

CAN MINORITY LANGUAGES BE SAVED?

GLOBALIZATION vs. CULTURE

The increasing mobility of people, goods, and information has driven a powerful trend toward cultural uniformity and the extinction of local languages. But languages that have young people, business, and government on their side are alive and thriving.

By Eric Garland

Globalized economics and media are changing the face of culture around the globe, reducing the number of languages that humans speak. As the world economy becomes more integrated, a common tongue has become more important than ever to promote commerce, and that puts speakers of regional dialects and minority languages at a distinct disadvantage. In addition, telecommunications has pressured languages to become more standardized, further squeezing local variations of language.

Over the past 500 years, as nation-states developed and became more centralized, regional dialects and minority languages have been dominated by the centrist dialects of the ruling parties. Cornish has given



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way to English, Breton to French, Bavarian to High German, and Fu-jian-wa to Cantonese. Linguists concur that minority languages all over the world are giving way to more dominant languages, such as English, Mandarin, and Spanish, among others. The realities of commerce and the seductive power of world pop culture are placing pressure on speakers of minority languages to learn majority languages or suffer the consequences: greater difficulty doing business, less access to information, etc.

These pressures are inducing a rapid die-off of languages around the world. Languages have been disappearing steadily, with 3,000 of the world's languages predicted to disappear in the next 100 years. According to the United Nations Environment Program, there are 5,000 to 7,000 spoken languages in the world, with 4,000 to 5,000 of these classed as indigenous, used by native tribes. More than 2,500 are in danger of immediate extinction, and many more are losing their link with the natural world, becoming museum pieces rather than living languages.

Futurists have noted this loss with no little despair, for significant, culturally specific information may disappear along with a language. For instance, knowledge about unique medicines and treatments used by aboriginal groups could be lost forever if the language used to transmit that information is banned by a majority culture.

The common wisdom is that globalization is the wave of the future, and in many respects this is undeniable. However, swept up in this conventional wisdom is the notion that languages and cultures will simply cease to exist, and people will instead choose "global" cultures and languages that will transcend boundaries.

This is not the only potential scenario. It is possible for globalization and new technology to safeguard cultural identity while simultaneously allowing free exchanges of ideas and goods. For centuries, dialects and languages have been unifying to facilitate national identity, scientific research, and commerce.

Without question, there will be a need for common languages, as standardization allows growth in software and in people. But global prosperity and new technologies may also allow smaller cultures to preserve their niches. It is clear from several modern examples that a dying or dead language can turn around and become vibrant again, depending on people's determination and the government policies that are put in place.

Reversing Language Loss

The idea of saving languages is very modern. When linguistics scholar Joshua A. Fishman first wrote of "reversing language shift" in his book of that title (1990), one reviewer actually laughed at the notion. The conventional wisdom among linguists, historians, and sociologists was that, if your culture and language were on the way out, their doom was assured in a globalized world. After all, the prevailing trends are toward globalization and a unified world. Tiny dialects—such as Breton, the Celtic language spoken in Brittany, a province on the northwestern coast of France—are not a benefit in the global economy, since they are difficult to learn, poorly adapted to modern life, and

unintelligible to almost everyone beyond a small region.

Learning or relearning a native language is often a political statement, an act of self-definition, one that brings solidarity with our neighbors. It is political power, cultural reverence, and perhaps a feeling of control in a world where political and cultural borders are collapsing all around us. Minority languages may also have a place alongside majority forms of communication. The International Committee for the Defense of the Breton Language suggests that early bilingualism can help prepare young people to master several languages, which will be an advantage—if not a necessity—for the future in Europe.

Changing world geopolitics is already reforming the pressures on languages. The fall of the Soviet Union actually spurred a trend toward reversing language loss. In many of the former Soviet republics, older Turkic languages have been revived, now that the Russian influence is gone. Turkey is spending \$1.5 billion to encourage the resurgence of Turkish throughout the region. Language is power, economic and otherwise, and the Turks are capitalizing on the possibility of extending their reach, causing a reverse of language shift in the region.

DATA BOX: Global Distribution of Living Languages

Area	Living Languages		Number of Speakers	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Africa	2,092	30.3%	675.9 million	11.8%
Americas	1,002	14.5	47.5 million	0.8
Asia	2,269	32.8	3,489.9 million	61.0
Europe	239	3.5	1,504.4 million	26.3
Pacific	1,310	19.0	6.1 million	0.1
World	6,912	100.0	5,723.9 million	100.0

Note: A living language is defined as one that is the first language of at least one speaker. Extinct languages that are spoken as a second language are excluded. Total world language speakers do not reflect total population because of insufficient data for some languages.

Source: *Ethnologue*, 15th edition. Edited by Raymond G. Gordon Jr., SIL International, www.ethnologue.com.

