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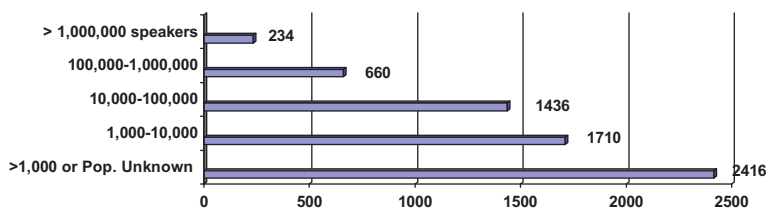
Nicholas Ostler

“The journey of a thousand *li* begins under your foot.”
Lao-zi: Daodejing 64.2

1. Desperate Straits

The plight of the world’s endangered languages has certain properties that define it as a threat to humanity in our time. The problem is recognized as global: there is no continent without scores of languages that are unlikely to survive the current century. But evidently it looms largest where multilingualism — whether many languages in one area, or many in one mind — was once rife, but is now exceptional: in North and South America, in North Asia and in Australia. In these parts of the world, there are particularly many languages with tiny populations which place them very close to extinction. A look at the pattern of populations in the world’s languages shows that over a third of them face a very uncertain future: with a population of a thousand or less, even a small drop in the size of the community might shift them onto a path to oblivion.

Figure 1: Numbers of Languages at Different Population Sizes



It is also worth remembering that the danger of language loss is not one that is specific to our era. Languages have been lost throughout human history; so language endangerment is a perpetual, as well as a global, problem. And when a language goes, there is literally nothing that can replace it. Every language has a unique set of properties, like an individual human being. Identity is the essence of a human language, and consequently the loss of a language is a personal thing.

Nevertheless, the pendulum of language endangerment can swing back as well as forth. To illustrate how close all of us have actually come to language loss, consider two cases from the last millennium where languages were almost lost. Both the languages concerned happen now to be exceedingly large and widespread, but — for varying conjunctions of circumstances — they both had a period of endangerment. They went through a century or two of extreme vulnerability: in that time, if others had made some different decisions, it is quite likely that today Portuguese would have become a minority language, or perhaps disappeared entirely. The same is true also for English.

Hence they each offer an example of how a language can encounter desperate straits, and yet come through. It is possible for a language's prospects to change, and change radically.

2. Portuguese under Spain: 1580-1640

In the middle of the 16th century, Portugal, although a relatively small country (with a population around 1.1 million¹) was in a highly advantageous position. It had achieved security within its borders, and was becoming increasingly prosperous, because of the new trading empire it had won in the Indian Ocean since Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope and sailed to India in 1498.

There were now profitable Portuguese trading settlements, protected by fortresses and fleets, all along the coast of the Indian Ocean, and at strategic points beyond, in Malaya and the South China Seas. The Indian Ocean was almost a Portuguese lake. After military and commercial expansion had come a drive for religious conversion: there were Catholic dioceses in Mozambique, Goa and Cochin in India, Malacca and Macao; there was even an attempt to spread the faith beyond the shelter of Portuguese trading posts, in Ethiopia and Japan. And on their way to the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese had become masters of the shores on both sides of the South Atlantic. They possessed slaving stations in Africa (Guinea and Angola) and had founded colonies at scattered points on the coast of what is now Brazil.

Along with trade, religion, slaving and settlement had gone the Portuguese language; all round the Indian and South Atlantic Oceans it had become the *lingua franca* of international dealings. In 1551 the Englishman Thomas Wyndham, visiting the Gold Coast with a Portuguese companion Antonio Pinteado, found that they could converse in Portuguese with the king of Benin, who had known it since his childhood.² In 1600 when Japan received its first ever English visitor, the pilot Will Adams, he could only

¹ Estimated in <http://www.library.uu.nl/wesp/populstat/Europe/portugac.htm>

² Santarém 1958, and Dictionary of National Biography s.v. *Wyndham, Thomas*

communicate when his surprised host the *Shōgun* Tokugawa Ieyasu managed to find a Portuguese-speaking interpreter.³

Yet at this point, Portugal suddenly lost its independent status. The Portuguese throne fell vacant, and in 1580 Philip II of Spain forcibly asserted his claim to it; Portugal — and hence its empire too — were annexed by their even more powerful neighbour, uniting the whole Iberian peninsula under a single government, but also their hitherto separate colonial empires, Spain's centred in Mexico, Peru and Philippines, Portugal's in Asia, Africa and Brazil. At a stroke, the Spanish-Portuguese empire came to girdle the world.

