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DAVID CRYSTAL

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Endangered languages: what should we do now?

David Crystal

We seem to be at a turning point in the history of our encounter with endangered languages, and this workshop is timely. Future historians of linguistics will surely see the 1990s as a revolutionary decade, in the way it brought the language crisis into the forefront of academic and political attention. It is remarkable what we have in fact managed to do since 1990 — hardly a decade ago — which was when the crisis began to be systematically addressed through a number of visionary articles and public statements, notably those arising out of the Endangered Languages Symposium organized by the Linguistic Society of America in 1991 (see Kraus 1992, Hale 1992), and the statement emanating from the International Congress of Linguists in Quebec in 1992 (see also Robins and Uhlenbeck 1991). UNESCO came on board in 1993, with its Endangered Languages Project. By 1995, the organizations began to appear — such as the Tokyo Clearing House, the UK Foundation for Endangered Languages, and the US Endangered Language Fund. In the mid-1990s the articles began to build up, both polemical (in the best sense) and descriptive, and collections of papers began to appear (eg. Grenoble and Whaley 1998, Matsumura 1998, Ostler 1998). The first exposés aimed at a more general public were published (Dixon 1997). Then by the turn of the century, we find a flurry of book-length expository syntheses of the topic. In this respect, the years 2000-2001 were special years, with three general books coincidentally appearing from Claude Hagège, Suzanne Romaine and Daniel Nettle, and myself — very different perspectives, but with a single focus (Crystal 2000, Hagège 2001, Nettle and Romaine 2000). Since then we have had Dalby 2002, McWhorter 2001[2003], and Abley 2003.

Within a decade, in short, the academic linguistic world had begun to wake up to the fact that Something Was Up — or at least those linguists did who still retained an interest in real languages as part of their professionalism. The statistics, whether expressed by pessimists (80 per cent extinction within a century) or optimists (25 per cent extinction), were compelling, and the accounts of ongoing endangerment, as well as of successful revitalization when conditions are right, were persuasive. The descriptive literature having grown dramatically, it was possible to make informed and judicious appraisals of the general situation. And I think now we all know the answers, at least in general terms, to the basic theoretical questions:

- what are the factors which lead to language death?
- why are we experiencing this crisis now? and
- what conditions need to be present in order to revitalize a language?

This workshop, moreover, shows that we are aware of the central role of documentation in addressing these questions. Obviously there is still a great deal of empirical and procedural work to be done, and we have hardly begun to develop ‘documentation theory’ as part of an ‘applied preventive linguistics’ — by which I mean the application of our theoretical, descriptive, and methodological advances to individual endangered situations. We do not yet have a typology of intervention and best practice to match those available in some other applied linguistic domains, such as language teaching and speech pathology. But at least all these issues are recognized, and research is ongoing (see Himmelmann 1998, Woodbury, this volume). So what do we do next? In this paper I want to draw attention to a dimension of our responsibility which has as yet received hardly any recognition — the gap which exists between academic awareness of these matters and the awareness of the general public. This, I believe, is the domain which next demands our attention.

Anyone who works in the conservation field will tell you that bridging this gap is the most difficult goal to achieve. It has taken the ecological movement as a whole over a century to bring the world to its present state of consciousness about endangered plant and animal species. For example, the National Audubon Society in the US was founded in 1866: we have been bird-aware for nearly 150 years. For world heritage sites, we have the highly successful UNESCO programme, begun in 1972. Greenpeace, the year before, 1971. The World Wildlife Fund, 1961. The World Conservation Union, 1948. It took over 30 years before this Union was able to establish a World Conservation Strategy (1980), which led to the principles laid down in the booklet 1991 document *Caring for the Earth*.

Compared with such time-frames, linguistic achievements by way of consciousness-raising within just a decade have been remarkable indeed. Thanks to an enormous amount of effort by a fairly small number of individuals and institutions, we have made great progress in relation to the three criteria which we know must be present before progress can be made with an endangered language. First, there is what might be called the ‘bottom-up’ interest — the speech-community itself must want its language saved — and there are now many recorded accounts of how attitudes can be sensitively managed and energies channelled to ensure that this happens. It is also true that we have learned from our mistakes, in this connection. Second, there must be ‘top-down’ interest: the local and national government need to be in sympathy with the philosophy of language revitalization and supportive of the task in hand. ‘Top-down’ also includes obtaining the support of international political organizations, such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe, who are crucial in forming an appropriate political climate within which pressure can be brought to bear in difficult situations. We need only reflect for a moment on the number of political statements which were made during the 1990s, such as the 1996 Barcelona Declaration, to realize that enormous progress has been made in this respect — but we are still, it seems, some way from the goal of an unequivocal United Nations statement of human linguistic rights.

