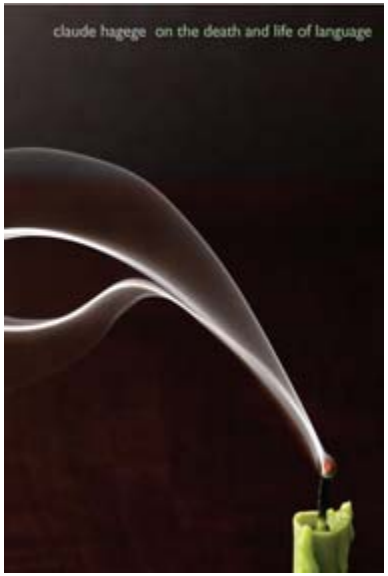
Schott's Vocab

A Miscellany of Modern Words & Phrases

December 16, 2009, *4:32 am*

Q and A: The Death of Languages



Yale University Press

A week or so ago, co-vocabularists were invited to post questions on the future of communication to the French linguist Claude Hagège – author of "On the Death and Life of Languages."

Mr. Hagège's detailed and thought-provoking answers are below:

Q.

Who says English is going to dominate forever? Last I checked, India and China are ascendant and the US is in decline … – Brian Bailey

A.

Hindi (the most spoken language in India) and Mandarin Chinese might replace English as dominant languages some day. But two reasons at least lead one to think that the process could be long:

(i) Hindi is not widespread outside Asia, and there is presently no special effort to promote it worldwide. As for Mandarin Chinese, it is true that a great number of Confucius Institutes are scheduled to be built by China in various countries, but we cannot know today the result of this decision;

(ii) The publications (books, internet, etc.) in English cover all domains of knowledge, let alone the presence of English in all other activities. These traces of the worldwide spread of English will not disappear.

Q.

What role, if any, do you think that arts play in the survival of a language? – Adam

A.

I would tend to think that arts play a rather limited role in the survival of a language. This applies, in particular, to painting, sculpture and architecture, which are particular types of communication, able to deliver messages by using other means than words. However, historically, many traces of extinct languages are transmitted to us by linguistic messages which accompany works of art. For instance, many old religious buildings, shrines, temples, churches contain inscriptions. Archaic mints exhibit carved words which keep traces of Latin, classical Greek, Pharaonic Egyptian, Sumerian, Coptic, Turkish, etc. Poems in Classical Chinese often accompany Chinese paintings. Finally, old forms of various languages are conserved in musical works in which the melody is accompanied by the words of one or another language.

Q.

In your study of languages, do you distinguish between what is commonly referred to as British English and American English? If so, how do you apply that distinction in terms of assessing the health of a spoken language? I am also thinking of various forms of French, Spanish, and German that are not considered regional dialects. – Henry Krawitz

A.

The existence of various forms of a spoken language can both prove its health and bear signs of its split. Due to continuous relationships across the Atlantic, the American form of English has not become a language entirely different from British English, even though many phonetic, lexical, and, to a lesser extent, grammatical features are not the same on both sides of the Atlantic, and make it possible to assign a certain way of speaking either to British or to American English. But at the same time, the spread of a language in many parts of the world can generate increasingly diverging forms. The English spoken in India, in Thailand, in the Philippines, to take three Asian examples, and the English spoken in Uganda, Tanzania and Nigeria, to take three African examples, are different enough to have given rise to a new discipline within linguistics, namely the study of N(on) N(ative) V(arieties) of E(nglish). It is not ruled out that these Englishes might some day become as many different languages.

This evolution is less likely in the case of French and Spanish. The reason for that is not far to seek. There is no established norm of English, that would be imposed, whether after the British or the American model, on all those who express themselves in this language. As opposed to that, other languages which also have an international vocation are much more unified. Such is the case of French, which is official or widely used in the 70 countries of the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie). Forms of French that are not considered regional dialects, like those used in Quebec, southern Belgium or Romance Switzerland, are more or less modelled of Parisian French, even though there are phonetic and lexical differences between them. This is largely due to the permanent communication between the speakers of these forms of French. Similarly, lexicographers and grammarians from all the countries which speak Spanish, in Europe and Central and South America, gather regularly in order to establish a common norm for this language, even in its spoken form.

Q.

A language is irreplaceable, just like an animal or plant species. And those of us who love languages know that a language is not just words: it mirrors and defines a way of life, a way of thinking, a unique view of reality. My question: at what point do we declare that a language has died? –

Paulette

A.

A language is declared to be dead when the last, generally old, people who still spoke it die without having transmitted it to their children and grandchildren. Thus the two, mutually related, criteria are: death of the last speakers and lack of transmission.

Q.

Dear Prof Hagège, Many thanks for fielding questions on your research from this forum. I know that the Gaelic League struggled during the 1890s over which dialect to use for teaching Irish to the organization's exclusively English speakers. They eventually chose the Irish spoken in Connaught over that of either Munster or Ulster, in part, because of its unique influence on the English also spoken there. Remarkably, some also thought the English spoken in Connaught closer to older forms of spoken English, not least that of Shakespeare. I hope, then, that you might speculate on the role played by hybridity in preserving and protecting endangered languages. Best wishes, Adam

A.

Thank you for adducing the case of Connaught Irish, which seems to dovetail nicely with the idea (hopefully not quite a speculation!) that hybridization may, in certain situations, protect a language, by conserving important parts of its original structure while, at the same time, importing other components from languages whose pressure might appear as threatening, but becomes, in that way, an enrichment and a diversification. To the cases of the Copper Island language and Mbugu, mentioned in "On the Death and Life of Languages," Connaught Irish may be added as a further convincing illustration.

Q.

Dear Mr. Hagège: have you found similarities between the way languages grasp the world? Thank you so much. Carlos Salas

A.

