Language Death and Disappearance: Causes and Circumstances

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Introductory Remarks

Well over five thousand languages are known to exist or to have existed in the world, but hundreds of these are no longer living languages used by speakers and speech communities in their day-to-day activities and lives. Some of them lead a pseudo-life as revered monuments of the past which still have some restricted and specialised roles to play today, such as Latin, Ancient Greek, Church Slavonic and others, but most of them are of interest and concern only to a small group of linguists, historians and some other experts who look at the past. Many languages have disappeared without being known to us in any great detail, with only some fragmentary materials in them – written or noted down by speakers or observers of them hundreds or even thousands of years ago – at our disposal to give us some idea as to what those languages were like. Others have disappeared without even that scanty information about their nature being available to us; only their names are known from historical records, or perhaps some remarks were written down by someone many years ago and were preserved over the ages to tell us something about some special features of such a language or such languages and who and what kind of people their speakers were. Many other languages, certainly a much larger number than the dead languages about which we know something, have disappeared without our knowing anything of or about them.

This disappearance of languages continues today, and has greatly accelerated during the last two hundred years or so. Hundreds of languages, especially indigenous languages in several continents, particularly the Americas and Australia,

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have died during this period, and hundreds more are destined to meet the same fate in the foreseeable future.

Reasons for Language Death and Disappearance

What, then, are the reasons for the dying and disappearance of languages, especially on such a large scale?

Death of all Speakers

One important reason, more so in days gone by than in recent years and at present, is the accelerated death rate of the community of speakers of a given language, be it through violent acts such as warfare and genocide, or through epidemic diseases such as those spreading amongst indigenous populations during the last two centuries or so following the first European contacts, or as a result of natural catastrophes such as extreme droughts causing disastrous famines, or heavy floods, volcanic eruptions and the like.

Changes in the Ecology of Languages

Less violent, but potentially of equally disastrous consequences for given languages are phenomena broadly coming under the heading of changes in the ecology of the languages concerned. There are close parallels in the circumstances surrounding the decimation and eventual extinction of animal or plant species, and in those of languages in t his respect. Extinction through violence and catastrophe is readily comparable in both instances, but the same is also the case with changes in ecology: an animal or plant species loses its viability and ability to survive through the drastic reduction or alteration of its habitat and/or the introduction of other animal or plant species which in some important respects are more powerful and with which the species concerned is unable to compete successfully. The introduction of predatory animals such as dogs and cats into areas in which the local fauna has no natural defences against them is a well-known example of the latter, and the replacement of an untouched wilderness by an agricultural area an example of the former. Both can lead to a reduction of numbers of the original animal or plant population

to below a minimal level needed for its survival and reproduction. All this can be readily translated into comparable circumstances surrounding languages: changes in environment would mean that the cultural and social settings in which a given language had been functioning, usually for a very long time, have been replaced by new and quite different ones as a result of irresistible culture contact and clash, with the traditional language unsuited for readily functioning as a vehicle of expression of the new culture. The newly introduced dangerous animal and plant species mentioned above can be compared with negative and destructive attitudes towards this traditional language by the carriers of the newly introduced culture and speakers of the language serving as its means of expression. This is a well-known phenomenon, manifested for instance in the beliefs of speakers of former colonial languages, who maintain that native languages are not really languages, but only rudimentary jargons ('dialects') unsuitable for the expression of even the simplest thoughts, being merely a succession of grunts and animal-like sounds having to be heavily supported by gestures to convey meaning, and so on.

It is interesting to note that until fairly recently, the belief was widely held that nature would look after itself, and no thought was given to the possible disastrous consequences of human interference with nature. Only quite recently has there been a general recognition of the fact that nature does not look after itself in the wake of massive human interference and resulting ecological and environmental changes, and has it been realised that management of nature, on the basis of very detailed and thorough knowledge, is a necessity to avoid permanent harm to it, or to try to alleviate and rectify harm already done, as far as this may still be possible. Curiously enough, it was a group of people much maligned for their interference with wildlife, i.e. the shooters and pleasure hunters, who realised that their prey needed management and looking after in order to remain available for them, long before people concerned with the exploitation of other natural resources realised that these too (precious woods, forest mushrooms, etc.) had to be managed properly to remain continuously available as resources. Similarly, it has only very recently been realised that many languages needed management to survive, and that language planning of some sort was essential. Most linguists long ignored this facet of the study of languages. Only since the strong shift of interest in languages from a predominant

concern with the nature of the languages themselves to one with the setting, function and role of languages in society and culture has there been a growing realisation of the importance of language management and language planning.

