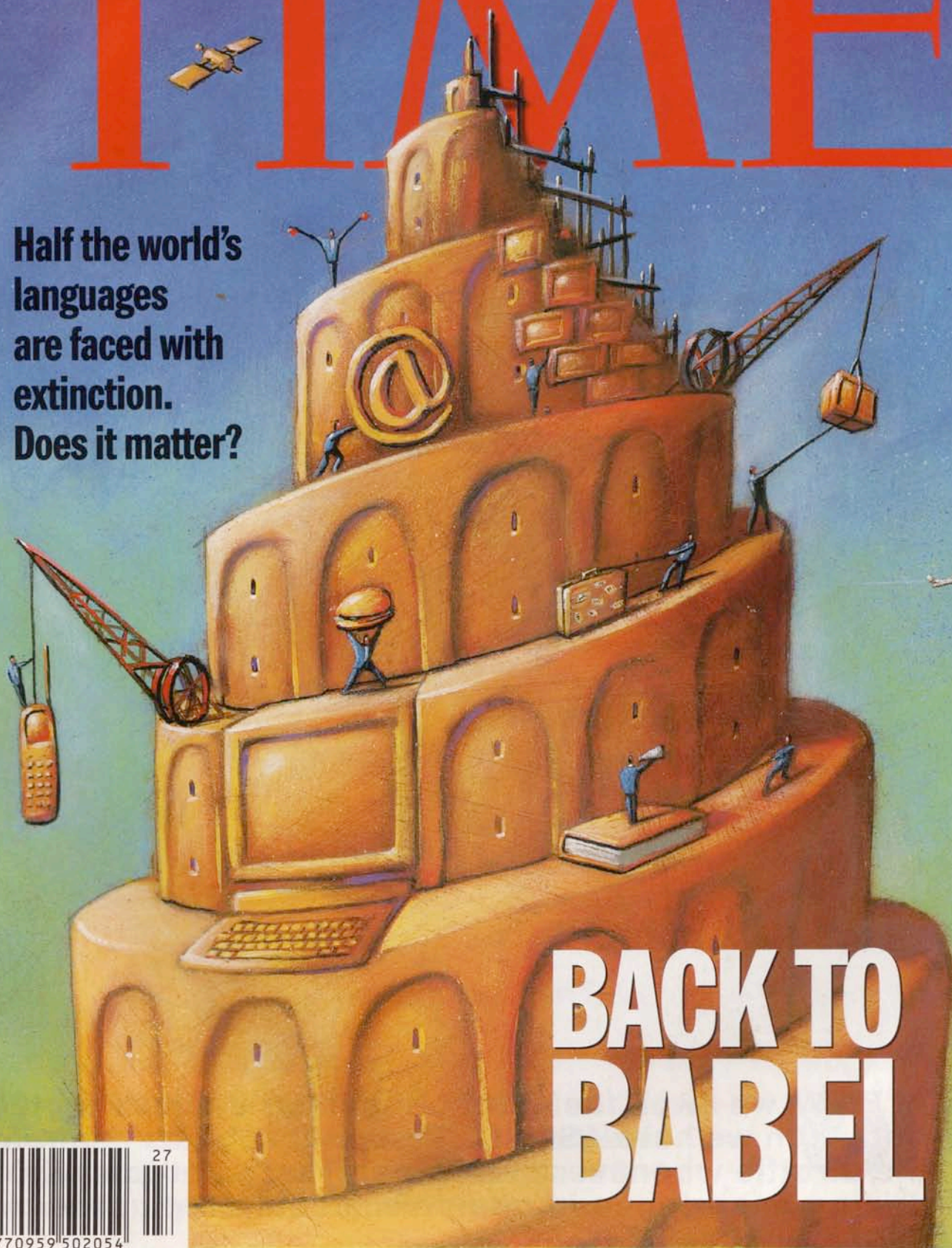


JULY 7, 1997

SPECIAL REPORT  
**GLOBALIZATION**

# TIME

Half the world's  
languages  
are faced with  
extinction.  
Does it matter?