But neither bottom-up nor top-down support are enough, without the third criterion — cash. We know that implementing a minority language policy is expensive, in the short-term. In the long-term, of course, any policy of balanced multilingualism, in which minority languages are respected and protected, guarantees massive savings — if for no other reason, by avoiding the huge expenditure (often, in terms of life as well as money) which arises when people, seeing their linguistic identity threatened, take civil action to protect themselves and their future. But the initial outlay does cost money — not huge amounts, as we know, but enough to put governments off, and enough to give support organizations (such as the Endangered Language Fund) a tough time finding capital to make even a small contribution to the present need. That is why the efforts of the large organizations, such as the Volkswagen Stiftung and the Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund have to be loudly applauded. I would never have dreamed, ten years ago, that two such bodies would be helping our cause to the extent that they are. But the question remains, why are there not more of them? Why, if language conservation is the intellectual equivalent of biological conservation, have we yet made so little progress in obtaining the requisite funding? The World Conservation Union had a budget of 140 million Swiss Francs in 2002, and heaven knows how many million more goes into the support of biological conservation projects worldwide. Compared with that, the support for linguistic projects is so far minuscule. Why?

The answer, I believe, is that still very few people are aware of the existence and the scale of the problem. And there are large numbers of the general population who still need to be persuaded that the situation *is* a problem. The Babel myth — that a single language on earth guarantees a mutually intelligible and therefore peaceful planet — is still widely believed. And many of the people who are unaware of the language crisis are the opinion-formers of this world — journalists, politicians, media personalities, businessmen, and others. I doubt whether there is anyone in the thinking world who is not now aware, even if only dimly, of the crisis facing the world's bio-ecology. By contrast, only a tiny proportion of these people have any awareness at all of the crisis in linguistic ecology. This is the gap I referred to above: Us who know versus Them who don't. How many are Them? A little while ago, in preparing for a radio programme, I asked a series of passers-by in the street whether they were aware that so many of the world's languages were dying. The people who claimed to be aware (whether they really were or not I do not know) were one in four. The other three had no idea what I was talking about. A similar exercise at the University of Manchester got the same result. And each year at my own university I ask a first-year class of English undergraduates the same question, before hammering them on the subject — the figure has grown over the last few years, but is still only about one in four. Seventy-five percent of the population do not know there is an issue, therefore. And a fair number of the remaining twenty-five percent do not believe that it is an important issue. How can we get through to Them?

We can of course lecture to Them, and write books for Them — but let us not fool ourselves. Even if one of our academic books sold out, we would be talking only about a

few thousand copies. I am not so naive as to think that a book like *Language Death* will ever get into a Christmas must-buy best-selling list. Academic textbooks have an important role in forming intellectual opinion, but they are not the way of bridging the public awareness gap, and certainly not if we are in a hurry. We have to look in other directions. In fact there are several ways of achieving this goal, but the most important ways we have hardly begun to explore, and certainly not at an institutional level. I believe there are four primary ways of engaging with the general public in relation to our subject — using the media, the arts, the Internet, and the school curriculum. I shall concentrate on the first two, given the time available, and refer only briefly to the last two — but all four need to be involved in any systematic effort to bring public awareness about linguistic ecology to the same level as that which exists in the biological domain.

Some progress has been made with reference to the first way: enlisting the support of the media. I can give examples only from my own locality, the UK — readers will, I am sure, have their own examples — but I have been quite impressed with the increased interest shown by some sections of the media during the past two or three years. For example, several articles have appeared in general-interest magazines and newspapers. There have been pieces, often illustrated with stunning photographs, in such periodicals as *Civilization*, *Prospect*, *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, and even the British Airways in-flight magazine, *High Life*. Radio has also served us well. From 2000-1 I know of a dozen or so radio programmes devoted to the topic of language death on the BBC's two main documentary channels, Radio 3 or Radio 4 — in one case a series (called 'Lost for Words') of four half-hour programmes. There seems to have been similar radio interest elsewhere: I have contributed to programmes being made in the United States, Canada, and Australia, and many colleagues have too. Television, by contrast, has been less interested. Since the mid-1990s I know of ten proposals to the various UK television channels for documentaries or mini-series on language death, and although three of these reached a quite advanced stage of preparation — including in one case scripted and partly filmed material — none ever reached completion. The only success story was the component on language death which was included in the series *Beyond Babel*, which was screened in over 50 countries last year, and which is now available on DVD (Infonation, the film-making branch of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office). This was, ironically, an account of how English has become a world language; but the producers were sensible enough to accept the argument that there was another side to the coin.

