Quest:
Language Loss: Why are so many of the world's languages disappearing?
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It's parent-teacher conference night at St. Vincent DePaul School. The multi-language (formerly "English-as-a-second language") teacher talks to parents through her interpreter. A father's hand goes up. He is from Malaysia. He speaks Zo and says, "I am sad that I cannot help my son with his homework because I don't know English." Tears fall down his cheeks. Other parents nod as their eyes fill with tears. Soon, the teacher's cheeks are wet, as well. She tells the parent she will look into starting a parents' multi-language class. She seeks materials and funds for the class.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand, Te Hiku Media, a Maori radio station, is pioneering the use of artificial intelligence. Using open-source technology, along with its vast audio archives, the radio station is training and building its own speech-to-text AI model in the Te Reo Maori language.

These stories illustrate polar-opposite examples of language loss and rescue: The first demonstrates parents' desperation to learn the *lingua franca.* The second describes a radio station's effort to help resurrect the "lost" Maori language.

Before I take a deep dive into lost languages, let's look at language gains and losses among Fort Wayne Quest Club members.

Thanks to the nearly 50 Questers who responded to the Language Survey I sent out last fall. Besides English, Spanish was the most common language, studied by 23 respondents. German and French tied for second and third place, with 16 of you studying one or both languages, followed by 11 students of Latin. Please note that some Questers studied multiple languages, so these are not unique totals. Other languages varied greatly from Greek and Hebrew to Slovenian.

No one claimed to be conversant in any language besides English, although several of you know a foreign language well enough to use in business travel and on vacations. A unique response came from Susan Burns, whose dog's puppy years were with Spanish speakers. Today, the dog responds more quickly to some Spanish commands than English ones. How's that working for you, Susan?

Your responses all showed that if a language is not spoken regularly, it becomes rusty or is forgotten.

So why even worry about language loss. As long as we can communicate with one another – isn't that enough?

Well, not so fast, says, linguist Robert Dixon. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Languages,* he writes, “Language is the most precious human resource. … Only by studying the varied possibilities across all languages can we gain a general picture of the nature of the human brain as it relates to language activity. By examining the ways meanings are organized in some little-known language, the linguist may shed light on some universal feature of semantic structure, or evolve some new mode of thinking that could help to deal with problems of the modern world.” So there!

Beyond soaring declarations of universal good, linguists have found many reasons to study – and SAVE – languages. Here are just a few.

- Language contains our history. Different languages offer different ways to describe our world
- Half of the human race is known to be at least bilingual. But, people in a predominantly monolingual culture (Know any of these?) are not used to a bilingual world because they live in the dominant culture that requires people learn their language, while they do not have to learn others’ languages.
- Why don’t we view endangered languages like many view botanical and zoological species? Linguist John McWhorter writes in *The Power of Babel,* “Today, languages are disappearing at a rate as alarmingly rapid as flora and fauna. The same geopolitical forces that are raping the global environment are also vaporizing not just the occasional obscure tongue spoken in remote regions, but most of the world’s 7,000 languages.”
- Linguists maintain there are no primitive languages. As David Crystal writes in *Language Death,* “There is not a language among Native North Americans that fails to offer breathtakingly beautiful intimacy.” Likewise, as we’ll soon learn, other languages add detail to their **specific world that can be found nowhere else on the globe.**
- Languages often express a culture’s identity. In the Korean language, “noism” is a common feature, meaning an individual often uses a collective pronoun to refer to him or herself, such as “our,” compared to the English or American culture that uses “my” or “mine.” Such a subtle feature conveys the collective mindset of the Korean culture, compared to the individualistic mindset of English and American cultures.
- In working with the Kunwinjku (**koon-WINJ-koo**) in northern Australia, Nicholas Evans found the people describe kangaroos’ different manners of hopping. Evans notes that recent computer programs devised by zoologists to identify wallaby species, have had more success when focusing on movement rather than on static appearance – something the Kunwinjku have known for generations. Similarly, Crystal says the number of words the Intuit culture has for snow is truly unanswerable as estimates range from scores to hundreds. The same applies to Siberians’ descriptions of reindeer.
- And finally, during World War II, numerous Native American tribes, most notably the Navajo, served as “Code Talkers,” using their complex, unwritten languages to create unbreakable messages the U.S. military used to

communicate, saving countless lives and helping secure crucial victories, such as at Iwo Jima.

