

Language Death

by David Crystal

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By most estimates, there are currently about 6000 languages in the world and half of these will probably die over the next one hundred years as more and more people switch to one of the dominant languages, especially English, and then fail to transmit their indigenous language to their children. That is a casualty rate of roughly one every two weeks. But so what? Surely if we all end up speaking the same language, we will be able to communicate nice and easily with everyone else and thereby eliminate international misunderstandings. And then, just like the situation before the Tower of Babel incident when “the whole earth was of one language, and one speech” (Genesis, 11:1), we can finally attain a blissful paradise of cross-cultural cooperation and universal peace.

Well, no, actually. As David Crystal points out, most of the bloodiest civil wars the world has seen have been between people who understood each other perfectly well. Sharing a common language did not prevent the American Civil War, the endless conflicts in Northern Ireland, or the savage slaughters in Bosnia. So it is not clear that the emergence of a single global language, or maybe a few shared languages, would actually result in more peace and prosperity in the world. In fact, exactly the reverse, it might well create even more conflict.

Quite apart from this issue of whether a single universal language would enhance or hinder the prospects for world peace, Crystal argues passionately that there is an urgent need for all of us to try and maintain the diversity of our linguistic heritage, claiming that it is just as important to save languages that are threatened with imminent extinction as it is to protect biodiversity and prevent even more plants and animals disappearing from the face of the Earth. Just as a newly-discovered type of plant might be found to hold the key to a cure for cancer, every single language presents us with a unique window on to the possibilities for human expression and enriches the totality of our shared culture. If nobody had heard the Khoisan languages of southern Africa, we would never have appreciated the potential for using a full range of clicks as distinctive consonants in our speech; and if no linguists had taken the trouble to study the Tuyuca language in Brazil, we would never have become aware of its system of evidentials which grammatically encode in the form of the verb the status of a speaker’s knowledge,

including distinctions between whether we know something because we have experienced it personally, because we have been told it, or because we are assuming it to be true. Every time a language is lost, the potential for human expression is reduced and the diversity of our human culture is depleted, and this is just as serious for us as the extinction of a species of animal or plant.

The trouble with all of this is that, while there is widespread sympathy throughout the world for efforts to maintain biodiversity, the need to protect and support endangered languages is less well appreciated. Indeed, quite the opposite, there is often substantial pressure to conform, as both governments and ordinary folk feel threatened by minority groups that refuse to adopt the language and culture of the majority. Furthermore, it is expensive to support endangered languages by providing such essential things as trained teachers, printed materials, and multimedia programs, especially as in some cases the few remaining speakers of a language do not actually care too much if it disappears, so it is hard to see many people putting support for endangered languages high on their list of priorities for funding when there are so many in the world starving, dying of preventable diseases, and suffering from the effects of natural disasters such as earthquakes and tsunamis. If next Saturday morning you saw a collecting tin that was seeking to raise money to help save a threatened language, would you be willing to donate? And even after reading this book with its eloquent and passionate case for the need to protect and support endangered languages, even though everything that David Crystal says makes perfect sense, it is still hard to convince oneself that such noble endeavours really should be a priority in the world today when there are so many other problems that need to be fixed.

This book is exceptionally important in helping to wake us up to the urgency of the need to do something about our disappearing linguistic heritage. But one suspects that we still have a long way to go before the majority of people accept its central assertion, that the threat to endangered languages is a major catastrophe facing the human race. And, to be honest, I am not sure that I would put my hard-earned cash into that collecting tin.

