

How to rescue indigenous languages from extinction? Complete Gutenberg's Revolution

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The problem:

The extinction of language is nothing new. Hundreds of historically well-documented languages have died over the centuries for which we have historical records (that is, dating back about 3,500 years) and thousands of other pre-literary languages have no doubt disappeared during that time. Today, neither ancient Aramaic nor Roman Latin, the languages of Jesus of Nazareth and Julius Caesar, are spoken.

What is new today is the rate and extent of extinction of languages, which increased dramatically after 1500 CE, coinciding with the rise of colonialism, especially by the European powers, and the consequent abandonment of native languages by the indigenous peoples of the whole world, in favor of the languages of the colonial powers.

In Canada, only three of the 50 indigenous languages are not in immediate danger of extinction. In the United States, there are 574 recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes, comprising about 5 million people. More than 90% of those people only speak English.

There are 63 officially recognized indigenous languages in Mexico, but there are at least 282 indigenous languages spoken in Mexico. The discrepancy is the result of counting the large language families as languages, with the dozens of Mixtec languages classified simply as Mixtec and all the Nāhñu languages simply called Otomi. We see the different languages in these families referred to as "varieties" or "dialects" in the literature. Nobody would think today of calling

Spanish, Romanian, Catalan, French and Portuguese as "varieties" of Latin.

This situation is repeated all over the world. There are more than 200 indigenous languages in Brazil, a country of 212 million inhabitants, and there are at least 168 indigenous languages ... spoken by a total of about 400,000 people—that is, two-tenths of one percent of the population. Many indigenous languages of Russia are dying and will soon be extinct. Of the 120 indigenous languages spoken in China, many are dying ...

So to sum up: at least 60% of the world's 7,000 or so languages are spoken by only 3% of the world's population. Flip it over to see the scope of the problem: 97% of the world's linguistic diversity is under the stewardship of 3% of its people, and is rapidly disappearing. This reduction in linguistic diversity may threaten the survival of humanity. I say "may threaten" because I have no way of testing this hypothesis.

But consider: 40,000 years ago, there were no more than 15 million human beings in the world (Cohen 1977: 54). Today we are almost 8 billion people. This spectacular adaptive radiation of humans, occupying islands and mountains, jungles, deserts and the Arctic, was accompanied by the proliferation of languages, the repositories of knowledge about how to survive in all those environments. With the loss of indigenous languages, all that ethnoecological knowledge is rapidly fading (Aswani et al. 2018; Kik et al. 2021; Reyes-García et al. 2007).

There is widespread agreement that the reduction of biodiversity today threatens us all. Does the same happen with the loss of cultural diversity? We don't know for sure, but we are conducting an experiment to see what will happen to humanity if we remove "cultural species" from the world. It is a reckless experiment because if we don't like the way it turns out, there is no going back.

The solutions:

Recently, indigenous peoples around the world have struggled to revive their traditional cultures, including their languages. We see strong movements in Canada, Australia, the United States, Mexico, Brazil, Taiwan—in all countries with a democratic political system and freedom of expression. In the remainder of this presentation, I'll lay out what it takes for these efforts to be successful—that is, what we know about that actually works in language revival movements. Two things really work: (1) language nests and (2) publishing in indigenous languages. I treat these in turn.

(1) Language nests are preschools for children up to 5 years of age who are taught exclusively in their ancestral language. The term "language nest" is a translation of the Maori phrase "kōhanga reo" and the related Hawaiian phrase "pūnana leo." The first kōhanga reo opened in New Zealand in 1981 and the first pūnana leo opened in Hawaii in 1984. Students at the University of Hawaii can now complete master's degrees in Hawaiian language and culture with courses taught in Hawaiian. And language nests are spreading - in Canada, for many local languages; in Australia, in the US, and in Finland. ... Language nests support the creation of a new generation of native speakers of an endangered language, but require substantial financial support. A good way to start is to pay older native speakers to provide daycare for the preschool children of working mothers. This not only creates native speaking children; it also frees the mother for paid work.

(2) The other thing that works is the publishing of books in indigenous languages - books that go beyond school primers. There are at least three objections to this. (A) Writing destroys the "essential orality" of indigenous languages. (B) We cannot jump to publication until indigenous peoples decide on a standard orthography. (C) Publishing books in indigenous languages is not sustainable because the populations of those languages are too small. Who was going to buy books in indigenous languages? For me, the answers to these objections are easy and convincing.