These provide but some examples of the unique, and sometimes crucial, gifts other languages offer.

Now that I've tried to indoctrinate you about saving languages of the world, let's move on to a history of language and the status of languages around the globe.

Archaeological records show a significant rise in symbolic actions (beads, cave art, burials) starting around 100,000 years ago, indicating language was becoming a common tool.

If a language isn't written down, the language cannot be saved if there are no current speakers. McWhorter emphasizes written language is very recent in the history of language. He writes: "If humans had existed just one day, then writing would have been invented at 11 p.m."

Linguists estimate the world may have harbored as many as 100,00 languages during the hunter-gatherer era. Many languages died alongside the fast growth of agriculture, starting around 9,000 B.C. That's because agriculture required large expanses of land and its greater yield led to population growth, which then freed certain classes of people from hand-to-mouth subsistence to develop specializations that led to technological advances. The result? Agricultural societies – and their language -- overran hunter-gatherer groups.

And so, ever since those land-grabbing, greedy agriculturalists, language death has marched on.

Today, *Ethnologue,* an online database that provides statistics and information on the world's known living languages, lists 7,159 languages spoken in 242 countries. However, as linguist Crystal cautions*,* it's very likely that not all languages on earth have been discovered.

Linguist McWhorter, emphasizes that 96 percent of the world's population speaks one or more of the top 20 languages. This means, "only four percent of the world's population speaks all other languages, with these speakers likely being indigenous."

The top 20 languages are – listed by number of speakers: Chinese, English, Spanish, Hindi, Arabic, Bengali, Russian, Portuguese, Japanese, German,

…With the remaining ones being: French, Punjabi, Javanese, Bihari, Italian, Korean, Telugu, Tami, Marathi and Vietnamese.

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Language distribution by geographic area shows:

- 4% of the world's languages are spoken in Europe
- 15% in North and South America
- 31% in Africa
- 50% in Asia and the Pacific, with Papua New Guinea and Indonesia accounting for 25% of the world's languages, or an estimated 1,529 languages

McWhorter continues, "The imbalance of power leads to some gruesome predictions. By one reasonable estimate, 90 percent of the world's languages will be dead by 2100. Or, as linguist Crystal puts it, "this means that a language is dying roughly every two weeks."

Crystal writes, "When one culture assimilates to another, the sequence of events affecting the endangered language seems to be the same everywhere and fall into three broad stages:

- **First:** Immense pressure to speak the dominant language. Pressure can be political, social or economic and it can be "top-down" or "bottom up." That is from government mandates or peer pressure from friends.
- **Second:** bilingualism starts to decline, with the old language giving way to the new, which leads to the third stage ---
- **The younger generation** becomes increasingly proficient in the new language, identifying more with it and finding their first language less relevant to their needs.

So, what is "Language death"?

Language death happens when no one speaks the language anymore. Crystal explains these stages of language death:

- Safe: No dangers to the language's viability
- Endangered: When only a few elderly speakers remain
- Moribund: A relatively new category added by Linguist Michael Krause: when children stop learning their parents' language as their "first language."
- Extinct: When the last fluent speaker dies and there is no sign of revival.

There are basically five key ways that bring about language death: conquests by other nations, language drift and shift, colonialization, disasters—both natural and from human-made, and, finally globalization and urbanization.

The onslaught of Vikings and Romans pushed the Celtic and Gaelic languages to the margins in Ireland and Scotland. However, as we'll soon learn, there are reports of resuscitation of these languages.

Thanks to the Romans, Romance languages generally spread in a continuous path from Portugal eastward – to what's called "the Romance language break" beyond Italy.