It is becoming clear that, when people have a strong cultural reason to reverse language shift, they can effectively resist the onslaught of majority languages. Moreover, the mass-media technologies that allowed the one-way dialogue of majority languages to drive out minority languages and dialects are now helping those silenced languages to make a comeback. Speakers of these smaller languages can use interactive technologies such as Web sites, e-mail, and message boards to talk back to the world by creating and distributing media in their own language to a global diaspora.



Québec: Case Study in Reversing Language Shift

Some minority languages are resurging despite the pressures of globalization. An excellent example of this phenomenon is Québec, which has shown that smaller languages, given sufficient economic power and policy planning, can resist even the strongest linguistic force on the planet: English.

Québec is a Canadian province of about 7 million inhabitants, where more than 95% are native French speakers. Since France signed the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and ceded command of New France to the English, North America's French-speaking inhabitants have been surrounded by English-speakers, who held almost all official and economic power over Québec. Though most Québec inhabitants lived and died speaking French, British government officials and factory bosses generally required the use of English.

As the twentieth century stretched on, even young Québécois began to turn toward bilingualism in English and away from French education. After hundreds of years of survival, Canadian French appeared headed toward extinction. This created great tension among the people of Québec, culminating in the 1960s with the *Revolution Tranquille*, during which native francophone Québécois demanded the use of French as the only official language of the province.

Today, Québécois strongly defend their language and have passed laws to make it the medium of commerce and governance. Québec passed the *Loi 101*, requiring the public use of French in all cases and relegating English to a secondary status. French is now the dominant language of commerce and government in Québec; English is also available on an incidental basis in federal matters, but French must always be offered. On the commercial side, even the extremely technical language of technology is translated into French for use in the province, such as for textbooks and training manuals.

In the media, all billboards and public signs must appear in French; English words, if used, must be accompanied by a French translation. Also, the technology that supported the English language in Canada is now used to maintain the regular use of French. The Canadian government now pays for the support of fully bilingual national media, both the English-language Canadian Broadcasting Company and its French equivalent, Radio-Canada. Both stations require a certain percentage of their offering to be original Canadian content. The government has decreed that the airwaves will be filled with Canadian French (not even European French) programming. From the news to game shows, Canadian French is clearly the language of the province's popular culture.

Another policy that effectively

Former Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien promotes bilingualism at a conference in Ottawa.

supports the reversal of language shift in Québec is the encouragement of immigrants to speak the local language. West Africans, Haitians, Dominicans, Poles, and Greeks are all encouraged to speak French when arriving in places such as Montréal and Québec City; many immigrants remain bilingual in their native tongue and French, even though the powerful influence of English can be felt all around from the rest of Canada and the United States.

Québec is an example of a place where a language heading toward extinction has assured its own survival by education, political will, and commercial expedience. The technologies that initially placed pressure on the people to learn English, such as mass media (TV, radio, public signage, and print), has been appropriated to support the local language now and in the future. It is an example of the technologies of globalization being used to support the minority culture.

Dead Languages Reborn: The Case of Hebrew

Hebrew demonstrates how a language can be brought back from the dead to form the basis of a national identity. Israel united first as a state and then deliberately as a linguistically unified culture.

At the end of the nineteenth century, there were 10 million Yiddish-speaking Jews around the world, but none were habitual or primary speakers of Hebrew. Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, called the father of Modern Hebrew, is responsible for the adaptation of ancient Hebrew dialects into the Modern Hebrew language currently associated with the state of Israel.

The transition to a modern language still has some bumps. Words have needed to be invented by language councils even to describe the activities of daily life. In the first

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Peruvian immigrants take lessons in Hebrew language. Jews immigrating to Israel from around the world are helping to support the revival of Modern Hebrew.

years of Israel, the state published posters asking speakers of German, Yiddish, and Russian to learn Hebrew from their children, who were being taught the new form. Once there was a second generation, where children saw their parents, policemen, and librarians speaking Hebrew, a national language was born.

Modern Hebrew is an established language in no threat of extinction because it adheres to the three most

important factors in maintaining a language for the future: It is the language of education for the young, of commerce, and of official government activity. It is important to note that the forces of globalization and dominant languages like English and French do not appear to be a threat to this young language. A local TV and film industry provides Hebrew-based entertainment and a common popular culture for young people. Similarly, the rapid development of technologies and Internet sites for Hebrew has promoted the spread of the language all over the world. Modern life is not a threat to this recently revived language.

The resurgence of Hebrew in Israel offers a role model for speakers of languages such as Welsh, Irish Gaelic, Catalan, and Basque. Representatives from Catalonia and the Basque country have been sent to Israel to study the effect that Hebrew has had in solidifying the idea of Israel as a nation-state.