There are differences and similarities between the ways languages grasp the world. To begin with differences, let me mention only two examples among many:

(i) It is impossible in Mandarin Chinese to say something identical to English "a book." Between yì ("a, one") and shū ("book"), this language requires the addition of another word: běn, called a classifier by linguists because it refers to the class of objects to which books belong. Thus, while English does not need to assign an object to a class, Chinese imposes this assignment on speakers. Therefore, these two languages do not grasp the world in the same way, since the existence of classes of objects, a universal property of the world such as viewed and organized by human societies, is expressed here and left unexpressed there;

(ii) The expression of a meaning which is called semelfactive by linguists, namely "occurrence of an event at least once in the past" varies widely

through languages. Mandarin Chinese says, for example, *John qù guo Yingguó* (John go SEMELFACTIVE England) "John has been (at least once) to England." In Japanese, on the other hand, one has no choice but to say *John ga Eikoku ni itta koto ga aru* (John SUBJECT.MARKER England to went fact SUBJECT.MARKER exists) "the fact that John has been to England exists," which may be considered a complex way of wording this meaning. In English there is an interesting difference between John has gone to England and John has been to England. The first sentence implies that John is now in England, or is on his way there, whereas the second sentence simply says that on at least one occasion John did in fact go to England. This difference between go and be in English makes it possible to differentiate between a past event in general and one which is characterized as having occurred at least once. But English, unlike Mandarin Chinese, has no specific form to express this last meaning. Thus, we see that the occurrence of an event in the world, namely a meaning which is the same everywhere, is expressed in fairly different ways by these three languages.

However, there exists an important activity which clearly shows that even though the ways languages grasp the world may vary widely from one language to another, they all build, in fact, the same contents, and equivalent conceptions of the world. This activity is translation. Any text in any language can be translated into a text in another language. These two texts express the same meaning. We can therefore conclude that despite the differences between the ways languages grasp the world, all languages are easily convertible into one another, because humans interpret the world along the same, or comparable, semantic lines.

Q.

What's your take on whether distinct dialects (say, of widely-used languages such as Chinese or Arabic) will survive increasing globalization and a limited number of dialects of those languages being taught to nonnative speakers? Also, what languages native to the Americas still survive today, and in what capacities? Do these tongues have a future? – Allison.

A.

Increasing globalization concerns international commercial relationships rather than private communication. It is unlikely that Arabian dialects, which are constantly used in oral exchange, will be ousted by literary Arabic, which is not spoken as a common conversation language in any Arabian country. The same can be said of Chinese dialects, let alone Chinese languages other than Mandarin, like Cantonese. Despite the spread of standard Chinese, which is taught in schools, languages and dialects spoken in China are not threatened by globalization. The forms which are taught to nonnative speakers are not dialects whose number would be dwindling, but standard forms. Furthermore, nonnatives are a minority if compared to the masses which use a variety of dialects.

As far as languages native to the Americas are concerned, the pressure of Spanish in Central and South America and English in North America has certainly brought about, from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, a decrease in the number of languages (the problem, here, is different from that of dialects of widespread languages like Arabic or Chinese mentioned above). However a number of Indian communities are striving to revive their vernacular languages, or to foster its widest possible use, and to preserve it against the perspective of extinction. In the US and Canada Athabaskan languages such as Chipewyan and, especially, Navaho are strongly supported by teaching and maintenance in everyday life, and the same is true of some Algonquian languages. In Mexico, Nahuatl (Aztecan) and Quiche (Mayan) are also backed by maintenance efforts, and widely used. In Peru and Bolivia, the same applies to Quechua. In Chile the Mapuches have so far resisted the pressure of Spanish, and succeeded in preserving a wide use of their language. Paraguay has even gone as far as making Guarani an official language on the same level as Spanish.

The future of these tongues depends on the will of their speakers to maintain their use. Judging by the strength of their identity feeling, which commands this will, it seems that some, at least, of the languages that coexist with widespread international languages might survive for some time.

Q.

What role do language immersion schools play in arresting the extinction of a culture or language? Do these help to maintain the cultural identity of a marginalized group? Also, what benefits does immersion show over book learning coupled with language coursework? Specifically, I'm curious about Native American language immersion schools.It's a fascinating topic, thank you. – Jared

A.

Immersion schools have the power of arresting the extinction of a culture or language and maintaining the cultural identity of a marginalized group. An example which I mention in my book "On the Death and Life of Languages," Yale University Press, 2009, is that of the Peach Springs experiment in Arizona (p. 227). Beginning in 1975, the immersion schools program succeeded in curbing the erosion of Hualapai, an Indian language formerly spoken there on a wide basis. Immersion of course does not rule out book learning and language coursework. They are all combined to strengthen the effort to protect endangered languages.

However, there is a problem with these immersion schools. When children finish their courses in these schools, they resume their relationships with a society in which English is dominant. The only way to maintain the knowledge and practice acquired in immersion schools would be to give the threatened Indian language, within the tribe or community which has decided to promote it through these schools, an official status on the same level as English. Such an extension of the results obtained by immersion schools is not impossible, despite obvious practical difficulties in everyday life contexts, which put the Indian language in permanent contact with English. This extension requires an important financial support. This support itself implies a strong identity feeling, as is often found among Indian communities whose languages are endangered.

Q.

With the exponential growth of technology, accompanied by a proliferation of technical terms expressed the same across languages, will the richness and nuanced expression across languages be diminished. – annieR

A.

The proliferation of technical terms that are expressed the same across languages as a result of the exponential growth of technology does not jeopardize in the least the richness and nuanced expression across languages, if only because what we express in our interpersonal relationships has little to do with technology. Let us take affects and feelings as examples. No one has reported, so far, that the many ways that exist, across languages, to declare oneself to somebody one loves are by no means diminished by the growth of technology. Let me mention examples from my book, A Language-Lover's Dictionary of Languages (French edition: Paris, Plon, 2009):

"I love you" is expressed by "I want you" (*te quiero*) in Spanish, "(you) are (a) love(-source) (to me)" (*suki da*) in Japanese, "I love towards you"

(*aku cinta pada mu*) in Indonesian, "I love a part of you" (!) (*rakastan sinua*) in Finnish, "I wish good (things to happen) to you" *(ti voglio bene*) in Italian, "to-me from-you love is" (*mujhe tum-se pyar hê*) in Hindi and many other languages spoken in India, "love I-have-you" (*maite zaitut*) in Basque, "to me you me-love-are" (*me shen mi-kvar-khar*) in Georgian (Georgia, southern Caucasus), "I I-you-love" (*she ro-haihu*) in Guarani (Paraguay).