Linguist Laura Spinney cautions that the linguistic landscape is terribly susceptible to black swan events, or those defined by unpredictability. For example, Egyptian survived the arrival of the Greeks, Romans and Christianity, but not that of Arabic and Islam in 7th century A.D., and no one knows quite why.

I had never heard of “language drift” or “language shift” until I began researching this paper. Language drift happens around us every day. It’s a slow, natural, and often unconscious evolution of language sounds, meaning and grammar. It can be as simple as using “don’t” rather than “do not,” and as complicated as having Rome’s Latin gradually “drift” into Portuguese, Spanish, French and Italian.

How would America’s various dialects from north, south, east and west have “drifted” if no mass media offered the same words and similar grammar to all readers and listeners?

And now, we move into one of the most devastating chapters in language loss: colonialism.

In the United States, Native Americans spoke about 300 separate languages when the Europeans landed. Today, a third of the languages are gone, with most of the remaining languages only spoken by the elderly. Many of these languages are expected to become extinct within a decade or so.

Language death also occurred on the first slave ships, whose captains and crews purposefully separated people who spoke the same languages. Similarly, when the U.S. banished Native Americans to new territories, they often made certain to separate those speaking the same language.

The United States – as well as Canada, New Zealand and Australia – forcibly compelled their indigenous populations to learn English, through compulsory boarding schools, from the late 1800s to the middle of the 20th century. Students were punished for speaking their native language, often involving physical abuse, isolation and shaming. Children were stripped of traditional clothing, given English names and discouraged from practicing native beliefs.

Notes from other areas include:

- Around 1500 A.D., people of Brazil spoke an estimated 1,725 languages; today there are about 200 languages spoken in Brazil.
- The Andoke people of Columbia were reduced from 10,000 in 1908 to 100 bilingual speakers in the 1970s as a result of enslavement on rubber plantations.

Colonialization also diminished language through disease. Within 200 years of the arrival of Europeans in the Americas, it is thought over 90% of the population was killed by diseases that accompanied the settlers.

Today, globalization and urbanization provide the major threat to indigenous languages.

McWhorter notes, “During the Neolithic revolution, when a language spread across an area, it generally did so relatively slowly, such that, by the time the spread was complete, the language had already developed into several new ones, which continued to spawn new ones in turn. However, capitalism and globalization have led to replacing many languages with only a handful of dominant languages in a very short time…”

McWhorter admits the tendency to romanticize saving languages. “We are trained to emphasize the downside of our First World existence and want to picture a globe peopled by smallish groups living on the land as ‘the way things should be.’” He explains, “Yet for all the pernicious injustices and psychological dislocation inherent in Western life, there is a danger in romanticizing. He points to dwellers in the Amazon rain forest, whose cultures and language are dying at an alarming rate. Their life expectancy is often brief, they have a high infant mortality rate and their treatment of women “would be unthinkable to anyone reared in a modern society.”

He writes that it is not accidental that women in rural and indigenous societies are often at the vanguard of opting out of their native language in order to open the linguistic key to success by entering surrounding cultures, where women have more freedom of choice about child rearing and more control over their relationships.

Now that I’ve depressed you with language loss stories, let’s pull back the dark curtain to examine efforts to resuscitate and save endangered languages. Any discussion about saving a language must begin with the greatest language revival success story of all time: Hebrew.

By the late 1800s, Hebrew had been used only in writing or for liturgical purposes for more than 2,000 years. The movement to make Hebrew the official language of Israel was so successful that today nearly 6 million people speak Hebrew as their native language. As Crystal notes, “A powerful combination of political and religious factors explain the rebirth and ongoing maintenance of Hebrew.”

Although no other language shares the resuscitation success of Hebrew or an international movement such as Zionism to revive it, many noteworthy efforts are taking place around the globe.

The following are just a few examples.

