



IT'S GOOD TO TALK

While language is intrinsically linked to culture, heritage, education and employment, many of the world's minority languages are in peril. Flashes investigates...

Coming so soon after the horrors of the Second World War, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 was hailed as a necessary response to the atrocities that conflict wrought. Central to this was the premise that no discrimination could be made on the basis of language.

And yet, just over 70 years on, while there might be widespread acknowledgement about the importance of language – to culture, heritage, education and employment – many of the world's minority languages are in peril.

UNESCO, which publishes an *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, estimates that around 2,500 languages (out of 6,000 languages spoken) are in some sort of peril. Indeed, its latest edition of the *Atlas*, in 2010, suggested that 576 languages were “critically endangered”.

Andrew Key, CEO and founder of the World Literacy Foundation (WLF), an organisation that attempts to quell these rising numbers, intimates the worst could yet be to come. “Some experts believe that over the next century a further 50% of those languages will be lost,” he cautions. “Some place it as high as 90%.”

The reasons for minority languages disappearing are, unsurprisingly, multi-faceted. Throughout human existence languages have disappeared. But as Key has already said, the crisis we face today is particularly acute. His organisation states: “Modernisation, a globalizing economy, and the homogenization of international culture are making minority languages die out at an unprecedented rate.”

Writing for the *BBC Future* website about why we should save dying languages, award-winning science journalist Rachel Nuwer explained that linguists believe languages usually reach the point of crisis after being displaced by another language that is socially, politically and economically more dominant. >

SIX RAREST LANGUAGES STILL SPOKEN TODAY



NJEREP

Having already become extinct in one country (Cameroon), Njerep, a Bantoid language, is spoken in Nigeria by only four individuals. According to reports from anthropologists, the youngest person who speaks the language is 60, meaning that the chances of Njerep surviving beyond this last generation are pretty slim.



KAWISHANA

Spoken near the Japura River in Brazil, Kawishana (Kaixana) was once a popular language utilized by many. The numbers began dwindling, eventually dropping down to 200. Now, there remains only one documented person still able to speak the language.



PAAKANTYI

This Australian Aboriginal language is still spoken in regions alongside the Darling River, but only by a few people. Reports vary, claiming that anywhere from 22 to two individuals are able to speak Paakyanti—but either way, it's hard to argue that this language is on the verge of extinction. In an effort to avoid this fate, some schools have begun programmes to attempt to reintroduce Paakantyi to a new generation.



LIKI

The select few able to speak Liki inhabit several islands in the Papua region off the coast of Indonesia. Liki was once far more commonly spoken, especially by indigenous church leaders. Today, the numbers have dropped and aren't likely to increase any time soon.



SARCEE

Sarsi, related to the Navajo language spoken in the Southern United States, is spoken by the Canadian branch of the Tsuu T'ina tribe. Because the culture is based predominately on oral transmission and tradition, there are no written records (or writing system, for that matter) available, and because only 50 or so speakers remain, Sarsi faces almost certain extinction.



CHEMEHUEVI

A Colorado River Numic language, Chemehuevi is verging on extinction and is now only spoken by a handful of people in the Midwestern United States. Having been studied rather extensively by linguist Margaret L. Press, the language has been preserved in the form of field notes and recordings but is still likely to die out.

Source: pacsafe

Nuwer said: "In this scenario, the majority speaks another language – English, Mandarin, Swahili – so speaking that language is key to accessing jobs, education and opportunities. Sometimes, especially in immigrant communities, parents will decide not to teach their children their heritage language, perceiving it as a potential hindrance to their success in life."

In some cases, legislation is passed prohibiting ethnic languages being taught at school. Key recently returned from a project in Lagos, Nigeria, where the government had passed a law banning the many ethnic languages being used in education and preventing books being published in those languages.

"So you have children living in ethnic regions of the country whose mother tongue that they speak at home and in their wider community is banned from being used at school," he explains. "There are no books or printed material and they're speaking a language [the national tongue] they're not speaking at home or in the community."

Echoing the thoughts expressed by Nuwer, Key believes governments pass such draconian legislation because they want the entire country to speak the same language. He suspects politicians believe that if they can get ethnic minorities to speak the national language they will benefit from far greater educational and economic prospects.



"Parents will decide not to teach their children their heritage language, perceiving it as a potential hindrance to their success in life opportunities"

RACHEL NUWER,
AWARD-WINNING SCIENCE
JOURNALIST

He strikes a note of caution though. "However, mother tongue minority languages have, in many cases, like in Australia where we're based, thousands of years of history attached to it. To get to a place where these languages are lost is tragic."

Key says that in the last 150 years alone, 100 indigenous languages have been lost in Australia. "We have 200 indigenous languages," he says, "and of those we have about four main Aboriginal languages that are spoken in Australia. And then you have small pockets of communities speaking an indigenous language that has been in their family bloodline for thousands of years."

Thankfully, there are now widespread moves to bolster, protect and promote minority languages. Unlike the days of imperialism in the 19th Century when it was the "civilizing mission" of the colonialists to force the native population to speak their language – whether that be English, French, Spanish or Portuguese – it's now acknowledged that these minority languages have, according to the WLF, "irreplaceable cultural significance, ancestral memories, heritage, and unique knowledge and traditions. These assets are lost at the moment a language disappears." In line with the United Nations' commitment to sustainable development,



UNESCO's International Mother Language Day (held every February) promotes linguistic and cultural diversity alongside multilingualism.

This celebration of cultural traditions views languages as “a powerful instrument of preserving and developing our tangible and intangible heritage. All moves to promote the dissemination of mother tongues will serve not only to encourage linguistic diversity and multilingual education but also to develop fuller awareness of linguistic and cultural traditions throughout the world and to inspire solidarity based on understanding, tolerance and dialogue”.

Coming out of this is an acceptance that mother tongue-based multilingual education is a significant way of preserving ethnic languages, as well as arming ethnic groups with the tools needed to not only survive, but flourish in the modern world.

The WLF's Andrew Key is a particularly enthusiastic advocate of this approach. He says evidence shows that by allowing children to learn a national language – in the case of Australia that would be English – but through their mother tongue is the best way to preserve minority languages.

“There used to be a fear of native languages, certainly in a spiritual sense,” he says, “It used to be about

getting those colonised communities to be like them – to dress the same, to sound the same, and what have you. Today, there has been a huge shift. Particularly in Australia, where there's been some big moves around the preservation of indigenous languages.”

The WLF uses a lot of digital technology to enhance this parallel learning approach. They can create low-cost digital books in a matter of minutes that will last a lifetime. “The primary purpose of the digital content that we're developing,” he explains, “is to aid that transition for children between five and 12 to learn English through their mother tongue. But also it's about localised stories, so it's about the preservation of local language through storytelling and that digital record is there for life.”

By giving people the tools to keep their cultural identity, it's the belief of organisations like the WLF that it provides them with a greater sense of belonging, which can then be carried over into the realms of education and employment.

In this age, the work of UNESCO and the World Literacy Foundation in protecting and preserving cultural diversity should not be underestimated. The rich and nourishing traditions of language are central to the freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. ♪

Above: A new law in Lagos, Nigeria, bans many ethnic languages being used in education