Other affects and feelings are expressed in very rich, diverse and nuanced ways across languages, whatever the impact of technology in our lives. For example, shame is "seen," or "eaten," etc., in such languages as Swahili (Tanzania), Ewe (Ghana and Togo) or Mandarin Chinese; illness "has" me in Moore (Burkina Faso); hunger and fear are "on" me in Irish; "my friend is sick" or "she is happy" cannot be expressed in that way in Japanese, where one has to add a word meaning "apparently" or "allegedly," because for speakers of this language, ego cannot refer to affects or feelings that s/he does not undergo him- or herself. "To be boring" or "to be bored" are expressed as "to have a millstone around the neck" in Dutch, "to get out from the elbow" in Hungarian, "to talk with one's lice" in Subcarpathic Gypsy, "to hunt flies" in Moroccan Arabic, "to have one's anus torn out" in Maithili (India), "to suck the marrow" in Yiddish.

To the best of my knowledge, such expressions, far from being threatened by the growth of technology, continuously flourish across languages.

Q.

This article briefly discusses how the loss of a language can erase its original and creative conceptions of reality from the pages of history and the minds of humanity. With that in mind, what are the most interesting alternative conceptions of reality embedded in languages and their grammar that are currently dead or dying? What, if any, linguistic-metaphysical ideas should we be trying to save from extinction? – Ian K

A.

Interesting conceptions of reality are embedded in dying or dead languages and their grammar, which should be saved from extinction (cf. "On the Death and Life of Languages," Yale University Press, 2009 (pp.191-203):

· Many ideas are drawn from the observation of living (zoological, botanical) species, reflected in names that point to the way they are perceived and to the properties that tribal societies have discovered in them. This kind of relationship with nature tends to be lost in industrial societies, and has much to teach us on the links we should keep with our environment, for our health and our social harmony, let alone our happiness itself;

· Many extinct or nearly extinct languages were spoken by tribes whose chiefs gathered people in order to give them instruction on the behavior to be adopted in various circumstances, on the way to express one's solidarity with neighbors and other members of the tribe, and on a number of principles which guarantee the moral health of a human community;

· Initiatory languages (for example Damin, the initiatory language of the Lardil tribe in Mornington Island (Northern Queensland, Australia)) exhibit a sophisticated blend of abstraction and concern for concrete details, which assumes a whole body of subtle mental activities, very suggestive for present research in cognitive sciences. The same applies to the existence of three or even four past or future tenses in certain endangered languages in Africa and Papua-New Guinea, each of these referring to a precise moment in time.

· Many endangered languages have special grammatical tools that are obligatory in every affirmative sentence, and that indicate the source of the knowledge expressed by the speaker: observed reality, hearsay, eye witness, inference, logical deduction, etc. This characteristic, very often present in Amerindian languages like those of the Amazonian forest in Brazil or those of the Sioux family in the US, is entirely absent from European languages, and has much to teach us on the relationship we have with our own discourse.

Q.

I am an American studying Arabic and often ask myself this question: How can we reconcile (1) preserving world languages, their beauty and history, with (2) the increasing need for foreign language speakers to know English if they plan to succeed in many cases? I've had many debates on the importance of Arabic in the Arab world but some have responded to my support of fusha by saying "are you going to make them study that in the classroom when English could give someone a better life?" It is a huge question which has numerous subquestions but I would like to hear your thoughts. – Dot

A.

Teaching English as a language which can more easily provide a better life and a profession does not prevent foreign language speakers from remaining faithful to their vernacular language as the only one able to express their most personal thoughts and feelings. It does not seem that the two are difficult to reconcile, since the domains of use of the two languages, say Arabic fusha (Classical or "pure" language) and English, are quite different, as are the circumstances, in peoples' lives, in which one or the other is used.

Q.

Suppose everyone woke up tomorrow fluently speaking, writing, and reading the same one language, in addition to the one(s) they now speak.1. What would happen? My guess is that the benefits of our all being able to understand each other would be great and we would soon gravitate towards having most of our communicating being done in that language. We would even more quickly become a one language world.2. Would that be a good thing? How could it NOT be a good thing? – Charles Foster

A.

The advent of one and the same language for the whole world instead of the present diversity is both unlikely and infelicitous:

(i) It is unlikely because it is in the nature of languages, like living organisms, to become more and more different from each other, if only because the cultural backgrounds of human societies, i.e. the backgrounds from which languages have been formed, are deeply different;

(ii) It would be infelicitous, because the cultural, and hence linguistic, diversity of the world is the main factor of its richness. A one language world would be an unbearable world, in which people would be bored to death.

Today, the language which would come close to the "ideal" of a one language world would be English. But then, speakers of other languages which are also widespread, like Spanish, French, Portuguese, etc., could say: "why not our language?".

Q.

Phenomena come and go and to try to "preserve" a language is a useless endeavor. And why would you want to? It is a tool and when its need disappears with the culture new languages come up.Trying to preserve everything that ever was at the expense of new developments crowds us out of the crucial continuance of life. If you try to stand still you die. If you evolve and grow you go to higher levels.It is a feature of nature to change continuously, to shed the old no matter how beautiful. The spirit that creates leads us to new experiences always. – rowdy 68

A.

To try to preserve a language is not a useless endeavor. Languages are much more than communication tools. When one tries to preserve something that existed before, it is far from being at the expense of new developments, nor does it by any means crowd us out of the crucial continuance of life. Would one say that Roman and Gothic cathedrals, Renaissance paintings, sculptures and castles, Venice palaces, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms chamber-music are works that make us stand still? Quite to the contrary, preserving masterpieces inherited from the past enhances our own creativeness. Languages are not technical objects or industrial devices that can be abandoned once used. They are creations of our minds, and preserving them offers us seminal conceptions of the relationships between man and the universe. Shedding the old when it isn't useful anymore is conceivable, but endangered languages are not obsolete systems that no society needs. They reflect various very interesting human cultures which make part of human civilization (as recalled in my "Language-Lover's Dictionary of Languages," French edition: Paris, Plon, 2009). Furthermore, they can be revived. When Hebrew became, by the collective decision of a human community, the language of a state, it had disappeared from spoken usage two millenaries earlier. Just because they express endlessly varying identities, human languages do not fall into oblivion when they fall into disuse.

