

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #068

What Happens When Languages Die?

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[00:00:03] Hello, hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to fascinating stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about what happens when a language dies.

[00:00:29] There are almost 8 billion people on the planet, and we speak 7,000 different languages.

[00:00:36] Yet languages are dying out fast, and linguists believe that half of the languages spoken today will not exist by the end of the century.

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[00:00:49] It's a sad truth, and today, we are going to talk about why languages die, which languages are dying, and what we can do about it.

[00:01:00] Before we get right into the episode though, I just wanted to remind those of you listening to this episode on your favourite podcast app that you can get the subtitles, transcript, and key vocabulary for this episode, plus a load of extra, bonus episodes, on our website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:21] In case you hadn't checked this out yet, we also do monthly meetups, Q&A sessions, which are a lot of fun - we just had the last one last week, on Accents in English, and had members joining from all over the world.

[00:01:38] So if you would like to improve your English in a more interesting way, then I'd definitely recommend checking out the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:48] OK then, let's get cracking, and talk about dying languages.

[00:01:54] Language is just the most magical thing. It's what [sets us apart¹](#) from animals, it allows us to communicate with one another, to tell stories, to record our history, traditions, and culture.

[00:02:09] It allows us to express ourselves, to show who we truly are.

¹ makes us different from or better than other people or things

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[00:02:15] And, as anyone who speaks more than one language knows, the language you speak is a big part of your identity. You feel different when you speak a different language.

[00:02:28] If English isn't your native language, which, I guess if you are listening to this podcast, it probably isn't, then you feel different when you speak in English.

[00:02:39] Depending on your level and experience, how you feel might change.

[00:02:45] If you aren't that confident in English, then I imagine it can feel frustrating, [limiting²](#), that you can't say the same things in English, with the same fluency as you would be able to do in your native language.

[00:03:00] And even if you are amazingly fluent in English, or even bilingual, the language you speak, for most people, makes you feel different.

[00:03:12] You behave slightly differently, you might use one language in one situation, or to communicate with one group of people. No language perfectly translates from one to the other.

[00:03:26] So the language we speak has huge importance [over and above³](#) it being just a [means⁴](#) of communication.

² preventing, stopping

³ in addition to

⁴ way, a method to do something

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[00:03:34] So, what happens to people when they can't communicate in the language they want to?

[00:03:40] What happens to the cultures and countries when the original language of its people dies out?

[00:03:48] What happens then?

[00:03:50] This, as you may know, isn't just a [theoretical](#)⁵ question.

[00:03:55] In the past 100 years, the world has lost about one language every 3 months, so that's around 400 languages. [Wiped away](#)⁶, disappeared.

[00:04:06] And as a population, we are moving away from having this huge variety of different languages to having a small selection of languages that are native to a large proportion of people, and understandable to even more.

[00:04:24] Indeed, about 2/3 of the world's population speaks just 12 languages, out of the 7,000 or so different languages that exist in the world.

[00:04:37] So almost 70% of the population speaks a total of less than 0.2% of the languages in the world.

⁵ based on an idea, not the practical use (of something)

⁶ destroyed

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[00:04:48] You can probably guess the most [dominant](#)⁷ languages - there's Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, Japanese, Western Punjabi, Marathi, Telugu, and Wu Chinese.

[00:05:02] These languages have come to [dominate](#)⁸, and [endanger](#)⁹ the other almost 7,000 languages.

[00:05:10] You might say, well, it's only natural. As more people speak a certain language, it's understandable that people want their children to speak that language, so they stop speaking their own language at home, and thus these other languages eventually die out as people choose not to use them.

[00:05:32] That may be true, but these [dominant](#) languages haven't only [prospered](#)¹⁰ because they have attracted people. There have also been large efforts to [crush](#)¹¹ smaller languages - from doing things like [outlawing](#)¹², the forbidding, the use of

⁷ most important or strong than similar things

⁸ see dominant

⁹ to put someone or something at risk of being hurt or harmed

¹⁰ became successful

¹¹ destroy, get rid of

¹² completely stop something by making it illegal

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[non-core](#)¹³ languages to actively [persecuting](#)¹⁴ speakers of different languages, there has been a lot of activity aimed specifically at killing off less popular languages.