## BACK TO BABEL



27



# SPEAKING

**As telecommunications, tourism and trade make the world a smaller place, languages are dying at an alarming rate**

By JAMES GEARY

**S**ITTING IN A CIRCLE WITH A DOZEN OTHER MEMBERS OF the native American Tlingit (pronounced klink-it) tribe, Jon Rowan, a 33-year-old schoolteacher, mutters in frustration: "We're babies. All we speak is baby gibberish." The group is gathered at the community center in Klawock, a town of some 800 people on the eastern fringe of Prince of Wales Island. In the Gulf of Alaska, some 40 km off the Alaskan coast, Prince of Wales Island still survives in a state of pristine natural beauty. But this idyllic stretch of land is home to at least one endangered species: the Tlingit language.

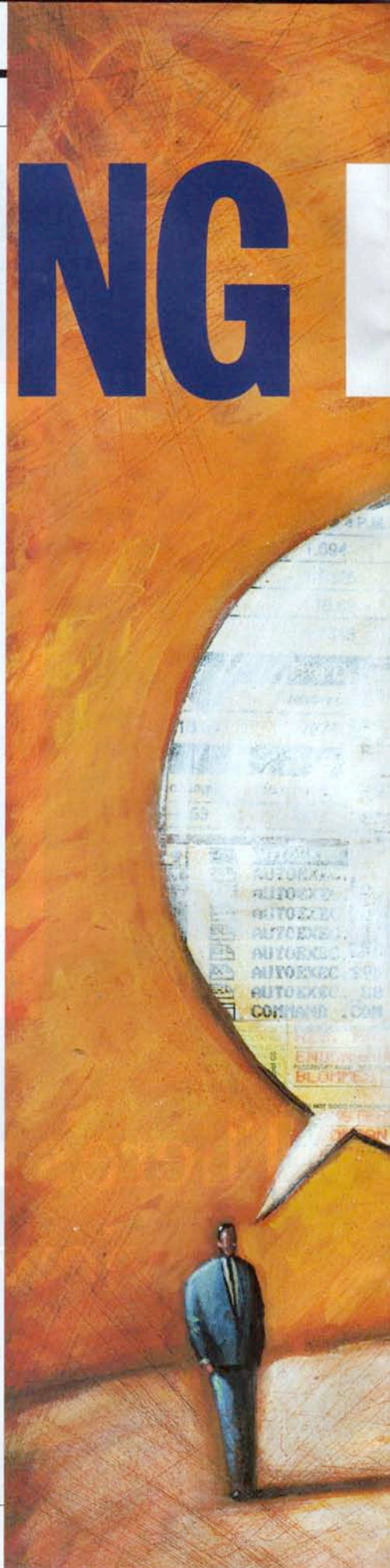
Rowan and his fellow tribesmen meet every other week in sessions like this to learn their native tongue before the last fluent tribal elder dies. But as Rowan's frustration indicates, the task is made more difficult because Tlingit is becoming extinct. Forty years ago, the entire tribe was fluent in the language, a guttural tongue that relies heavily on accompanying gesture for its meaning. Now it is spoken by only a handful of people throughout southern Alaska and portions of Canada, nearly all of whom are over the age of 60. Since Tlingit was not originally a written language, Rowan and company are trying to record as much of it as possible by translating just about anything they can get their hands on into Tlingit, from Christmas carols like *Jingle Bells* to nursery rhymes such as *Hickory Dickory Dock*.

The plight of Tlingit is a small page in the modern version of the Tower of Babel story—with the plot reversed. The Old Testament describes the first, mythical humans as "of one language and of one speech." They built a city on a plain with a tower whose peak reached unto heaven. God, offended by their impudence in building something to rival His own creation, punished them by shattering their

single language into many tongues and scattering the speakers. "Therefore is the name of it called Babel," the Bible says, "because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth."