Q.

Aside from Hebrew, Gaelic, and to a lesser extent Welsh would you please discuss any other models for language survival and/or revival? In the case of the above mentioned languages, what do you think are the main reasons for their relative success? Can lessons from these cases be applied to maintaining other languages currently under threat of extinction? Finally, in all three of the above cases, these languages were preserved because the respective linguistic communities were committed to preserving them. To what extent are other languages currently suffering extinction falling out of use because the given linguistic communities are VOLUNTARILY letting them fall out of use? In a word, these languages are dying because no one wants to speak that particular language any more – speakers of that language believe greater economic, social, educational benefits are available to them if they assimilate to the local dominant language. If language death is voluntary, if the death of a language arises from the preference of its speakers to assimilate to some other language, who is anyone to say that is a bad thing? – cadmus

A.

Economic and social pressures are a capital factor in the process that leads a language to fall into disuse. The promoters of Hebrew, Gaelic and Welsh, to which Cornish should be added (since it is in the process of being revived even though it died at the beginning of the XIXth century), were not submitted to strong pressures from a foreign society imposing assimilation on them. This, on the contrary, is exactly what happened to Amerindian communities submitted to the pressure of English in North America and Australia, and Spanish and Portuguese in Central and South America. It

cannot be said that "the given linguistic communities are voluntarily letting [their languages] fall out of use" because "no one wants to speak [them] any more," or that "speakers of [these languages] believe greater economic, social, educational benefits are available to them if they assimilate to the local dominant language." This is not the result of a free choice.

The proof is not far to seek. As recalled in "On the Death and Life of Languages" (pp. 123-124), in Australia and North-America, the Anglophone school was a death machine for Aboriginal and Indian languages. It was explicitly stated, for instance, that Indians should be "civilized" by removing their children from the "barbaric" influence of their native tongues and transferring them into prison-like boarding schools where the use of Indian languages was absolutely forbidden: all infractions were severely punished, and Indian languages were portrayed as diabolic creations, hated by God, whom children were ordered to obey absolutely. Thus, the belief that Indian languages had no future was very early hammered into Indians, and it is fairly doubtful that speakers abandoned them by free choice.

Q.

How do you think the Irish language (Gaeilge) will fare out and the continuing effort to revive it as a second language in Ireland? It is true that the successful effort to ban it by the British, when they were in power in Ireland through 1920, caused major problems for the Irish. Having one's own language is a great source of pride and individuality. To be forced to abandon it caused the reverse emotions. – Jim Conlon

A.

Irish is, along with English, one of the two official languages of Ireland. It is taught in schools in *gaeltachtai*, namely regions in which it is still present as a mother-tongue, whose use is linked to traditional activities, representing only 10% of the Irish population. In fact, the pressure of English, geographically close and economically dominant as it has been for centuries and centuries, is so strong, that even though Irish is not really on the brink of extinction, it can be considered an endangered language. It is quite true that "having one's own language is a great source of pride and individuality." But this feeling has often been strongly combated by those who wanted to impose their language on communities whose language they eradicated, as illustrated by the fate of Indian and Aboriginal languages in North America and Australia during the XIXth century (see answer to Cadmus's question above).

Q.

To what degree do languages change over time in relation to the flexibility of syntax and size of vocabulary (I do not assume that all systems evolve toward more flexibility and/or larger vocabularies). Do these variables lead to different capacities for those using a particular language system to express ideas, emotions? – Peter

A.

The evolution of languages is cyclic rather than unilinear. Synthetic languages, in which grammatical meanings are composed together into complex verbs and nouns, become, across centuries or millenaries, analytical languages, in which grammatical as well as lexical units tend to correspond to independent words. This evolution is attested by languages for which we have documents extending over a very long period, like Egyptian between

remote pharaonic dynasties and present-day liturgical Coptic. As far as vocabulary is concerned, periods of relatively "impoverished" lexical stock are followed by opposite periods of expanding lexicon. The reason for this evolution of vocabularies is mostly extra-linguistic: social and technical "progress" is generally reflected in richer vocabularies.

Q.

Between languages there are "translatable concepts," for example the English "dog" vs the German "Hund" but there are also "untranslatable concepts" like the German concept of "kitsch" or the Hebrew concept of "chutzpah." As a result English uses these concepts as loan words, because we do not have these concepts in our language.
And therein lies the contrast: surely language, as a medium of communication, should be able to describe these "foreign phenomena"? Why is it, that we can have similar words for certain concepts but completely lack words for others? Also, similarly, do the connotations of a particular phrasing vary among different cultures? For example, would the learner of Polish, with a more versatile syntax [in general] interpret a particular phrasing in a particular way, in comparison to English with its much more "fixed" word order? – Jeffrey

A.

The reason why a language can have words similar to those of another language for certain concepts while it completely lacks words for others is simply linked to the cultural background of every language. Loanwords are created in a language in order to introduce a notion which does not exist in its cultural background of this language. When a loanword enters a language, it is interpreted by its speakers with the meaning it has in the source language.

Thus, American English chutzpah comes from Yiddish, which borrowed it from Hebrew, in which it referred to the attitude of a person who, having killed his parents, throws himself on the mercy of the court saying he is a poor orphan. English could of course translate this word by "shameless audacity," "presumption-plus-arrogance," "brazen nerve" and the like. However, only the word in its original (Hebraic) form contains the whole richness of this concept, and all the implications linked with Yiddish humor, so that it is much more significant and suggestive as a loanword than when it is translated. Likewise, kitsch, from Bavarian *kitschen* "to sell old furniture as if it were modern," kept all the implications of its origin when it was borrowed into English around 1926, as a word expressing a content which did not correspond to any reality in British and American cultures, and therefore did not appear as nameworthy.

We can conclude that concepts for which no word exists in a given language are often those which do not appear as nameworthy in the culture reflected by this language.

This situation applies to vocabulary, but much less to the various types of phrasings. Assuming that in Polish (and other Slavonic languages) syntax is more versatile than in English with its much more "fixed" word order, this does not entail that the learner of Polish would interpret a particular Polish phrasing in a particular way, distinct from the interpretation of the corresponding English phrasing. The crosslinguistic variations in word order, and in syntax generally, are characteristic of various linguistic types but have little or no impact on the content of sentences: one and the same semantic content can, depending on the language, and even within the same language, be expressed by various syntactic constructions.

