Addressing Together the Threat of Losing the World’s Language Diversity

Dr Michel Kenmogne, SIL International—January 28, 2019

I can hardly hide my emotions as I participate in this launching of the celebration of the International Year of Indigenous Languages. In fact, I carry within me two passions that are at the heart of this International Year of Indigenous Languages celebration.

Hope for the future of indigenous people and their languages

Firstly, I’m a native speaker of Ghomálá’, one of the 280+ indigenous language spoken in Cameroon. I grew up speaking only this language until the age of six. It is the language in which I feel most deeply; the language that has shaped my worldview and my main values in life. It is a language which my parents’ generation fought to see preserved and used despite the imposition of a neighbouring language by other dominant institutions. It is a language whose survival continues to be at risk today as the pressures of globalisation, economic opportunities and the disturbance of the natural ecosystem force its speakers to learn other languages and gradually neglect their own. The International Year of Indigenous Languages brings hope for me and to the entire Ghomálá’ speaking community of Cameroon.

Secondly, I’m the leader of SIL International, an organisation that has been at the forefront of fighting for the preservation of the indigenous languages of the world for the past 85 years. As an organisation, we continue to document indigenous languages, to help produce writing systems for them, to advocate for policies that help them to thrive, to work alongside communities as they grapple with the reality of multilingualism and effective language use in education and other vital domains of life in the 21st Century. We are currently engaged among 1651 indigenous language communities around the world, working to see that these languages can be preserved so they continue to serve the changing needs of their speakers across multiple generations. For this reason, the International Year of Indigenous Languages instills in me and my 4500 colleagues spread around the world a deep sense of hope for the future of indigenous peoples and the languages they speak.

Challenges to the survival of lesser-known languages

Today, about 75% of the world population speaks approximately 8% of the world’s languages. These languages, numbering approximately 580 are highly stable and have a guaranteed future use because they are endowed with institutions and infrastructures that protect them and promote their sustained use through education, literature production and other language
modernisation strategies. Conversely, 25% of the world’s population speaks the remaining 92% of the world’s languages. This represents about 1.8 billion people who speak lesser known languages. The size of such languages is generally relatively small. In the 21st Century, these languages, and their speakers, like my own native Ghomálá’, are facing unprecedented challenges to their ongoing survival, because they lack the needed recognition, institutions and infrastructure to enable their preservation and transmission. Today, the global community identifies loss of biodiversity as a major problem that endangers the quality of human life. I’d like to submit that we equally face a global cultural catastrophe as the linguistic tapestry of the world continues to be impoverished as a result of language extinction and death.

In SIL International, as Registration Authority for the ISO 639-3 standard, we continue to document and assign three-letter codes to the known languages of the world and through our flagship publication, the *Ethnologue*, we release yearly updates on the world languages situation. In the 2019 update, our researchers have used the trends of language extinction to estimate the vitality of indigenous languages around the world two centuries ago as compared to today.

These graphics show that, two centuries ago, the whole planet was by and large linguistically and culturally green because a significantly diverse number of languages were in use across the globe. Each of them enjoyed prestige within the communities and environments where they were spoken. But human actions have not only caused the ecological catastrophe that threatens humanity today; they have also triggered a real cultural and linguistic genocide. In fact, the colonialism and nationalism of the past two centuries and today’s globalisation have been major factors contributing to the modification of the language ecosystem of the world in drastic ways. As a result, the world is a much different place to live in as it becomes linguistically impoverished and continues to lose its cultural diversity and the wealth that comes with it.

**Indigenous Languages in the 21st Century**

The UN call for an International Year of Indigenous Languages sounds the alarm of a tragedy that is almost unnoticeably changing the cultural fabric of humanity. From our organisational count, since 1950, languages continue to die at the average pace of 9 per year. It is anticipated that this pace will double as we move towards the end of this century, unless we take concerted global efforts to reverse the trends of language death.