We should not take our television failure too personally, by the way. We must not forget that there has never been a television blockbuster series on the general topic of language, as such, anywhere in the world. There have of course been individual programmes on some of the 'sexier' aspects of language — such as child language acquisition, or sign language, or speech disability. And there have been a number of series or programmes on individual languages. English, as you might expect, gets the most attention. *The Story of English* appeared in the 1980s — a huge eight-hour transatlantic co-production — and another eight-hour epic, *The Adventure of English*, has recently been

shown on UK television, telling the same story in a very similar way. A few other individual languages have attracted interest too. A six-part series, *The Story of Welsh* has just finished on BBC Wales; and I know of similar programmes on Breton, Irish, and a number of other European minority languages, as well as on the indigenous languages of Australia, the USA, and Canada.

But in all these cases, the creative energy is entirely inward-looking. These programmes tell the story of endangerment only as it affects the individual communities — the Welsh, the Bretons, or whoever. None of them takes the requisite step back and looks at the language endangerment situation as a whole. The nearest you get is when a programme deals with more than one language together, such as a programme made for the Netherlands TV network, in 2001, which looked at the similar plights of Welsh and Frisian, and inevitably began to generalize as a consequence. Another is an ongoing project by the Czech film-maker Michael Havas, whose project on a single Brazilian language, spoken by the Kranak, ‘Brasilian Dream’, is conceived as a symbol of the world situation. Such perspectives are rare. It seems very difficult to get people who are desperately anxious about the state of their own language to devote some of their energy to considering the broader picture. It is short-sighted, because each endangered language can learn something from the situation of other languages — why some languages seem to be doing better than others. Nonetheless, in 2003 our theme still awaits effective television treatment.

As I say, we should not take the lack of a television presence too personally. There are reasons why television executives do not like programmes on language. I know what they are because I have been in the fortunate position, thanks to my work in broadcasting over the past 20 years, of being able to ask programme-commissioners. The answer is always the same: language is too abstract and complex a subject. The decision-makers are either thinking back to their days of studying grammar in school (broadcasting senior management is of the age when they all had to parse sentences and study prescriptive grammar) or they have had a close encounter of the third kind with Chomsky, and it has scared them. They are also worried by the generality of the subject: that language does not fit neatly into a TV niche, such as current affairs, or comedy. They are petrified by the risk of the academic approach making people switch off. Even though there have been highly successful TV series by academics — Jonathan Millers’ *The Body in Question* on human physiology, Simon Schama’s series on history, Lord Winston’s on medicine — when it comes to language, the eyes glaze over. Even the specific-language programmes are affected. Language programmes tend to be presented by well-known personalities — *The Adventure of English* by Melvyn Bragg; *The Story of Welsh* by Huw Edwards. If we did ever manage to get a TV series on language death up and running, heaven knows who they would get to present it — Oprah Winfrey, probably.

Mind you, would that be such a bad thing? If the content is right and the quality is assured, then a big media personality would probably do our subject the world of good.

And this leads to my next point, that we are still some way from attracting the interest of most of the general population (which of course means the politician-electing, fund-raising population) in our crisis. Bottom-up, top-down, cash — my three criteria will all operate at their best if a profound awareness of the nature and likelihood of language death enters the general population. And personalities can help make this happen. But it is more than awareness that we need. We also need enthusiasm. People have to be enthused about the issues surrounding language death. Their emotions as well as their intellects have to be engaged. I think we have done quite a good job in the past decade under the latter heading: a lot of people — well, one in four, anyway — now have a degree of intellectual understanding of the issues which they did not have before. But how many have an emotional grasp? How many would weep over a dying language, as I have seen people weep over a dying animal species. How many experience real joy at the prospect of a revitalized language — like the moment in *Beyond Babel* when you hear Cally Lara, a teenager from Hupa Valley in Northern California, say:

As long as we're here, as long as the valley is here, as long as our culture is alive, the language and teaching the language will be a part of what we do. It's our responsibility.

And his friend, Silis-chi-tawn Jackson, adds:

If it's up to me, this language is going to go on.

