

[◀ Return to Full](#)**LexisNexis™ Academic**

Copyright 2004 Nationwide News Pty Limited
The Australian

March 11, 2004 Thursday All-round Country Edition

SECTION: FEATURES-TYPE- FEATURETABLE; Pg. 13

LENGTH: 1645 words

HEADLINE: Lost in translation

SOURCE: MATP

BYLINE: Leigh Dayton

BODY:

Nine out of 10 languages spoken across the world could disappear this century, science writer Leigh Dayton reports

IT'S a modern parable. While the box office take from Mel Gibson's controversial film *The Passion of the Christ* skyrockets into the multi-millions, the number of people speaking the language of Jesus is dwindling into insignificance.

Aramaic, the 2500-year-old tongue of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians and Palestinians, is used as one of the languages in Gibson's film, yet today it is spoken in only three Syrian villages. Its probable fate as a spoken language? Extinction, say concerned linguists.

It's all part of a language crisis heralding the emergence of a new linguistic world order, according to scholar David Graddol of Britain's aptly named *The English Company*.

"We will experience some decades of rapid and perhaps disorienting change," he predicts ominously. In other words, Aramaic is not the only language facing an uncertain future.

Surprisingly, as Graddol says, English is sliding down the "league table" of dominant languages.

Why? To borrow from Treasurer Peter Costello, "demography is destiny". The number of people born into English-speaking communities is falling when compared with those born to parents whose native language is Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic and Hindi or Urdu, which many linguists class as a single language.

While English will power on as the language of science and politics, Graddol spots a business trend which may unsettle monolingual English speakers. "Employers in parts of Asia are already looking beyond English," he argues. "In the next decade, the new must-learn language is likely to be Mandarin."

Graddol is not the only expert flagging enormous changes in what they call the world's language system, one that has evolved over centuries. **David Harrison**, a linguist at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, estimates that as we speak -- literally -- we do so in between 6000 and 7000 languages worldwide, but not for long.

"Linguistic diversity is undergoing a precipitous and unprecedented decline," he said at the recent American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Seattle.

"This state of affairs has given rise to the dire, but not entirely preposterous prediction, that fully one half of extant human languages might well vanish in the course of this century."

Graddol, a linguist, went further last month in the journal *Science*.

"We may now be losing a language every day," he wrote, adding that 90 per cent of all languages will perish this century.

While Aramaic is the language of concern now, authorities such as Harrison and Graddol claim it is unlikely to be the next language to fade into nothingness. They predict that dubious honour will go to even more obscure tongues such as Middle Chulym, a language Harrison "discovered" last year in remote central Siberia. Out of a community of 426 people, he says only 35 speak it fluently. When those elders die, so too will Middle Chulym.

Clearly, indigenous languages worldwide are at greatest risk of serious decline or extinction. After all, speakers experience the combined impact of declining populations, technological advances and often overwhelming economic and cultural pressure to join the global community. Case in point: Australia's Aboriginal languages.

The statistics are rubbery, yet they suggest that roughly 250 indigenous languages were spoken in 1788. Today, possibly one-third of those first-contact languages are gone. Of those remaining, only about 20 have any hope of surviving.

"It's undeniable that we're losing speakers," notes Faith Baisden, projects manager with the Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages, a national body advising the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Although she's studying it, Baisden doesn't yet speak her own ancestral tongue, Yugambeh. There are only a handful of people who do, she claims.

Still, it's not all gloom and doom for so-called minority languages. Speakers of such languages and advocates such as Baisden are fighting back with some success. Hebrew was brought back from near extinction. In the US, Mohawk has undergone a revival, and ever more New Zealand kindergarteners are learning Maori.

In Australia, Baisden claims that growing numbers of Aboriginal communities are working with elders, applied linguists and groups such as FATSIL and ATSIC to shore up **endangered languages**.

They're developing dictionaries, web-based resources and other learning materials, as well as pushing for native language instruction.