In 1991, Professor Michael Krauss, who devoted decades to research on the Alaska indigenous
languages, drew the attention of the Linguistic Society of America to the alarming trends of language endangerment. The following year, Krauss gave a warning that “the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages.” Irish linguist David Crystal moderated this alarming statement in 2000 when he more optimistically suggested that “50% loss…cannot be very far from the truth,” which would require that “at least one language must die, on average, every two weeks or so.” However, SIL’s research shows that the rate of language loss is not as dire as this, but it could be heading in that direction.

In SIL International, we have developed a mountain metaphor to talk about language development and endangerment. There are levels of language use that are sustainable which are like plateaus on a mountain slope, but when the level of language use falls between those plateaus, it is in danger of sliding to the next lowest sustainable level. Our research on the current state of the world’s languages allows us to locate the languages of the world at various places along that mountain slope, where the positioning of languages indicates their perceived vitality.

On this mountain, we can place languages into five broad categories that reflect the degree to which they are vital and viable.

1. **Institutional Languages**: They have a provincial, national or international scope of use and benefit from institutions that maintain their standardization and further development. Institutional languages are used in education and there is motivation for people to continue to learn them, including non natives who adopt them for various reasons. There are about 580 languages in this category, which represent approximately 8% of the world languages.

2. **Developing Languages**: These languages are widely spoken by all the generations of their users. Literature in a standardized form is used by some, though this is not yet widespread or
sustainable and not everyone is able to read it. There are approximately 1590 languages in this category, accounting for 22% of the world languages.

3. **Vigorous Languages**: They have sustainable oral use among all generations. But most of these languages lack a writing system and the supporting infrastructure for their promotion, etc. In an era of acute globalisation, these languages, while vital, will have difficulty sustaining themselves in the long run. There are 2446 languages in this situation, which make up 35% of the world’s languages.

4. **Languages in trouble**: Such languages are very well spoken by younger adults, but not necessarily by their children. The disruption of intergenerational language transmission indicates that they have begun a downdrift process towards extinction. There are approximately 1559 languages facing this condition today, representing 22% of the world’s languages.

5. **Dying Languages**: Here we find languages that are spoken by the elderly only, perhaps only seldomly. These languages essentially serve as a symbol of group identity and unity for those who identify with them. There are clear signals that they will disappear with the aging generations unless socio-political measures are taken to reverse the course of their natural death. There are about 922 dying languages today, which is about 13% of the world’s languages.

6. **Extinct and Forgotten Languages**: These are languages whose last known speakers have died and nobody retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language. If the language still exists at all, it is only in archival records. Since 1950, 377 languages around the world have suffered this fate.

Past and current actions of individuals continue to foster the perception and treatment of some languages as prestigious and dominant while others are viewed as marginal and relatively unimportant. Thus, languages are classified relative to their economic, religious, communicative or cooperative power. When languages offer opportunities for financial advancement, or confer prestige by allowing greater recognition and mobility, people naturally strive towards acquiring them at the expense of those that do not offer the same benefits. People continue to move into urban areas around the world and globalisation remains an acute phenomenon that can hardly be reversed. Those two contemporary realities have added to the previous effects of colonialism and nationalism to hasten the process of indigenous language extinction. As a global community, there is a choice in front of us: passively let the status quo prevail or boldly commit to reverse the trends of language extinction and death. The celebration of the International Year of Indigenous Languages will be worth it if and only if it results in concerted decisions and actions that reverse the downward trend of the 2481 languages that are in trouble or dying.

But, why should anyone care about language death or worry about a more linguistically homogeneous world? In fact, one could wonder why we should care about languages that are dying. What if the loss of language diversity were a means to further a more linguistically homogeneous community around the globe? In fact, many have argued for the need to reduce linguistic diversity and others have done so through their actions and attitudes. It is my view that those who act or behave in that way are mostly speakers of the few dominant languages of the
world that have secured for themselves a population size and institutions that preserve them from foreseeable threat of extinction. Those people, while they might be sincere in their thinking, are actually insensitive to the plight and emotional reality of those who experience the loss of a language in which most of their identity is expressed.