This was not a positive development for Portuguese identity, especially as expressed in the Portuguese language. Spain's court replaced Portugal's just as Spain's literature was in the full flower of its Golden Age. Even before 1580, Spanish had been the auxiliary language at the Portuguese Court, a situation reinforced by the series of Spanish princesses who had presided over it as Queens-consort of the Kings of Portugal. The greatest Portuguese writers of the age, from Gil Vicente (1470-1536) through Sá de Miranda (1481-1558) and Luis de Camões (1524-1580) to Francisco Manuel de Melo (1608-1666), all wrote in Spanish as well as Portuguese, although when they tried to speak Spanish, it apparently came out as "*uma specie de castelhano aporuguesado*". Spanish became the language of secondary education.⁴ Spanish also came to dominate the only mass media with a popular audience of the time, the Lisbon theatres.

Although there is no reason to expect that there had been any effect on the language spoken by country people (Portugal was at the time a much less urbanized country than Spain, and in any case all the non-Castilian Romance languages of Iberia have survived up to the present day), it is clear that the Portuguese language was sustaining a major blow to its speakers' own sense of its value. Plays did not begin to be written in Portuguese again for two and a half centuries.⁵ And when almost a generation after the Restoration, João de Medeiros Correia is writing a military guidebook, he "begs pardon from his compatriots for using his own language: it runs in mother tongue because I write only for our Portuguese lads, of whom our most blessed Army is made up".⁶

To add to the global troubles of Portuguese, Portugal had acquired Spain's enemies along with its government. Above all the Dutch, as a back-up to a long-standing war to free themselves from Spanish rule, felt free to attack Portuguese colonies on a par with Spanish ones, especially so since the Spanish government denied them entry to Portuguese ports as it did to its own. From 1605, they began to attack and capture all the principal Portuguese

³ Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimes*, ii, p. 345 (Glasgow 1905 [1625])

⁴ Vázquez Cuesta, Pilar, (trl. Mario Matos e Lemos) 1988, *A Língua e a Cultura Portuguesas no Tempo dos Filipes*, p. 85

⁵ Vázquez Cuesta 1988, p. 89

⁶ Medeiros Correia 1659, *Perfeito Soldado e Política Militar*, Prólogo

trading zones in the Moluccas and Ceylon, as well as the Malabar and Coromandel coasts of southern India. These losses were permanent. In 1631 the Dutch also conquered the richest part of Brazil, its northern coast, and in 1641 they took the supply side of the lucrative slave trade, Angola. The Dutchman Willem Bosman remarked in 1704 that the Portuguese had been “as setting-dogs to spring the game, which as soon as they had done, was seized by others”.⁷

At this point, Portuguese was on course to be replaced by Spanish as official language in its home territory, with no more official status than Galician or Catalan. If any Iberian colonies had survived long in Brazil, they would probably have converted gradually to being Spanish-speaking, since this would have been the language of the government and the schools; and most likely only a minority of subsequent colonists would have come specifically from Portugal. Portuguese would certainly not have died out immediately in the Indian Ocean, since a Portuguese creole remained a useful *lingua franca* for a century and more even in the Dutch and then British colonies which came to supplant the Portuguese ones. But with no organized community, it would probably have largely died out by the 19th century. By now Portuguese would have been like its close northern relative, Galician, with a population of perhaps a few million in western Spain, and far more nostalgia than national prestige.

Dis aliter visum. The restoration of the Portuguese Crown and State in 1640, which also restored Portuguese as a fully literate language, was not inevitable: it was achieved by the opportunism of the Duke of Bragança, who claimed the throne of Portugal while Spain was hard pressed to put down the revolt of Catalunya. Portugal was able to defend its renewed independence, and went on to another triumph overseas, when in 1654 the remaining Portuguese colonists were able, with mainland help, to drive the Dutch from Brazil. More effort was then put into the exploration of this vast colony, but very few Portuguese settled there until the turn of that century, when gold and precious stones were discovered. This led to the first gold rush, and a population explosion — largely of Portuguese-speakers. The population had comprised less than 150,000 around 1650; by 1770 they registered over 1,500,000.

