

Half of all languages face extinction this century

16:42 16 February 04

[NewScientist.com news service](#)

Half of all human languages will have disappeared by the end of the century, as smaller societies are assimilated into national and global cultures, scientists have warned.

Losing this linguistic diversity will be a blow not only for cultural studies but also for cognitive science, they say. The only option is to record and catalogue these languages before they disappear for good, say the researchers, who gathered at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Seattle, Washington, to issue the warning.

Some 6800 "unique" languages are thought to exist today. But social, demographic and political factors are all contributing to the rapid disappearance of many mother tongues.

"There are fewer languages than there were a month or six months ago," David Harrison of Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, US, says. "Human languages are literally disappearing as we speak."

Harrison gives the example of the language Middle Chulym, now spoken by only a handful of Siberian townfolk, all of whom are all over the age 45. Integration into Russian society has reduced the need for the language and once the last fluent speaker has died the language itself will be extinct.

Other worlds

"What is lost when a language is lost is another world," says Stephen Anderson, of Yale University. He says valuable ethnographic and cultural information disappears when a language is lost.

Harrison adds that each language lost leaves a gap in our understanding of the variable cognitive structures of which the human brain is capable. Studies of different languages have already revealed vastly different ways of representing and interpreting the world. Some Native American languages, for example, reveal a completely different understanding of the nature of time.

But just as many minority languages are dying out, the languages that dominate the globe, such as Chinese, English and Spanish, are becoming increasingly varied and complex, says David Lightfoot, a language researcher at Georgetown University. And new languages may even spring up. For example, new versions of Chinese are likely to emerge that cannot be understood by some other Chinese speakers.

Nonetheless, Lightfoot stresses that documenting existing languages is vitally important. "We want to understand as much as we can about human language," he says. "But to keep them alive you need a viable community and that's not something that's really controllable."

[Will Knight, Seattle](#)

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