Lost Languages

There are currently between six and seven thousand languages in the world, but some linguists have estimated by the end of this century up to half of them will be lost. Why? Well, for one thing, the spread of the Internet, global trade and mass media enable communication across cultures like never before, but they also tend to make certain highly popular languages like English more dominant than ever. This isn't necessarily a problem, but it does become a problem when the youth of a culture with a minority language don't learn the language. After a while it is only the elderly who can speak it, and then, pretty soon, the language may die out with them.

Some people point out that there are advantages to loosing some of the more obscure languages. For instance, it makes it easier for larger numbers of people to understand eachother if they all speak the same language. It is also cheaper for people to speak a common language as signs and instructions don't have to be translated so much.

However, I would argue that there are two main reasons why it is a great shame for a language to be lost.

Firstly, languages are a great repository of information about a culture and its history. Mainly because for most of history we didn't have the written word and information was passed down through time by mouth. Such oral histories are the basis of myths, and scholars are now discovering that many of the world's myths, rather than just simple fanciful tales, are actually coded forms of information about the distant past. When we loose a language, we loose the opportunity for studying this information. Also, by studying languages and their similarities to other languages, linguists can learn about Human history in general. They can track back the connections of cultures and how people migrated across continents.

Secondly, different languages can create different ways of perceiving the world. For example, the native American language of Choctaw, spoken in Oklahoma and Mississippi, is now spoken by just 11,000 people. This is still more than many endangered languages, however, only half of the young people are now learning the language, compared to 95% just 20 years ago. It's currently believed that Choctaw could die out in the next two generations. The interesting thing about the language is that when you are discussing something, you have to make it clear where your evidence is coming from. For example, if you are talking about something that you know for a fact to be true, you have to use a different tense than if you are merely passing on information that you have heard from someone else. Choctaw is the only known language to have this feature, and almost certainly results in its speakers having a slightly different perception of the world. Incidentally, most of the spoken native American languages are now classified as endangered.

If a language is lost, is it possible to retrieve it? Yes, sometimes. For years, scholars where unable to understand the language of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Then, in 1799 a stone – the so-called Rosetta stone – was discovered on which the same message was written in both Greek and hieroglyphics. This unlocked the meaning of this ancient Egyptian language and enabled researches to decode large amounts of ancient history.

Also, with modern recording methods it is possible to archive the way words in an ancient language are spoken. So, in theory, even if people stop speaking certain languages in everyday life, they need not always be lost forever.