

Probing Question: What is lost when a language dies?

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Oy vey! Although English dictionaries list "Oh dear!" as a rough equivalent of this Yiddish expression, Yiddishists will tell you how short that falls in conveying the phrase's varied, flexible and nuanced meanings, ranging from sadness and worry to aggravation, anger and tiredness.

Yiddish — once spoken by 10 million European Jews — has been in a steep decline since the 1920s, but is still spoken by at least a million people worldwide. However, many other languages are vanishing as their last speakers die. In his 2000 book "Language Death," author David Crystal included an obituary of the Kasabe tongue, spoken in the Mambila region of Cameroon. Kasabe died on Nov. 5, 1995, with its final speaker, named Bogon.

Such quiet exits are now common, occurring about every two weeks. Linguists estimate roughly half of the world's 6,000 languages will vanish within 100 years.

"There's an alarming disappearance of language," noted John Lipski, a Penn State professor of Spanish and linguistics who studies variations in Spanish throughout the world.

Lipski explained that wars, colonialism and globalization increase the dominance of the world's leading languages such as English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Russian and Mandarin. At present, English is the most dominant international lingua franca. (One in four people

worldwide now speak at least basic English, which holds official or special status in 75 countries.)

Linguists are fighting back by documenting waning languages, creating nonprofit groups such as The Endangered Language Fund, and holding international conferences on the safeguarding of indigenous and minority languages.

When an endangered animal goes extinct, the world loses a unique part of our global ecosystem. But what exactly is lost when an endangered language dies?

According to Lipski, we lose cultural identities and the richness and diversity of humanity's linguistic heritage. But "something more is lost," he continued, noting that the full dimension of such loss is only fully understood by those deprived of their mother tongue. "Imagine being told you can't use your language and you'll see what that undefinable 'more' is," he added.

Hendrik Stuurman, who grew up speaking Khoikhoi in northwestern South Africa, describes it this way in Crystal's book: "I feel that I have drunk the milk of a strange woman, that I grew up alongside another person. I feel like this because I do not speak my mother's language."

Lipski believes that since some aspects of learning language begin at birth — even perhaps in the womb — and speaking abilities begin at around 1 year old, language is a lifetime experience that can't be teased out from the rest of our lives.

"We learn our native languages from those individuals who are closest to us, emotionally and physically," he said. "A language contains the words and sounds that a particular group uses to describe and interact with the world, and thus forms an essential part of that group's identity."

Explained Lipski, the philosophical argument behind biodiversity — that the greater the variety of plant and animal species, the more enriched our lives are — also supports the importance of a rich diversity of languages. “Those who live around many cultures and languages tend to be more tolerant than those who don’t,” he noted, adding that preserving linguistic diversity might be a factor in creating a more peaceful planet.

In North America and elsewhere, efforts are under way to both record and revive fading languages. More than 300 Native American languages are still taught and spoken today, said John Sanchez, a Penn State associate professor of communications. Most of the 570 Native American tribes are working to preserve their language through both grassroots educational initiatives and academic scholarship, he noted.

Lipski said adversity can ultimately strengthen a minority language. "Consider how Yiddish has survived extensive persecution of Jewish communities," he noted, "as has Judeo (Sephardic) Spanish, carried to the former Ottoman Empire by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and still spoken in some communities in Greece, Turkey and Israel." For another example, "In 1940s Spain, dictator Francisco Franco banned minority languages such as Basque, Galician (his own native language) and Catalan." According to some sources, children caught speaking Basque in schools would be whipped. Added Lipski, "Now, those languages are flourishing and considered co-official to Castilian Spanish in their respective regions."

More than ever, though, experts are recognizing the decline of linguistic diversity as a true crisis. The International Congress of Linguists has declared that "... the disappearance of any one language constitutes an irretrievable loss to mankind ..." and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has responded by creating the UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages. In addition, the United Nations has proclaimed 2008 the International Year of

Languages.

Said Lipski, just imagine how bland the collective music of human language would be without the sounds of Sami, Gaeilic, Tsalagi (Cherokee) or the countless other languages kept alive mainly among village elders worldwide. Losing them would indeed be "a shandeh un a charpeh," as is said in Yiddish — a shame and a disgrace.

Source: By Lisa Duchene, Research/Penn State

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