This makes my heart, as well as my mind, leap, to hear teenagers say that — teenagers! (Anyone who has had teenagers of their own knows how difficult it is to get them to engage their interest in anything apart from sex!) How many share in this sense of celebration? Indeed, how many opportunities are there to celebrate? Another question I ask people, these days, is do they know when World Language Day is, or World Mother-Tongue Day? Hardly anyone knows.

How do we get from consciousness to conscience? We have to engage with people's sensibilities, and this is the most difficult of tasks. In fact I know of only two ways of doing it — one is through religion, the other is through the arts. And of the two, the arts turns out to be the more general, because it transcends the distinction between theism and a-theism. I have personal experience of its widespread appeal, because I have been the director of a new arts centre in my home town of Holyhead in North Wales, over the past ten years, and the one thing I have learned, from our programme of art exhibitions, sculptures, films, plays, concerts, and performances of all shapes and sizes is that everyone, everyone, appreciates the arts, regardless of age and class. They may appreciate different kinds of art, of course; but even the people in my town who turn their noses up at an exhibition of abstract art or a concert of medieval music, calling it elitist, come to the arts centre when we are showing a James Bond film or putting on a Christmas pantomime for the children. And when I visit their houses, I see pictures on the walls and ornaments on the mantelpieces. Art reaches out to everyone. As Oscar Wilde said, 'We spend our days, each one of us, in looking for the secret of life. Well, the secret of life is in art'.

So, if we want a means of getting our message across to everyone in the most direct and engaging way, my belief is that we should be making maximum use of the arts, in order to do so. If we want Them to see what the situation is, the artists can help us more than anyone else. Repeatedly we find people acknowledging the point: US poet Archibald Macleish put it like this: ‘Anything can make us look; only art can make us see’. Another poet, Robert Penn Warren: ‘the poem is not a thing we see — it is, rather, a light by which we may see — and what we see is life’. Picasso: ‘We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth’. And, as if drawing attention to the difference between the media and the arts, we have Ezra Pound: ‘Literature is news that stays news’. But my favourite quotation, in this connection, is from Disraeli, in the Preface to his novel, *Coningsby*: ‘Fiction, in the temper of the times, stands the best chance of influencing opinion’. The way forward is through the arts, in its broadest sense, to include everything sensory — visual, verbal, tactile, gustatory, and olfactory — that we consider artistic. And here we meet another kind of gap. For we as academics have not been much interested in the arts, and the artists (in this broadest sense) have not been much interested in us. This in my view is where we next need to direct some of our own creative energies.

It is not difficult to justify my claim. For the last five years I have been trying to find examples of artists who have addressed the issue of language death within their areas of expertise, and I have found next to nothing. I have asked hundreds of artists if they know of anything. Let me begin with the visual arts. I have seen whole exhibitions devoted to plant and animal conservation, but never seen a painting which deals with language conservation. I have come across just one sculpture — the living sculpture produced by Rachel Berwick, shown in New York and London, in which two Amazon parrots in a special enclosure had been trained to speak some words of now-extinct Maypuré. I know of nothing in photography or ceramics or textiles. Artists are continually using the terms of language to define their roles — the ‘language of’ photography, paintings which ‘speak to us’. But they do not seem to have focused on language itself as a subject. I would have expected music and dance to be especially interested in this topic. Music has been characterized as ‘the universal language of mankind’ (Longfellow), ‘the speech of angels’ (Carlyle), ‘the only universal tongue’ (Samuel Rogers). You would expect these metaphors to have motivated composers to reach for their staves to deal with linguistic issues. But I have not yet encountered pieces which deal with the subject explicitly. The topic of language death deserves at least a symphony, a fantasia, an opera, a ballet, or — to change the genres — a large-scale jazz piece, or a guitar extravaganza. Even the folk-singers have failed to lament about the world situation. The nearest I have come to a major musical work is the marvellous score Philip Glass composed for Godfrey Reggio’s film, *Powaqqatsi*, the second of his Hopi *qatsi* trilogy — the name means ‘a way of life [technology, in this vision] that consumes the life forces of other beings in order to further its own life’. The anthem composed for that film well expresses the notion of loss, but Reggio’s theme is cultural destruction in general, as a result of technology, not linguistic loss in particular. Last year I was talking to the composer Michael Berkeley on Radio 3 about language death, and I asked him whether he knew of anything. He did not. But as a

result of this programme, a listener wrote in and told me of a short electronic live performance piece by French composer Jean Vauget: ‘instant sonore #5 pygmées’.