Minority Languages in Europe

A number of minority languages in western Europe still exist despite overwhelming pressure from the majority, centrist languages of the nations in which they co-exist. English, French, and Castilian Spanish are clearly the dominant languages, even in the geographical areas where the minority ethnicities exist. But the future of the local languages depends not so much on the strength of the national languages as on the relationship of the local language to education, government, and commerce.

Here is an overview of some of the trends in Europe's less-widely spoken languages.

• **Catalan: Seeking freedom in Castilian Spain.** Catalan is an example of a language that has resisted the pressures of homogenization. Catalan is the national language of the tiny nation of Andorra and the "co-official" language of the Catalonia region of eastern Spain, the Balearic Islands, and regions of Sardinia and France. Sharing roots with both French and Spanish, Catalan is far from a small minority tongue,

with 7.5 million speakers.

During the Franco regime (1939–1975), the use of Catalan was banned, along with all other regional languages of Spain, such as Basque and Galician. With the death of Franco in 1975, the ban was lifted, and new Catalan newspapers and television channels were launched. Catalan is now Catalonia's official language for all government, commerce, education, and culture. The new strength of the language may lead to the formation of a semi-autonomous Catalanian state within federal Spain.

• **Irish Gaelic: Reviving Ireland's native tongue.** Despite suffering centuries of repression under English landlords who would repeatedly outlaw the native language, Irish Gaelic is increasing in strength and relevance. According to the 2004 census, 1.6 million people, or 45% of Ireland's total population, were competent speakers of Irish Gaelic, or *gaeilge*, up from 1.4 million speakers in 1996. It has been the official language of the free state of Ireland since 1922, but English remains the most commonly spoken language in Ireland.

Education is increasing the total number of Irish speakers throughout the country, especially among younger Irish citizens. There is also a burgeoning media culture entirely in the Irish language. The television network TG4 provides news, current affairs, sports, and even a soap opera, *Ros na Rún*, entirely in Irish Gaelic. The majority of Irish Web sites are still in English, and those written in Gaelic either pertain to cultural matters such as music or the language itself or are of official government publications.

The government appears to be the greatest driver of the Irish language, if not popular culture. A growing number of legal precedents support Ireland's right to require the use of its indigenous language. For example, in 1989, European courts accepted the right of the Irish government to require Dutch art teacher Anita Groener to learn Irish Gaelic as a prerequisite to her employment.

Still, the use of Irish language in government has been perfunctory



(Left) Mural on a Belfast rowhouse bids a Gaelic “goodbye” to British soldiers. The Irish government is promoting fluency in native Gaelic, but the historic dominance of the English language will be difficult to overcome, says author Garland.

(Below) Welsh Secretary Ron Davies (left) and Scottish Secretary Donald Dewar proclaim their support for both English and Welsh in a 1997 campaign for autonomy in Cardiff, Wales. Welsh may now be on the upswing after two centuries of domination by English.

BARRY BATCHELOR / AFP / NEWSCOM



until recently. The ability to function in the Irish language is legally required for all government bureaucrats, but fluency was not required, and Irish was rarely used. Meanwhile, English was a daily necessity. But with the Official Languages Act of 2003, the use of Irish in the government has increased, enabling any Irish citizen to obtain government services entirely in Gaelic.

Still, the future success of Irish remains uncertain. The impact of increased education and of the Official Languages Act is likely to give some buoyancy to the language, but its establishment as a monoglot language of commerce remains unlikely.

• **Welsh: Language becomes an important argument for political autonomy.** The Celtic language of Welsh, or *cymraeg*, has been overshadowed by its dominant neighbor, English. The Welsh people do not share the Scots’ streak of independence, so their language has mostly existed only as a provincial tongue—one associated with farmers and not landed gentry. Over the past two centuries, the language has been eroded to the point that the Welsh monoglot population is less than 1% of the nation, having declined as a result of two world wars, television, and the increasing choice of Wales as a retirement community for many Englishmen.

Yet, the Welsh people and their

language have prevailed, even in the face of the economic and technological trends of globalization.

The use of the Welsh language is a cultural and political statement for many in Wales, but especially in the agrarian north. In Wales, as in Scotland, the regional nationalist party has won representation in Parliament. In Wales, more than 20% of the population speaks Welsh fluently.

Today, Welsh is offered regularly as a second language in schools and is increasingly the language of primary instruction once again. The percentage of Welsh children up to age 14 who are able to speak Welsh increased from 15% in 1971 to 25% in 1991. Welsh language media are limited but growing. A separate Welsh TV channel, S4C, began broadcasting in 1982 and now features news, cultural programming, and children’s shows. Today, in the government sector, several high-level public jobs require bilingualism, but in the commercial realm, English remains the unchallenged *lingua franca*.