Q.

My guess is the languages most likelyto go into disuse are those in localitieswhere a prominent language of commerceis taking over extensively and few peoplefeel the need to continue using the "old"language. As when a language in a jungleor mountain hinterland gives way toSpanish or Portugese in Latin America, e.g.Languages that are spoken only, and notwritten, which have no national function,but more of a tribal local function, yet arestill surviving, I'm thinking, are likely toremain extant if in a remote enough regionthat it's not so much influenced bycommerce and the power of a nation.Are these at least some of the factorsthat send a language into disuse? – Michael Dennis Mooney, Albany, NY

A.

It is quite true that languages that are exposed to the pressure of prominent languages of commerce are most likely to go into disuse, and even more so when they are spoken only and not written, and have a tribal local, rather than national, function. Nevertheless, those, among them, that are spoken in a remote enough region, far from the influence of commerce and power, are much better preserved. Other factors also prevent a language from falling into disuse, especially the following two: (i) an identity feeling rooted in deep ethnic consciousness and (ii) a culture rooted in an old, and constantly recalled, tradition. Examples are Kamsra, Andoke, and several Cariban and Arawak languages spoken in north-western Brazil and south-eastern Colombia, where Spanish and Portuguese are dominant, or Hinukh, spoken in north-eastern Caucasus, where Russian is strongly present.

Q.

At Expo 86 in Vancouver, I saw a marvelous thing. The English statement, "Language is the glue. Without it, culture falls apart." Simple statement, complex concept(s). This powerful statement was translated into all the written languages of the First Nations of Canada. It was absolutely stunning and I'll never forget it. My question: What should ordinary non-linguists like us do toward preserving languages, dialects, vocabularies, and the like? – Tom

A.

Thank you for reporting this statement, a stunning and marvellous one indeed. The answer to your question can be found in chapter 9 of "On the Death and Life of Languages," whose title is "Factors in Preservation and the Struggle against Disaster." To sum it up, the best non-linguists can do, in North-America, towards preserving languages, dialects, vocabularies and the like is, among other possible actions,

(i) Participating in associations which, in the US and Canada, work to obtain from local and national governments a recognition of the importance of Indian languages (prosecuted and led to quasi-extinction during the XIXth century) and cultures, such as those of the Algonquian, Athabaskan, Haida, Na-Dene, Nootkan, Penutian, Salishan, Tlingit communities, to name just a few;

(ii) Participating in funding the creation of schools and the appointment and payment of competent teachers;

(iii) Participating in the training of linguists and ethnologists belonging to Indian tribes, in order to foster the publication of grammars and dictionaries, which should also be financially helped;

iv) Acting in order to introduce the knowledge of Indian cultures as one of the important topics in American and Canadian TV and radio programs.

Q.

In an attempt to understand the current ongoing Holocene Extinction event, in which millions of entire species are being removed from the DNA pool, cannot languages be seen as another living structure facing extinction from the activities of the too-successful human species? Classical Sanskrit, Classical Greek, and Latin are three well known examples of languages that have had world impact, but are no longer current. Their influence is still evident in our existing western language structures, however. Nothing remains the same, and everything is always new, even if built on the ruins of what has been. Isn't the problem really about mortality and the inevitability of uncontrollable change? – Wanderer

A.

To some extent, languages can be seen as living species which, like other such species, face extinction, but the "activities of the too-successful human species" cannot themselves be the factor leading to the extinction of languages, since languages are part of the very definition of the human species. This is the reason why most human societies have always cared for dead languages, by keeping traces and testimonies, like the countless texts in Sanskrit, Classical Greek, Latin, and even Sumerian, Pharaonic Egyptian, Geez (old Ethiopic), Classical Chinese, etc. It is therefore not quite true that human societies are powerless against "mortality and the inevitability of uncontrollable change." If it were true, how could Hebrew have been revived to become the language of the state of Israel today, knowing that it had become extinct as early as the sixth century BC, when it was replaced by Aramaic, the language which Yeoshua of Nazareth spoke, like all other Jews, his contemporaries? There are, besides most of the Bible itself, countless texts in Classical Hebrew. The "only" thing which was needed, in order to revive a language whose death went back to such a remote past, was an enormously strong collective human will. This is exactly what happened in Palestine in the first decades of the XXth century! We can conclude that human will can, in certain circumstances, have enough energy to counter social and human changes as well as physical changes in the world, by opposing a neg-entropic force to its blind entropic evolution.

Q.

In Mumbai, there is a political group trying to save Marathi, which they claim, is dying due to the exponentially growing cosmopolitan population of the city. They are causing such a nuisance by forcing (even violently, sometimes) people to display signs only in Marathi, have shops write their names in Marathi, and other such things. They even attacked a movie producer and his office because in his latest release the actors kept referring to Mumbai as Bombay (its old, non-Marathi name!) Its ridiculous! This is not the way to try and save a language. It is very disturbing to see the youth in Mumbai behaving the way they are. I'm sure they can find a better way to promote the use of Marathi among the new generation. Probably by coming out with better quality movies, theater plays, and fun entertainment. What other ways would you suggest in such a case? Thanks.ShachiiBom… uh, oops! Mumbai, India – Shachii

A.

On the first page of her book "Marathi" (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), Rajeshwari V. Pandharipande writes: "For my parents, who gave me the precious gift of the Marathi language." This author is probably one among many lovers of Marathi, the mother tongue, I suppose, of Salman

Rushdie, and also a language important enough to have caused the leaders of the Indian Union to give the political and administrative status of a state, named Maharashtra, to the territory where it is spoken. Of course, the importance of this language in Mumbai is great, but it is also true that (Indo-Aryan) Gujarati, Hindi, and neighboring (Dravidian) languages like Telugu and Kanara, are also spoken in Mumbai, as well as other languages, due to the "exponentially growing cosmopolitan population of the city." Forcing people to display signs, and shops to write their names, only in Marathi, as well as condemning the use of the old name Bombay, are regrettable attitudes. There are better ways to promote Marathi. Among these, I would suggest

(i) TV and radio programs;
(ii) The insistence on Marathi in elementary and high schools;
(iii) Official suggestions to literary authors to use Marathi rather than English in at least some of their works.