Thinking it might be me, qua aging linguist, who was unaware of what was going on in the younger arts world, I put the problem to my daughter, in her mid-twenties. Lucy is based in Amsterdam, and works in a free-lance networking way in the world of the arts. In the English language I do not know how to describe her professionalism, but she is the kind of person you would approach if you were mounting an art exhibition and you wanted to book a jazz group for the occasion, or were arranging a folk concert and you wanted to display some photography. She would know who to approach and would fix it up. She — I believe the term is — ‘networks’. But she did not know anything either. She asked around her artist friends and drew a complete blank. The result, however, was a project called ‘Language as Arts and Arts as Language’, in which she made contact with artists in several European countries, none of whom had ever thought of producing work in relation to this theme, but all of whom proved keen to do so. An array of fine ideas came out of the preliminary thinking, but in the absence of funding the project remains in abeyance. Only one achievement has so far come out of the initiative — a month-long project in Arizona, in which she and a small team worked with the rurally isolated youth of three US Amerindian communities — the Hopi, Navajo, and Gila — to teach them how to use digital story-telling techniques to record on film aspects of their communities’ oral histories (see the diary account at <http://www.rez02.net/>). Lucy’s experience has demonstrated to me that there is a great deal of interest and potential within the artistic community, but it has yet to be tapped.

We might expect, from its nature, that the world of the verbal arts would yield more positive results — the world of poetry, drama, the novel, the short-story. Here too, though, there is very little. I know of no novel directly concerned with the general theme, though a few which reflect on an individual cultural or linguistic situation — such as Joan Bodon (Jean Boudou) writing on the death of Occitan (e.g. *Lo Libre de Catoia*), the Argentinian writer Leopoldo Brizuela’s fable about an imaginary encounter between English and Patagonian cultures (*Inglaterra, una fabula*), or the Abkhazian writer Bagrat Shinkuba’s account of the demise of Ubykh, translated as *Last of the Departed*. There is Alphonse Daudet’s short story, ‘The Last Class’, about the reaction of a schoolchild to the news that French was being replaced by German in his Alsatian school. But I know of no novel and only one short story on the general theme, by the Australian writer David Malouf (Malouf 1985). In a succinct, breathtaking 4-page tale, ‘The Only Speaker of his Tongue’, he tells the story of a lexicographer visiting a last speaker.

He is, they tell me, the one surviving speaker of his tongue. Half a century back, when he was a boy, the last of his people were massacred. The language, one of hundreds (why make a fuss?) died with them. Only not quite. For all his lifetime this man had spoken it, if only to himself. The words, the great system of sound and silence, are locked up now in his heavy skull, behind the folds of the black brow, in the mouth with its stained teeth and fat,

rather pink tongue. It is alive still in the man's silence, a whole alternative universe, since the world as we know it is in the last resort the words through which we imagine and name it; and when he narrows his eyes, and grins and says, 'Yes, boss, you wanta see me?', it is not breathed out.

And the lexicographer reflects ...

When I think of my tongue being no longer alive in the mouths of men, a chill goes over me that is deeper than my own death, since it is the gathered death of all my kind. It is black night descending once and forever on all that world of forests, lakes, snow peaks, great birds' wings; on little fishing sloops, on foxes nosing their way into a coop, on the piles of logs that make bonfires, and the heels of the young girls leaping over them, on sewing-needles, milk pails, axes, on gingerbread moulds made out of good birchwood, on fiddles, school slates, spinning-tops – my breath catches, my heart jumps. O the holy dread of it! Of having under your tongue the first and last words of all those generations down there in your blood, down there in the earth, for whom these syllables were the magic once for calling the whole of creation to come striding, swaying singing towards them. I look at this old fellow and my heart stops. I do not know what to say to him.

This is poetry in prose. And, to move into the genre of poetry, here a few writers *have* taken the theme on board. I have been collecting poems on the subject, and so far have about 30. From Canada we have Margaret Atwood, whose 'Marsh Language' stands out (Atwood 1995). It begins:

The dark soft languages are being silenced:
 Mothertongue Mothertongue Mothertongue
 falling one by one back into the moon.

The US author W S Merwin has written a handful of relevant poems. Here is the beginning of 'Losing a Language' (Merwin 1988):

A breath leaves the sentences and does not come back
 yet the old still remember something that they could say
 but they know that such things are no longer believed
 and the young have fewer words

I am currently compiling an anthology of these and other texts, but making slow progress.