[00:06:06] English, of course, is a prime example - the British Empire forced people to speak English, and the fact that the founding fathers of America were native English speakers and chose to write the constitution in English meant that other, native languages were pushed to one side, and English became the [dominant](#) language for the world's [dominant](#) power.

[00:06:33] If it weren't for things like this, you probably wouldn't be learning English, as it would never have reached such a globally [dominant](#) position.

[00:06:41] But for centuries, the majority of people didn't care about languages dying out.

[00:06:48] Languages die when their speakers die, and so, by default, if there aren't any speakers of the language left then there aren't many people that really care about that language.

[00:07:01] And globally, we don't seem to really care about the fact that there are so many [endangered](#) languages. To be precise, according to UNESCO, at least 43% all languages spoken in the world are [endangered](#), more than half have fewer than 10,000

¹³ not the main, not the normal

¹⁴ treating someone or something unfairly

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speakers, a quarter have fewer than 1,000 speakers, and around 20 languages only have one speaker left.

[00:07:33] Now, there are five different categories of '[endangered](#)' languages', ranging from 'vulnerable', which means that most children can speak the language, but it's normally restricted to certain situations, normally just at home.

[00:07:48] And the final category is 'extinct', meaning that there are no speakers left.

[00:07:54] And the sad thing is that, for a lot of these languages that are dying out, when the last person dies, that's it, you can't just 'turn it back on again'.

[00:08:07] As fewer and fewer people speak a language, it's hard to reverse the [decline](#)¹⁵.

[00:08:14] Fewer children learn it, and the older people who do speak it won't live forever.

[00:08:21] So purely from a '[sands of time](#)¹⁶' point of view, this situation naturally means that the number of speakers reduces, and [tends](#)¹⁷ to zero.

[00:08:33] But also, the fewer speakers of a language that do exist, the fewer opportunities those people have to speak that language, and as we all know, if you

¹⁵ to decrease, to become worse and worse

¹⁶ the passing of time

¹⁷ naturally goes towards

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don't actually use a language, you start to speak less fluently in it, and you start to lose the language yourself.

[00:08:53] And if you are the only speaker of a language and you don't have anyone left to practice with, well then that language is quickly on the path to becoming extinct.

[00:09:05] There was a story a few years ago about a village in Mexico where there were only two speakers left of a language called Ayapaneco. So the only people that they could practice Ayapaneco with were each other.

[00:09:22] But they hated each other, they had had a disagreement, and they weren't speaking. So great was the [disdain¹⁸](#) and hatred that they held for one another that they wouldn't even speak [for the sake of¹⁹](#) practicing this almost extinct language.

[00:09:42] So the telecoms company, Vodafone, came along and helped them become friends again to save the language, and teach a new generation this traditional language, Ayapaneco.

[00:09:55] What an amazing story, right?

[00:09:59] Unfortunately, it was too amazing to be true.

¹⁸ hatred, normally shown through a lack of respect

¹⁹ in order to allow something to happen

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[00:10:02] It was proved to be a completely [made-up](#)²⁰ story, a complete lie, created to promote Vodafone.

[00:10:10] However, the situation it was talking about certainly does exist - when people don't have anyone to practice a language with, and if they haven't taught anyone else that language, then that language [goes to the grave](#)²¹ with the death of its last speaker.

[00:10:29] Unless there has been a [conscious](#)²² effort to protect it, and to get a generation of new speakers speaking that language, then this is exactly what happens.

[00:10:42] And there have been some real success stories of languages that looked like they were moving towards becoming extinct, with the number of speakers decreasing every year, that have enjoyed a [revival](#)²³, a rebirth.

[00:10:58] In the UK, for instance, you will know that we speak English, and it is spoken by 98% of the population.