There are cases in which the disappearance of languages is caused by ecological shifts which are changes not in the ecology of given languages themselves, but in the ecology on which the life of a small speech community is based. An example which is valid for many of the very small, traditionally quite stable, speech communities in the New Guinea area, for instance, which number only a few hundred, or even fewer, speakers, is as follows. Under the influence of the modern world, most of the young male members of such an isolated speech community leave their tribal area and move to towns or other population centres to seek economic betterment. There they take wives speaking different languages and their tribal language is not passed on to their offspring. Those young women who stay in the tribal area marry speakers of other languages from other tribes in the absence of a sufficient number of young men of their own tribe remaining available in the tribal area. While their children may be bilingual, the original tribal language of these young women is eventually lost. The absent young men have little, or at best very sporadic, contact with the members of their speech community who remain in the tribal area, and while they may have contacts with the few other, mostly male, members of their speech community who come to live in the same population centre to which they have moved, these contacts do not lead to the passing on and perpetuation of their tribal language after their death. The old members of the speech community who remain in the tribal area, eventually die off without passing on their language, and in the end the language ceases to be a functioning language in daily use by even a small group of people, and is only remembered fragmentarily by a few of the descendants of the women who married into other speech communities, to disappear entirely with the death of these people.

Culture Contact and Clash

To return to the adverse effects of changes affecting the ecology of given languages themselves, which have been briefly touched

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upon above in a general way: this may now be examined in more detail.

Highly important factors often leading to major changes in the ecology of a language are, as has already been pointed out, events describable as culture contact and culture clash. While these themselves do not lead to the extinction or even marked decimation of the population or community speaking a given language, they may severely affect the *attitude* of that population or community towards its own language. Broadly speaking, such situations tend to occur if a speech community comes into economic, cultural or political contact with another community or population speaking a different language and which is economically stronger and more advanced than the first speech community, or culturally aggressive, or politically more powerful and mighty.

Economic Influence If such a contact is essentially on the economic level, knowledge of the language of the economically stronger population by members of the economically weaker speech community tends to lead to advantages for the latter which are unobtainable by those who lack such a knowledge. Monetary benefits, access to coveted goods and services, employment and other economic advantages are the result of such a knowledge, and this makes it very clear to the speakers of the economically weaker group that their own language is becoming useless in the changing economic situation in which they find themselves. This realisation makes them have less and less regard for it, and this tends to lead to a gradual increase by them in the use of the language of the economically stronger population, even in situations not directly connected with the economic advantages inherent in the mastery and use of that language. This is at the expense of the language of the speech community which comes under such an influence, and can lead to a severe decline in its use, with old people eventually becoming the only ones to use it regularly, and the language disappears with their death. Such a situation constitutes the extreme case, and usually occurs only if economic influence is accompanied by strong cultural and political influence. This has for instance been the case in much of Aboriginal Australia, is strongly evident in both the USSR and China for the languages of a number of the small minorities there, in spite of the official encouragement given to their continued existence, and as an example from the past, happened in

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the Inca Empire before the Spanish conquest. The fate of the Celtic language of Ireland constitutes another case in point, though it is a somewhat special case as will be mentioned later.