Language loss impoverishes humanity’s multicultural heritage

Much has been said or written about the tragedy when a language ceases to exist. World renowned linguist Noam Chomsky wrote that “when we study human language, we are approaching what some might call ‘the human essence,’ the distinctive qualities of mind that are, so far as we know, unique to man and that are inseparable from any critical phase of human existence, personal or social.” Chomsky thus construes language as the unique faculty/ability that human beings have to use limited sets of utterances to generate infinite meaning within communities. If language is so essential to our human condition, then it would be absurd for anyone to be indifferent when languages (understood as diverse expressions of that human ability to use language) are lost. In fact, the loss of any language represents a significant loss to humanity as a whole. It means that the way that community had conceptualized the world around it and the resulting wisdom, knowledge, literature, medicine, philosophy, art, crafts have been lost for good, unless it has been preserved through writing and documentation. In a sense, the loss of a language entails the impoverishment of humanity’s multicultural fabric and heritage.

For her part, Serota Cote, drawing from her study of the struggles of the Breton people from France, who lost their language as a result of nationalist pressure, argues that “the diversity of our languages represents the richness of our expressiveness of Being. This is how language, culture and identity intersect, it is also why the loss of a language is such a concern and why minority language rights is such an emotionally charged issue in countries around the world.”

As a movement sprang up in the 1970s towards the revitalisation of the Breton language, many people learned it and were able to discover and reconcile with their historical roots. Cote goes on to observe that “a high rate of alcoholism and depression has receded” as people closed the gap and healed their past wounds of shame.

From personal experience, I can testify to the negative effects of dominating the native language of a people and obliging them to acquire another one in the context of education. My early childhood experience in school, like that of millions of children around the world, was not enjoyable, but rather traumatic. As indicated earlier, I spoke only my mother tongue until I reached school age. Like all children in the community, I was pretty fluent, could count and tell the stories that we had heard from our parents. But entering the classroom, we were exposed to a foreign language without any preparation. Worse still, speaking the mother tongue on the school campus was forbidden. This was a traumatic experience for many of us who had to learn both the skill of reading and writing, and the language of instruction itself at the same time. Learning was not a process of moving from the known to the unknown; it was rather a total separation from our daily reality that made education a foreign and mysterious thing to acquire. It is not surprising that many children were thought to be dull, and the majority dropped out of the school system.
over the year. Looking back, it remains a miracle to me that some of us went through such a system and eventually learned to read and write. Furthermore, we need to acknowledge that in spite of the promise of access to better job opportunities and integration into the dominant societies, the imposition of language through education has numerous problems. It portrays knowledge as the product of a dominant society and education as the means to access it. As a result, speakers of indigenous languages tend to despise their own language, history, and natural resources because education is essentially a cultural and linguistic alienation process. Having been prepared to look to the dominant societies as the source of their wellbeing, millions of people from this condition are becoming migrants around the world, raising a major issue that many nations are not prepared to address. I’m convinced each person should have access to education in the language that they speak and understand already. Therefore, imposing foreign languages in the context of children’s education is not only ineffective, but it goes a long way to compromising the ability of nations to appropriately take responsibility for addressing their own issues.

Ultimately, I see this as a justice issue that compromises peace within the global community. We need to come to terms with the fact that the global issues of migration and diasporisation will not be addressed without a serious engagement with the major realities that affect and threaten the indigenous peoples and their languages in the 21st Century.

The effect of natural habitat loss on speakers of lesser-known languages

Finally, and on another note, as I observe communities of indigenous people, I notice the rise of a new set of issues that have the likelihood to make a final blow to their overall ecosystem. The natural habitats of many indigenous peoples continue to be destroyed through exploitation, often by outside parties who remove stewarding/safeguarding power from the indigenous peoples themselves. These changes in their natural environment affect them in unprecedented ways. The biodiversity that they preserved over the centuries as part of their ecosystem is being shamelessly exploited with little benefit for the indigenous dwellers who are linguistically and otherwise disempowered to fight for their rights. Some of these naturally rich areas of the globe have become hotspots of war and unrest, causing indigenous people who never dreamt of leaving their villages to become refugees in foreign lands.