[00:11:06] But people also speak Scots, Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Irish, and Cornish.

²⁰ invented, fake

²¹ dies

²² purposeful, deliberate

²³ becoming more popular and in use again

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[00:11:13] There has been a [concerted](#)²⁴ effort in the UK to promote these languages, with them being taught in schools, used on road signs, and in official documentation which is made available in other languages than English

[00:11:32] And in Hawaii, the local language, Hawaiian, was almost completely extinct by the end of the 1980s. Some schools had banned it, and English was strongly encouraged. There were only a few hundred speakers left, and it looked like it was going to die out within a generation.

[00:11:56] However, a few good souls decided to do something about it. They opened schools and encouraged children to learn Hawaiian. There are now about 25,000 fluent Hawaiian speakers, which of course is nothing compared to the number of English speakers, but it is certainly enough to bring it out of the immediate [danger zone](#)²⁵.

[00:12:21] But what happens when a language does really die though?

[00:12:26] Well, there is one famous example of a language where all its speakers did die, but the language today is [thriving](#)²⁶.

[00:12:38] No, it's not Latin - I don't think that people learning it in schools and speaking it in the Vatican City can be considered '[thriving](#)'.

²⁴ done for a shared purpose

²⁵ in a dangerous place

²⁶ successful and growing

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[00:12:47] It's Hebrew, an official language of Israel.

[00:12:50] Hebrew hadn't been a spoken language for communication purposes since the second century AD, but had been [preserved²⁷](#) in religious texts, and it had been spoken in prayers and religious services.

[00:13:08] But that was it - people didn't speak it in their day to day lives.

[00:13:13] Towards the end of the 19th century, there were large efforts to [revive](#) the language, and it's now spoken by 90% of Israeli Jews.

[00:13:25] Interestingly enough, when the language was [revived](#), they had to come up with all these new words for things that just didn't exist when the language stopped being spoken, 1700 years before.

[00:13:40] So they had to invent entirely new words for things like the tomato, which had only been introduced to Israel after having been brought back from the Americas. And they had to come up for a word for things like 'electricity', which obviously didn't exist in the 2nd century.

²⁷ saved from being destroyed or harmed

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[00:14:01] So, if there is enough [will](#)²⁸, for whatever reason, just because a language looks like it might die out, the process can be stopped, and languages can [flourish](#)²⁹ again.

[00:14:14] Now, we have a [plethora](#)³⁰ of advantages that previous generations didn't have.

[00:14:21] It's very easy to record people speaking, so we can preserve how to speak a language. And the internet makes it easier than ever for people to connect with each other, for speakers of different languages to come together and practice it, or at least, to help linguists understand how to preserve those languages.

[00:14:44] However, despite all of these advantages, people need to want to do it.

[00:14:51] Without the people that want to preserve the language for future generations, there will be no preserving it.

[00:14:59] The majority of the [endangered](#) languages are oral languages, they often don't have written forms, which makes preserving them even harder.

²⁸ desire to do something

²⁹ to develop and become successful

³⁰ a very large amount

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[00:15:10] If every English speaker on the planet died tomorrow, someone could relatively easily figure out how to speak English, because there is so much written in English. But if nothing is written, then the language dies with its last speaker.

[00:15:30] And this isn't a rare [occurrence](#)³¹ - only around a third of all world languages have written systems, a way of actually writing the language down.

[00:15:40] You might be thinking, 'so what? Languages dying out is just a natural part of the life cycle of the world - instead of spending money encouraging people to speak them, why don't we invest in schools, hospitals, or teaching people a more useful language like English, or Spanish, or Mandarin?'

[00:16:01] It also begs the question, why should we actually preserve anything? From ancient buildings to sculptures, to wildlife to animals, should we [interfere](#)³² with the natural flow of things?

[00:16:17] If you are approaching the subject from a purely [utilitarian](#)³³ point of view, saying that we should only seek to preserve things that have an immediate use for mankind, then you probably don't think it's worth battling to preserve a dying language.