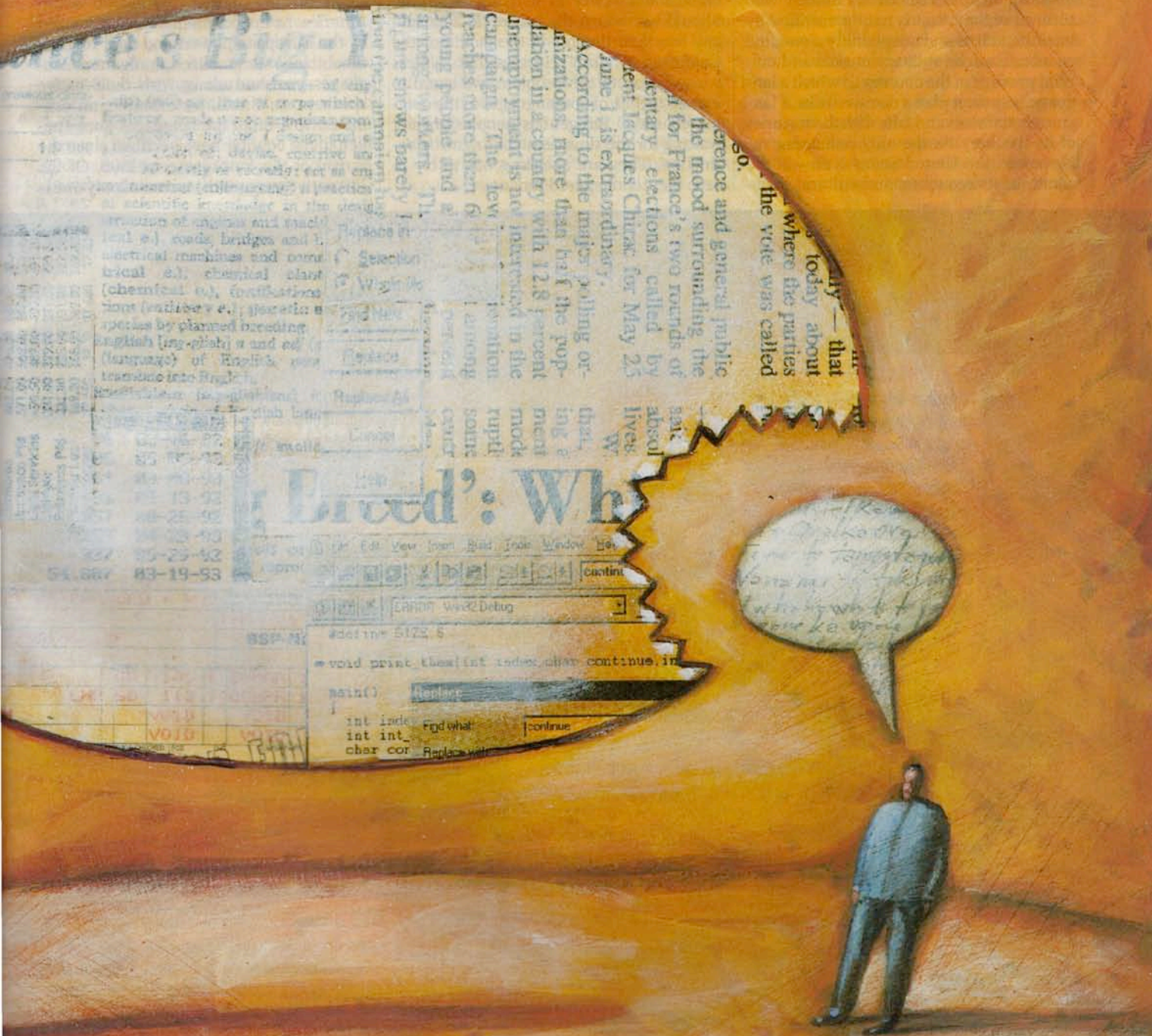
Today, this diaspora of languages is being pulled back. Mass tourism is shrinking the world, bringing once-distant peoples face to face. Telecommunications technology and the Internet are providing people from Peru to Pennsylvania with access to identical information and entertainment, while consumers from Bangkok to Brussels go to the same shops to purchase the same products from the same multinational corporations. All are conversant in the universal language of popular culture and commercial advertising. Much of the world, it seems, is coming to resemble a kind of new Babel, a cozy little global village of common understanding.

And there is hard evidence that the number of languages in the world is shrinking: of the roughly 6,500 languages now spoken, up to half are already endangered or on the brink of extinction. Linguists estimate that a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks. "More conflicts have been created between the world's languages than ever be-





# N TONGUES





fore, causing languages to disappear at an increasing rate," says Stephen Wurm, professor emeritus at the Australian National University in Canberra and editor of UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*.