Situations in which a language is essentially the carrier of economic influence only, without much cultural and political influence associated with it, rarely lead to the complete loss of the original language of a people, though their speakers are eager to become bilingual in the language of the carriers of the economic influence. Examples of such a situation are Swahili in East Africa and Trade Malay in the East Indies: economic advantages were available to speakers of local languages from their respective mastery. However, even though the colonial powers in East Africa and the East Indies adopted and used them for many aspects of their colonial rule, and while Indonesian, on the basis of the widespread knowledge of Trade Malay, was adopted as the national language of what is today Indonesia, with a similar trend in Tanzania regarding Swahili, the local languages were not given up by their speakers in favour of Swahili or Indonesian. Rather, bilingualism in the major languages is the aim of speakers of local languages who are looking for economic betterment. Another good case is Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin): especially in colonial days, knowledge of it provided very considerable economic advantages to speakers of local languages, but it was not the language of the culturally and politically dominant group who only used it as a tool, much as was the case with Swahili in East Africa and Trade Malay in the East Indies. Again there was no great stimulus for speakers of local languages to give them up in favour of Tok Pisin. In the relatively few instances in which this has nevertheless taken place, the reasons were different and predominantly connected with the mixing of speakers of many languages in given areas as a result of recent population mobility. This results in intermarriage of people from different language backgrounds who have Tok Pisin as their only common language, which as a result becomes the first language of their offspring. This is another cause of language death in the case of very small languages, as has already been pointed out above.

Cultural Influence Perhaps the most serious problem for the fate and nature of a language which is often an unwritten language, or has only recently been reduced to writing, results from influence upon its speakers by speakers of another language who are

culturally more aggressive and more powerful in some way. For instance, they may have a written language with a literary tradition, be the bearers of a powerful religion, have a complex civilisation with a long recorded history, be members of a modern metropolitan nation – or on the indigenous level, have a technically more complex culture, and so on. Such an influence usually leads to the partial or complete adoption of much of the culture of the latter people by the former, who in the process lose much, if not all, of their traditional culture – or at least it is profoundly changed or modified. This tends to have far-reaching results for the language of these people:

a. It may disappear and be replaced by that of the culturally more aggressive people, either fully or in a modified, simplified or pidginised-creolised form of it;
b. It may be relegated to culturally inferior and unimportant roles and functions or, in some rare instances, to some special uses;
c. It may be heavily influenced especially in its vocabulary and to some extent also in its structure by the language of the culturally more aggressive people;
d. It will lose a number of its characteristics which are rooted in the traditional culture of its speakers and become in many ways an imitation of the language of the culturally more aggressive people. It no longer reflects the unique traditional and original world-view and culture of its speakers which has been lost, but more that of the culturally more aggressive people who have influenced its speakers.

Some examples of each type are as follows.

For (a): Many languages of Australian Aboriginals and American Indians, for instance, have died, or are dying, in this manner. A number of the small minority languages in the USSR and China are currently undergoing this process in spite of the official policies of the two countries, which are aimed at preserving them. Equally, the Ainu language in Japan is now virtually dead, and it may be significant that, years ago, one of the last Ainu speakers said to the present writer that Ainu could not be written, as Japanese could, and therefore was doomed to disappear. An indigenous language with no traditional writing system tends to yield thus to a language which serves as the means of expression to a metropolitan or otherwise aggressive culture which possesses

a traditional writing system and a written, as opposed to oral, literary tradition. It may also be remembered that in the eighteenth century, the influence of French culture and language was so strong in much of Europe that it became virtually the sole language of much of the elite in several countries who sometimes, as is said of the Prussian king Frederick the Great, prided themselves in having almost forgotten their own languages. Examples of modified or pidginised forms of a language being taken over as a result of overwhelming culture clash and cultural influence are Australian Aboriginal English, as well as Caribbean creoles, though the latter also come under the heading of political influence and conquest.

For (b): Again, small minority languages in the USSR and China should be mentioned. Because of the low number of their speakers, their location (which is frequently in the immediate neighbourhood of large populations speaking Russian or Chinese respectively) and their restricted value in economic terms, the young generations of their speakers have become almost monolingual Russian or Chinese speakers, with their own languages heading for extinction. Their only use is increasingly as the language of private at-home conversations of older people, and occasionally of story-telling to elderly listeners, and as the working language of older people who work in a group. Such languages are, for instance: in the USSR, the Ugrian languages Khanti (Ostyak) and Mansi (Vogul), some Tungus languages such as Nanay (Goldi) and Udege, Paleo-Siberian languages such as Itelmen (Kamchadal), and others; and in China the dying Miao-Yao language She (and outside mainland China in Taiwan, several of the dying Formosan Austronesian languages), several small Tungus languages, the Tibeto-Burman language Tujia, and the Austro-Tai (Daic) language Gelao.

