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# Fading Species and Dying Tongues: When the Two Part Ways

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For the past decade, scholars and political activists have been working to get the rest of us worried about the future of the world's 6,000 or so spoken languages. One tool is an analogy: languages with fewer and fewer speakers, they argue, are like species heading for extinction.

A paper published on May 15 in *Nature* gives the comparison a statistical basis. The analysis, by Prof. William J. Sutherland of the University of East Anglia, notes that when standard measures of species risk are applied to language communities, human tongues come out even more endangered than the animals.

The metaphor of "endangered languages" is both easy to grasp and appealing to the sense of fair play: fluent speakers of languages like Kasabe, Ona and Eyak are dying off, while their children and grandchildren increasingly speak languages like English, Chinese, Spanish or Swahili.

Language preservationists have been using this analogy for years. The often-quoted question posed by Dr. Michael Krauss, an emeritus professor of linguistics at the University of Alaska, for instance, is: "Should we mourn the loss of Eyak or Ubykh less than the loss of the panda or the California condor?"

It is no surprise that linguists and activists promote maintaining spoken languages. Just as the Poultry and Egg Council wants us to eat eggs, linguists want languages to study. I wonder, though, where science ends and politics begins.

How, really, are the panda and Ubykh equivalent? The panda, once gone, is gone forever. If the information and political will are present, Ubykh can be revived 500 years from now. Hebrew, after all, was brought back from ancient texts into daily use after 2,000 years. Ubykh, a language of Turkey, is a human creation. The panda is not; it is our neighbor, not our invention.

Talk of endangerment and extinction suggests languages as a finite resource, like gas in a tank heading toward empty. Preservationists have predicted that only half the world's currently spoken languages will be around in a century.

It would be a terrible thing to run out of languages. But there is no danger of that, because the reserve of language, unlike the gas tank, is refueled every day, as ordinary people engage in the creative and ingenious act of talking. Old words, constructions and pronunciations drop away, new ones are taken up, and, relentlessly, the language changes.

Every day, English, Spanish, Russian and French, along with almost all other living languages are being altered by speakers to suit changing times. In 2000, for example, another Nature paper revealed that even the Queen of England now pronounces her English less aristocratically than she used to.

As Professor Sutherland noted in his paper, languages are in "continual flux." That probably explains why a recently settled island can be as rich in languages as a long-inhabited continent. That flux never stops. Even this morning, languages are being altered by their speakers to suit changing times and places.

In an era when languages continue to change with time, can't we expect the big languages, like Latin before them, to blossom into families of related but distinct new tongues? Already, more than 100 new languages have been created out of the vast mixings of peoples and cultures of the last four centuries.

For example, on the preservationist Web site [terralingua.org](http://terralingua.org), one can find the organization's statement of purpose in Tok Pisin, a language of Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin did not exist 150 years ago. Like Haitian Creole, it is a new language, born of the last few centuries of human history.

So maybe the human race has all the languages it needs, and deserves. When we need a new one, we invent it. Language evolution is taking place every day; why interfere with it?

Preservationists call this an argument for accepting injustice. James Crawford, a thoughtful writer about language and a preservationist, notes that "language death does not happen in privileged communities."

"It happens to the dispossessed and the disempowered, peoples who most need their cultural resources to survive," he continues.

This is certainly true; many of the dying languages were systematically attacked by missionaries and governments in cruel, despicable ways. The game they lost was rigged. Abuses continue to be committed in the name of education, modernization and national identity, so the preservationists do good work in noting and protesting such practices.

It is important, though, to be clear about what -- or rather, who -- deserves protection. The right to remain safe and whole belongs to human beings, not to abstractions created to describe what human beings did yesterday.

The difference between a living creature with blood in its veins and a general notion should be obvious: your auburn-haired neighbor, nicknamed Red, has rights. The concept of "red" does not.

But don't people need their "cultural resources"? Sure, but because culture is reinvented by each person to suit a particular place and time, members of a culture will argue with one another about what those resources are. When we describe culture as an organism, we do not see the individuals inside it.

So if the study of languages is a scientific enterprise, the effort to preserve them is not. It is a political question: which voices represent the communities whose languages are fading?

Hearing how his ancestors were punished for speaking their own language at school, a young speaker might be persuaded by an elder to learn the ancestral tongue. That is a reason to preserve that language in the archives. Suppose, though, that the tales of days long gone do not

resonate with this hypothetical child. Is it science's job to help the elder preserve his sense of importance at the expense of the younger?

Language bullies who try to shame a child into learning his grandfather's language are not morally different from the language bullies who tried to shame the grandfather into learning English. The elucidation of language in all its complexity is an enthralling scientific enterprise. But "saving endangered languages" is not a part of it.