- **Maori:** Beyond the AI efforts at the radio station mentioned at the start of this presentation, New Zealand has made Maori an official language. Its revival is aided by governmental support, immersion schools and television and radio. Today there is bilingual signage and greetings around New Zealand,

- **Hawaiian:** Inspired by the Maori model, Hawaii launched pre-K immersion schools in 1983. The programs enjoy university-level support, degrees in the language, and technological resources.
- **As of 2021, First Languages Australia** has supported 39 language revival programs under its Priority Languages Support Project, commissioned by the Federal Government. Other university-supported and religious organizations are leading resuscitation efforts as well.
- **Palawa kani i**s an attempt to revive various Tasmanian dialects in a single combined form. Original Tasmanian languages, which may have numbered a dozen or more, became extinct in 1905. AI and other methods are involved in rebuilding and reviving these languages.
- **In the U.S.,** success stories arise as young Native Americans seek to acquire competence in their tribe's native language via tutelage from elders. A long-term project at the University of California, Berkley, pairs native Americans with elders in an attempt to save as many Californian indigenous languages as possible.
- **Tourism c**an bring considerable benefits to an endangered language as tourists want to hear the native language spoken

In some cases, parents encourage children to discard the native language. In a much-discussed article in the magazine, *Language,* linguist
Peter *Ladefoged (LAD - uh - foe – gid)* described a Dahalo-speaking father, who was proud of his son for learning Swahili, because it opened doors for his son to enjoy greater success by moving beyond the confines of his village.

As McWhorter repeatedly notes, saving a language is not a black and white issue.

Since the 1970s, and especially since the 1990s, governments and organizations around the globe have provided broad institutional support for language revival. A few examples include:

- **The Language Conservancy** collaborates with tribal nations to revitalize native languages, offering educational resources, training for teachers and developing technologies such as language learning apps
- **The two Native American Language Acts,** passed by Congress in 1990 and '92, offered, in part, to practice and develop Native American languages, and to assure the continuing vitality of their languages. As with other U.S. agencies, I am uncertain of its funding.
- **Wikitongues,** is a volunteer-run movement, using social media platforms to document as many of the world languages as possible.
- **The Endangered Language Fund** provides grants for language documentation and revitalization projects in many countries.

Various linguists provide a “must have” list for making language revival successful. My edited list from several sources maintains that an endangered language will progress if …

- **Its speakers increase in prestige, wealth and power within the dominant community.**
- **There is a strong sense of ethnic identity within the community**
- **The effort involves the community as a whole**
- **And last – and certainly not least – there is support from a stable funding base. ,,, And many more factors**

Piece of cake – right?

Even though many inspirational and herculean language resuscitation projects abound around the globe, nobody – including linguists – remotely believes we can save most of the indigenous languages.

What to do?

Linguists, who I’ve come across in my research, provide a range of answers, with a common theme: Get your heads and sorry selves out of academia and get out in the field.

McWhorter laments that the linguistic landscape is less diverse and much blander than in previous years. He urges linguists to record languages before the language goes extinct, emphasizing that linguists are the most qualified researchers to do this.

He adds, “If this work is not done soon, it can never be done.”

I’d like to end my presentation by moving beyond endangered languages to language losses and gains in Allen County. Every day, many students are learning English as their new *lingua franca*. But what about their native language, be it Spanish, Zo, Burmese or another language? Do they survive?

David Tijerina, Jr., Director of Multilingual Learners at Fort Wayne Community Schools, says of its 28,000 students, 4,600 qualify for Multilingual Learners Classes There are more than 80 languages spoken in Fort Wayne Schools.

The School District has interpreters for Spanish and Burmese on staff. Contracted interpreters help with other languages.

Tijerina said some students exhibit great pride of their culture. For example, Burmese students often ask to wear traditional clothes on special multi-cultural days. (“Of course, they can!” responds Tijerina.) Burmese students often return home to a large Burmese community where the language is spoken and their

culture remains strong. Students speaking other languages may not return to such strong communities that help to keep their culture alive.

He adds, “Some families don’t want to keep their culture. They want their kids to learn English and find success.”