The Irish language is a special case in this connection: it has ceased to be used as a language of daily life in most parts of Ireland and has been replaced by English. It is kept only artificially alive through being taught at school, and used in special, almost ritual functions in facets of political life. The Irish have a very strong sense of identity, and as in many other cases, the traditional language of a people has become the symbol of their identity. However, with the Irish, the linguistic symbol of their identity has been transferred to their very pronounced Irish accent in English, at the expense of their traditional Celtic language

which is no longer regarded by most Irish people as a symbol of their identity. Recently, however, there has been a reversal, and many members of the young generation in Ireland are beginning to take a renewed pride in the Irish Gaelic language. On the other hand, the Celtic Welsh language is very much regarded by the Welsh as a symbol of their identity, and while it was officially relegated to an inferior position by the English in the past, this is no longer the case today to the same extent. However, it is losing ground for economic reasons and because of increasing English settlement in Wales, which has greatly augmented the culture-clash situation.

For (c): A typical example for this is the powerful influence exerted by Arabic, as the language of the Islamic religion and culture, upon the languages of the people who had come under Islamic influence and been converted to Islam. Turkish, Persian, Swahili and some central Asian Turkic languages such as Uzbek are good examples of this influence, which affects not only the vocabulary of such languages, but also some of their structure, especially in the case of Turkish and Persian. At the same time, the highly sophisticated civilisation of the Persian elite has been instrumental in the Persian language also strongly influencing Turkish, in addition to Arabic; and both Arabic and Persian influence upon a Hindi dialect led to the development of Urdu which, though linguistically still Hindi apart from a substantially altered vocabulary and a number of Arabic and Persian grammatical features, is no longer readily mutually intelligible with traditional Hindi. Characteristically, increasing geographical distance from the Arabic-speaking central area of Islamic religion and civilisation has resulted in a lower level of Arabic influence on the languages of such distant people who have been converted to Islam, such as that observable on Malay for instance. Sanskrit and Prakrit as means of expression of Hinduism and Buddhism have exerted a strong influence upon the vocabulary of the languages of people converted to these religions, especially in the case of the written and 'high' forms of them, such as Tibetan, Tai and to a lesser extent Ancient Javanese. However, their respective structures have remained largely unaffected by such influence. In more recent times, Russian, as the language of a metropolitan civilisation and aggressive culture (and in part also for reasons coming under the heading of political power and influence), has exerted a strong influence upon a number of languages in the Soviet

Union, especially on those of people previously lacking writing systems and literary and historical traditions, such as is the case with most local Siberian peoples. In one instance, that of the dialect of Aleutian spoken on Mednyj Island, some of the highly complex Aleutian suffixal verb inflection had been replaced by one derived from Russian as a result of such an influence (Vakhtin and Golovko 1987).

For (d): A number of indigenous languages of the New Guinea area, especially Papuan languages, come into this category, in particular those which have, or had, complex systems of noun classes with these systems based on aspects of the speakers' traditional world-view, which underlies the subdivision of their observed and conceived material and spiritual surroundings and world into categories. When the traditional culture of the speakers is largely or entirely lost as a result of culture clash, and their traditional world-view replaced by that of culturally more aggressive people, or more usually by a rudimentary and modified form of it, the basis for the noun class system disappears, and the noun class system itself with its accompanying grammatical features (such as concordance systems, inflections, etc.) largely or completely ceases to be used and is soon forgotten. So, for instance, a Catholic missionary wrote in 1926 (Kirschbaum 1926) about the highly complex noun class system in the Buna language in the north of what is today the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea; the system comprised twelve classes with complicated concordance phenomena. No Buna speaker alive today has any memory of a noun class system in their language, or of their parents or grandparents using one. A similar situation exists with regard to several other Papuan languages (Wurm 1986). In the Äŷiwo language of the Santa Cruz Archipelago at the eastern end of the Solomon Islands chain, a highly complex noun class system with concordance phenomena in the noun phrase has been decaying during recent years (Wurm, forthcoming a), but as a result of a strong revivalist movement amongst the Äŷiwo speakers, the decay has been arrested and in part reversed, and there is at least some recollection, by a few very old speakers, of features of an even more complex noun class system, with some concordance features going beyond the noun phrase (Wurm, forthcoming b).