It's all part of an international trend to bolster ancient rural and indigenous languages, or at least to document them before they vanish. For native speakers, this is a matter of urgency. Language epitomises group identity

and carries important cultural meanings, ones they hope to pass on to the next generation.

Moreover, Harrison points out that collectively the world's languages embody the diverse possibilities of human speech. They embody underlying mental structures that both shape and are shaped by the way different peoples speak of their world, for instance number systems, grammatical structures and ways of classifying kinship or natural events.

"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," Harrison says.

University of Sydney linguistics specialist Jane Simpson, who is working to save threatened languages, agrees.

"What does it matter if you lose a particular frog species or if you lose Michelangelo's David," she says.

"Think of languages as works of human creativity."

Simpson has teamed up with colleagues at the University of Melbourne and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra. Along with four doctoral students, the group is following pre-school children in three Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley and Northern Territory.

Over the four-year project the team hopes to learn how the youngsters manage the different languages they hear, from their native language to varieties of English. They want to know how the children shift between languages with such ease and hope to find out if the linguistic flip-flops affect language learning and use.

"There are implications for how kids learn at school and what kind of teaching strategies to use," she says.

But Simpson and company are particularly interested in the dynamics of hybrid languages known as creoles. Such languages develop spontaneously when -- usually -- children listen to a pidgin language cobbled together as a lingua franca by adults who speak different languages.

"The Lajamanu and Kalkaringi kids are either acquiring a weird variety of a local creole, called Kriol, or they are developing a new mixed language based on Kriol," says Simpson, who explains that children everywhere are master language builders. Indeed, youngsters are on the job around the globe, especially in cities where languages mingle and change rapidly. The question is, are they creating enough new languages to counter the startling rate of language extinction?

Yes, no, maybe, replies Yale University linguist Laurence Horn. Speaking at the AAAS meeting, he suggested the answer may well be a matter of definitions. "What counts as a language, a mere dialect or jargon?" he asked in rhetorical mode.

According to Horn, non-linguist factors affect the answer. Power, money, literary tradition, the nature of a writing system and even whether or not a community needs a new language are all involved in separating true languages from linguistic wannabes such as Esperanto, which lingers in the conversational backwaters.

Although Esperanto was devised deliberately by Ludwig Zamenhof, Eubonics is a version of English popularised by young African Americans. Is it non-standard English, a dialect, a language, or a street

vernacular? Some linguists agree with the Oakland, California's 1997 school board decree that Eubonics is "a genetically-based language", while others disagree vehemently.

And what about Scots, spoken in the film *Trainspotting*, the Slinglish of Singapore, the Japlish of Japan or any of the other Englishes of the world? Debates rage as to whether they're shiny new languages or jumped-up dialects destined for the linguistic scrap heap.

At the broadest level, the definitional debates may be irrelevant if one of Graddol's predictions comes true. He argues that although a handful of languages will dominate, people will continue speaking other tongues at home.

The bilingual -- even multilingual -- world of tomorrow may well resemble the one in which Jesus walked. After all, like his contemporaries, he probably spoke Greek, Aramaic and maybe even a touch of Latin.

SPEAKING VOLUMES

Top 10 spoken languages (global)

Rank ... 1995 ... 2050

1 ... Chinese ... Chinese

2 ... English ... Hindi/Urdu

3 ... Hindi/Urdu ... Arabic

4 ... Spanish ... English

5 ... Arabic ... Spanish

6 ... Portuguese ... Portuguese

7 ... Russian ... Russian

8 ... Bengali ... Bengali

9 ... Japanese ... Japanese

10 ... German ... Malay

Source: *Science*, February 27

In the mid-20th century, nearly 9 per cent of the world's people spoke English as their first language. That will drop by nearly half by 2050.

English will fall to fourth place on the league table of global languages, based on numbers of native speakers.

English will remain central to science, business and politics as native speakers of other languages adopt English as a second language.

Already a wave of English has spread through Europe. About 80 per cent of people in Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands speak English, with rates rising in the south.

LOAD-DATE: March 10, 2004