Portuguese in Brazil has never looked back, and there are now 16 times as many speakers in Brazil as there are in Portugal (158 million to 10 million).

3. English under Normandy 1066-1399

In the 10th to 11th centuries, English, the common descendant of the languages of north German settlers from the last five hundred years, was an impressive newcomer. Under the stimulus of its cultured King Alfred (r. 871-899) it had had the earliest vernacular literature in Europe. It was no stranger to foreign conquest: after a generation of smash-and-grab

⁷ *Nauwkeurige beschryving van de Guinese Goud-, Tand- en Slave-Kust*, (Amsterdam 1704) quoted by Boxer, Charles R., 1969, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, p. 106.

raids, there had been Danish settlements since 850; a Danish king had even seized the throne in 1017, and his son had ruled for 25 years. These foreigners seemed to integrate and take up English, a language fairly closely related to their Danish. But then, in 1066, the Kingdom was suddenly taken over by speakers of a totally different language, Norman French. In scale, the incoming force was small, at least by comparison with the then population of England: William came with some 5,000 knights, and the total numbers who “came over with the Conqueror”, all told, will have amounted to at most four times this number, 20,000 to set against the then English population of 1½ million (Brandt 1969, p. 374). So in the first generation of Norman rule, perhaps one person in a hundred spoke Norman French.

The invasion effectively decapitated English society. The invaders replaced the English elite: king, court, barons, abbots and bishops. This had a devastating effect on the written life of English; the *scriptoria* in the monasteries were henceforth staffed by clerics writing in Latin. There does seem to have been a benefit to the cultural standards of the Normans, in that their distinctive culture of chivalry and courtly love soon generates a literature of its own: Norman French thus became the first Romance language to have a vernacular literature, taking a leaf out of the Old English book.⁸

However, the exponents of Old English culture found themselves very much disadvantaged. For the first time in Britain, the English language came to be associated exclusively with the lower classes, in contrast with courtly French as well as with learned Latin. There was considerable resentment of this, and it lasted for at least half a dozen generations, as this fragment of poetry from Worcester Cathedral in the early 13th century shows:

Sanctus Beda was iboren her on Breotene mid us,
 And he wisliche bec awende
 þæt þeo Englise leoden þurh weren ilerde.
 And he þeo ennoten unwreih, þe questiuns hoteþ,
 þa deme diðelnesse þe deorwurþe is.
 Ælfric abbod, þe we Alquin hoteþ,
 he was bocare, and þe fif bec wende:
 Genesis, Exodus, Leuiticus, Numerus, Vtronomius.
 þurh þeos weren ilerde ure leoden on Englise.
 þet were þeos biscopes þe bodeden Cristendom,
 Wilfrid of Ripum [+ 12 more names].
 þeos lærden ure leodan on Englisc næs deorc heore
 liht, ac hit fære glod.
 Nu is þeo leore foreleten, and þet folc is forloren.
 Nu beoþ oþre leoden þeo læreþ ure folc,
 And feole of þen lorþeines losiaþ and þet folc forþ
 mid...

Saint Bede was born here in Britain with us
 And he wisely books translated
 So that the English people were taught by them.
 And he the riddles solved, called *Quaestiones*,
 The secret mysteries that are precious.
 Abbot Ælfric, whom we call Alcuin,
 he was a scholar, and translated the five books
 Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy.
 Through these were taught our people in English.
 There were these bishops who preached Christianity
 Wilfrid of Ripon [+ 12 more names].
 These taught our people in English: not dark was their
 light, and it brightly glowed.
 Now their teaching is neglected, and their folk is lost.
 Now there are other people who teach our folk,
 And many of the ministers are damned and the folk
 away with them

“The Tremulous Hand of Worcester”, MS, in Lerer 1999, pp. 23-24

⁸ Trotter 2000, p. 198

In the Norman *triglossia*, which was being actively spread into the (previously Celtic) corners of the realm, English was rated purely as a language of everyday communication for the common people, in the island of Britain. If it had continued — as it would if the Norman and Angevin kings had succeeded in overpowering the French monarch based at Paris — English would most likely have fallen in status to become a regional language like Cornish, Welsh, Gaelic or Basque: meanwhile the standard language of the Norman French realms would have been either the Anglo-Norman dialect of French, or perhaps standard French.