Languages, like all living things, depend on their environment to survive. When they die out, it is for reasons analogous to those that cause the extinction of plant and animal species: they are consumed by predator tongues, deprived of their natural habitats or displaced by more successful competitors. In this type of linguistic natural selection, though, the survival of the fittest is not determined by intrinsic merits and adaptability alone; the economic might, military muscle and cultural prestige of the country in which a language is spoken play a decisive role. A language's star rises and falls with the fortunes of its speakers. As the only remaining superpower, the United States is now at the zenith of its economic and cultural hege-

mony. English therefore thrives as the world's *lingua franca* while minority languages—like Tlingit—succumb to pressure from mightier competitors.

But the death of a language such as Tlingit means more than simply the loss of another obscure, incomprehensible tongue. It marks the loss of an entire culture. "Just as the extinction of any animal species diminishes our world, so does the extinction of any language," argues Michael Krauss, an expert on endangered languages at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. "Any language is as divine and endless a mystery as a living organism. Should we mourn the loss of [a language] any less than the loss of the panda or the California condor?" He says that "Unless we wake up to the problem, we stand to lose up to 95% of our languages in the coming century." Indigenous peoples are not waiting for the slow death of linguistic extinction. They are speaking out to try to save their endangered tongues.

## Instruments of Empire

In 1492, when Columbus set sail for the New World, medieval linguist Antonio de Nebrija compiled a book of Spanish grammar, the first work of its kind for a European language. When he presented the volume to Queen Isabella, the monarch was puzzled. "What is it for?" she asked. "Your Majesty," the Bishop of Avila replied, "language is the perfect instrument of empire."

The European empire-building expeditions of the 16th and 17th centuries heralded the beginning of the end for thousands of languages in North and South America. As the continents were colonized by the European powers and their original inhabitants marginalized, indigenous languages vanished along with their native speakers. In Brazil, for example, an estimated 75% of all the languages once spoken in the country have perished since the arrival of the Portuguese in 1500. Of the 180 native tongues that remain, only one is

### EUROPE

European languages in danger of disappearing include the Celtic languages of Britain, Ireland and Brittany in France; several Lappish languages in Scandinavia; various Romani (Gypsy) tongues, and numerous indigenous languages in the former Soviet Union.

### ASIA

The most threatened languages in China are located in the Xinjiang and Yunnan provinces. In Southeast Asia, minority languages in Nepal and Malaysia are under threat. In Japan, Ainu, a threatened tongue spoken in Hokkaido, is making a comeback as a result of the efforts of native speakers and a change in official government policy. Relatively few languages are under threat on the Indian subcontinent due to widespread multilingualism.

### AFRICA

In Africa, multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception. It is common, for example, for many Africans to speak five or six tribal languages in addition to their own mother tongue. Nevertheless, small tribal languages are under continual threat from their larger neighbors. The Khoisan language group, for example, to which the Hottentot and Bushman tongues belong, is almost extinct.

### PACIFIC

Many languages in Papua New Guinea are under threat due to the increasing popularity of two Pidgin tongues. In Australia, one of the areas where language extinction has exacted the heaviest toll, few of the surviving 250 or so Aboriginal languages are still viable.



spoken by more than 10,000 people, out of a population of 160 million. "The world is a mosaic of visions," says Aryon Dall'Igna Rodrigues, Brazil's leading authority on native languages. "With each language that disappears, a piece of that mosaic is lost."

Among the Krenak in southeastern Brazil, only a handful of elders among the 70 or so tribesmen still speak their mother tongue. Originally a tribe of hunter-gatherers, the Krenak were expelled from their land and herded into reserves by government agents intent on making more space for farming. Up until the 1950s, Catholic missionaries forbade them to perform rituals or speak their own language. The linguistic ban, combined with the tribe's expulsion from its traditional lands, devastated the oral transmission of tribal culture. "Oral traditions are constantly renovated as they're passed on," says Ailton Krenak, 42, tribal member and head of the Nucleus of Indian Culture, a São Paulo-based organization that promotes Brazil's

cultural diversity. "When a language is no longer spoken, it's like pinning a dead butterfly on a board—you've interrupted the chain of life."