Q.

What is your opinion on the future of Chinese language? – CHANG

A.

There is no official effort, so far, to promote Chinese beyond its traditional zone of influence, namely Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, where, along with imported Chinese written characters (*hànzì*), Japanese (through their adaptation as *kanji*), Korean and Vietnamese (among many other languages in that region) imported an enormous amount of Chinese words: they constitute more than half the vocabulary of these three languages, as components which are labelled Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean and Sino-Vietnamese respectively. Today, the Chinese view English as the language by which China can become more open to the rest of the world. This does not mean that the enormous capacity of other countries' sinization which has characterized Chinese culture through the past centuries could not manifest itself again. Chinese communities are present in many parts of the world, essentially in Asia, to some extent in North-America, much less in Europe and Africa, despite recent efforts in the last case. But they do not promote Chinese, at least today, outside Chinese-speaking groups. The situation might change if China continues to appear as one of the leading powers in the world. Moreover, it should be pointed out that a great number (over 1000) of Confucius Institutes are scheduled to be built by China in various countries worldwide, but we cannot know yet what will result from this decision.

Q.

If you were to select one endangered language to learn, and so help preserve, on the basis of its linguistic originality and ability to express ideas in ways not found in other languages, what would it be?– Ryan

A.

An endangered language I would select on the basis of its linguistic originality and ability to express ideas in ways not found in other languages would be Seneca, a northern Iroquoian language. In 1993 it was spoken by fewer than 200 people, on the Tonawanda, Cattaraugus, and Allegany reservations in western New York State. It deserves to be learnt and so helped against extinction.

- Previous post Renup

- Next post BRINK

From 1 to 25 of 110 Comments

1 2 3 ... 5 Next »

1. 1. December 16, 2009 4:54 am Link

   Thank you Mr. Hagège. And thank you, Schott's Vocab Blog.

   — *Shachii*
2. 2. December 16, 2009 6:27 am Link

   Merci M. Hagège. C'était vraiment intéressant.

   — *range*
3. 3. December 16, 2009 7:04 am Link

   Language !
   It is the art of Communication
   It is a medium of Instruction
   It is a symbol of culture
   Without Language skills, Language is alien
   Speaking, reading, writing and Listening
   Otherwise we have signs
   It leads to Emotional integration

A dead or Living Language
shows the Temper of the People
It is a sign of self-respect
Grammar is the soul of any Language !

— *Shahab Mohd Altaf*

4. 4. December 16, 2009 8:08 am Link

What an incredibly lucid and universal article. I wish there were a way to translate it so people of other languages could benefit. That's really what is needed, a better method of real-time translation so people could universally communicate, rather than the less-than-perfect machine translation we have to bear now.

— *Narragansett*

5. 5. December 16, 2009 9:57 am Link

In this article it is stated that, "In Japanese, on the other hand, one has no choice but to say John ga Eikoku ni itta koto ga aru (John SUBJECT.MARKER England to went fact SUBJECT.MARKER exists) "the fact that John has been to England exists," which may be considered a complex way of wording this meaning. In English there is an interesting difference between John has gone to England and John has been to England. The first sentence implies that John is now in England, or is on his way there, whereas the second sentence simply says that on at least one occasion John did in fact go to England. This difference between go and be in English makes it possible to differentiate between a past event in general and one which is characterized as having occurred at least once."

Actually in Japanese there is always choice, so contrary to the statement in the quotation above this comment, in this case too there is a choice:

John ga Eikoku ni itta koto ga aru.
John has been to England (at least once).

John wa Eikoku ni ikimashita.
John has gone to England (and is still there now.)

John wa Eikoku ni imashita.
John has lived in England.

All the best from Tokyo.

Andrew desu. (I am Andrew)
watashi wa 23 nen nihon ni imasu.
(i have been living in Japan for 23 years….)
and am still here now as I write this comment… all the best from Tokyo. (:

— *Andrew Grimes*

6. 6. December 16, 2009 10:16 am Link

   Language is a tool, emerges and develops as an on going interaction of people. However, there are many factors that embody, enhance and empower the usage and popularity of a language.
   There is no rule of thumb to escalate the possibility of long term presence of any language. Yet, it is surprisingly correct that causes of the erosion or extinction of languages resemble to a great extent.
   For me it is useless to mourn over threat that languages will continue or not, the real thing is, whether all the languages will carry the message of love and truth in this globalization era or not?
   Let us see which nation is inclined to convey the message of tolerance to rest of the humanity by the manipulation of its language. What is the significance of my language, if full of abhorrence, hatreds and extortion. Let us form a global language of LOVE, PEACE & TRUTH.A word of kindness is better than libraries of any language, depicting the greedy and blood lusty intentions and practices of its subjects.
   This blog has managed the language issue nicely. In my perspective, Arabic having religious significance for Muslims and English being the language of technology and other sciences (since bulky work has been preserved in English language during last centuries, up till now) will continue till the last dawn.

   — *mylinktahir*

7. 7. December 16, 2009 12:32 pm Link

   I tend to think that you overestimate the ability of "lexicographers and grammarians" to manage the inevitable evolution of a single language spoken in distant geographies. While French or Spanish lexicographers may attempt to manage these divergences, at my level, they have been largely unsuccessful.

   — *dormilon*

8. 8. December 16, 2009 12:49 pm Link

Regarding the continued domination of English, I agree with Mr. Hagège. Just because China and India are rising, does not mean that they will carry their languages to the rest of the world and displace English. As The India Expert, I travel to that country frequently and today hundreds of millions of young Indians are desperate to learn English as a way to improve their income and social standing. India's rise is in a big part the ability of its English speakers to monetize their communication skills. In China as well, young people are learning English for similar reasons, although in smaller numbers. Today most taxi drivers in Mumbai will speak a few words of English.

India has 23 major languages, most of which are not spoken in great numbers outside the country. Indians use English to intercommunicate among themselves. I don't think you are going to see a billion people learn Hindi or Bengali in the next 50 years! While millions will indeed learn Mandarin Chinese, it is unlikely that the the numbers will impact English's lead.