Another consequence of the partial or complete loss of the traditional culture and world-view of a people and its replacement

by another manifests itself in the simplification of verb forms denoting concepts rooted in the traditional culture of its speakers. So for instance, in the Kiwai language of the Western Province of Papua New Guinea, there are highly complex verb forms in which four numbers of the actor and persons acted upon as object are variously indicated in a manner progressing from singular versus non-singular first, proceeding to more precise indication of the non-singular number (i.e. dual, trial, full plural) further on in that verb form. Also, a large range of tenses exists (Ray 1932; Wurm 1973). In the language spoken by the young generation, many of these complex features have either fallen into disuse, or their use has become optional, and they are often incorrectly applied. Also, most of the highly inflected verb forms of the traditional language have been replaced by verbal nouns which show only vestiges of the complex original verb inflection. Traditional Kiwai culture was characterised by a preoccupation with the meticulous indication of the precise number of actors and persons acted upon, and with that of the time of an action, as well as with the exact reference to these in the inflectional systems of the language serving as its vehicle. With the loss of the traditional Kiwai culture and the adoption of a new one in which such distinctions are much less significant, these preoccupations have become less important for the Kiwai speakers.

Another change in the structure of some Papuan languages which is the direct consequence of clash with the intrusive metropolitan culture, involves the concepts and systems of counting objects of all kinds. Very often the noun class systems mentioned above play a part in counting in these languages, and with the loss of the traditional culture on which these class systems are based, they tend to be very much reduced in complexity or to disappear entirely from the counting systems in the languages of the communities thus affected. However, in some Papuan languages, different and in some ways more fundamental changes occur in the traditional counting systems and principles; these systems are, for instance, based on parts of the bodies of the speakers as tallies, such as the fingers, proceeding from the right hand to the right wrist, elbow, shoulder, across the tip of the nose to the left shoulder and down to the right hand, then continuing with the two nipples of the breast to the navel and eventually down the legs and to the toes. Up to thirty-seven consecutive counting positions have been observed (Williams 1940–1). The

numeral words present in such languages are derived from the respective parts of the bodies of their speakers. As a result of culture clash and the loss of the traditional culture, these special systems of counting tend to disappear and to be replaced by the abstract decimal counting system of Tok Pisin or English, along with the adoption of the Tok Pisin and English numeral words by the speakers. This is usually the first step in such a language moving towards its 'pseudo-death' (see below).

There are several other highly specialised characteristics of the traditional languages of the New Guinea area, such as a tendency in some to possess special verb forms for reference to actions and events actually witnessed by the speaker, or those only known to him through information supplied by others with him regarding that information to be true or untrue, or concluded by him as having taken place from evidence observed by him after the action or event (for Enga, which has some such features, see Lang 1973). Such formal distinctions are not a feature of the languages which are the means of expression of the new culture now encroaching upon the traditional culture in the areas where languages with such features are found; inevitably, the obligatory expression of these distinctions in the indigenous languages concerned falls into disuse.

To move into another area of the world in this connection it may be mentioned that Khalkha Mongolian, the language spoken by most of the population of present-day Mongolia, traditionally possesses a large number of different imperative verb forms by which many grades of ordering, from extremely rude to extremely polite, can be distinguished (Ramstedt 1903). Russian culture and language, which has exerted a powerful influence upon Mongolia during the last seventy years, with the young generation largely adopting the Russian culture and world-view, lacks these elaborate distinctions, and the young generation of Khalkha speakers are often no longer familiar with the fine distinctions referred to, and in any event do not use them, but restrict the imperative forms in their language to two categories which are equivalent to the two categories found in Russian.

A particularly interesting case of the influence of Russian culture and language upon languages within its present or past orbit, and the adoption of much of it by an indigenous people, is that of the Aleutian dialect spoken on Mednyj Island mentioned in (c), in which some of the highly complex Aleutian suffixal

verb inflection has been replaced by one derived from Russian.