But languages can be remarkably resilient. When empires crumble, suppressed tongues have a way of sprouting up again through the cracks. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 provided the Krenak with an unexpected opportunity to mend some of the broken links in their oral tradition—and restore a missing piece to the world's mosaic.

In 1993, during the period of *glasnost* begun by Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, Hungarian linguist Eva Sebastian stumbled across the manuscripts of Henrik Henrikovich Maniser, a Russian anthropologist who trekked across Brazil at the turn of the century, in the archives of the Ethnography Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. During his travels, Maniser recorded traditional Krenak narratives, rituals and songs

in both Russian and the native Krenak, thereby preserving a trove of words, expressions and stories the Krenak believed were gone for good. By translating from Russian into Portuguese, and then cross-checking with Maniser's Krenak, Ailton is working to recover more of the tribe's lost language and return it to his people. "Discovering these words, stories [and] songs is to recover the path of our being," he says, "the path of our dream."

## Wealth of Nations

Examples of linguistic imperialism are not confined to the 16th and 17th centuries. In the 20th century, political repression has often combined with rapid industrialization to drive a language under. In the former Soviet Union, the country's program of "Russification" for indigenous populations scattered along the southern, northern and Pacific borders intensified in the 1950s. To inculcate native children with Russian culture, boarding schools, or *inter-*

TOM VAN SANT—GEOSPHERE PROJECT; SANTA MONICA SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

## MAPPING OUR ENDANGERED TONGUES

Linguists estimate that nearly half the world's 6,500 languages are threatened

### WORLD'S TOP TEN LANGUAGES

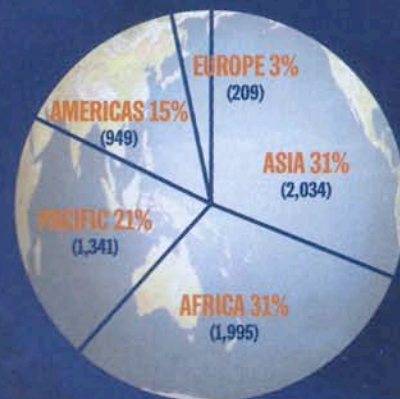
First-language speaker estimates given in millions

1. Mandarin Chinese	726
2. English	427
3. Spanish	266
4. Hindi	182
5. Arabic	181
6. Portuguese	165
7. Bengali	162
8. Russian	158
9. Japanese	124
10. German	121

Source: *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*

### DISTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD'S LANGUAGES

Total number of languages: 6,528



### AMERICAS

In Arctic North America many Eskimo and Amerindian languages are threatened. The status of native American tongues in Canada and the United States is perhaps the worst in the world. In Central and South America, large numbers of languages are moribund, while many of the languages that are still viable have drastically reduced numbers of speakers.

**Endangered:** A language is considered endangered when it is no longer spoken by children.

**Moribund:** A language is considered moribund when only a handful of elderly speakers are left.

**Extinct:** A language is considered extinct when there are no speakers left.

Source: *Unesco's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*



nats, were established, where children as young as two years old lived in a completely Russian environment for nine months of the year. *Internat* students routinely lost interest—and proficiency—in their native tongues. This policy of linguistic and cultural repression created a generation estranged from its own language and traditional way of life.

One branch of the Nenets tribe, a group of some 20,000 reindeer herders living in the Yamal-Nenets Autonomous Region on the coast of the Kara Sea in the Arctic Circle, has been luckier than most. Although they were subjected to the *internat* regime and lost their pasture lands on Novaya Zemlya to the Soviet nuclear testing program in 1950s, they were spared the first Siberian oil and gas boom in 1970s, which ravaged the lands and traditions of neighboring tribes.

In the treeless expanse beyond the wooden barracks of Salekhard, a town founded by Russian fur traders 400 years ago, the Nentsi lifestyle hasn't changed much for hundreds of years. Their language embodies the rites and rituals of a life set to the rhythms of the tundra. The year begins in November with "the hunt for the polar fox"; spring's advent is marked by the birth of the first reindeer fawns; summer's start is known as *nyarkanze iriy*, "the month of the flowering grasses." But with the discovery in the

late 1980s of huge natural gas beds on the Yamal Peninsula, the Nentsi way is threatened. Foreign companies are lining up to exploit the fabulous wealth lying below what has come to be known as the "Nentsi Emirates." How can the Nentsi preserve their language if their way of life is lost?