Gunjan Bagla
http://www.theindiaexpert.com
Author "Doing Business in 21st Century India"

— *Gunjan Bagla*

9. 9. December 16, 2009 12:51 pm Link

language, spoken or in silent nod, the way all species communicate, however odd.
it is sad when any form of life goes extinct
as each has its own merit, so distinct
as languages fade
as species die
i am afraid
where will go
you and i

— *karen lyons kalmenson*

10. 10. December 16, 2009 12:51 pm Link

Wider use of the planned auxiliary language Esperanto could contribute to the saving of languages under threat.

Esperanto works! I've used it in speech and writing - and sung in it - in about fifteen countries over recent years.

Indeed, the language has some remarkable practical benefits. Personally, I've made friends around the world through Esperanto that I would never have been able to communicate with otherwise. And then there's the Pasporta Servo, which provides free lodging and local information to Esperanto-speaking travellers in over 90 countries. In the past few years I have had guided tours of Berlin and Milan and Douala in Cameroon in the planned language. I have discussed philosophy with a Slovene poet, humour on television with a Bulgarian TV producer. I've discussed what life was like in East Berlin before the wall came down, how to cook perfect spaghetti, the advantages and disadvantages of monarchy, and so on.

Take a look at http://www.lernu.net

— *Bill Chapman*

11. 11. December 16, 2009 2:15 pm Link

Thank you for standing up for Seneca. In fact all of the Iroquoian languages of New York and Canada (including Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida and to a lesser extent, Mohawk) are similarly endangered and equally expressive.

— *Jen*

12. 12. December 16, 2009 2:19 pm Link

Just because French and Spanish are "standardized" doesn't mean there aren't variants and derivatives of them. One has to look no further than the creoles in New Orleans and the Caribbean to see that.

— *zind*

13. 13. December 16, 2009 2:44 pm Link

Where can I get a copy of your book. I live in the United States and could not find it on Amazon.com or Amazon.fr. Please advise.

— *A Howland*

14. 14. December 16, 2009 3:27 pm Link

I have to nitpick this statement:

"Many endangered languages have special grammatical tools that are obligatory in every affirmative sentence, and that indicate the source of the knowledge expressed by the speaker: observed reality, hearsay, eye witness, inference, logical deduction, etc. This characteristic, very often present in Amerindian languages like those of the Amazonian forest in Brazil or those of the Sioux family in the US, is entirely absent from European languages"

In fact, there are European languages that do possess the category of evidentiality. Macedonian and Bulgarian are two of the most often cited examples of the European languages with this category (probably influenced by the Turkish through the Balkan sprachbund).

— *Sana*

15. 15. December 16, 2009 5:44 pm Link

A Howland – Amazon.com has the book for sale here.

— *Ben Schott*

16. 16. December 16, 2009 8:34 pm Link

Thank you for including my question (Vancouver BC Expo 86)!!
I wish I had a picture of the display!!
:) :) :) tom

— *Tom*

17. 17. December 17, 2009 3:19 am Link

my exprience says, english will die. because almost new-knowlege it has. internet, movies, and TV will change the english but it soul wwill be remain alive. those languages who dont have such capacity as english has also will not die so soon,

— *abdulaziz abid*

18. 18. December 17, 2009 4:52 am Link

The internationalisation of IT, which I enthusiastically support, will, in the longer term, reduce the dominance of English. One part of this endeavour is the use of IDNs.
eg. Loughborough Student Union, England now has Web Addresses in English, Chinese and Japanese. Their English address is http://lufbra.net/ and their Simplified Chinese address is http://拉夫堡学生会.cn/

— *André 小山 Schappo*

19. 19. December 17, 2009 1:31 pm Link

to quote that great acid group Mt. Rushmore from the late 60's

"dust to dust,
ashes to ashes,
'sept for the things that the mind flashes"

the transmissabilty of the english language through the generations such that we can still read and understand the greatest writer in english long after he lived and was buried in Stratford is nothing short of amazing

— *assumed by any or known to none*

20. 20. December 17, 2009 1:41 pm Link

Gracias, excelente articulo.

— *Aida*

21. 21. December 17, 2009 2:03 pm Link

Hasn't English become almost the universal language because it is so Latin/French? Had it not been for William of Normandy we would probably be speaking a Germanic dialect that nobody would outside Britain would have the slightest interest in learning.

— *Phil Linehan*

22. 22. December 17, 2009 2:04 pm Link

Hindi may be spoken by millions in India, but growing up I was *taught* to be embarrassed about Hindi, and that English is a superior language. We were prevented from speaking in Indian languages in school even during recess (the policing wasn't strict, but the attitude does have an effect on impressionable kids). Add to that the boring instruction and textbooks for Indian languages. Add to that the fact that French (French!) was compulsory for EVERYone in sixth and seventh grade, in my English-medium school. That was the 1970s, but the more things change the more they remain the same. Today, millions of parents in small towns who did their schooling in Hindi or some other regional language do whatever it takes to put their kids in schools where English is the medium of instruction. See this article by Amy Waldman, NYT, Nov 15, 2003:
http://www.nytimes.comhttp://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/15/world/india-s-poor-bet-precious-sums-on-private-schools.html

— *Uma*

23. 23. December 17, 2009 2:05 pm Link

i recently stumbled into Unicode and all of The various alphabets and Their variants. coming from an architectural graphics background i mashed up a cartesian coordinate system display of vowels & consonants (separate displays) That show where The vowels are located by Their physical positions. (same for consonants) & Then sliced Them into separate identifiable 'letters' That can be easily related back To The 'over-all' graphical display.

This could be useful in describing 'every' sound both vowels, consonants, glides, phonemes in all languages. just a concept, i am sure it can be improved. maybe we could start a wiki To further develop This. let me know if interested.

i was only using Macedonian and English (so far).

(ps. has This already been done b4?)

Thanks

— *randy sanders*

24. 24. December 17, 2009 2:07 pm Link

Fascinating discussion. Thank you.

