

GUEST OPINION: Languages are under threat

Premium content

Contributed

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As the Roman Empire gave way to new nationalities, the Latin language was superseded by Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian.



Henry Srebrnik
Guest opinion

Language is the essence of culture, so people tend to feel passionately about their mother tongue, especially when they have reason to believe that it is threatened in some way.

In Canada, French Canadians have been worried about their language ever since the conquest of Quebec. After all, in North America, they live in a “sea” of English – and, increasingly, Spanish.

Meanwhile, Indigenous people have seen many of their languages near extinction and fight hard to preserve those that remain viable. Endangered tongues pass from the scene when elders still speaking them die.

Linguists estimate that tens of thousands of languages have been born and lost, leaving no trace, throughout human history. Today, about 7,000 languages remain, half of them classified by linguists as endangered.

Because of imperialism in earlier centuries, and globalization today, the prevalence of a few major cultures has allowed for a large degree of linguistic homogenization.

Why does so much of the world speak English? Because of a “settler revolution,” which launched vast numbers of emigrants from the British Isles to North America, Australia and New Zealand, and parts of South America and Africa.

Also, when modern states emerged and “national” languages became part of the identity of nations, minority languages not only withered but became targets for suppression. Those who spoke them often became marginalized and politically at odds with the majority population.

Oppressed people made the revival of their languages a priority – hence the revival of Gaelic in Ireland and Hebrew in Israel.

Speaking and writing in a relatively smaller language like Danish or Kazakh encloses you in a metaphorical prison – an author whose works are not translated into a global language remains relatively unknown, no matter their talent.

Still, not everyone thinks the loss of languages is a bad thing. Converging language use would undoubtedly have a positive effect on economic interaction.

As well, a modern lingua franca such as English, already spoken throughout the world, usually as a second language, may be helpful. If a Filipino and a Moroccan meet in Romania, it’s highly unlikely either will know the other’s native language, or Romanian – but both may be able to converse in English.

Although versions of Chinese are spoken as a mother tongue by about 1.2 billion people, about three times as many as English, it is English that is spoken around the world. Chinese remains essentially confined within the borders of the state.

Advertisements for professionals at all levels tend to stipulate language ability in English, and business schools from Sweden to Singapore conduct all or most of their courses in English.

Travel to any country outside the anglosphere, and you quickly notice the ubiquitous signs for English language schools.

However, even dominant languages may eventually disappear. Thanks to the might of the Roman Empire, Latin once predominated in much of Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.

But the empire gave way to new nationalities, and Latin was superseded by Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian. Spanish and Portuguese eventually became global languages themselves.

Now, thanks to the expansion of the British Empire in modern times, and therefore the use of English, especially in today's most powerful culture, that of the United States, that language reigns supreme.

But the lessons of history are that nothing lasts. Already, differing accents and local words are widening the gap between the English spoken in, say, Hong Kong and Jamaica.

Their users may eventually become mutually unintelligible.

Henry Srebrnik is a professor of political science at the University of Prince Edward Island.

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1 being least likely, and 10 being most likely

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Diane Clark was just 15 years old when she started smoking cigarettes to fit in with her friends. It didn't seem like a big deal at the time, but 47 years later, the Augustine Cove resident couldn't quit the habit. By last winter, Diane and her husband were each smoking a full pack a day. They were always out of breath, had no energy and suffered from uncontrollable coughing fits.