Many more cases coming under category (d) which concern mainly morphological, syntactic and discourse features and idiom could be mentioned, but the examples provided may suffice. This category has been treated more extensively than the others, because there is generally less awareness of this phenomenon than of those dealt with under (a), (b) and (c). What has been described under (d) actually constitutes the death of a language in its traditional form, and its replacement by something mirroring a culture alien to the speakers of the traditional language. It could be described as pseudo-death.

Political Influence and Conquest Outside political influence upon speakers of a language may also have far-reaching consequences for that language. Such political influence may take many forms and range from pressure of various kinds, to colonialism and conquest of the area where speakers of a given language live. In the last case, the conquerors may be actively encouraging the adoption of their language by the speakers of the local language(s) rather than relying on the economic and cultural influence exerted by them upon the local people. The case of the Incas conquering a large part of western South America a short time before the Spanish invasion and putting the local populations under pressure to adopt their Quechua language is well known. It seems that most speakers of other languages in the area adopted Quechua only reluctantly, because a number of other languages are said to have appeared (i.e. reappeared) in the area, after the power of the Incas had been broken by the Spaniards. The Irish mostly adopted the English language of their conquerors as their own but in a special form which clearly identifies them (see above, examples for (b)). Many Australian Aboriginals have adopted English, though often in a sub-standard form as Aboriginal English. The Latin language of the Roman conquerors was adopted in many parts of the Roman Empire by speakers of Celtic, Iberian and other languages which gave rise to the present-day Romance languages. The cultural and economic strength and aggressiveness of the conquerors appear to have played a significant part in many such cases. A special instance of conquest has been the transporting of a large number of Africans as slaves to the Americas, with these slaves soon adopting the languages of their masters, though usually in a simplified and modified form which led

to the development of the various creole languages there (which are based on English, French and Dutch), and also of Negro English in the USA.

In some instances, the reverse happens, and the conquerors adopt the language of the conquered. This is particularly so with warrior nations whose culture lacks certain qualities and features characteristic of nations with a metropolitan civilisation in which great store is set by literary tradition, and who conquer another nation whose culture has these qualities. All conquerors of China – largely people of Mongolian, Turkic and Tungusic stock – adopted Chinese as their language before long, and became culturally Chinese, though some, like the Tungusic Manchu, kept their traditional language artificially alive in addition, at least in writing. Some Viking groups of conquerors adopted French; others, who penetrated what is today western Russia, adopted the local Slavic language in place of their own. The Sumerians, who had a highly sophisticated culture and civilisation and who created the cuneiform script which became widespread in the Ancient Middle East, were ultimately conquered by the Akkadians, and yet the Sumerian language continued to be used by the latter for certain ritual and other purposes for a long time.

Nations colonising areas occupied by speakers of other languages, mostly indigenous ones, have not as a rule imposed their own languages upon the local populations, but tended to use one or several of the local languages for purposes of communication and administration, and to rule the areas. The languages thus used gained prestige and sometimes became widespread *linguae francae* amongst the local populations, though rarely replacing local languages. Hindustani in the Indian sub-continent and Swahili in East Africa are cases in point, as is Malay in the Dutch East Indies. Some colonial powers such as the French, Spanish, Portuguese and the Italians, placed more weight on the spreading of the knowledge of their own languages amongst the local populations of their colonies than, for instance, did the British, Germans and the Dutch.

In concluding this section, it may be pointed out that the three main types of influence, i.e. economic, cultural and political, may well be present together in varying degrees in any one case. So for instance, minority languages in the USSR are officially encouraged to survive. Instruction in elementary education is given in them in many instances, publications for school and general

use are produced in them, and so on. Nevertheless, the young generations increasingly adopt Russian as their language as the only means of economic advancement, in response to Russian cultural pressure, and to political pressure aiming at Russification. Only recently have there been beginnings of countermovements against this amongst some speakers of minority languages as a result of a heightening feeling of identity through language amongst such people in the light of the changing situation in the USSR. The situation in China is in many ways comparable to that described for the USSR.

Forces Acting Against Language Loss and Death

While the foregoing has painted a gloomy picture of the fate of many languages heading towards death and disappearance, there are several powerful forces which work against such a fate and often ensure the survival of languages which, according to what has been said so far, appear to be doomed.