³¹ something that happens

³² get in the way of

³³ not caring for anything other than usefulness or practicality

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[00:16:35] But then, you shouldn't see any reason to protect a beautiful [fresco](#)³⁴, or to stop the pandas from dying out.

[00:16:44] Languages give us just the most amazing insight into how people, cultures, and society develops.

[00:16:53] The words and expressions that exist in a language tell us about its people - people need words to [convey](#)³⁵ meaning, the words in a language tell us what people need to say.

[00:17:06] There's the quote that you've probably heard 1,000 times that Eskimos have 50 different words for different types of snow, but this kind of idea applies to almost every language.

[00:17:21] In your language, I'm sure there are words and expressions that don't have an exact equivalent in English.

[00:17:28] For example, in a situation where in English you would say 'How are you?', in Mandarin you would say 'Have you eaten yet?'

[00:17:38] And in Cherokee, a Native American language, there is no word for 'goodbye', only 'I'll see you again'.

³⁴ a painting on a wall, painted when the paint is still fresh

³⁵ to express a thought or meaning

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[00:17:47] These might be small differences, but they tell us a huge amount about the culture and the people that use the language. And when the language dies out, and without any real written or recorded evidence of how to use it, so dies an important part of our knowledge of the people that spoke it.

[00:18:08] And I, for one, think we should do everything we can to avoid that.

[00:18:14] Ok then, that is it for this episode on Endangered Languages.

[00:18:19] It's a hugely interesting topic, and although English may be a useful language, and there are many excellent reasons to learn it, it is just one of nearly 7,000 languages that are spoken around the world.

[00:18:34] A world where we all just speak one of a [handful](#)³⁶ languages is a less rich, less [diverse](#)³⁷ one, but unless there is a [conscious](#) effort to protect and encourage the speaking of these [endangered](#) languages, that is the direction that we are heading in.

[00:18:51] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode, especially if you speak an [endangered](#) language, but even if you don't.

[00:19:00] You can email hi@leonardoenglish.com.

³⁶ a small amount of something

³⁷ including many different types of people or things:

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[00:19:05] And on the subject of dying languages, watch out for our next members-only episode, which is going to be on Esperanto, a language that is certainly not dead, but was born, '[artificially](#)³⁸', I guess.

[00:19:18] That will be released exclusively on the website on Tuesday, so keep a look out for that one..

[00:19:24] And as a final reminder, if you are looking for all of the bonus episodes, plus subtitles, transcripts, and key vocabulary, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:19:36] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:19:41] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

³⁸ in a non-natural way

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Sets us apart	makes us different from or better than other people or things
Limiting	preventing, stopping
Over and above	in addition to
Means	way, a method to do something
Theoretical	based on an idea, not the practical use (of something)
Wiped away	destroyed
Dominant	most important or strong than similar things
Dominate	see dominant
Endanger	to put someone or something at risk of being hurt or harmed
Prospered	became successful
Crush	destroy, get rid of
Outlawing	completely stop something by making it illegal
Non-core	not the main, not the normal

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Persecuting	treating someone or something unfairly
Decline	to decrease, to become worse and worse
Sands of time	the passing of time
Tends	naturally goes towards
Disdain	hatred, normally shown through a lack of respect
For the sake of	in order to allow something to happen
Made-up	invented, fake
Goes to the grave	dies
Conscious	purposeful, deliberate
Revival	becoming more popular and in use again
Concerted	done for a shared purpose
Danger zone	in a dangerous place
Thriving	successful and growing
Preserved	saved from being destroyed or harmed
Will	desire to do something

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Flourish	to develop and become successful
Plethora	a very large amount
Occurrence	something that happens
Interfere	get in the way of
Utilitarian	not caring for anything other than usefulness or practicality
Fresco	a painting on a wall, painted when the paint is still fresh
Convey	to express a thought or meaning
Handful	a small amount of something
Diverse	including many different types of people or things:
Artificially	in a non-natural way

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.