"To possess another language is to possess another soul." - Voltaire

— *billp*

25. 25. December 17, 2009 2:18 pm Link

I've read that the post war Japan (1945-) Japanese government seriously considered adopting English as the official Japanese language. Among the reasons for this proposal were the perceived "difficulty" of learning Japanese. Evidently, it was perceived that the time consumed in learning Japanese could put Japanese at a competitive disadvantage (the time could be spent on Algebra?!?!). Eventually, the Japanese government created lists of "standard" KANJI (Chinese characters) that consisted of fewer characters (than had previously been in wide use) and in some cases simplified versions of those characters. China has also created simplified versions of its characters - for the same reason?? Are Japanese and other character based languages actually more difficult to learn? Modern Korean by comparison to Japanese uses fewer Chinese characters and uses them less frequently. Was this an intentional effort on the part of the Korean government to make the language easier to learn and gain competitive advantage. Also, in Kanji based languages, tracing out characters in the palm of your own or someone else's hand is a common form of communication - for instance, when clearing up homonym confusion. Could it be that the discipline of learning Chinese characters is brain exercise…like learning to read sheet music. Perhaps overcoming difficulty/complexity in language results in a competitive advantage?!?!? Would this be true for written language, but not spoken language, if my perception is correct that the two are acquired differently.

— *Rich Young*

1 2 3 ... 5 Next »

Add your comments...

Your Name Required

Your E-mail Required, will not be published

Your Comment
Comments are moderated and generally will be posted if they are on-topic and not abusive. For more information, please see our Comments FAQ.

Submit

Search This Blog

Search

- Previous post Renup

- Next post BRINK

About Schott's Vocab

Schott's Vocab is a repository of unconsidered lexicographical trifles — some serious, others frivolous, some neologized, others newly newsworthy. Each day, Schott's Vocab explores news sites around the world to find words and phrases that encapsulate the times in which we live or shed light on a story of note. If language is the archives of history, as Emerson believed, then Schott's Vocab is an attempt to index those archives on the fly.

Ben Schott is the author of "Schott's Original Miscellany," its two sequels, and the yearbook "Schott's Almanac." He is a contributing columnist to The Times's Op-Ed page. He lives in London.

His Web site can be viewed at benschott.com, and his Opinion pieces here.

Participate

Vocabulary loves company. So, if you have stumbled across a word or phrase that you think suitable for inclusion, please e-mail your suggestion to ben.schott@nytimes.com. You can also follow Schott's Vocab on Twitter.

Vocab of Note

- **For Me Jok**

  A Korean phrase describing self-indulgent purchases.

- **The Credit Munch**

  Recession-prompted comfort eating.

- **Maori Edge**

  The unique characteristics of Maori culture – which may have particular relevance during the economic downturn.

Past Competitions

Below are the weekend competitions from weeks past. Co-vocabularists are invited to peruse the wisdom and wit of their fellow readers, and post any *esprit de l'escalier* that may have just presented itself.

- Euphemisms for Stupidity
- Define Youth
- Eponyms
- Thingummyjigs
- Drunkemisms
- Composite Individuals
- Imaginary Libraries
- Mangled Proverbs
- Define Age
- Confusonyms
- Limericks
- Unlikely Song Lyrics

- $10 Words
- A is to B as C is to D
- Define Work
- Recession Lexicon
- Chronologies for Happiness
- Weasel Words

- Catch-21
- Bernankisms
- Modern Proverbs
- Modern Similes
- Mnemonics
- Inflationary Language
- Define Faith
- Opposites Attract
- Tom Swifties
- Favorite. Word. Ever.
- Define America
- A Murder of Crow(d)s
- Fake Book Titles
- Family Phrases
- Pet Peeves & Vocab Vexations
- Define Money
- Supererogation & Stupidity

Recent Posts

December 18
(730)

Weekend Competition: Pun(ishment)

This weekend, co-vocabularists are invited to stoop to the lowest form of wit and submit the puns that have always tickled them. * * * Whether you're a wordbotcher, quip on the draw, or a glutton for pun(ishment), your puns are welcome here.

December 18
(7)

Constipagen

An irreverent term for the interminable negotiations - and queues - at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen.

December 17
(8)

Salahi

A dubious new verb meaning to crash a party, after Tareq and Michaele Salahi.

December 17
(4)

BRINK

An oil-industry acronym for Brazil, Russia, Iraq, Nigeria and Kazakhstan - five countries predicted to make a significant mark on oil production in the 2010s.

December 16
(110)

Q and A: The Death of Languages

The French linguist Claude Hagege - author of "On the Death and Life of Languages" - responds to questions from co-vocabularists.

Comments of the Moment

> " Did you hear about the rabbi who tried to cheer up his congregants who were sad they couldn't celebrate Christmas? He told them to go deck their halls with loaves of challah."

— joan
Weekend Competition: Pun(ishment)

> " Have you heard about the new corduroy pillows? They're making headlines!"

— Clara
Weekend Competition: Pun(ishment)

Ben Schott's Books

- Schott's Original Miscellany
- Schott's Food & Drink Miscellany
- Schott's Sporting, Gaming, & Idling Miscellany
- Schott's Almanac: 2010

Tag List

- DUBIOUS 149
- PORTMANTEAU 87
- SCITECHNET 80
- SOCIETY 80
- POLITICS 77
- ECONOMY 67
- BRITAIN 66
- RECESSION 65
- NICKNAME 57
- MEDIA 48
- NEOLOGISM 43
- CRIME 35
- FOOD 29
- FINANCE 28
- BARACK OBAMA 26

- ENVIRONMENT 23
- JAPAN 23
- CHINA 23
- TRAVEL 23
- CULTURE 22
- MILITARY 22
- BANKING 19
- MEDICAL 18
- INDIA 18
- TRANSPORT 17
- PROTEST 17
- FRANCE 16
- TERRORISM 16

- CHILDREN 16
- VIOLENCE 15

Archive

Select Month

From the Opinion Blogs

Paul Krugman

The insincere center

Let's not fail to take note of those who had a chance to join in this historic moment, and punted.

Ross Douthat

Weekend Links

Links for the weekend.

Feeds

- Schott's Vocab RSS

Home

- World
- U.S.
- N.Y. / Region
- Business
- Technology
- Science
- Health
- Sports
- Opinion
- Arts
- Style
- Travel
- Jobs
- Real Estate
- Autos
- Back to Top

- Privacy
- Terms of Service
- Search
- Corrections
- RSS
- First Look
- Help
- Contact Us