"Our language has the smell of smoke," says Valentina Nyarui, a Nentsi educator who is leading the effort to maintain her tribal tongue. Nyarui is convinced the

guarantee indigenous peoples the right to pursue their traditional lifestyles in areas being developed.

But even if ecological destruction is averted, many Nentsi might be tempted to trade their traditional lifestyles and language for jobs with the gas companies. Why should young Nentsi bother with their mother tongue when their futures will depend on being able to speak Russian? Nyarui says this linguistic and cultural erosion has already begun. "The Nentsi in towns are losing their language," she explains. "They live in Russian homes. They don't wear their traditional clothes. They don't tell their traditional stories." The challenge facing the Nentsi—and the Russian government—is how to exploit the natural

wealth of the Yamal Peninsula without destroying the cultural wealth of the Nentsi people.

### The Smell of Rain

With just over one-fifth of all existing languages, the Pacific basin is one of the most linguistically diverse regions in the world. Since European colonization though, the number of native languages has dwindled considerably. When white settlers first arrived in Australia in 1788, the continent supported some 250 Aboriginal tongues. Today, only 20 are considered still viable.

Australian Aborigines endured a policy of cultural and linguistic assimilation simi-

## “Children need to see the reindeer with their massive horns”

—VALENTINA NYARUI  
Nentsi educator and composer

Nentsi must cling to their centuries-old patterns of herding and hunting. "Children need to see the flocks of geese rising from the lakes," she says, "the herds of reindeer with their massive horns." To this end, she is collecting and composing folk songs and lullabies to encourage language transmission from parent to child.

Meanwhile, development plans for the region are being vetted by the Committee for the Protection of the Environment and Natural Resources in Moscow to ensure that the economy and the ecosystem are given equal consideration. The Russian Duma is also debating the establishment of "ethnic nature parks," a policy that would

**PLAIN LIVING:** The Nentsi language and way of life are threatened by development





lar to that of the Nentsi. For many Aboriginal people, the disappearance of their traditional language still leaves a painful gap in their sense of self. "You feel lost without it," says Rhonda Inkamala, 36, a language coordinator at the bilingual Yapiirinya school in Alice Springs. "You feel left out." To make sure Aboriginal children are not deprived of their linguistic heritage, Inkamala helps organize a program through which students at the Yapiirinya school spend two days a week on cultural excursions into the surrounding area with local tribal elders.

Aboriginal languages are distinctive for the rich vocabularies they use to describe the natural world. The evocative imagery they contain expresses how closely Aboriginal clans are linked to the land. One traditional song in the threatened Ngiyampaa language of New South Wales, for example, describes a bird whose tail twitches like a *walu*. The closest English approximation to *walu* is "a strip of bark dangling from a tree." In the Eastern Arrernte language of Central Australia the simple, sensual word *nyimpe* denotes "the smell of rain."

But the value of Aboriginal languages does not lie in their poetic beauty alone. Nicholas Evans, head of linguistics at Melbourne University and a specialist in Aboriginal languages, credits these little-known tongues with advances in science. Botanists are discovering new species of flora by researching the different Aboriginal names given to seemingly identical plants. The study of these languages can also shed new light on the migrations of early populations and the origins of cultural innovations. "The process has just begun of correlating linguistic with archaeological facts," says Evans. "But we can infer a lot about Australia's ancient past through looking at information furnished by languages. This is lost when the language goes."