But again, it was not to be. The French realm had never been able to abide the independence of the Norman kings, originally its vassals, and in 1204 King Philip II seized the opportunity to defeat one of them (King John) in battle, and so end their control of Normandy. Within the rigours of the feudal system, it was impossible for barons to maintain a divided loyalty: henceforth they must declare fealty either to the King of England or the King of France, and give up any lands they might hold in the other kingdom. In the sequel, English barons became determinedly English. From lack of day-to-day use, French began to be a subject that needed to be taught at school, rather than the living language of the elite. For a long time, it retained its prestige: a proverb of the time ran — “Jack wold be a gentilman if he coude speke frensshe.” (William Caxton’s 1482 edition of John of Trevisa’s 1385 translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*.)

The final blow was given to French in England by the social revolution caused by the Black Death pandemic, which visited the country three times in the second half of the 14th century: borne by fleas on rats, it had higher incidence in towns and monasteries, precisely the places where courts, professionals and the writing classes would be found. The breakdown of the feudal system followed, higher geographic and social mobility, and a liberalization of the labour market. A sign of the times was the Statute of Pleading of 1362: court proceedings would henceforth take place in English, “enrolled in Latin”. In the century after the Black Death, even royalty stopped using French. Richard II, with his deft handling of the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381, showed that he was quite able to appeal to a common crowd in English. After deposing him, Henry IV’s coronation speech of 1399 was the first of its kind in English.

English went on, after the age of European imperialism and the Industrial Revolution, to become the second most populous language in the world — now with half a billion speakers using it as a first or second language.

4. Some Less Encouraging (and More Typical) Cases

The above two brief case studies show languages which suddenly lost their political status in their societies; each society, though quite large among their contemporaries, was organized hierarchically, and lost its apex to speakers of a foreign language. The language

will only be completely lost if the take-over then percolates down to lower levels; and if the societies are large, and fairly rigid in structure, there is quite a time available in which the situation may be reversed.

But for these two relatively familiar examples where the balance did swing back, there are vast numbers where it has not. Immediate examples come to mind in the very lands where Portuguese and English were able to revive.

In Brazil, Tupi, known as the “*Lingua Geral*”, had been a universal *lingua franca* inland, and had been adopted for preaching and contact by Jesuits for over 200 years. In 1759, the Portuguese government expelled from Brazil the Jesuits, who had been the main organizers and defenders of the indigenous people; at the same time it banned further use of Tupi. This language had for over two centuries been far more widely used in the colony than Portuguese itself, but now its use collapsed.

Tupi had lost both its advocates the Jesuits, and the social structures, the *reduções*, in which it had flourished; the world of its speakers collapsed. Unlike the Normans, who had depended on English retainers for everything, the new settlers in Brazil coming in the gold-rushes were not interested in building links with this section of pre-existing society.

Nheengatu (the modern descendant of Tupi — it means “the good speech”) now has only about 8,000 speakers.⁹

In Britain, social adversity continued to tell against British, the Celtic language spoken by the pre-English inhabitants of the country since at least the mid 1st millennium BC. By the time of the Norman conquest in 1066 AD, it had split into a number of distinct dialect areas, Cumbric, Welsh and Cornish, in different western extremities of Britain, confined by the advance of the Germanic-speaking English from the 6th century AD. Cornwall had already been largely reduced by the English, and so immediately came under Norman rule; but the other parts resisted.

Cumbria, which had been a Scots possession linked closely with Strathclyde, was the scene of a struggle which lasted from 1092 to 1157. Cumbric probably died out in the 12th century.¹⁰ Wales held out much longer; Gwent in the south-east was taken by 1087, but although “*Marcher Lordships*”, dependent on the Norman king, were soon established across the whole of southern Wales, resistance did not die away. In the 12th century, most of the country aside from the southern coast and western borders had re-asserted its independence, and there was a period of *de facto* acceptance of an indigenous *Pura Wallia*, surrounded by a Norman *Marchia Wallie*. It was only in 1283 that the (French-speaking) Edward I completed the conquest of the principality. Even then, there were two more country-wide rebellions, a decade and then a century later. Denied its own rulers, the

⁹ Grimes 2000

¹⁰ Price 2000, p.121

kingdom saw its language gradually replaced by English over the next five centuries, though there are still half a million speakers today, making up 18.6% of the population.¹¹

5. What helps a language?

From these cases, it is evident that political or social autonomy is highly beneficial for the survival of a language; but as the Welsh case shows, all is not necessarily lost, even if this goes. The rest of this paper considers the predicament more generally, as well as the vast task of what can be done practically on their behalf. We can identify five factors which have favoured the survival of some small languages, when others in similar situations have gone into decline.