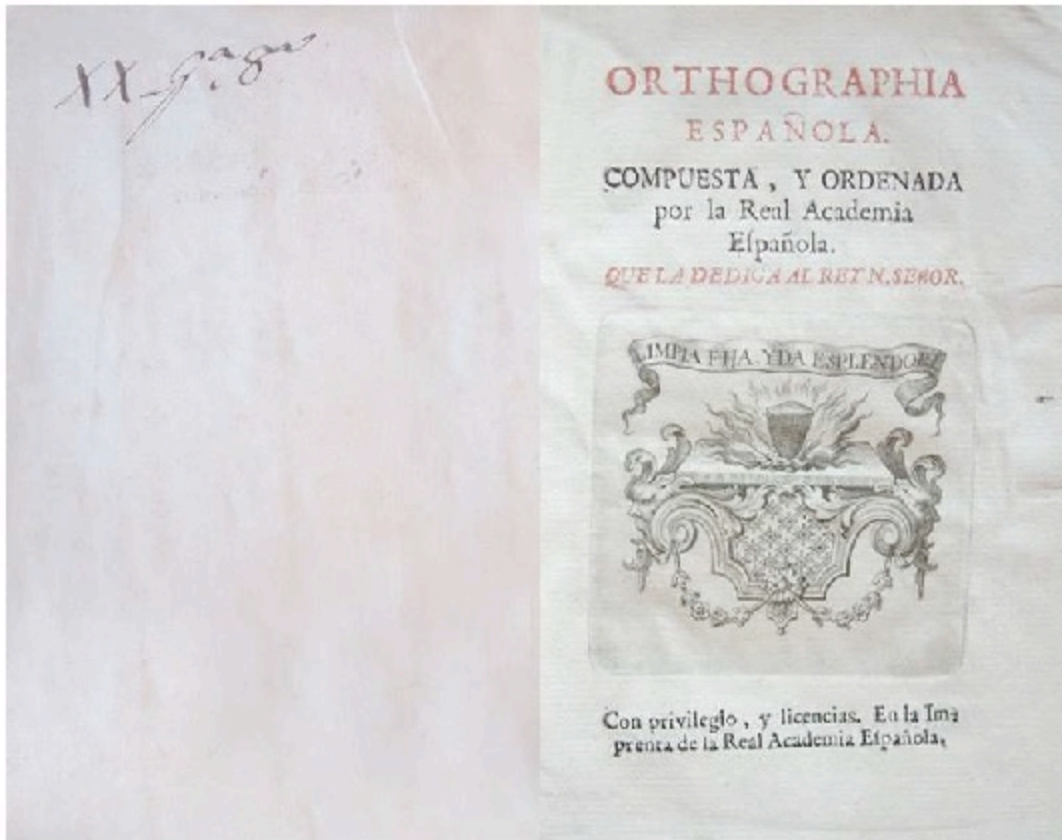
A) The argument that writing erodes memory was first put forward by Socrates and disagreement over the effects of writing on thought continues today. But remember: Spanish, English, French, Arabic, Russian, Chinese ... all the big languages of the world were at one time completely oral. Writing was invented 5500 years ago, but widespread literacy in the world's major languages was not the norm until there was free public education. ...

In Spain, that began in 1867; in Mexico, in the 1920s. It was in 1857 in the state of Massachusetts in the United States and in 1917 in the state of Mississippi. In 2010, India became one of 135 countries with compulsory primary education. ...

But beyond all that, the simple fact is this: Endangered oral languages that do not develop a written literary tradition will soon die. And when the great-grandchildren of people who today abandon their mother tongue decide that they want to resurrect their ancestral languages, there will be nothing to turn to, except perhaps some recordings.

B) About orthographies: The argument that we cannot jump to publication until indigenous peoples decide on a standard orthography is a paternalistic and colonial argument that doesn't work with the history of the languages of the colonizers. Spellings for English, Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic, Hindi, Thai, etc., are continually evolving.

Ironically, the cedilla was invented in Spain and was purged of Spanish spelling in 1741 at the meeting of the Royal Spanish Academy. Here is the cover of the meeting report. Note the obsolete use of th and ph for t and f.



And here's a list of the spelling changes enacted by the same Academy in 2010 ...

1. The accent will be removed from the word "sólo" [only]
2. Pronouns like "éste" o "ésa" [this or that] will no longer have an accent.
3. the letter "q" will no longer be used to represent the sound "k". Iraq will be written as "Irak" and "quórum" [quorum] will become "cuórum".
4. Prefixes such as "ex" and "anti" will be attached to the word they precede. For example, "exmarido" [ex-husband] instead of "ex-marido", but the prefixes will still be written with a space when they precede two words, as in the case of "pro derechos humanos" [pro human rights].
5. Words such as guión, huí, riáis, Sión or truhán [screenplay, i fled, you laugh, Zion, rogue] will be considered monosyllabic and, therefore, will cease to be accentuated.
6. The conjunction "o" used to be written with an accent when it appeared between two numbers (eg 3 ó 4 [3 or 4],. This rule will be removed.

Spellings are continually evolving, so while requiring perfect and coordinated spelling from indigenous peoples may create employment for linguists, it is another example of extreme paternalism.

In 1989, I taught five English-Kom bilingual speakers from Cameroon to write in Kom. It was an experiment to show that anyone who is bilingual in an indigenous language and in a colonial language, and who also knows how to read and write in the colonial language, can easily learn to write in the indigenous language. It only requires the transfer of literacy skills from one language to another. Those five English-Kom speakers produced 25,000 words of fluent text in one week. ...