He prefers not to use the term “assimilate” when discussing the Multilingual Learners program. “We don’t want students to absorb our culture, but rather keep their own culture, which has its own unique beauty.”

Tijerina has created a document that shows gains and losses for a culture that does not retain its native language. **SLIDE**

- **Language** is one of the strongest carriers of culture, as it encodes worldviews, metaphors, idioms, songs and more.
- **Culture** includes values, beliefs, traditions, religion, food, social norms and community identity
- **When a language disappears,** generally,
    - Traditional stories lose their authenticity
    - Slang, humor and symbolism don’t translate easily
    - Intergenerational ties weaken when children cannot speak with elders
    - Cultural rituals lose their linguistic meaning
- **What can be preserved without the language include:**
    - Cultural celebrations such as Dia de los Muertos, the Lunar New Year and others
    - Religious practices
    - Cuisine, clothing, dance and music
    - Community values such as respect, family unity and hospitality
    - Cultural identity such as “I am, Mexican or I am Burmese or …

- **Three primary protections help a culture survive a language loss:**
    - **1.** A strong family and community identity
    - **2.** Cultural institutions such as churches, temples and mosques; a community center; diasporic groups; a cultural festival; and local businesses that all reinforce identity
    - **3.** International preservation efforts, such as learning songs, preserving stories, maintaining art and traditions and teaching their cultural history in English
- **Conclusion: A culture can survive without its language, but it will invariably change, lose depth and become less connected to its original roots.**

Aide’ [**I-DAY]** a parent of two boys who attended multi-language learner classes at St. Vincent de Paul, tells her children that being bilingual is their super power.

She exudes pride in her Mexican culture, and very much wants her boys to retain their native language to be able to speak to relatives, understand their jokes and maintain a strong sense of culture and self. (Understanding family jokes is a common theme!)

She intentionally enrolled her boys in programs that spoke and/or taught English from an early age such as Head Start and programs at the YMCA. In fact, she prefers NOT to speak English as home for two reasons: she wants her boys to speak Spanish at home, and she wants her boys to learn English from those who speak it best.

Ree Gui, of Amani Family Services, lived in New York City's China Town before moving to Fort Wayne several years ago. ChinaTown allowed her to maintain her language and culture. Today, Gui is relearning Chinese to deepen – and maintain -- her connection with her culture and her relatives.

Amani Family Services serves more than 2,000 families and individuals from around the world who have made Allen County their home.

My nail technician, Amy whose native language is Vietnamese, wants her three sons to know and speak Vietnamese so they can converse with their grandparents and other relatives. However, she and her husband strongly encourage their sons to excel in English and academics and pursue successful careers. Their plan is working! Their oldest son is in his first year at IU medical school, their middle son is at IU, hoping to attend medical school as well, and their youngest is flourishing at Carroll High School.

When I sked Amy if her sons can write Vietnamese, she quickly said "OH NO! We do not live in a Vietnamese community like my sister's family in Florida."

Amy explained the local Catholic church near her sister provides a base for the Vietnamese community, offering language classes and providing a center for Vietnamese celebrations and more. "That is not the situation here, where there is not large Vietnamese community."

At St. Vincent de Paul School, one of the five students I interviewed, did not want to retain his native language. While he can understand his grandmother's Spanish, he has no desire to learn the language. His parents speak English in their home and he wants to excel in his English.

The other four students enthusiastically proclaimed plans to keep their native language, and to teach future children their language. Culture was very important to them, with general raves about their culture's yummy food – and family jokes.

Their Multi Language instructor, Erin Warden, said most children come to her classes knowing some English. “They learn English from siblings, parents, television and just life,” Warden explained.

She works on vocabulary, and emphasizes pronunciation of word endings, such as ED, S, F and ING, as many students don’t have these sounds in their native language.

Throughout all of her classes, Warden says she, “Always pushes for them not to drop their native language – as it is part of who they are.”

Every linguist in my research would agree.