5.1 Resolute isolation

Some languages have survived simply through being unknown, or inaccessible, to others throughout their history. Such cases are best known in South America, e.g. the Waorani of Ecuador, a jungle people some of whom are still uncontacted, or the Teribe of Panama, who may be threatened when a new road is built — and so join their long-assimilated cousins, the Térraba of Costa Rica. The threat is greatest to the language of an uncontacted people soon after contact, since by definition, their community will not have developed any mechanisms for coping with alien influences.

5.2 Political status

The Icelandic language, with only a quarter of a million speakers is not endangered, whereas other European languages with higher populations may well be, such as Breton in France, or Udmurt in Russia (both with half a million speakers but falling sharply). These, though, have some political unity, at least at the level of local government. Contrast the 50,000 Saami split between three countries (Norway, Sweden and Finland). Outside Europe, small language communities with political representation are very rare indeed. Geography favours small communities who live on separate islands (notably in the Pacific), but elsewhere small groups, as citizens of larger countries, must compete for resources with all the others. Local identity is often seen as a problem for nation-building. Or small communities' interests may simply be disregarded, as when border peoples have been moved in the interests of larger states — e.g. the Ainu on Sakhalin, whose language has never recovered from their expulsion from Russia to Japan at the end of the World War II.

¹¹ Price 2000, p. 96

5.3 Physical survival

For a language to survive, it helps if its home community survives, both through having children that it can bring up in its own traditions, and in preserving a common life, and often a territory, of its own. The fate of the Indian communities of the eastern USA (e.g. Pequot, Narragansett, Massachusetts) is a telling example of the failure of this; the Mohawk and Passamaquoddy further north show something of what may be achieved if the basic minimum is retained. In modern Ireland, the attempt is being made to continue Irish in a new urban setting as the language is progressively lost from its surviving traditional homes on the west coast.

5.4 Literary corpus, and literacy

The existence of a clear literary tradition, ideally accessible through writing as well as spoken memory, is a good guarantee of survival, since it makes for respect, especially within the community in which it is spoken, but also outside. The speakers of Mayan languages in Guatemala are attending to this, by producing a series of authoritative grammars and dictionaries; the tradition marked by the ancient Popol Vuh in K'iche'e, and Rabinal Achi in Yukateko, is thus reinforced. People who can read and write in their language will also treat it with greater respect than if they think it is only for informal life at home.

5.5 Self-conscious tradition

Above all, language survival in modern conditions requires a modicum of awareness of the language, and of the identity and history of the people that speak it. Self-esteem is necessary for self-assertion, and no small language will long survive if its speakers lack it. This self-awareness has maintained Aramaic through 1,500 years of mobile life in small religious communities. It has also maintained the Basque language for over 3,000 years through multiple invasions, and political conquests, of their European homeland.

6. What is to be done?

These five factors suggest various lines of action that may benefit the cause of small language communities. The only one which seems to be beyond any effective action is the strategy of Resolute Isolation. Although it clearly preserves languages, it is not an evident blessing for any human community; in any case, it is beyond the power of any outside group to secure it.

6.1 Give the language status

This is a strategy of political action, at whatever level is possible or appropriate. A language with status is one that non-speakers must take seriously.

6.2 Protect transmission, resist intrusion

This is a strategy to fortify the continuing tradition, and community, in which the language exists. It may involve bringing the language into formal education; it may also involve the establishment of special rights for lineal members of the language community, e.g. to own property in certain places.

6.3 Record, document and publish

This is to provide or reinforce the permanent, and especially the written, record of the language. Not only does this provide a physical trace of what the language has been, which can be preserved independently of the living tradition; but the activity also raises the profile of the language, and so increases its status within and beyond the community. It may also stimulate new creation of literature and other art in the language.

6.4 Build solidarity, at all levels

Speakers of endangered languages need to feel how important their concern for their own languages is, and that it is shared by others, not only other groups who speak their own endangered languages, but also by members of the wider world, who may even be monolingual in a majority language. Human contact, in the cause of language survival, is valuable in itself, but can also inspire speakers (and linguists) to redoubled efforts to defend and revitalize the endangered traditions.

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