are dealing with a problem whose effects can be alleviated, but certainly not solved, in the short term. The point is readily illustrated from those programmes which have been active for many years – 25 years, in the case of Mohawk, to take just one example.[61] The question of what works and why, when engaging in revitalization, is the really difficult one, just as it is in clinical interventions. The question can be answered, but it requires longitudinal research, and this takes several years, and is always expensive.

The present generation is the first to have enough data available to be able to make a true assessment of the situation. Having made it, the outcome, as we have seen, is bleak. Faced with the likelihood of losing half the world's languages within the next century, and of the distinct possibility of a world with only one language in it a few hundred years hence, it is this generation which needs to make the

[60] See The *Endangered Language Fund Newsletter* 2:2 (1998), 1–4. For an account of other early grants from this Fund, see *Ogmios* 6 (1997), 16–17; and for the first grants from the Foundation for Endangered Languages, see *Ogmios* 7 (1998), 3; *Ogmios* 10 (1998), 3–4. The situation is not helped by uncertainty in the world's currency markets: devaluation of a local currency can have a devastating effect on a revitalization project – as reported, for example, by a Nahuatl publishing project in 1996: see *Iatiku* 2 (1996), 7.

[61] Jacobs (1998: 122). To document a language and provide the basis for its maintenance takes 'upward of 20 years', according to SIL linguist Lynn Landweer (1998: 64).

decisions. We have two choices. We can sit back and do nothing, and let things just wind down. Already a great deal of time has elapsed since linguists began to get their act together, and Nancy Dorian makes the point:[62]

> Having waited too long before undertaking to rally support for threatened languages, we may find ourselves eulogizing extinct languages whose living uniqueness we had hoped instead to celebrate.

The alternative is to act, using as many means as possible to confront the situation and influence the outcome. We know that intervention can be successful. Revitalization schemes can work. But time is running out. It is already too late for many languages, but we hold the future of many others in our hands. The linguists in the front line, who are actually doing the fieldwork, therefore need as much support as we can mobilize. The raising of public awareness is a crucial step, and this book I hope will play its part in that task.

The urgency of the need to get things done has no parallel elsewhere within linguistics. Languages are dying at an unprecedented rate. If the estimates I reviewed in chapter 1 are right, another six or so have gone since I started to write this book.

[62] Dorian (1998: 21).

Appendix: some relevant organizations

This list contains all the organizations mentioned in the body of this book, plus a selection of other points of contact around the world.

Ad Hoc Committee on Endangered Languages
c/o Université de Québec à Montréal, CP 8888, succ. Centre-ville, Montréal, Québec H3C 3P8, Canada.
M366050@er.uqam.ca

Committee on Endangered Languages and their Preservation (CLEP)
c/o Linguistic Society of America, 1325 18th Street, NW, Washington DC 20036–6501
lsa@lsadc.org

The Endangered Language Fund, Inc
c/o Doug Whalen, Department of Linguistics, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520, USA
whalen@haskins.yale.edu
http://sapir.ling.yale.edu/~elf/study.html

Endangered-Languages-L Electronic Forum
c/o: Mari Rhydwen, Graduate School of Education, University of Western Australia, Nedlands, Perth, WA 6009, Australia
majordomo@coombs.anu.edu.au
mrhydwen@decel.ecel.uwa.edu.au

Ethnologue
c/o Barbara Grimes, Summer Institute of Linguistics Inc, International Linguistics Center, 7500 West Camp Wisdom Road, Dallas, TX 75236, USA
http://www.sil.org/ethnologue