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The languages of extinction: The world's endangered tongues

Every fortnight, another language dies; some 40 per cent of the world's languages are thought to be at risk. Now a new study has identified those that are most endangered. Claire Soares reports

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For the Nivkh people of eastern Siberia, it's not as easy as one, two, three. Depending on whether they are talking about skis or boats or batches of dried fish, there are different ways of counting. Twenty-six different ways in fact. Small wonder, then, that 90 per cent of Nivkhs choose to communicate in Russian but that choice has put Nivkh on the list of endangered languages.

And it is not alone. Linguists believe half the languages in the world will be extinct by the end of the century. The 80 major languages such as English, Russian and Mandarin are spoken by about 80 per cent of the global population, while the 3,500 linguistic minnows have just 0.2 per cent of the world keeping them alive.

"The pace of language extinction we're seeing, it's really unprecedented in human history," said Dr David Harrison, author of the book *When Languages Die*. "And it's happening faster than the extinction of flora and fauna. More than 40 per cent of the world's languages could be considered endangered compared to 8 per cent of plants and 18 per cent of mammals."

When dolphins or eagles become extinct, people can get sentimental and mourn their passing but the death of a language is an unnoticed event, despite the fact it's happening more frequently, with one language being killed off every fortnight. Globalisation and migration are the main culprits. Economic pressures force people to move from their village to the cities, local languages are coming under threat from the lingua franca of the workplace. Children also play a key role in killing of a language, such as a child growing up speaking Mayan and Spanish soon figuring out that Spanish is better because it's spoken in school and on television.

A study by Dr Harrison and Greg Anderson, the director of the Living Tongues Institute, has identified five hotspots for endangered languages around the world – Northern Australia, Central South America, Oklahoma and the south-west USA, the Northwest Pacific Plateau and Eastern Siberia.

In the course of their research they came across Australian Charlie Mungulda, an Aboriginal living in the Northern Territory who is believed to be the last speaker of Amurdag, a language previously thought to have been extinct. Dr Harrison plays a recording of the elderly Charlie, recalling words spoken by his late father. There's a long pause after the voice fades away. "Those are some of the very last words we will ever hear in Amurdag," the linguistics professor says with a sigh. That is unless someone shows a natural pronunciation gift when faced with the 100 or so words,

such as "aburga" (rainbow serpent) that the linguists managed to scribble down.

Losing languages means losing cultural insights. The often-quoted examples of Eskimos having many of words for snow, or Africans having many of words for rice are perhaps overly-familiar. But did you know that the 200 or so people who speak Toratan on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi have a word for waking up and finding something's changed? Open your eyes and find you've fallen out of bed in the night? Matuwuhou!

Or find yourself herding reindeer with Todzhu people of Siberia and want to point out a particularly charming, five-year-old castrated reindeer that can be ridden? The word you're looking for is chary.

And the loss of languages also often means a loss of identity. Serge Sagna, a Senegalese PhD student at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, who returned to his village recently to study its Bandial language, can personally testify to that. "My identity is completely bound up in my language. It reflects a unique view of the world, and a whole history without which we cannot move forward."

Bandial has been pushed aside in Senegal, not only by the former colonial language French, in which most professional business and education is conducted, but also by Wolof, the language of hip-hop, the streets and the national mbala dance craze. Even Mr Sagna reluctantly admits that, in two generations, his native tongue will be no more.

But perhaps more important than the individual words and cultural diversity are the vast chunks of human knowledge that accompany languages to the grave.

"We live in the information age, where information and knowledge are supposed to be of value, and we're running the risk of jettisoning millennia of knowledge," Dr Harrison said. "Most of what we know about endangered species is encoded in languages that have never been written down. So in saving languages we may be able to help save species and eco-systems,"

As Exhibit A, take the two-barred flasher butterfly of Central America. It was long assumed to be a single species but the native Mexican tribe, the Tzeltal, knew better. They had a well-honed system of distinguishing between the different larvae, depending on what crops they attacked. Eventually, Western science caught up with them and biologists confirmed at least 10 species of the butterfly.

Similarly the 4,000 speakers of Brazil's Kayapo tongue differentiate between 56 folk species of bees, based on anything from flight patterns to the quality of honey.

The Kallawaya herbalist healers living in Bolivia, have gone one step further. For the past 500 years, they have encrypted their knowledge of thousands of medicinal plants in a secret language handed down in the practitioner families from father to son. It's patenting by language, as it were.

"Kallawaya is an excellent example of a language that could be patented for both its form and content, for the economic well-being of the community that invented it, and for protection against predatory pharmaceutical corporations that seek to exploit that knowledge without recompense," says Dr Harrison.

So what can be done to preserve these languages and the knowledge that they articulate?

In Australia, Doris Edgar is one of the last three remaining speakers of Yawuru. Ms Edgar, in her 80s, visits schools in the town of Broome, Western Australia, imparting to eager pupils the Yawuru names of local plants and their traditional uses.

Dr Anderson reckons it takes three to four years to adequately document a language at a cost of up to £200,000. "We have people and communities that desire our help to save their language, what we lack are the funds to do that," he said.