### A War of Words

Linguistic revival is often associated with a resurgence of ethnic or national identity. Northern Ireland is a classic example of how language can become bound up with the struggle for this type of cultural and political recognition. After conquering Ireland during the middle of the 16th century, the English virtually eliminated the Irish-speaking ruling classes and their cultural institutions. English displaced Irish as the

## Sowing the Seeds of Speech

**B**Y THE YEAR 2000, AN ESTIMATED ONE-AND-A-HALF BILLION PEOPLE—a quarter of the world's population—will speak English. For some 400 million people, the majority of whom will be living in the United States and the United Kingdom, English will be their first language. But for another 1.1 billion, English will be a second or third language essential to both their professional and their personal lives. English is increasingly becoming entrenched as the language of choice for business, science and popular culture. Three-quarters of the world's mail, for example, is currently written in English, as is up to 80% of the electronic mail on the Internet. Soon, more people will speak English as a foreign language than speak it as their mother tongue. "There has never been a language spoken by so many people in so many places," says Professor David Crystal, author of the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* and the just released *English as a global language*. But why is English rising so far above the babble of the world's other tongues?

There are no clear linguistic reasons for English's global dominance. The grammar is complicated, the pronunciation eccentric, and the spelling peculiar, to say the least. But, as Crystal points out, logic does not necessarily apply when building a lingua franca. "A language becomes powerful when a nation becomes powerful," he says. This power may be military or cultural or economic—or in the case of the U.S., arbiter of world English, all of the above. "Wave dollar bills

in front of someone," Crystal notes, "and they will learn complicated spellings and grammar."

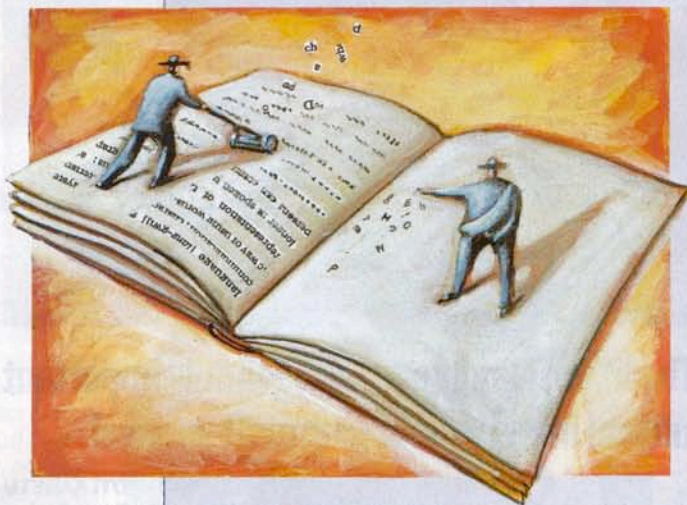
Another key factor is flexibility. According to Crystal, "English is a kind of vacuum cleaner of language—it sucks in vocabulary from any language it can get." Crystal estimates that there are now words from more than 150 other languages incorporated into standard English. Spelling and pronunciation are so capricious—and so frustrating for non-native speakers—precisely because the language has been quick to take on these foreign influences.

This flexibility has less to do with English itself, says Crystal, than it does with "the attitudes and temperaments of English-speakers."

But English may yet be suckered by its own success. As the language spreads among non-native speakers, it will invariably be transformed—even subverted—to suit regional needs. Local vocabulary, slang and pronunciation will displace existing British and American usages. English could fragment into mutually unintelligible spoken forms, the way Latin fragmented into French, Spanish and other languages some 1,500 years ago. New Englishes are, in fact, already spoken. Dictionaries of Asian, Australian, Caribbean and South African English—which contain words no "native" speaker would recognize—have already been published. A more likely scenario, Crystal believes, is the emergence of a regionally neutral conversational English for international use, with each country retaining its own national variations.

In 1898, when Otto von Bismarck was asked what in his opinion was the most decisive event in modern history, the German statesman replied: "The fact that the North Americans speak English." Asked this same question a hundred years from now, who knows that some Asian, Indian or African politician may not reply: "The fact that so many people outside North America speak English."

—By James Geary. Reported by Helen Gibson/London





*lingua franca* of government and public life, while Irish became associated with economic and cultural backwardness. When Northern Ireland was founded in 1921, the new political establishment favored the Protestant, English-speaking Unionists, relegating Irish to the Catholic Nationalist community.

