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Financial Times (London, England)

February 17, 2004 Tuesday
USA Edition 1

SECTION: INTERNATIONAL ECONOMY; Pg. 4

LENGTH: 343 words

HEADLINE: World's languages vanish at 'catastrophic' rate

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DATELINE: SEATTLE

BODY:

The world's languages are disappearing at a "catastrophic" rate that makes the extinction of plant and animal species seem sedate, linguists told the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Seattle.

"It is difficult to overstate the importance to science of documenting **endangered languages**," said **David Harrison**, an expert in Siberian languages at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. "Each language that vanishes without being documented leaves an enormous gap in our understanding of some of the many complex structures the human mind is capable of producing."

There is no consensus about the number of languages spoken in the world today, because experts cannot agree on the point at which two or more linguistic varieties constitute distinct languages as opposed to dialects of the same language, said Laurence Horn, professor of linguistics at Yale University.

The most widely quoted figure of 6,800 comes from the Ethnologue database maintained by SIL International, an organisation with roots in Christian missionary work and Bible translations.

Stephen Anderson, also of Yale, said a mainstream estimate was that at least 40 per cent of languages spoken today would die out during this century.

Endangered languages are distributed fairly evenly around the world, though there are far fewer in Europe than in other regions. The Ethnologue database lists 417 languages as "nearly extinct", with only a few elderly speakers still living.

As an example of what is at stake when a language becomes extinct, Prof Harrison described two peoples living in remote parts of Siberia, the Middle Chulym and the Tofa. In each case younger people speak Russian only and there are about 40 fluent native speakers left in a population of several hundred.

He said the Chulym and Tofa languages contained "complex cognitive structures" not found elsewhere. They also embody a highly specialised knowledge of the environment - medicinal plants, animal behaviour, weather signs, hunting and gathering techniques - and a rich pre-literate oral tradition.

LOAD-DATE: February 16, 2004