What is important about such poems is that they are generalizing works. They are not restricted to bemoaning the plight of the author's own language, and stopping with that. They use a personal experience to reflect upon the world situation. Some authors are very

skilled at doing this. One of the poets in Wales who repeatedly wrote in this way was R.S. Thomas, an Anglican clergyman (Thomas 2003). He was desperately concerned about the loss of Welsh, but note how, in this poem, ‘Drowning’, his reflections at the very end leave Wales, and become of general applicability.

They were irreplaceable and forgettable.
Inhabitants of the parish and speakers
of the Welsh tongue, I looked on and
there was one less and one less and one less.

They were not of the soil, but contributed
to it in dying, a manure not
to be referred to as such, but from which
poetry is grown and legends and green tales.

Their immortality was what they hoped for
by being kind. Their smiles were such as,
exercised so often, became perennial
as flowers, blossoming where they had been cut down.

I ministered uneasily among them until
what had been gaps in the straggling hedgerow
of the nation widened to reveal the emptiness
that was inside, where echoes haunted and thin ghosts.

A rare place, but one identifiable
with other places where on as deep a sea
men have clung to the last spars of their language
and gone down with it, unremembered but uncomplaining.

The point could not be clearer: this is a people and a language ‘identifiable with other places’, and the image of the drowning language would resonate anywhere.

But the genre which puzzles me most, because it is the genre most obviously applicable to expound our subject, is theatre. Where are the plays? Here too there have been works which deal with the problems of a particular linguistic/cultural situation — the

best example I know is Brian Friel's *Translations*, about Irish. Another is Louis Nowra's *The Golden Age*, about the community discovered in the wilds of Tasmania in 1939, for whom the playwright created a special variety of speech. But what plays deal with the problems of language endangerment in general, or which generalize from individual instances in the way R S Thomas's poem did? Harold Pinter's *Mountain Language*, a 20-minute virtuoso explosion, was my solitary discovery, but that is of little general use for it deals only with the topic of linguistic genocide which, relevant as it is for some parts of the world, is only a part of the overall picture. You will get the flavour from this brief extract: an officer from the subjugating party addresses a group of women who have been forced to leave their mountain homes and come down to the capital city:

Now hear this. You are mountain people. You hear me? Your language is dead. It is forbidden. It is not permitted to speak your mountain language in this place. You cannot speak your language to your men. It is not permitted. Do you understand? You may not speak it. It is outlawed. You may speak only the language of the capital. That is the only language permitted in this place. You will be badly punished if you attempt to speak your mountain language in this place. This is a military decree. It is the law. Your language is forbidden. It is dead. No one is allowed to speak your language. Your language no longer exists.

A powerful piece, but the only one I have found.

Apart from this next story, which is apposite at this point, even though it is a personal anecdote, for it illustrates the difficulty of bridging the artistic gap. In 1997, I had an article on language death published in the Library of Congress magazine, *Civilization*. This was read by a British theatre director, Greg Doran, who was in the US at the time. When he returned, he phoned me, said he had enjoyed the article, and asked me whether the topic had ever had any stage or film treatment. I said I did not know of any. He was of the opinion that language death was a topic of great dramatic potential, and he visited me at my home to discuss it further. We found no difficulty in thinking of a dozen ways of handling the subject, but there was an impasse when we began to discuss who should write it. To summarise the long discussion: there were plenty of excellent playwrights around, but none of them knew anything about language death; on the other hand, the people who knew about language death were not playwrights. Among the playwrights who might have been interested — other than Pinter, who had already dealt with it — were Tom Stoppard and Brian Friel. They were busy on other projects. And in any case, you can see the problem: how could a professional writer acquire a sufficiently sophisticated knowledge of language endangerment to be able to write in an informed way about the present crisis? It could be done, but it would take an enormous commitment.

We therefore decided to approach the problem the other way round, and, in short, I ended up writing the play myself. As, on a scale of playwriting reputation running from 1

to 10 my position is minus several thousand — it was a risky enterprise, and I needed a great deal of advice and help from Greg and others involved in the theatre business. But in the end it was finished, revised, re-revised, re-re-revised, and parts given readings in various parts of the world. I took the theme which I considered to be of maximum dramatic potential, that of the ‘last speaker’, created an archetypal character and community derived from the personalities and traditions which have been studied in many parts of the world, invented a language, based on linguistic universals, for him to speak, then explored the motivations and tensions which affected him as he decides whether to allow his language to be recorded for posterity or not. As a script I was relieved to find that it was well received. I have a file of positive reaction which makes me feel that my amateurish efforts were worthwhile. Brian Friel, who I consider to be one of the leading dramatists of our time, wrote me a letter applauding the work and saying ‘This is exactly the kind of thing national theatres ought to do’. As you can imagine, I was much relieved.