But when the current Troubles began in Northern Ireland in 1968, Irish became a badge of cultural and national identity. Sinn Féin (Irish for "Ourselves Alone"), the political wing of the Irish Republican Army, is still run in a loosely bilingual fashion. Many members of the republican movement, including current Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams, first learned Irish in prison. A gesture of defiance and a boost to self-esteem, knowledge of Irish also had an enormous practical advantage: prisoners could converse in a language that their guards didn't understand. There are now two Irish-only wings in the Maze prison 20 km southwest of Belfast. "Sinn Féin has no monopoly on the Irish language," says West Belfast Sinn Féin councillor Mairtin O Muilleoir. "But we believe that, in creating a new Ireland, we need a strong Irish identity. The Irish language can help create that."

While language activists claim Irish is above politics, its close association with the I.R.A. and Sinn Féin does little to garner acceptance by Unionists. But the language is nevertheless winning a lively following among the general population, mainly in the nationalist areas of Belfast and Londonderry. On the Falls Road in nationalist West Belfast alone, there are more than 60 Irish language classes.

This new-found popularity is exemplified south of the border as well by the first Irish-language television channel, Teilifís na Gaeilge (TnaG). Launched last year, the station broadcasts music, documentary, dramatic, sports and news programs aimed primarily at young people. "The largest group of fluent Irish speakers is the under-25s," says TnaG spokesman Padhraic O Ciardha. "There has been a huge upsurge in interest in Irish culture, and TnaG is reflecting that. We've been

able to prove that something indigenous doesn't have to be backward-looking."

### Leaving the Nest

The most serious indication of a language's imminent demise is when it is no longer spoken by children. Cut the cords of linguistic transmission between the generations and when the elders die, their language dies with them. For much of this century in New Zealand, the decline in fluent Maori speakers was drastic and seemingly irreversible. From an estimated 64,000 in the early 1970s, the number fell to around 10,000 in 1995. There was almost no language transmission from Maori par-

New Zealand, alongside English, in 1987. Some Maori leaders are now petitioning the government to restore the country's original Maori name, Aotearoa, meaning Land of the Long White Cloud. Today, almost 60% of all New Zealand schoolchildren—Maori and non-Maori alike—study the language to some extent. But an even surer sign of Maori's renewed vigor is the fact that New Zealand English is dotted with Maori words and expressions. The most common, *kia ora*, an all-purpose salutation, is increasingly used instead of "hello" both in general conversation and when answering the telephone. "Language is absolutely important to cultural integrity

and survival," says Timoti Karetu, 60, head of the Maori Language Commission. "The more Maori is used to pepper New Zealand speech, the more it becomes a unique language to New Zealand."

That uniqueness is plain to see before each match played by New Zealand's national rugby team, the All Blacks. The haka, a fierce traditional Maori dance, is intended to intimidate the opposition. Players line up on the field and make a series of aggressive gestures with their hands and feet while beginning to chant "*Ka mate! Ka mate! Ka ora! Ka ora!*" The *Ka Mate* haka tells the story of the great Maori warrior Te Raurapa's daring escape from his enemies. It translates roughly as: "It is death! It is life! ... One



**“[The Maori] language is absolutely important to cultural integrity and [cultural] survival”**

—TIMOTI KARETU  
Head of the Maori Language Commission

ents to their children during the 1960s and 1970s. But since the first *Kohanga Reo* (language nests)—a nationwide network of early childhood centers that nurture a knowledge of the Maori language among children—were established in 1982, this downward spiral has been halted.

Language nests provide a fun, home-like environment for children under the age of five, where they are intensively exposed to the Maori language. Paid staff are a mix of elderly Maori speakers, usually grandparents, and younger teachers. There are now over 800 language nests across the country, which have introduced more than 100,000 Maori children to their native tongue.

Maori was made an official language of

last upward step, then step forth into the sun that shines!”

For many of the world's indigenous tongues, a very thin line separates the new dawn of language revival from the black hole of extinction. But the efforts of communities as diverse as the Tlingit and the Krenak show that it is still possible for small groups of determined individuals to confound the forces of globalization and mass culture that are the prime architects of today's Tower of Babel. In the coming struggle for linguistic survival, native peoples like the Maori may yet have the last word. —Reported by Lisa Clausen/Sydney, Tony Connelly/Dublin, Dan Cray/Klawock, Daniela Hart/São Paulo, Simon Robinson/Auckland and Sophia Sears/Salekhard