Beyond the ecosystem, it is the people who are harmed in ways that are almost irreversible. As they are forced to move to foreign lands, the first act of seeking integration is to begin trading their identity through learning a new language. In the meantime and almost unconsciously, the quest for acceptance in their new place of settlement causes them to gradually unlearn their own culture, along with its treasures as they are swallowed up in the prevailing dominant cultures. Soon, the next generation experiences a language shift. It is a widespread observation that indigenous communities do not always benefit from the legal protection over the use of their ancestral land and ecosystem. In this way, the lack of a legal framework that protects the indigenous peoples and their habitats will continue to worsen the fate of the indigenous languages.
The ability to speak multiple languages does not diminish the love of the first

As I conclude, I’d like to remark that the ability of many indigenous people to speak multiple other languages might suggest that indigenous languages are not that relevant. Today I can fluently speak at least five different languages. But none of these other languages that I learned can replace my indigenous and mother language. My early encounter and experience of the world, the stories I heard which shaped my perceptions and assumptions about reality were all organised and expressed through the concepts provided by this language. As such, it connects me with the past of my community and tells me where I come from and how I fit in the world, thereby giving me a sense of identity. My two younger children are currently studying in an American school where we live in Germany. They are striving to speak the relevant accent of English to be understood by others in their school environment. They are pretty well incorporated into this dominant English-speaking community. But deep in their minds, they are aware that, although they have enough English proficiency to relate and communicate, this is not where they fundamentally belong. Through them, I can perceive that the loss of indigenous languages carries the likelihood to create millions of people who live with deep unresolved emotional and identity issues. These unresolved issues may be some of the deeper roots to a number of social ills that plague the global community, i.e. drug abuse, suicide, terrorism, violence, etc.

Of all foreign languages that I’ve learned and used so far, I’ve not found any that expresses the same deeper meaning of greeting as my mother tongue. While I can easily say “Guten Tag” or “Bonjour” or “Hello” to people depending on the contexts, it sounds like a mere wish or a simple indication of politeness. Instead, the Ghomálá’ greeting “O li la” (Have you slept?) is a true question that invites a response. It assumes that sleeping is a result of physical, spiritual, and psycho-social wholeness and peace. In other words, one can’t sleep when they are sick or disturbed by something that has gone wrong in their family or community. In this regard, the greeting is a show of care to the person being greeted. It can, depending on the situation, open up to conversations that result in caregiving that releases the stress of the individual, thereby providing healing. The greeting in Ghomálá’ reminds its users that the human being is not just another object, but a person with an intrinsic value. It also communicates that a person’s wellbeing is by nature holistic, including their material and immaterial dimensions as well as their relationships to others. The loss of Ghomálá’ as a language would entail the loss of this perspective on harmony and wholeness.

Back in 1992, when Michael Krauss predicted the tragedy of the loss of the majority of the world’s indigenous languages, he made a vibrant appeal to the global community when he wrote: “we must do some serious rethinking of our priorities, lest linguistics go down in history as the only
science that presided obliviously over the disappearance of 90% of the very field to which it is dedicated”. In the same way, it is my strong conviction that we all need to take serious action in response to the threat of the loss of the world’s language diversity. May we be known as the generation that has understood the plight of indigenous language communities, considered the tragedy of a culturally impoverished world and acted in ways that empower all communities to revamp, strengthen and preserve the use of their own languages. Let us weave a global (community) tapestry marked by harmony and peace and achieving justice by giving space for each language to thrive.

5 N. Chomsky 1972: Language and Mind, CUP, 3rd edition
7 Krauss 1992: p.10

Dr. Kenmogne became the SIL Executive Director in 2016. His previous leadership experience includes Director of Wycliffe Global Alliance for Francophone Africa, Director of Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy, and lecturer at the university of Yaoundé I, Dschang, Buea, and South Africa Theological Seminary in Johannesburg. Dr. Kenmogne holds a Masters/DEA, a DIPES II and a PhD in African Linguistics from the University of Buea. He defended the first PhD of the University of Buea. He and his wife Laure Angele live in Germany with two of their five children.