But when it came to giving the play a full-scale production I encountered an insuperable problem. The subject turned out to be too risky for literary managers of the major theatres, who it seems wanted plays with familiar subjects to ensure their theatres are filled. A young director had taken my play on — Greg, my original contact, had in the meantime been translated to the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford, and was totally taken up with Shakespearean productions. We circulated the play to the main London theatres likely to be interested in a topic of this kind. They all read it, but none were. One manager said that the theme was too intellectually challenging for his audience — by which I assume he meant that there was not enough sex and violence in it. Another that the characters spoke too much — a surprising thing, that, in a play about language. A third found one of the events that control the action of the play to be ‘unbelievable’ — even though it was in fact based on an actual situation experienced by a linguist doing fieldwork. And so on. Most of the criticisms were not directed so much at the writing as at the topic. Language death, it seems, is not mainstream theatre. Maybe other dramatists, with higher artistic profiles and more creative pens than mine, would have better fortune. But I know of no-one yet prepared to take the job on.

I apologise for telling a personal story at such length, but I do believe it is indicative of the age, and of the nature of the problem we face. Language death is not just not mainstream theatre — it is not mainstream anything. Can you imagine Hollywood taking it on? It is so far outside the mindsets of most people that they have difficulty appreciating what the crisis is all about, because they are not used to thinking about language as an issue in itself. Somehow we need to change these mindsets. We need to get people thinking about language more explicitly, more intimately, more enthusiastically. Interest in language is certainly there, in the general population — most people are fascinated by such topics as where words come from, or what the origin of their town’s name is, or whether their baby’s name means anything; they are certainly prepared to play Scrabble and a host of other language games ad infinitum; and language games are often found on radio and television — but a willingness to focus that interest on general issues, a

preparedness to take on board the emotion and drama inherent in the situation of language endangerment, is not something that happens much. This a goal which artists can help us reach.

I believe the arts are the greatest untapped resource that we can exploit to help us do what has to be done. We know the urgency. We need the input of artists, and we need it now. Somehow — perhaps through UNESCO — the artists of the world need to be mobilized in our support, using all the resources at their disposal. Artists are extraordinary people. Once you catch their interest you do not have to persuade them to act. By their nature, they cannot not. The trick is to draw their attention to the fact that language, as such, is an issue. This is, as Lucy's project showed, not difficult to do. Give an artist an opportunity and he/she will take it. The problem is that, in so much work, opportunities are missed — not because of any active antagonism towards the language question, but simply because people have just not thought of it as an issue. Two years ago I returned from Brazil clutching a beautiful glossy art-book of photographs on the country, in which the writer and photographer had gone out of their way to find communities and environments at risk. Not a single mention of the Brazilian language crisis, in the whole book. There were statistics about the amount of rainforest which was disappearing, but none about the number of languages which were disappearing. The writer, I suspect, had simply not noticed it, or had taken it for granted, or had forgotten about it. The photographer had not even conceived of the exciting artistic challenge of attempting to pictorialize it.

We need the arts to help us get our initiative into the three domains where it can make greatest impact — the media, the school, and the home.

- First, for the media we need a stock of memorable, quotable statements from writers, pop-singers, film-stars, and others in the public eye. We are writers ourselves, so we can do our bit. But good slogans come best out of the mouths of artists. The media love artists. If a famous artist cuts his little finger it can be headline news with a photograph. If an academic linguist breaks his neck, it might make a late edition, on page 17, at the bottom, misspelled.
- Second, for the school: we need to get the issue into the curricula — something which is beginning to happen in a small way. In the UK, for example, the topic of language death is recognized in the A-level English Language syllabus that children take at age 16. But age 16 is too late; awareness of the biological crisis is in schools at age five. Art projects can help here too. I have seen a whole art exhibition by children on the theme of wildlife extinction. It made front-page news in our local paper. Would a language extinction exhibition? I think it would.
- Third, and above all, we have to get awareness of the language crisis into the home. And here I know of only two ways of easily getting into people's homes: the Internet and the arts. The Internet is an important and still under-used resource for our theme, but it has its problems: it is still not available to a huge proportion of the human race

(in many places there is still not even enough electricity to run a computer); it can be slow and cumbersome, especially in downloading multimedia material; and those of us who do use the Internet routinely know how difficult it is to get a simple message across — or even noticed, within the floods of pages that exist. But the arts can get into the home every day in all kinds of mutually reinforcing ways — whether it be via a radio or television programme, a CD or DVD, a computer game, a wall decoration or painting or photograph, a novel, a postcard, or a text-message poem (currently one of the coolest of artistic mediums among the young). There are so many opportunities, and so few have yet been exploited.