C) And finally, on the need to establish a publishing industry for indigenous languages ... Before Gutenberg's invention in 1439, it took a moderately well-off family about three years to save for parchment, copying, illustration and the binding of a Bible. Gutenberg's invention lowered the price of book printing so dramatically, by 1500 there were publishers in every city in Europe. Since then books have become affordable in all languages where it is profitable for publishers to market those books.

From 1962 to 1970, Jesús Salinas Pedraza, the main honoree of today's proceedings, patiently taught my students and me some of his mother tongue, Ñähñu. In 1971, I was about to start writing an ethnography of Ñähñu when Jesús told me that he would like to write that. I dropped everything and we started a 17-year project—a four-volume ethnography of Ñähñu in Ñähñu.

In 1977 Jesús spent three months with me in West Virginia. The idea was for me to teach Jesús about ethnography, so I suggested that we start with something “simple,” like a chapter on the environment. He asked me if that included the different winds and their effects on plants and animals. I couldn't even have constructed the question in Ñähñu to retrieve that information and after 3 months the "chapter" was a book. This tells us why we need more indigenous ethnography.

But there is more. Much more. Jesús Salinas' masterpiece comprises four volumes, a corpus of around 250,000 words and perhaps 8,000 unique Ñähñu lexemes. Each of those 8,000 possible entries in a dictionary is exemplified by one or more sentences from the corpus. Linguists can work for 20 years and produce a dictionary of 2000-5000 words, while dictionaries of literary languages contain hundreds of thousands of words—and they grow as lexicographers review books, comics, magazines, newspapers, blogs, entries. social media, etc.—looking for new words and new uses of existing words.

This does not mean that indigenous languages have smaller vocabularies. It means that we will never know the richness of these languages without many thousands of hours of transcribed oral text and books, blogs and social networks in indigenous languages.

In 1987, when we completed the translation into Spanish and English of Jesús's ethnography, we conceived the Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, or CELIAC, as a way of expanding our work. And in 1994, with the support of private philanthropy, the center had its own building in Oaxaca. Until 2005, when the funds ran out, Salinas and Josefa González (Mixteca), vice president of CELIAC, trained more than 170 writers from all over Latin America (Mixtec and Zapotec from Mexico, Aymara and Quechuas from Bolivia and Peru, Quichua and Shuar from Ecuador, Mapuche from Chile, etc.). The writers chose what they wanted to write about: ethnography, biography, poetry, local history, cookbooks, children's stories, etc. They spent up to three months in residence at CELIAC, learned to handle the keyboards that were developed for their language, and many of them left with a printed book in hand, one that they had written themselves, in their native language.

Since then, CELIAC has published several books, supported by various sources, but without funding for marketing, sales were meager, and a half dozen books were ready for publication when the project ran out of external funding. In our latest effort, we are building a website, books4all.com where indigenous authors can publish their work in their ancestral languages. The goal is to charge for downloading those books, and share the proceeds of those sales with the authors as royalties, just like any of the big publishers.

To summarize: People say that they stop speaking their native languages because those languages do not offer economic and / or social benefits. If that's the case, then financial reasons must be found for people to want to keep their language. We know that a publisher cannot survive financially by selling books in an indigenous language. With the Internet, we will discover if a publisher can survive publishing books in

many indigenous languages—and at the same time, make the languages pay, if only for a few indigenous authors.

The commodification of language may seem crude. But people sell their food, their clothes, their jewelry, their pottery, tapestries, and cloth. Indigenous music and dance is sold with great success (see the Mexican National Folkloric Ballet). Selling their languages has been the domain of linguists, anthropologists, civil servants, and missionaries. At CELIAC the goal is to give indigenous authors the opportunity to sell their intellectual property.

As a university professor I sell what I know. Some of this knowledge was acquired by working with colleagues from CELIAC and from other parts of the world. When negotiating my salary with the university, I do not highlight the cultural and linguistic knowledge that I have acquired as raw cultural material. No one knows that material better than the people I have worked with. I emphasize the value that I have added to the raw cultural material: my analyzes of the data, my tests of hypotheses, my publications, etc. It is the added value that makes what I know—that is, my culture—worth paying for.

And so it is with my colleagues from CELIAC. It is not simply that they know how to speak Mixtec, Zapotec, Nāhñu or some other indigenous language. What makes that knowledge financially valuable is the value added. This includes being bilingual and having the skills to serve as a translator in court cases; being able to teach their mother tongue to anyone who wants to learn it, the ability to conduct interviews, the ability to write ethnographic and linguistic reports—and it includes packaging the language between the covers of a book.

In my opinion, then, the commercialization of language and culture by indigenous peoples is a vehicle for the economic development of these peoples. Ultimately, it is this development that will make it possible for indigenous languages to flourish.

The project will need continued external funding, but a global collaborative effort to create and sell books for everyone on the Internet allows us to renew the dream of rescuing humanity's linguistic diversity from extinction.

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