One of these forces is the possible use of an otherwise doomed language as a secret language in situations in which its speakers are under heavy political or other pressure by carriers of a strong aggressive culture, or invaders, conquerors, colonialists and the like. Some Australian Aboriginal languages in southeastern Australia, believed to be largely extinct in the 1950s, were found by the present writer to be (at least in rudimentary forms) in common use as secret languages to hide their speakers' actions and intentions from the police (whom Aboriginals regarded as their arch-enemies, because it was their job to enforce the tough drinking laws of the day which forbade the consumption of alcohol by most Aboriginals). This ability to derive advantages from being able to speak a language which their oppressors do not understand, serves also as a strong booster of the self-esteem of people who find themselves otherwise in an inferior position. Welsh and Gaelic have been used in Britain in similar roles, as have many other languages of people who find themselves in a losing cultural battle threatening their languages with extinction. From there it is only one step to the language of a people who are oppressed, or regard themselves as oppressed, becoming the rallying symbol of a political or cultural movement. The Papua Independent Movement in Papua New Guinea in the 1970s and 1980s had the

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Police Motu (now called Hiri Motu) language as its rallying point – with 200,000 speakers, it resisted the onslaught of Tok Pisin as a common language, though the latter had then over two million speakers. In addition to such functions, the traditional language of a people often serves as a powerful means of group and self-identification, and may well survive for that reason alone. The Maori language of New Zealand constitutes an example, and some languages which are highly complex and regarded as unlearnable by outsiders serve as very strong symbols of self- and group identification. Any good speaker of such a language is automatically regarded as being in the in-group and a friend. Hungarian is a case in point: native command of that language opens doors of Hungarians everywhere, and it is the language which is kept alive longest, i.e. for several generations, in countries of immigration such as Australia and the USA amongst immigrants who do not live in close-knit communities, such as Italians and Greeks often do, and thereby naturally maintain their languages as community languages. It is significant in this to remember that the Hungarians adhered to their Finno-Ugarian language (albeit adopting many Iranian, Turkic, Slavic and other loan words) during their 5,000 years of history, in spite of replacing their original culture and social structure first by an eastern Iranian and later a Turkic, and finally adopting the Western one on a Slavic and Germanic basis (Harmatta 1990). Finnish, Basque, Turkish and Central Asian Turkic languages are other examples of languages tenaciously adhered to by their speakers. Nations and other large national groupings differ markedly in the esteem in which they hold their own languages. Great complexity and difficult learnability of a language is in direct proportion to its boosting national pride, self-esteem and a feeling of superiority on the part of its speakers in the case of quite a few languages; this contributes greatly to their preservation in adverse cultural and other situations. It does not work that way in the case of some other complex languages, especially not if its speakers are unaware of its difficult nature for outsiders, have a tendency to believe in their own inferiority as a result of certain adverse historical and social experiences, and have lost much of their self-esteem and national or group pride and feeling of group cohesion.

Concluding Remarks

The processes outlined above have been constantly changing the linguistic picture of the world, and more significantly than before, during the last two or three centuries. They are likely to bring about even more profound changes in the future. Linguists of today, who regard language as an intrinsic part of the culture and society of its speakers, and as something based on the manner in which people view the material and spiritual world surrounding them, feel a sense of alarm about this development. Every language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. With the death of the language, or its pseudo-death as discussed in (d) above, an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view has been lost for ever. This is understood by many linguists today. For linguists of some common persuasions holding sway in the latter part of the twentieth century, the main subject of interest has been either the purely structural side of a language, or a language as one of the many surface forms of an underlying deep structure of human language as a whole. For them, the death of a particular language is not of the same importance; they are less concerned with the function of a language as the means of expression of the world-view, philosophy and system of thought of its speakers and of a speech community, and with questions of the roles and the setting of a language within the culture and society of its speakers who use it as their means of intercommunication within this framework.

It may be hoped that increasing awareness of the need for language management procedures, which include raising speakers' self-esteem and regard for their own language as a means of self-identification, may at least retard events as described in this paper, in the case of languages threatened with extinction.

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