I was writing the first draft of this paper just after Christmas 2002, and I looked around me at the things which had come into my home at that time. One of the most noticeable intrusions were the Christmas cards. I looked at the ones we had received. Several were bilingual or multilingual, but the languages were all healthy languages, full of *joyeux noels* and *fröhliche Weinachtens*. Why is there no Christmas card in which last speakers wish us happy holidays, in their languages, possibly for the last time? Why have I never seen a card wishing me happiness in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his disciples, a language which is so near to extinction in the present-day Middle East that, if he were to return using his mother-tongue, he would soon find no-one able to understand him? Let me leave Xmas behind. Why have I never seen an artistic oeuvre in which we see portrayed, for example, the communication gap between grandparent and grandchild, or any of the other striking images which we know characterize our field? There is certainly no shortage of images. In a poem, 'It Hurts Him to Think', R S Thomas writes:

The
 industrialists came, burrowing
 in the corpse of a nation
 for its congealed blood. I was
 born into the squalor of
 their feeding and sucked their speech
 in with my mother's
 infected milk, so that whatever
 I throw up now is still theirs.

My mother's linguistically infected milk. Why is there no portrayal of that? Or again, in 'Reservoirs' he writes:

I have walked the shore
 For an hour and seen the English
 Scavenging among the remains
 Of our culture, covering the sand

Like the tide and, with the roughness
 Of the tide, elbowing our language
 Into the grave that we have dug for it.

Elbowing a language into a grave. Why is there no portrayal of that?

These are all dramatic images, memorable images, and indeed in some cases people might find them shocking. They might even offend their sensibilities. But at least we would have made people sit up and take notice. We would have engaged with those sensibilities, which, I have argued in this paper, is an essential task if our field is to achieve the kind of world presence it needs.

Alongside our properly technical concerns, therefore, let us not forget that communication with the general public is just as much a part of our professionalism. And, to date, it is the most neglected side of our professionalism. To bridge our language awareness gap we need to take a leap of the imagination. But I do not think we can do it alone, and our best potential allies are the artists. We need to make every effort to get them on board, therefore. In particular, we need to make their job easier, by compiling an archive or library of metadata about endangered languages. This would help journalists and broadcasters too. Here is a typical e-mail, which I received in January 2003 (a similar request arrives every few weeks) to illustrate why such a databank is needed:

I'd like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. My name is [X] and I work as a researcher at a documentary production company called [Y] in Toronto, Canada. We are interested in pursuing a project related to endangered languages. ... I was wondering if you could recommend some endangered languages that could be used as case studies, or specific locations with rich linguistic anthropological circumstances. Any suggestions or advice you could offer would be much appreciated.

Where does one send such a person? There is no central place. Each such initiative has to start from scratch — an immensely time-wasting and expensive operation. Once we have managed to get people interested, we must make their job easy for them. And one way of doing this would be to establish a public depository, such as exists in the book world, for copies of works — radio programmes, magazine articles, interviews with last speakers and community leaders, stock footage of communities — anything which relates to language death.

Secondly, let us take positive steps to attract the interest of artists. One way would be a prize. Our modern society is obsessed with prizes. There are Oscars, Grammys, Emmies, Golden Globes, Booker Prizes, Pulitzers, Goncourts, ... Everything has its prizes. The annual award of the Turner prize for art, in its often controversial decisions, has generated an extraordinary amount of discussion about the nature of art. So, as part of our language and arts initiative, let there be an annual prize for artistic achievement in

endangered languages, to be announced perhaps on World Language Day. It is the kind of thing that UNESCO or a philanthropic organization might sponsor. Let there be something, anything, concrete, to focus public attention on the language crisis. A dimension of this kind, I believe, would complement our professional linguistic activities, and ultimately aid them, for public awareness and sympathy is prerequisite if we are to alter the intellectual, emotional, and financial climate within which we have to work.

The Canadian poet, Mark Abley, has written (Abley 1994):

Each time we lose a language,
the ghosts who made use of it
cast a new bell.

The voices magnify. Soon,
listen, they'll outpeal

the tongues of earth.

I believe an alliance between linguists and artists, in a common cause, is the best way of bridging our public awareness gap, and making the bells ring out in celebration once again.

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