The Welsh language may be on the upswing compared to the trends of the latter part of the twentieth century, but still there may not be a future for a nation of monoglot Welshmen. A strong majority (80%) of Welshmen do not see Welsh as the

key to nationhood. For now, the Welsh language as a primary driver of nationalism is in question, even though the Welsh language is in resurgence.

Consistent policies expanding the use of Welsh ensure its survival, and it is less in danger of disappearing than it was a century ago. However, its use as the monoglot language of commerce or government seems unlikely in the future.

• **Scots Gaelic: A museum piece of a language.** Indigenous Scots Gaelic (*ghàidhlig*), stands in sharp relief to the experiences of native Welsh and Irish Gaelic. Scotland has virtually no Gaelic-only speakers. No public services are available in the language, and making it the national language is not even an issue.

This indifference to an indigenous national language is perhaps due to the unique history of the Scottish culture vis-à-vis its English neighbors. After conquering the Scots in 1746, the English victors outlawed the Scots language and culture, along with the wearing of the tartan. Over time, the prohibition of Scottish culture was changed to assimilation. The British military began adopting

some traditions, such as music (bag-pipe and drums), as well as the wearing of the tartan for the Black Watch. English royalty established new homes in Scotland, and the notion of the Highlander became romanticized: In effect, Scottish culture became the property of the British, as much a distinct political statement as local languages are in Ireland and Wales.

Today, there are 60,000 speakers of Scots Gaelic, but they are on average considerably older than speakers of many resurging languages. Many Scots regard the Scottish language as a relic of the past. There is no mandatory education in Scots Gaelic, and French is more popular as a second language in high schools.

Scottish-language media is limited compared with Irish Gaelic and Welsh. There are newspapers in the Highlands that feature sections in Scots Gaelic, but no major dailies in the language. Radio may feature the local language for music, but news broadcasts are in English. Scottish youth are not using the Internet to perpetuate the local language. The technological forces of globalization overwhelmingly demand the English language.

The national linguistic identity of Scotland seems more likely to focus on the use of proper English in public settings and a secondary strong regional accent for use among countrymen. A full resurgence of the local language appears unlikely.

• **Breton: Overcoming French suppression and increasing the use of the native tongue.** Western France is considered one of the seven Celtic nations, home of the Breton people who speak a Celtic language called *brezhoneg*. The Breton language suffered centuries of repression at the hands of the central French government, but Brittany retains a strong cultural and historical identity. Today, 200,000 to 300,000 people still speak Breton, down from the 1.2 million who spoke it at the start of the twentieth century. Now, however, it is gaining greater popularity and public acceptance, mostly through educational and cultural means. Though government services and commerce are conducted almost ex-



Great Britain's Prince Charles (left), hosted by Donald McCormick, inspects the McCormick collection of Gaelic and highland-related material at the Gaelic College at Sleat, Isle of Skye.

clusively in French, Breton language instruction in schools supports its preservation.

Breton may attain an equal cultural status in Brittany, so long as young people are still allowed to form identities through the Breton language, but it is unlikely to enjoy the success of supremacy achieved by Canadian French and Catalan, since there is little commercial or governmental support for Breton.

Minority Languages for the Future

Globalized commerce and media are not necessarily the death knell for local languages, because certain trends support their preservation. Whereas one-way mass media technologies such as TV, radio, and print served to support majority languages, today's computer technology is turning the tables. It is considerably less expensive now to produce video and audio in any language, and communications technologies allow you to transmit these media to a diaspora anywhere in the world.

In the future, with lower prices for powerful computers and dramatic

advances in broadband Internet (such as IPv6 architecture that will soon turn any Internet connection into a broadcast device), majority languages may no longer possess an advantage in distributing information to the public. In the future, anybody anywhere on Earth could conceivably receive the evening news in Welsh or Irish Gaelic. Also, the availability of cheap, powerful multimedia will allow teachers to translate educational materials into a local language more easily. These educational technologies will be essential to the survival and prosperity of languages in the future. Only education of the youth assures the continuity of a language.

The availability of government services in a chosen language is the only path to its legitimacy in a political sense, but even more critical is for a minority language to be used in commerce.

The pressures of globalization on minority languages are undeniable, and many will likely disappear. However, extinction is not a certainty. The trend toward the homogeneity of global culture has stimulated many people to search for their native roots and hold tighter to their cultural identity.

We are living in interesting times, linguistically, as powerful national languages encounter fierce resistance in their drive to dislodge local languages. New technologies are offering people greater freedom to choose their own cultural identity, and many are choosing minority local languages. The linguistic giants will not be the only choice in the future. □



About the Author

Eric Garland is the principal of Competitive Futures Inc., a futures consultancy, www.competitivefutures.com. His last article for THE FUTURIST, "Scenarios in Practice: Futuring in the Pharmaceutical Industry," appeared in January-February 2006.

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